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Stimulating learner autonomy in English language education : a curriculum innovation study in a Vietnamese context

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the field of foreign language education, any practice that ties students to memorized or paraphrased stock phrases from audio-lingual or grammar-translation methods is said to be a handicap (Wessner, 2001, personal communication). Teacher-centered classrooms with audio-lingual or grammar translation methods do not create opportunities for learners to satisfy their communicative needs in the target language. Even the so-called communicative activities of Communicative Language Teaching only create opportunities for learners to use the target language in “do-as-if” (Wolff, 1994) situations. In other words, foreign language learners’ genuine communicative purposes are not taken into consideration. In the context of teaching and learning English in Vietnam in general and at CTU in particular, learning occurs in do-as-if situations in which memorization plays a crucial role when it comes to succeeding in a course. With memorization, students can just at best acquire knowledge for short-term memory for exams and strengthen their memory capacity. However, learning is more than preparing for exams. What is English language education all about if it is not preparing students for life-long learning? To Little (2000a), the more autonomous language learners are the better language learners and users. Therefore, developing learners’ autonomy also means developing their communicative competence in the target language. However, learner autonomy is hardly attainable with the pre-packaged English as a second or as a foreign language (ESL or EFL) course books used in teacher education at CTU.

The currently used book series *Interactions* and *Mosaic* (McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1992) lacks consideration for learner autonomy. These books with “prepackaged knowledge” presume that students intend to become American graduate students, if not citizens (Wessner, 2001, personal communication). However, 99% of our students in the English as a Foreign Language Teachers (EFLT) program are not on that track. They need to become the best non-native users of English for Vietnamese purposes, based on their own and on nation-specific needs for development, reinvesting their knowledge for the good of Vietnam.

An ancient proverb goes, “Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime”. Teaching and learning English in our university is limited to “given our students a fish” (i.e., prepackaged knowledge) and far from “teach them how to fish” (i.e., learning how to learn). Our English language teacher education program is inclined to educate good secondary school teachers of English who are supposed to be proficient in language skills and good at teaching

methodologies to meet the requirement of the secondary school curriculum. Independent *working* appears in teachers' pedagogical practice, but learning to learn to promote independent *learning* has hardly been realized. Learning is viewed as a product rather than a process. Students in our program are not really offered opportunities to be independent learners. Teachers are still playing a central role in students' learning process. We, curriculum designers and teacher educators, have not considered fully

"the aim of learning to learn to encourage students to develop the life-long learning skills of being able to deal with the unexpected, making informed choices, developing sharp observational skills and constructing useful knowledge in one's interactions with the world while guided by their internal values, convictions, and reasons" (van Lier, 1996: 91).

In other words, our students are not trained to act as autonomous learners with a curriculum that focuses more on language content goals than on learning process goals.

In this study as one of the teacher educators in my department, I set myself the essential task of developing students' autonomy and communicative competence through developing a new curriculum (described below) which creates opportunities for students to become more responsible for their own learning and to help them develop as independent language learners.

1. THE OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1 Aims

The curriculum innovation study reported in this book follows the development research approach. The study attempts to design and implement an experimental curriculum with the purpose of improving the existing practice (van den Akker & Plomp, 1993 as cited in Ottevanger, 2001). In particular, the study aims to enhance the quality of secondary school English teacher education at CTU through designing and implementing an EFL language curriculum that aims to enhance the students' autonomy and communicative competence.

1.2 The studies

Based on Fullan's (1991) three-phase model of curriculum implementation (*initiation*, *implementation*, and *adaptation* or *continuation*), the curriculum innovation studies reported in this book concern two experiments.

Experiment 1 starts from the *initiation* of improving the quality of English language education by means of enhancing the quality of the currently used curriculum. In this experiment, I developed a curriculum (referred to as *the intended curriculum*), implemented it and tested its quality to gain insights into how to improve the quality of the currently used curriculum. The *implementation* of the intended curriculum brought me insights into its quality and created the opportunities for curriculum developers at my institute (with my cooperation) to *adapt* the parameters operationalized in the intended curriculum to design a new version of the intended cur-

riculum according to their educational philosophy. The new version of the intended curriculum will be referred to as *the adapted curriculum* (see more about the adapted curriculum in section 1.2.2 in this chapter).

Experiment 2 includes implementing the *adapted curriculum*, monitoring its operationalization at the classroom level and reporting its quality.

The two experiments will be described in connection with the three representations of the curriculum: the *intended*, the *implemented* and the *attained curriculum* (Goodlad, Klein, & Tye, 1979; van den Akker, 1999) in the sections below.

1.2.1 *The intended curriculum*

The intended curriculum is the one that exists in the mind of the designers. In this book, the development of the intended curriculum and the curriculum itself are presented from chapter 2 to chapter 5.

Concerning the design of the intended curriculum, I conducted three activities. *First*, I analyzed the context; the problems and the quality of English language education in Vietnam since its national reunification (1975) (see more in chapter 2 of this book). *Second*, I reviewed the relevant literature that puts forward the measures aiming to improve the quality of English language education. The results of the literature review are the teaching method (see more in chapters 3 and 4) and the curriculum development parameters that might enhance the quality of our English language education (see more in chapter 5). *Third*, I designed the intended curriculum within the parameters resulted from the literature review (see more in chapter 5 for the description of the intended curriculum). The intended curriculum was implemented in experiment 1. The following sections will describe in more detail the three activities I conducted to design the intended curriculum.

In chapter 2, I shall first present the socio-political and economic changes that have contributed to the decision of which language is to be taught in the Vietnamese educational system. Then, I will describe English language education and its learning outcomes in secondary and higher education. The synopsis of English language education and the learning outcomes show that there is a lack of student autonomy and that their communicative competence is far from satisfactory. The analysis of the context, problems and quality of English language education in Vietnam results in that *developing learners' autonomy* and *communicative competence* is what an EFL curriculum and its corresponding teaching method should aim for.

Reviewing the literature (presented in chapters 3 and 4) on the concept of learner autonomy, frameworks of communicative competence and developments in the field of language education that aim to develop learner autonomy and communicative competence brought about three results.

The *first* result was that task-based language learning (TBLL) fits the aims of stimulating the development of learners' autonomy and communicative competence the best. To develop learners' autonomy and communicative competence, learners should get access to opportunities to use the target language authentically while doing the tasks to learn the language.

The *second* result was the set of four parameters (i.e., choices, interactions, task features and learner development) for a curriculum aiming at stimulating learners' autonomy and communicative competence. *Choices* refer to options concerning learning content and learning methodology that the curriculum provides students with. *Interactions* refer to the communication students carry out while planning, monitoring, assessing their task performances, and seeking support from the teacher and classmates, and while negotiating on meaning. *Task features* are manifested in the themes, outcomes and structures of the tasks. *Learner development* refers to the strategies (social, affective, cognitive and meta-cognitive) and the approaches that might help students to equip themselves with these strategies so that they can cope with the act of learning a language outside the classroom. These parameters are hierarchically related. *Choice* functions as the umbrella parameter of task features and learner development. Regarding *task features*, students might choose which part of the task to work on, decide the outcomes of their task performances and how to perform the task. Concerning *learner development*, students might decide which learning strategies they need to equip themselves with, which ones they find fit their learning styles best or how they equip themselves with these strategies. The two parameters, *task features* and *learner developments* are manifested in *choices* of learning content (*what*) and learning methodology (*how*) that students are provided with when they perform tasks. Therefore, *choices* and *interactions* in the scope of this book are considered the design parameters. In chapter 5, I describe in detail these two parameters.

The *third* result was the theoretical framework for two key concepts: learner autonomy and communicative competence. Both rely on the concept of *strategic competence* (i.e., meta-cognitive activities for self-regulation: planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning performances). It could be inferred from these frameworks that developing learners' self-regulated skills is meant to promote the learners' autonomy and communicative competence. Implicit in the pedagogy of choices of learning content and learning methodology is the aim of promoting students' self-regulated skills. Then, it could be inferred that offering students choices enhances attitudes to autonomous learning and intrinsic motivation. Therefore, in our theoretical framework, choices of learning content and of learning methodology and interactions are hypothesized to be prerequisite conditions for the development of self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning. The theoretical framework of my study is summarized in figure 1.1.

Based on the two design parameters, I designed the intended curriculum according to the theory of task-based language learning. The curriculum consists of five units. In each unit, students will use the target language to learn it through doing a *task*. The task creates opportunities for students to make choices of learning content (i.e., what to learn) and learning methodology (i.e., how to learn) to complete it. A pilot version of the intended curriculum has been presented to the language educators of the Graduate School of Teaching and Learning, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands and to those of the English Department, CTU, Vietnam to receive feedback from experts in this domain. The description of the intended curriculum and that of its validation are described in chapter 5 of this book.

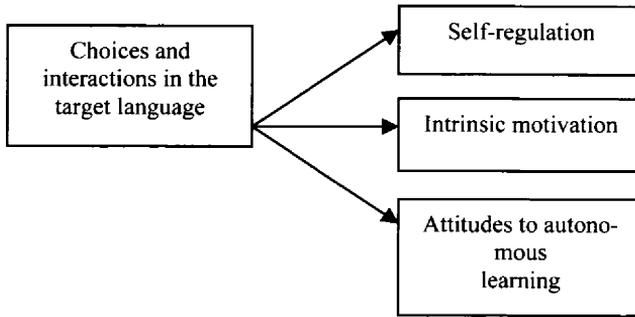


Figure 1.1. The theoretical framework.

Chapter 6 introduces the two empirical experiments (referred to as experiment 1 and experiment 2) of this book by explaining the research methodology and instruments for two purposes. The first purpose is to establish the level of implementation of the two curricula: *the intended curriculum* (implemented in experiment 1) and *the adapted curriculum* (implemented in experiment 2) (described in chapter 7 and chapter 8 respectively). The second purpose is to set up the quantitative study to assess the contribution of the curriculum to intrinsic motivation, self-regulation and attitudes to autonomous learning (described in chapter 9). The overall design of the two experiments is a one-group pre-test and post-test in which *choice* and *interactions in the target language* are the independent variables and self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning, the dependent variables while the actual implementation of the two curricula is monitored. To meet the requirement for a valid evaluation of the outcomes, the implementation of choice and the promotion of interactions in the target language are monitored using the classroom observation framework adapted from Nunan's (2000). As the outcomes of the implemented curriculum, in both experiments, we measured self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning respectively with the questionnaires adapted from Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie's (1991) *A Manual for the Use of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire* (MSLQ), Ryan and Deci's (1992) *Intrinsic Motivation Inventory* (IMI) and Camilleri's (1999) *Questionnaire to Help You Establish Your Personal Level of Autonomy*.

1.2.2 The implemented curriculum

The implemented curriculum is manifested by the degree to which the curriculum is operationalized at the classroom level and how it is perceived by teachers and students with whom the curriculum has been put into use. The implementation of the intended curriculum and the adapted curriculum is reported in chapters 7 and 8 of this book.

Choice and interactions are hypothesized to be the prerequisite condition for the development of self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning. Monitoring the level of implementation of the intended curriculum is therefore by nature monitoring the implementation of *choices* (of learning content and

learning methodology) that teachers provide students with and *interactions* in the target language. The intended curriculum was implemented in the first-year students of English as Foreign Language Teachers (see chapter 7 of this book). Monitoring showed that the curriculum was implemented as intended and that both students and teachers showed a positive reaction. From the teachers' perception, a significant finding is that weaving the idea of developing learner autonomy into the existing English teacher education curriculum is essential. From this finding, curriculum developers at my institute, with my cooperation, developed a curriculum referred to as *the adapted curriculum*.

The adapted curriculum consists of two components. The first component is an operationalization of the presentation-practice-production (PPP) paradigm, the existing pedagogical practice at my department. Within this paradigm, the teacher presents the language; students are then expected to practice and produce that piece of language in their language use. This is to say the first component is the *learning to use the language* paradigm. The second component of the adapted curriculum is the TBLL, which was operationalized in the intended curriculum. As presented, in the light of the TBLL, learners use the language to learn it while they do their tasks. Therefore, this component could be described as the *using to learn the language* paradigm. To test the effects of the TBLL in which *choices* of learning content and learning methodology and *interactions* in the target language are the independent variables on the development of self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning, the TBLL component was monitored in experiment 2. The implementation of the TBLL is reported in chapter 8. It reveals that the TBLL component in the adapted curriculum was implemented as intended.

1.2.3 *The attained curriculum*

The attained curriculum is the one manifested through the learning outcomes. The learning outcomes of the intended curriculum and the adapted curriculum are presented in chapter 9 of this book.

Having established that both curricula were implemented as intended, the requirement for a valid evaluation of the outcomes in terms of self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning is met. In chapter 9, a quantitative analysis of the outcomes of both curricula is presented. The results from statistical tests showed a change in students' attitudes to autonomous learning. However, no curriculum effect on students' self-regulation and intrinsic motivation was observed. Examining the effects of learners' characteristics (e.g., their initial level of English language proficiency or initial level of attitudes to autonomous learning) on the development of self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning in both curricula revealed that in many instances the curriculum contributed the outcomes (e.g., self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, attitudes to autonomous learning, and language achievement) of students with relatively high initial levels of the outcome variables.

In chapter 10, I summarize and reflect on (1) the theoretical framework I proposed and used in this curriculum innovation study and (2) the observations and

results from the two experiments. At the end of the chapter, I will propose directions for developing future curricula for learners' autonomy and communicative competence. TBLL is shown to suit the aims of stimulating the development of learner autonomy and communicative competence of those learners whose initial levels of self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning are rather high.

2. SUMMARY

To summarize, in this curriculum innovation study, I shall conduct four main research activities: *designing the intended curriculum* (reported in chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5), *implementing the intended curriculum and the adapted curriculum (two experiments)* (reported in chapters 7 and 8 respectively), *testing the hypothesis* (reported in chapter 9), and *reflecting on the effects of the curricula* (reported in chapter 10).

