

The Paradox of Student-Centeredness for Asian English Language Learners

by Croix C. Clayton

Introduction

Student-centeredness (i.e. learner-centeredness) posits, among other things, that classrooms should be shaped by students' personal experiences and educational needs (Ferguson, 1998; Wright, 2011). Communicative language teaching—which views language learning primarily as a process of developing communicative proficiency—may not always and necessarily be considered an essential component of student-centeredness, but the two are often coterminous, particularly in classes led by instructors who are native speakers of English (Rao, 2008).

This has long been the case for Asian ELLs studying in their own countries under expat professors, and is even more prevalent now, as increasing numbers of students from Asian countries attend Western universities for popular '3+1' or '2+2' programs. The number of Chinese students, alone, who study abroad has increased greatly, sometimes jumping nearly ten percent in a single year (Zou, 2019), to say nothing of Asian students as a whole, who in 2019 made up 56% of all international learners in OECD countries (OECD, 2019).

Student centeredness (SC) and communicative language teaching (CLT) have long pedigrees of well-reasoned arguments to recommend them to instructors (Celce-Murcia, 1979; Long, 1996; Parrish, 2004). Unfortunately, certain practical limitations may reveal themselves when instructors expect immediate results from students who are experientially and culturally unprepared for the SC/CLT paradigm.

SC and CLT in Asian Educational Contexts

For decades, researchers have noted the difficulty some Asian students experience in adjusting to student-centered and communicative classrooms (Li, 1984). Explanations for this struggle have ranged from cultural to conceptual. In Pakistan, for example, Manan and Mehmood (2015) describe a “deeply conservative” (p. 111) scholastic culture

where obedience is primary, and “stereotype and folk wisdom” (p.113) shape student intellectual development. Wong and Lai (2000) depict a transnational Chinese-diaspora culture where modesty, collectivism, and high power distance (the sociological measure of comfort level with interpersonal inequality in power, wealth, or status) all deeply influence scholastic discourse. A number of Asian scholars have described cultures of education where memorization and didacticism interfere with critical thinking (Khan, 2017; Liaw, 2007; Zhao, 2009), where reverent silence is expected student behavior (Zohrabi et. al, 2012), and where respect for authority is encouraged in children to a measurably greater extent than is typical in the West (Hofstede, 2011).

Some students even struggle in SC and CLT classrooms for instrumental reasons. Since so many Asian ELLs study English primarily to pass high-stakes (invariably grammar-based, written) exams in their home countries, many wonder how their careers are furthered by practicing 'authentic' conversation in a language few of them will ever use professionally or socially (Xu, 2010). When the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar is too wide, and students don't see the purpose of teacher choices, resentment, passive resistance, and non-learning may result (Ellis, 1996). Common complaints about Western instructors, according to Zhenhui Rao (2008), may include: a lack of clear overall structure and sequence, a preference for fluency over accuracy, and a casual informality and reluctance to correct that can strike Asian students as non-authoritative and non-committal. That this last point can lead to serious loss of respect is seconded by Baldauf and Moni (2006).

When is Student-Centered...Not?

In an inventory of SC characteristics, Parrish (2004) lists, among others, that “content of instruction is relevant to student needs and interests and draws on their knowledge and experience, ...learners have active roles in the classroom, ...and learners control the direction of activities” (p. 7). The paradox of student-centeredness in ESL/EFL for

Asian learners socialized into traditional scholastic norms is this: the successful fulfillment of some criteria of student-centeredness (active and ‘authentic’ communicative learning, for example) may entail the direct violation of others (such as student educational and professional needs). Put differently, are student learning style and reasons for studying English not forms of culture and knowledge to be validated? Furthermore, can students whose instructor expects from them a degree of communicative directness, spontaneity, and initiative for which they are culturally unprepared (Hu, 2002)—to a degree that can trigger intense anxiety (Wu, 2010)—really be said to “control the direction of activities” in their classroom?

Strategies vs. Preferences

Nonetheless, many Asian CLT skeptics find value in aspects of communicative and student-centered teaching. Hu grants that “collaborative learning, cultivation of sociolinguistic competence, and learning strategy training... are consonant with the Chinese emphasis on collective orientations, socially appropriate behavior, and concern for the right way of doing things” (2002, pp.102-103), and Zohrabi et al. (2012) praise the classic SC activity of mind-mapping as “most useful,” and suggest that their fellow Iranian teachers show more interest in student opinions and ideas in general.

Furthermore, researchers have cautioned against confusing Asian students’ strategic reactions to their native educational ecologies for actual preferences (Tang & Biggs, 1996). An illustration of this is Littlewood’s (1996) study of over 2000 adult Asian EFL learners, which identified a preference for active learning, and a wish for more fluency. Lee’s (1998) program in learner autonomy at Hong Kong Polytechnic found that students excelled at active, self-driven education, when it was voluntary, flexible, and included peer support and frequent constructive feedback, and Liu and Littlewood (1997) emphasize that SC communicative education can be viable for many Asian learners, if teachers emphasize student brainstorming, group-work, and make expectations clear and explicit.

From Disconnect to a Bridge between Styles

The solution, then, may be a kind of “consciousness bridge” (Kegan, 1994) or “style-stretching activity” (Rao, 2008) to help clarify for students what may appear to them as an alien set of objectives and rationales, and give them an opportunity to practice the equally new associated behaviors. Such a bridge may resemble an explicitly taught lesson, ideally on the first day. Alternately, it may manifest in course design as a cautiously even-handed approach to

the balance between form-focused, lecture-heavy teaching on one hand, and student-centered communicative activities on the other. Ideally, an instructor would utilize both approaches, and the hesitant might recall that canonical SC and CLT texts often suggest the value of some amount of form-focused lecturing to support communicative activities (Nunan, 1988). Some even establish thresholds, like Doman’s five-to-ten minute minimum of teacher-centered time per class (2005), which I would suggest at least doubling for classes of ninety minutes or more.

Productive Questioning and Designing a Balanced “Day One”

In the spirit of transparently initiating students into SC and CLT, any or all of the following strategies may be employed. To foster a respectful intercultural space, restraint in expressing value judgements when contrasting Western and Eastern educational cultures is suggested. Instructors may consider summarizing how contemporary theories in SLA conceptualize language learning (i.e. input, output, affective and cognitive engagement, etc.). Furthermore, they may explain in some detail the relevant theories and evidence behind the communicative method and the student-centered approach. Rao (2008) argues that Asian students often respond well to concrete, well-reasoned, and systematic presentations of information. In my own experience in Taiwan and China, a lecture on the rudiments of applied linguistics goes a long way toward capturing student interest for the more difficult task: teaching them to negotiate a form of education more communicative, spontaneous, and self-driven than many are used to. Beyond that, a teacher might consider some kind of explanation of the principles behind critical thinking. For example, productive questioning, which DiYanni (2016) describes as a kind of habitual inclination toward asking questions about quality of evidence, logical consistency, implicit assumptions, and conclusions that can be drawn reasonably. Because Asian students may consider it impertinent to question authority figures—certainly including teachers (Khan, 2017; Manan & Mehmood, 2015; Zhao, 2009)—the importance of this productive questioning to scholarship in general may not be immediately grasped. If time allows, a brief telling of Galileo’s conflict with the Inquisition can also make for a sympathetic and enlightening lesson on the productive questioning of authority in the service of knowledge.

Building a consciousness bridge to help Asian ELLs get the most out of SC and CLT methods may require patience and a willingness to front-load evidence and context (even in teacher-centered ways) into the beginning of the semester, but doing so can help ensure that students eventually reap the benefits of fluency, autonomy, and criticality that student-centered and communicative teaching can offer.

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