Group work for autonomy in China:
From the perspective of teacher practice and cognition

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Outline

- Why this research?
- What to find out?
- Where and with whom?
- How?
- What’s found out?
- What’s next?

Motivation

Research questions

Setting and participants

Methodology

Findings

Further questions
Autonomy in China

Laozi (Tao Tzu) (6th C. BC)

Therefore the sage says:

I do nothing, and the people, of themselves, are transformed;
I say nothing, and the people, of themselves, are corrected.
I let go control, and the people, by themselves, have all they need;
I let go desire, and the people, by themselves, remain pure and simple.
Autonomy in Chinese curriculum

Not the sage on the stage! \[\Rightarrow\] But a guide by the side!

New Curriculum Standards

(MoE China, 2001)
Autonomy in the west

• Definitions
  • (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Dickinson, 1994; Benson, 1996, 2001)
  • ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (Holec, 1981, p. 3)

• Origins
  • the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project in 1971
  • Rousseau’ natural education (cited in Boyd, 1956), Kilpatrick’s (1921) ‘project method’ and Rogers’ (1969) people as ‘self-actualizing’ beings

• Value to education
  • (Kenny, 1993; Little, 1995; Benson, 2001; Hurd, 2005)
  • Only when autonomy is practiced, is genuine education happening: anything less is conditioned education. (Little, 2007)
Collaborative group work for autonomy

• ‘Bergen definition’ of autonomy

• ‘A capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person’ (Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander and Trebbi, 1990, p. 102)

• Kohonen (1992): *Autonomy includes the notion of interdependence, i.e. being responsible for one’s own conduct in the social context* (p. 19).

• Little (1996): **collaborative group work** as an effective way to foster autonomy in classroom settings
Autonomy and teacher cognition

• While autonomy has been defined and applied from different theoretical perspectives, language teachers’ views have not been awarded much attention (Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012, p. 283).

• In the field of teacher education, it is well established that teachers’ beliefs influence their instructional choices, therefore an understanding of teachers’ beliefs needs to be an integral part of initiatives that aim to promote change in what teachers do in the classroom (Wedell, 2009).
Research questions

1. To what extent and in what ways are the teachers using group work in their class?

2. How do the teachers interpret their practice of using group work to enhance student autonomy?

3. How can the teachers’ practice and their interpretation be explained?
The research setting

- Private
- Established in 2009
- Well-recognized principal
- Expert executive director
- Parents of mid/upper class
- Teachers selected by principal
- Class size 20-36

- ‘An extreme and unique case as a ‘test bed’ ’ (Robson, 2002, p. 182)
- If it cannot work here, it is unlikely to work elsewhere.
## The participants

(9 E Ts + ED + Prin)

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<td>Prin</td>
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<td>PhD in US</td>
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<td>Founder and principal of 3 schools in China / intnl dept director in US</td>
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Methodology

How

1. observations
   - 22 video-recorded lessons
   - Teaching plans/PPT
   - Ss work

2. post-lesson discussions
   - 14 audio-recorded discussions

3. interviews
   - 1 with each T
   - 2 with the ED
   - 1 with the prin

Let data talk, and themes emerge.

grounded analysis (Charmaz, 2006)
Findings_1

1. To what extent and in what ways was group work used in class?

1.1 All the observed classes were organized in groups;

- 4-6 ss in each group
- mixed levels in terms of overall academic records
- Mainly home teachers’ job to do the group division (who in which group)
- Groups remained stable across subjects and over a period of time (a month, a term, or longer)
1.2 Group was used as classroom management unit;
- Ss were grouped and numbered within groups (T1- T9)
- Ss were awarded bonus points for individual and/or group work

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<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>+1+3…</td>
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<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>+2+3…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G3</td>
<td>+1…</td>
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<tr>
<td>G4</td>
<td>+4+1…</td>
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in-rows seating (T1, T7)

in-circles seating (T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T8, T9)

Group points (T1, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8)
1.3 A variety of activities were conducted under the name of group work at different phases of a lesson period;

Ss were asked … in groups:

- **to peer check the grammar rules**
- **to find answers to the questions**
- **to fill in the chart**
- **to drill the sentence patterns**
- **to share with each the timelines**
- **to discuss the given questions**
- **to talk and guess**
- **to make a dialogue**
- **to make a story**
- **to conduct a survey**
- **to do gap-filling exercises**
- **to rewrite a paragraph**
- **to peer review each other’s writing**
- **to identify new phrases**
- **to summarize grammar rules**
- **to peer teach**

- recapping
- before new input
- during new input
- after new input
- after-class group work
1.4 The way in which each activity was conducted varied greatly;

*It can be as complicated as this ...*

- Teacher gives instruction for group work
- Ss act in groups
- Ss group presenting in writing
- Ss group presenting in speaking
- Peer group making critical/additional comments
- T/ss evaluating the presented group work

OR

*as simple as this ...*

- T: … you can discuss in groups…
- SS: *(silence for 30’’)*
- T: OK, let’s come back...
1.5 *The extent to which ss take control in the group work diverged markedly;*

- 40’ ss full control (T4_2)
- 35’ with only TI & silence (T6_1)

1.6 *The way teachers facilitated group work differed considerably.*

- purposefully-designed guidelines (T5_2)
- zero support (T6_1)
Findings_2

2. How do the teachers interpret their practice of using group work to enhance student autonomy?

• 2.1 How have the teachers been coping with group work?
  (school promotion starting from August 2012)
  • Had been using it before the school project, had been exploring and adjusting (T1);
  • Used it → disliked it and gave up → resumed it as required → messy → getting better under ED’s guide → sure better and better (T4);
  • Resistant at the beginning → found sth good → indeed sth good (T2);
  • Started it as required and loved it (T3, T6);
  • Started it as required → believing it must be good, exploring and adjusting (T5, T9);
  • Started as required (Do as Romans do when in Rome) → hard to say good or not in a short time (T7);
  • Started as required → still not used to it (T8).
2.2 Does group work lead towards autonomy?

Yes, when…
- There is already some autonomy (T2, T6);
- Ss think independently first (T6);
- T provides with good guide (T2).

Yes, because …
- Ss like group work and they are more engaged (T1, T3, T4, T5);
- Weak ss ask for help from strong ss more easily than from ts (T1);
- ss want more points for their group, so they try harder (T1, T4);
- When helping others in groups, they feel like ‘teachers’ (T3);
- Weak ss work harder to contribute to group in order to be recognized or at least not be excluded (T1, T6).

No, when…
- Ss chat off topic and distract each other (T1, T7);
- Lazy ss turn to others for answers before thinking hard (T7);
- Ss are not interested (T9).
Findings_3

A tentative explanation between Ts’ practice and cognition

- More convergences in confident teachers (T2)
- Divergences in less confident teachers (T5, T3)
- Divergences in over-confident teachers (T6)
Autonomous & collaborative T2

- Early family education
- Principal's recognition
- Peer colleagues' positive comments
- Ss' compliments
- A learning attitude
- Self-reflection in teaching practice
- Personal character

Autonomy-and-collaboration-oriented teaching
Issues for further thinking and action

• Superficial changes and real changes

• From teacher collaboration and autonomy to student collaboration and autonomy
References

The school project: Towards autonomy, collaboration and effectiveness

- Effectiveness
  - Autonomous learning
  - Management
  - Collaborative learning
  - Management
The suggested model

Self-directed learning

Share learning through discussion

Share learning through presentation

Digestion and internalization

presentation

Peer critical / additional comments

evaluation