

From collaborative group work to learner autonomy: Chinese teachers' practices and beliefs

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Overview

- ❖ **Background to this research**
- ❖ **Research questions**
- ❖ **Methodology**
- ❖ **Findings**
- ❖ **Discussion and implications**

Learner Autonomy (LA) in Chinese National Curriculum

- The 2001 English Curriculum
 - encourages experiential, participatory, collaborative and communicative approaches, ... aims to develop students' positive attitudes, active thinking, cultural awareness and **autonomy**. (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2001)
- The 2011 English Curriculum
 - emphasises both the instrumental and the **humanising** value of English learning , aiming to develop students' language skills, language knowledge, positive attitudes, **learning strategies** and cultural awareness. (Chinese Ministry of education, 2011)
- Autonomy is a key goal of both curriculums.

Learner autonomy (LA): Central issues

- “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”
(Holec, 1981, p. 3)
- “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning”
(Benson, 2001, p. 47) **over:**
 - learning management
 - cognitive process
 - learning content

LA: The social dimension

- ‘Bergen definition’ of autonomy
(Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander and Trebbi, 1990, p. 102)
 - “A capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person”
- Four perspectives in the notion of LA
(Oxford, 2003)
 - technical
 - psychological
 - political-critical
 - sociocultural

LA in Chinese philosophy

故圣人云：

我无为，而民自化；

我好静，而民自正；

我无事，而民自富；

我无欲，而民自朴。

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.*

LA in Chinese language education

- Language learning is 'a whole person' education, which requires learners' self-determination, self-management and self-discipline. (Gu Yueguo, 2002)
- Foreign language education should encourage students critical cooperative autonomy. (Xu Jinfen, 2012)

Collaborative group work for LA

(Benson, 2011, pp. 166-167)

- Collaborative group work is beneficial to the development of LA, because
 - it shifts the focus of attention in the classroom from the teacher to the students;
 - transfer of control increases student-student interaction and opportunities to use and process the target language.

Teacher's responsibility in fostering LA

(Chinese Ministry of Education, 2001, 2011)

- Teachers should ...
 - provide students ample opportunities to collaborate with others and become autonomous learners,
 - give students plenty of space for self-development,
 - encourage learners to develop their language skills through experiential, practical, collaborative and inquiry-based learning.
 - create conditions that allow students to explore ... and solve problems by themselves.

**Control
shift
Ts → Ss**

Studies on LA

- LA has been defined and applied from different theoretical perspectives, YET language teachers' views have not been awarded much attention.
(Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012, p. 283)
- Few empirical studies in China have investigated teachers' beliefs about LA, or their practices of using collaborative group work to foster LA .

Research questions

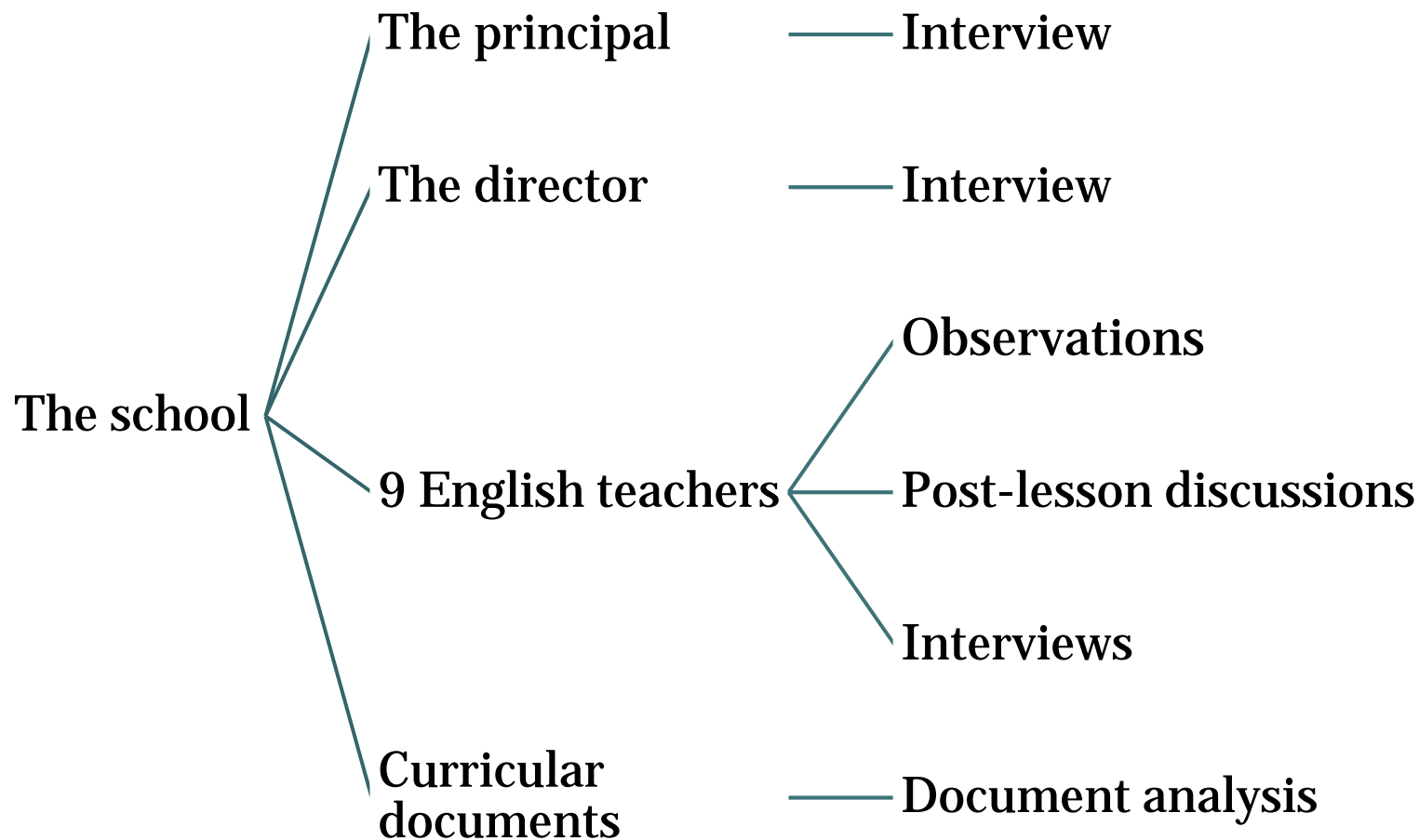
1. To what extent and in what ways was control and power shift reflected in the teachers' practices of using collaborative group work to foster LA in the given context?
2. How did the teachers perceive the effect of such control and power shift on the construction of LA?

Setting of the case study



- The study was conducted in a recently-established **private** secondary school (HT).
- **The principal** is a well-recognised educator and experienced school administrator with overseas educational background
- **Fostering LA** is a key vision at HT.
- **A new director** with expertise in autonomy and collaborative learning was recruited to realise this vision.

Participants and data collection



Findings

The principal's vision of
LA

The school innovation
project to promote LA

The teachers' practices
and beliefs about using
group work for LA

The principal's vision of LA

(Interview with the principal)

- LA = “Students as the agents of their own learning”.
- 3 characteristics of autonomous students:
 - **wanting to learn** rather than **being made to learn**
 - **self-disciplined** rather than **other-disciplined**
 - **knowing how** rather than **knowing what**
- The value of LA: an essential component of education, an eternal topic, crucial for lifelong learning

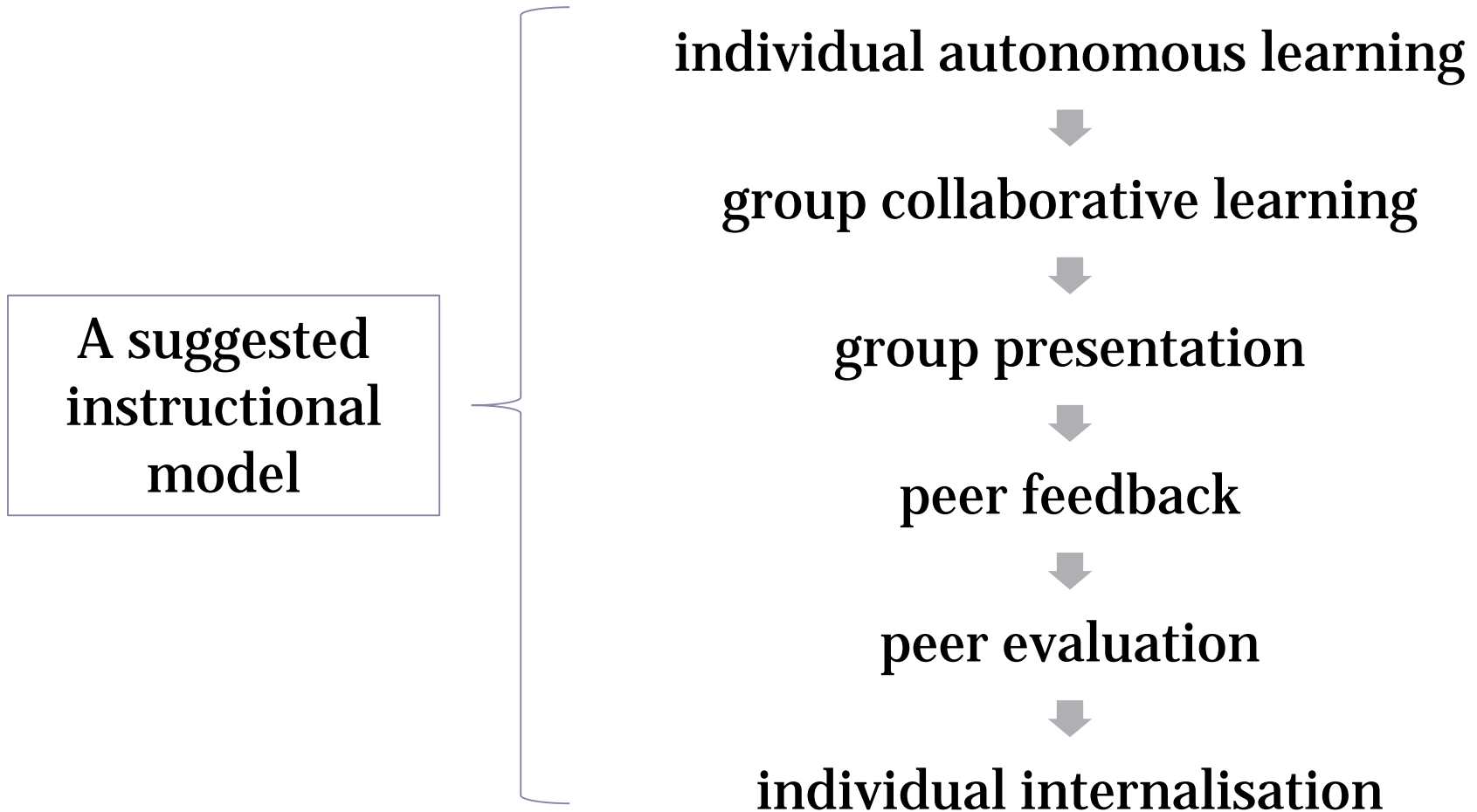
The principal's vision of LA – cont.

(Interview with the principal)

- To cultivate LA, teachers must
 - fully understand the concept and have a firm belief in its value.
 - trust students and empower students
 - let go control for students, and allow trial and error
- *“It’s like learning to ride a bicycle. You allow them to go, they may fall over. However, if not, they’ll never be able to do it”.*

The school innovation to foster LA

(Interview with the director & document analysis)



Teacher autonomy in adopting the model:

Voices from the administrators

(Interviews with the principal and the director)

- **The principal:**

- *“To foster autonomy, I don't believe that any single model can work for all situations”.*
- *“Actually the establishment of any model has gone against the nature of autonomy”.*
- *“But my way is to let them [the director and the teachers] go and try, and modify in their own ways”.*

- **The director:**

- *“The model is a process of knowledge construction, not a fixed lesson procedure. Teachers are free to make adaptations as necessary”.*

Teachers' practices of using group work

- Classroom management was generally group-based.
- Group work was commonly used in all the 22 lessons of all the 9 teachers, but differently.
- Group work tasks and activities involved various language skills and aspects – listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, lexicon and syntax.

Teachers' practices of using group work

Skills / aspects	Examples
Listening	Listening and answering questions ...
Reading	Reading and answering questions, reading and filling in the chart ...
Speaking	Conducting a survey, role play, discussing a given topic...
Writing	Co-creating a story, rewriting a given text, relay writing...
Grammar	summarising grammar rules, discussing rules...
Lexicon	Finding phrases from the text, gap-filling vocabulary exercises ...
Syntax	Sentence pattern practise , translation ...

Teachers' practices and beliefs about using group work: Variations

- **Teachers' practices varied in**
 - group-based classroom layout
 - extent of adopting the suggested model
 - extent of genuine control relinquishing
 - extent of student s taking control
- **Teachers' beliefs varied in**
 - the meaning of LA
 - the effect of group work in fostering LA
 - extent of trust in LA
 - attitudes towards the suggested model

Teacher categories

- Based on the variations, the following categories emerged:
 - An autonomous practitioner
 - An experimenting explorer
 - A practising doubter
 - A superficial follower
 - A lip service payer
 - An inactive “actor”

An autonomous practitioner (T2)

- One who
 - demonstrated understanding of the nature of LA,
 - showed belief in the effectiveness of collaborative learning in fostering LA,
 - expressed trust in students' ability for autonomy,
 - was observed not following the school model tightly,
yet
 - showed evidence of relinquishing control for students to work both individually and in groups with the aim of more autonomy.

An autonomous practitioner (T2)

- **Quotations from T2**

- *“Autonomous students are confident and independent. They have the ability to make their own decisions.”*
- *“Autonomous students work on their own, but also collaborate with others to seek help. Discussing in group broadens one’s own thinking, and certainly enhances autonomy.”*
- *“Students’ potentials are unlimited. As long as the teacher lets go control, they surely can go by themselves. Their performances met my expectations, and sometimes exceeded.”*
- *“I don’t check my practices with the model or the standards that the school set up. I know the core ideas and integrate them into my teaching. ”*

An experimenting explorer (T4, T8)

- One who
 - initially lacked belief in the school model of using group work to foster LA,
- but
 - started to try using the model with an experimenting attitude,
 - kept reflecting on and making modifications of the model,
 - gradually developed more belief in the core ideas embedded in the model,
 - carried on her reflective and exploratory practices.

An experimenting explorer (T4, T8)

- **Quotations from T4**

- *“I suspected at the beginning whether this would work or not, but I’m obedient-natured, so I decided to give it a go anyway, reluctantly though.”*
- *“Gradually I found something worked quite well, especially the group bonus points. Students looked more motivated. ”*
- *“That interested me, and I continued to try. If something didn’t work well, I adapted a little bit. My work was acknowledged by the director and he helped me a lot.”*
- *“Now I found it work quite well. Without it [the group-based management], students wouldn’t have gone the extra miles. They would just do what the teacher assigned, and just passively.”*

A practising doubter (T5)

- One who
 - expressed doubt about students' ability to be autonomous,
but
 - showed evidence of giving some control to students by getting students to work in groups,
yet
 - held negative attitudes towards students' performances in the group work
 - maintained the concern about students' taking more control
 - displayed uncertainty whether or not to give more control to students in future practices.

A practising doubter (T5)

- **Quotations from T5**

- *I know I should let go some control to get students more independent, but I'm just not convinced that they can go without the 'cane' of the teacher.*
- *From time to time, I did get them work in groups, as you see that day, but I worried that they didn't know where to start. That's why I provided each group a slip of notes as a guide.*
- *Anyway I'm still not assured that they can work autonomously by themselves.*

A superficial follower (T1, T3)

- One who
 - spoke in favour of the school model,
 - claimed trust in students' potentials and control shift to students
 - followed the model tightly in terms of the procedures,
- but
 - showed evidence of withholding control in practices,
 - revealed lack of real understanding of the nature of LA as well as the school model.

A superficial follower (T1, T3)

- **Quotations from T3:**

- *I like this model very much. It suits me very well.*
- *Students are very smart. I trust they can solve many problems by themselves.*
- *I love to get students work busily in groups. I let them go in their own way. I don't mind the class looking chaotic, as long as students are actively engaged.*

T3's explanation of a classroom episode that she wanted a student to present in the regulated way:

- *That student is very different and stubborn. I must straighten him out'.*
- *Maybe, unconsciously, I'm quite dominant.*

A lip service payer (T6)

- One who
 - claimed to believe in the importance of opportunities for students' taking control to acquire more autonomy,
 - claimed trust in students' ability to explore by themselves and together in groups,
 - showed in the lesson planning evidence of control shift to students,
- yet
 - controlled much of students' learning in the name of helping and training,
 - withdrew control in the middle of students' group presentations,
 - commented negatively on students' performances of taking control.

A lip service payer (T6)

- **Quotations from T6:**

- *Students should first think independently, make an analysis of the problems, and I surely give them such the opportunities.*
- *Students have great potential. ... as long as you **teach** them the right stuff, as long as they **do as told**, they will do it very well.*

An announcement about the lesson on the next day:

- *Tomorrow, the lesson will be completely controlled by students. welcome whoever interested come to observe.*

In the claimed-to-be-student-controlled lesson, T6 interrupted students' presentations and dominated the lesson for about 20 minutes. She made the following comments afterwards:

- *You see, they couldn't say much useful stuff, they couldn't get the point at all.*

An inactive “actor” (T7, T9)

- One who
 - commented negatively on students’ ability for independence,
 - lacked belief in the effectiveness of group work to foster LA,

but

- used some group work in practices
- admitted that the group work used in class was merely a formal response to the school innovation.

An inactive “actor” (T7, T9)

- **Quotations from T7:**

- *The autonomy of students in this school is very weak.*
- *I prefer students working on their own to find out the answers. Once you get them into groups, they tend to grab an answer from others, not to think much then.*
- *When in Rome, do as Romans do.*
- *If the school required collaborative work, I would do. Otherwise not much.*

Summary of findings: Question 1

1. To what extent and in what ways was control and power shift reflected in the teachers' practices of using collaborative group work to foster LA in the given context?
 - Evidence of control and power shift from teacher to students was seen in most of the observed lessons.
 - However, the extent of such shift varied from teacher to teacher – and within individual teachers.
 - Signs of pseudo empowerment was detected, in which the teacher superficially relinquished control to students, but withdrew it in actuality.

Summary of findings: Question 2

2. How did the teachers perceive the effect of such control and power shift on the construction of LA?
 - Teachers' perceptions of the control and power shift in their practices also varied considerably.
 - The most significant differences were the degree of trust that teachers held in their students' abilities for taking such control, and accordingly the degree of teachers' support or intervention.

Implications: The feasibility of LA

- The study shows that autonomy can be developed in everyday instruction within the normal constraints of classroom, curriculum, and organisational structure (Benson, 2007).
- The findings show that, in their everyday classrooms, teachers can relinquish a degree of control to students over learning management, cognitive processing and learning content (Benson, 2001).
- The findings display the complexity and the uniqueness of each teacher's beliefs and classroom practices, and the significant impact of the former on the latter (Borg, 2006).

Implications for professional development

- The variety and divergences shown in teachers' understandings and practices about developing learner autonomy raises issues regarding the extent to which a standard model of LA can be generally applied, even within one institution.
- The evidence of “pseudo empowerment” implies an urgent need professional development to focus on ensuring that teachers have a real understanding of the notion of autonomy, and how it can be implemented in their own classroom contexts, rather than simply applying model devised by someone else.

Implications for research

- The findings provide real-world pictures of teachers' practices of developing learner autonomy.
- These differ to an extent from the self-reported practices (questionnaires, interviews etc.) reported in previous studies in this area.
- This resonates with Borg's (2006) warnings of the risk of teacher cognition research without observed classroom data, and calls for the methodological amendment in this respect.

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Thank You!

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