

# The issue of power and control shift in constructing learner autonomy in Chinese language classrooms

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# Outline

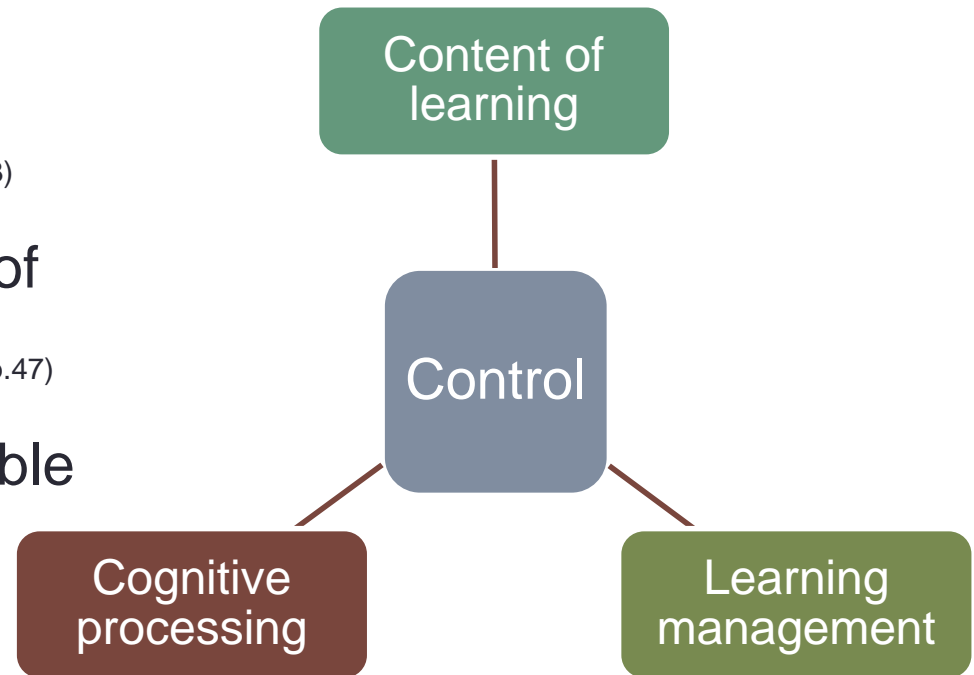
- ❖ **Why this research**
- ❖ **Research questions**
- ❖ **About the research setting**
- ❖ **Participants and methods**
- ❖ **Findings**
- ❖ **Discussions and implications**

# Why this research

- Learner autonomy has been mandated as a key goal of English language learning in the national curriculum of China since 2001, and teachers have been required to provide opportunities for students to learn autonomously.
- In the field of teacher education, it is well established that teachers' understanding of a notion plays a crucial role in its implementation in the classroom. (Wedell, 2009)
- With research into learner autonomy, while much has been studied and written, teachers' perspectives on what autonomy means have not been awarded much attention. (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012)

# Notion of autonomy

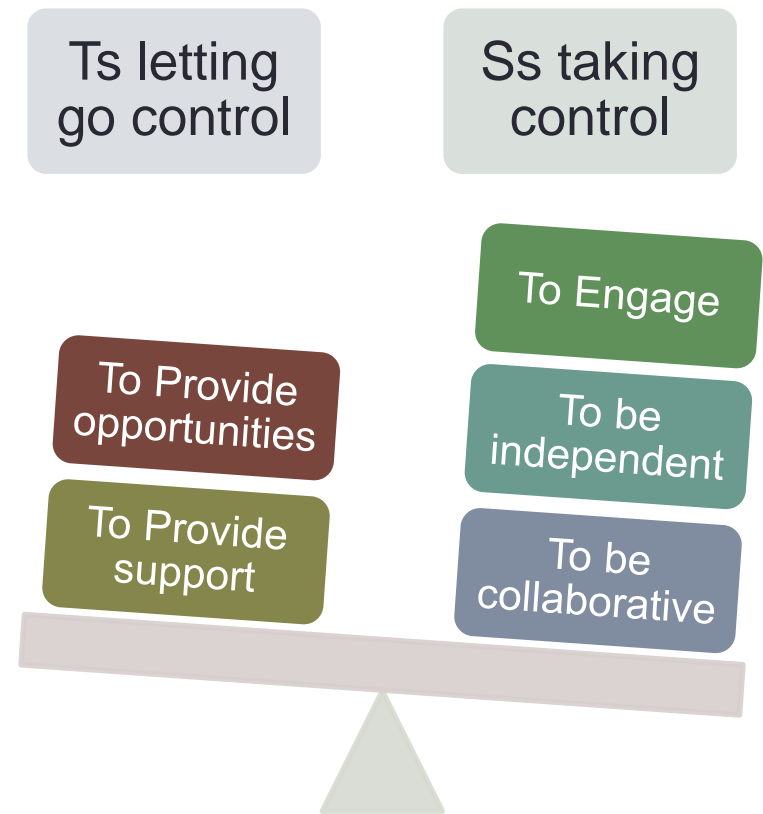
- “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p.3)
- “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (Benson, 2001, p.47)
- “not a single, easily describable behaviour” (Little, 1990, p. 7)
- For effective research and classroom practice, it must be describable in terms of observable behaviours. (Benson, 2001)



Benson (2001)

# Power and control shift in classroom

- As classroom is a 'social context' for learning and communication (Breen, 1986; Breen and Candlin, 1980), autonomy could be developed by a shift in relationships of power and control within the classroom (Benson, 2011, p. 15).
- No empirical studies have been found focusing on such control and power shift in everyday classrooms in the Asian context, particularly from the perspective of teacher cognition and practice.



# Research questions

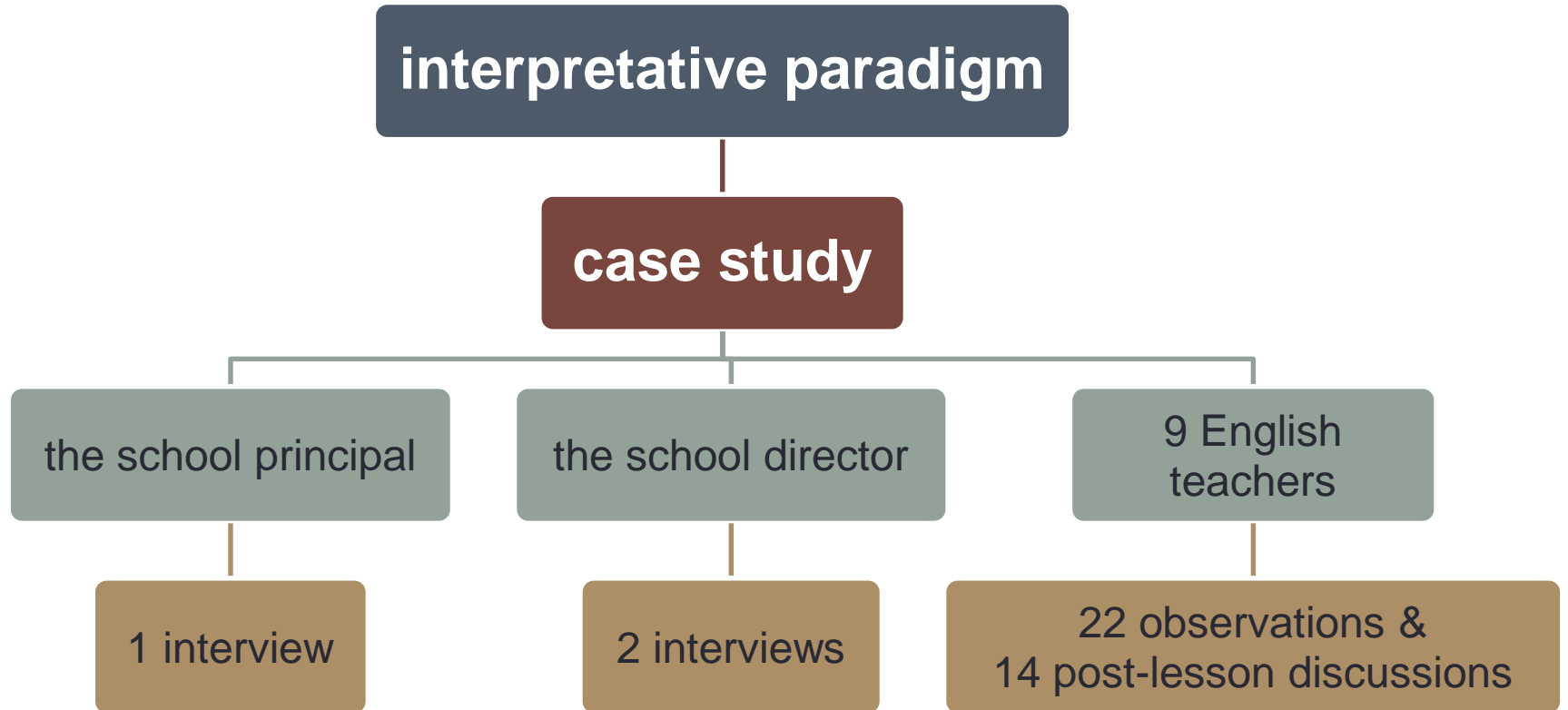
1. If any, to what extent and in what ways was control and power shift reflected in language learning in the given context?
2. If any, to what extent were the teachers aware of such shift in their classroom practices, and how did they perceive this?

# The school in study



- The study was conducted in a private secondary school in China, which was newly established in 2009.
- The principal as well as the founder was a well-recognised educator in China with overseas educational background and successful experience in school administration.
- Student autonomous development was a key school value at Zia.

# Participants & Methods



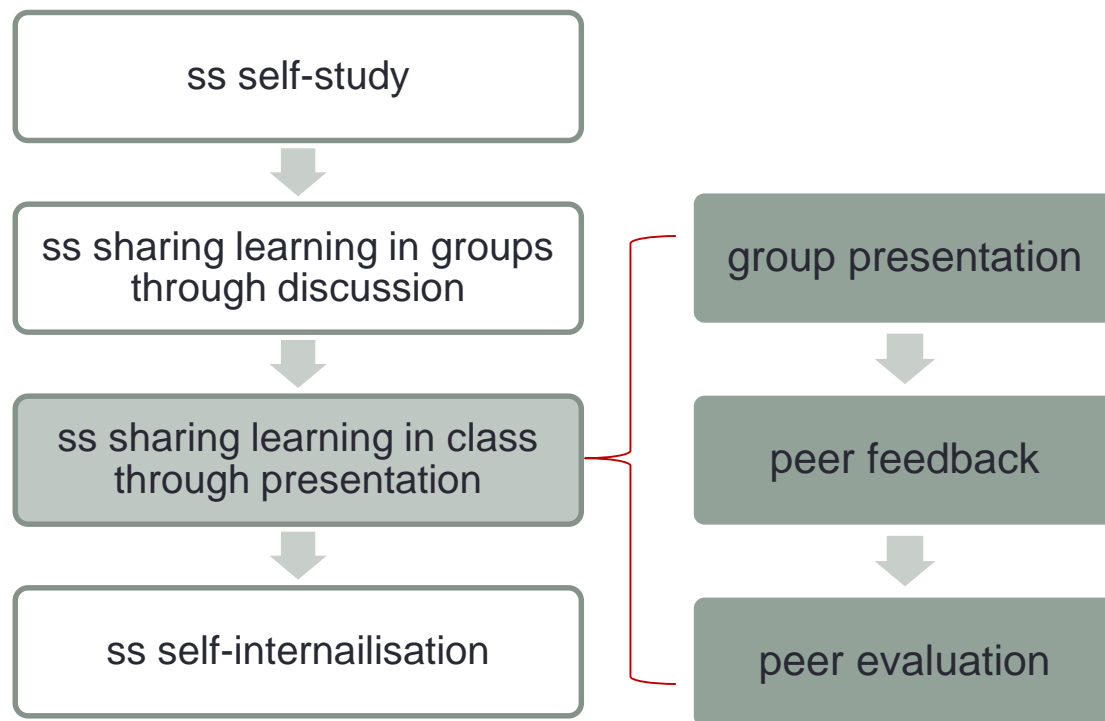
**grounded analysis**  
(Charmaz, 2006)

**Let data talk,  
and themes  
emerge.**



# Findings \_ A school innovative project

- An innovative project was in progress at Zia at the time of the study, promoting learner autonomy with a suggested instructional model entitled “*Autonomous and Collaborative Learning Class Model*”



(Summarised from Interview 1 with the school director )

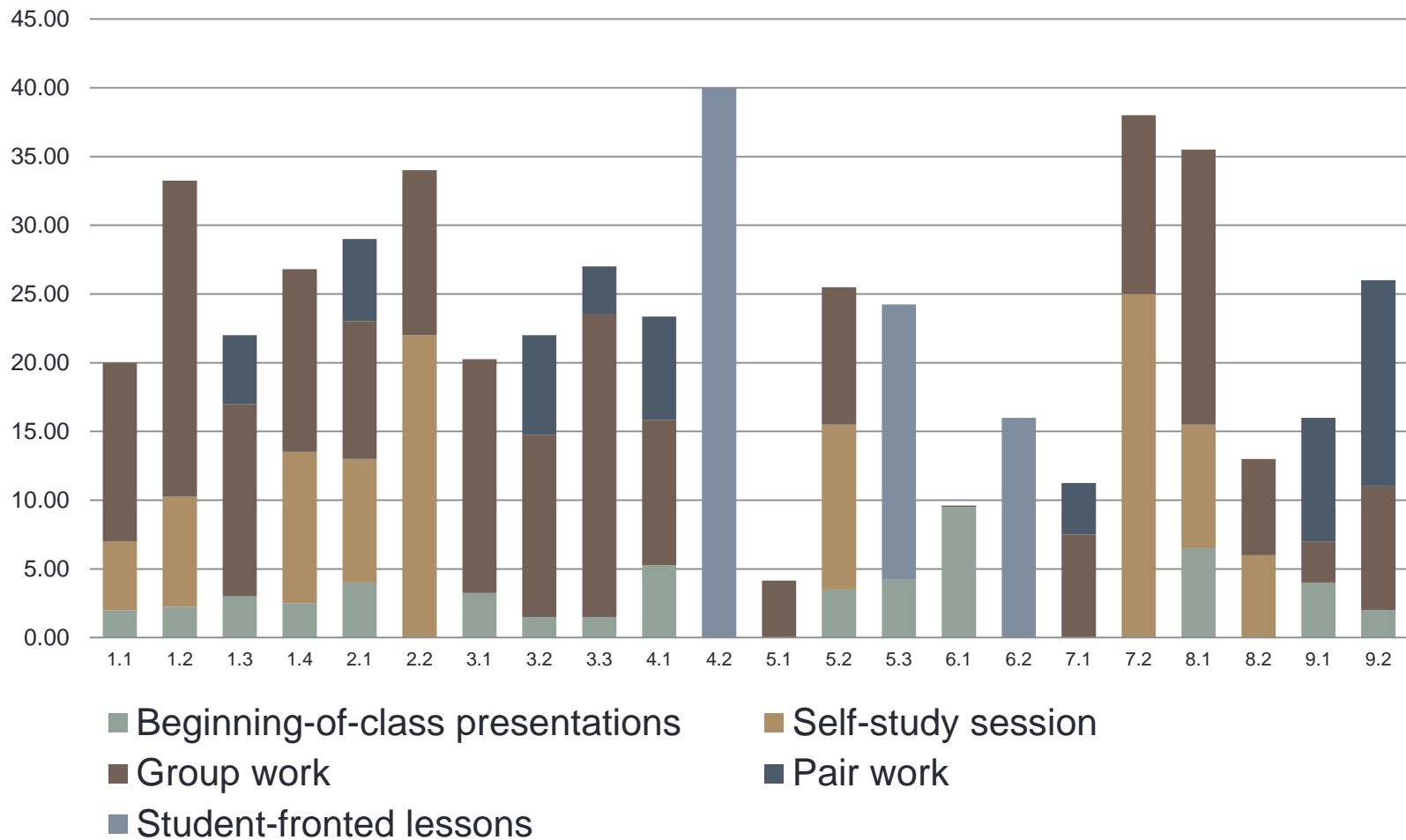
# Findings \_ The principal's voice

- *“To cultivate learner autonomy, teachers must trust students and let them go and try. Freedom is essential, and teachers must let go some control for students”. (Interview with the principal)*
- *“For autonomy, I don't believe in any model. In fact, the forming of any model has gone against the nature of autonomy. However, there is valuable element in this model, and my way is to let him (the school director as well as project leader) go and see how it goes”. (Interview with the principal)*

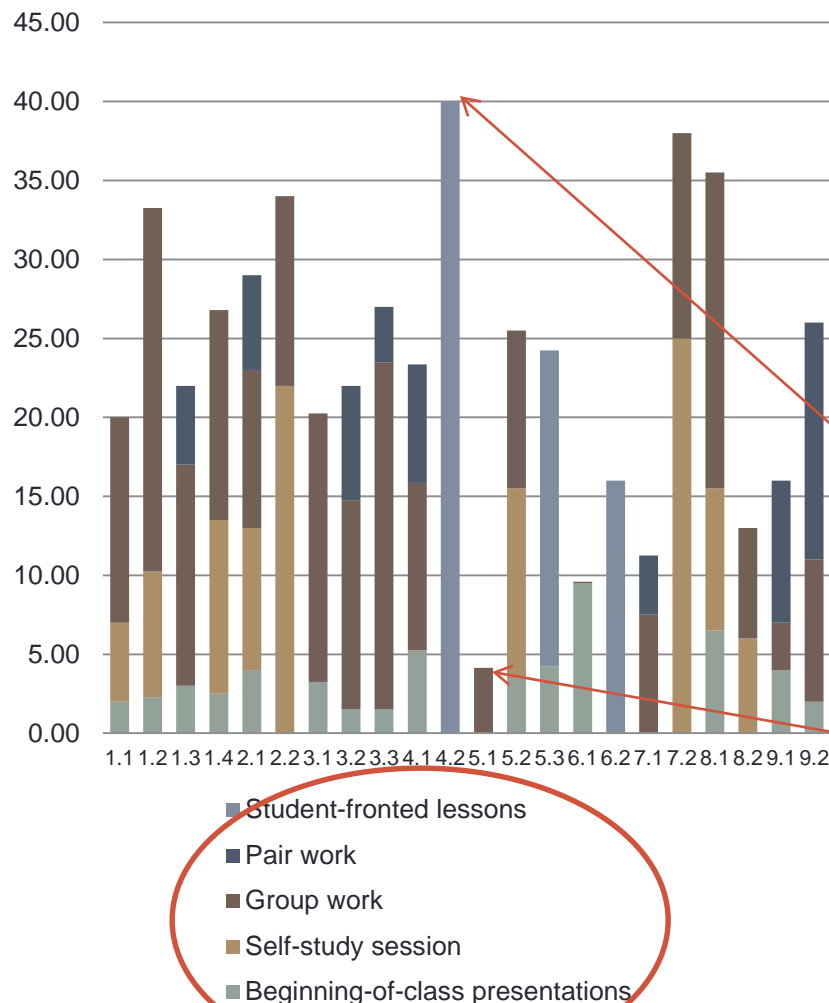
## Findings

Teachers' practices and perceptions  
in relation to control and power shift

## Overview of classroom activities



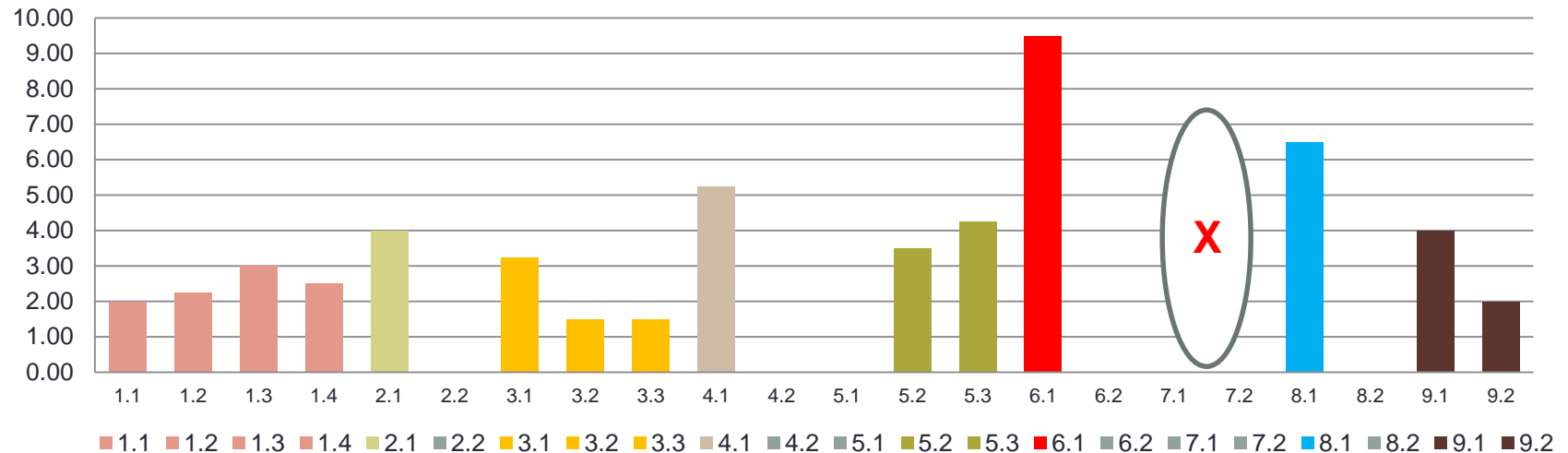
## Overview of classroom activities



*Learning a language is like learning playing a game. The best way to learn it is by playing it. Coaching is helpful, but coaching alone does not work.*

- It is evidenced that for a considerable amount of class time, students were “playing”, rather than listening to the teacher coaching.
- It also shows that students were “playing” both individually and collaboratively with peers.
- Students’ “playing” time varied significantly, from less than five minutes to the whole class session.

## Beginning-of-class presentations



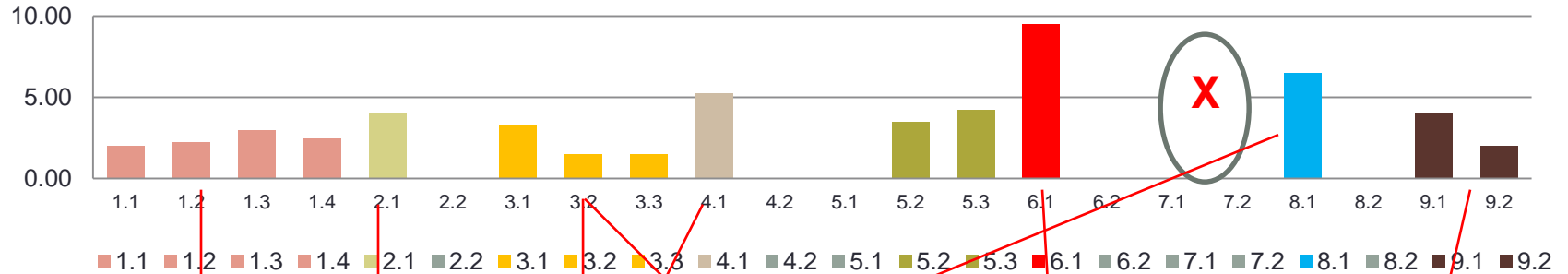
### About this activity

- At the beginning of the class
- Supposed to take 3-5 minutes
- Not a school required activity
- Common practice of 8/9 ts
- Consistent in 3/9 ts

### Evidence of student control

- Presenters choosing their own materials (T1, T3, T5, T8)
- Presenters creating their materials (T9)
- Ss negotiating with T who to present what (T2, T4)
- Presenters teaching the class new vocabulary (T1, T3, T5, T8)
- Presenters and ss asking and answering questions (T1, T3, T5, T8)
- Ss giving presenters critical comments (T1, T3, T4, T6)
- Ss-T co-evaluating the presentations (T1, T9)
- Team presenting (T4, T8, T9)

## Beginning-of-class presentations



... I let them choose any topic freely, so they're interested. They want to show the best of themselves. They come to the presentation and they pronounce the words.

I let you go. I know what I'm doing.

... I let them choose any topic freely. They must choose a topic. They choose a topic from each other. (T2)

... They are keen to do more because they earn points for the job done, and they keep checking their points. (T4)

... Students choose their own materials, but I ask them to come to the presentation and they present, pronounce the words. I give them suggestions in the text. They don't choose a topic. I must train them first. They pass my training, then I let them go. (T6)

I let you go, but...

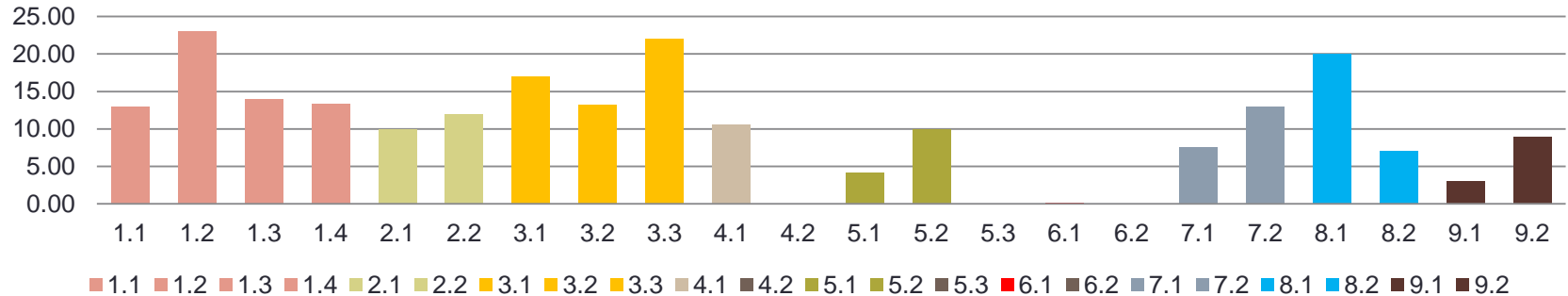
... Why have I introduced the presentation to them? They don't know much. Just a bit fun, other things are covered. (T9)

Well, I don't know

... Well, just to enlarge their vocabulary, nothing much... maybe, you know well, so they try to understand the text. It's a focus of mine... (T3)

Ah ha...

## Group work



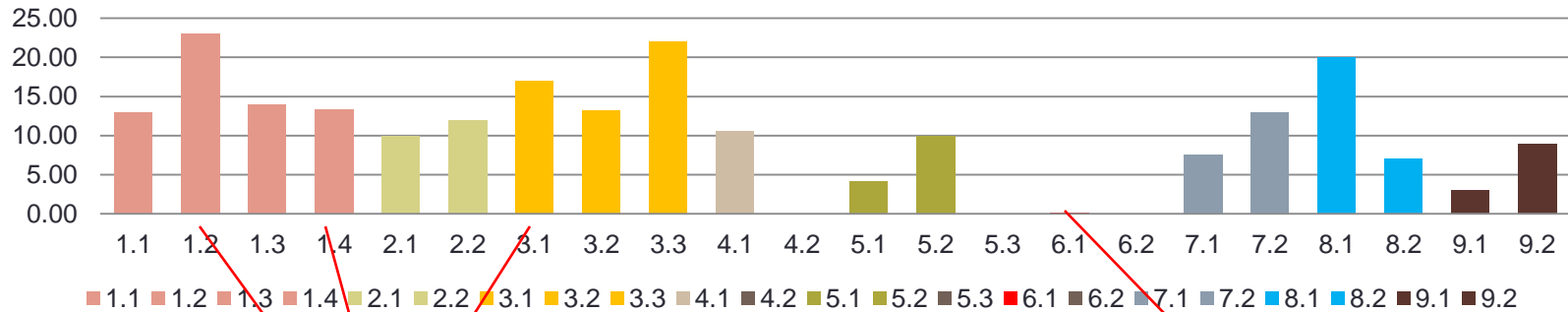
### About this activity

- Identified by the name of group work
- Suggested by the school project leader
- Common practice of 9/9 ts
- Consistent in 9/9 ts
- Time taken ranged from more than 20 to less than 1 minute.

- Doing gap-filling and substitution exercises
- **More closed-ended, and less authentic language use**
- Summarising grammar rules
- Discussing the given questions
- Making oral presentations
- **More open-ended, and more authentic language use**
- Peer-reviewing writing
- Co-creating a story



## Group work



Students worked in groups



Students group presented by writing on the blackboard



Students group presented by speaking to class



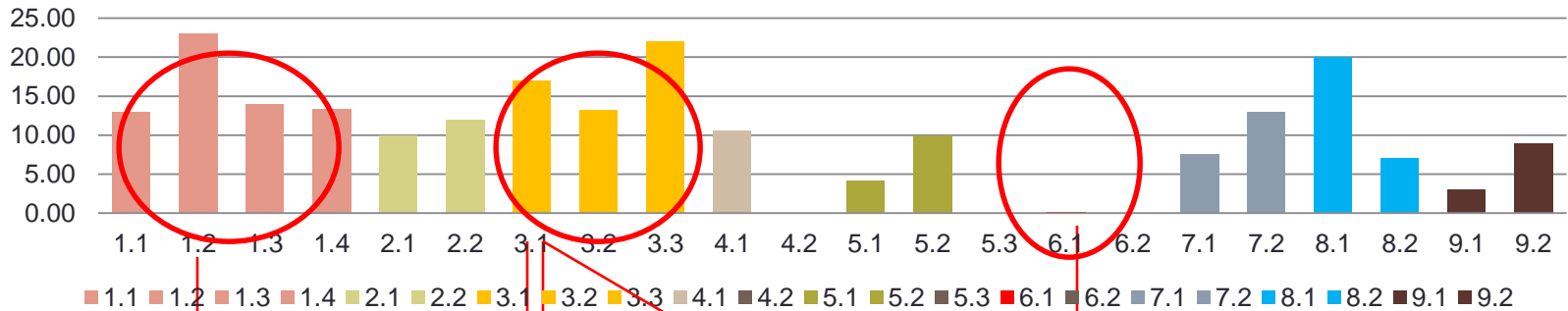
Peer students gave critical/additional comments



T/ss co-evaluated the presented group work

T: ... you can discuss in groups...  
 SS: <silence for 30''>  
 T: OK, let's come back...

# Group work



In groups, they have a sense of group  
 responsibility. They help each other. They  
 take over some of my jobs. (T1)

They are more engaged. They think  
 more actively. (T1, T3)

They have a tolerance of trial and error. (T5)



Ss taking more responsibility

T-ss tug of war for control

Ss more engaged

T pushing ss to work

## Student-fronted lessons

- Don't want to listen to me?
- Ok, you have a go!
- How is it going?
- Not perfect, but not bad. I believe you're fine.
- Let's do more!

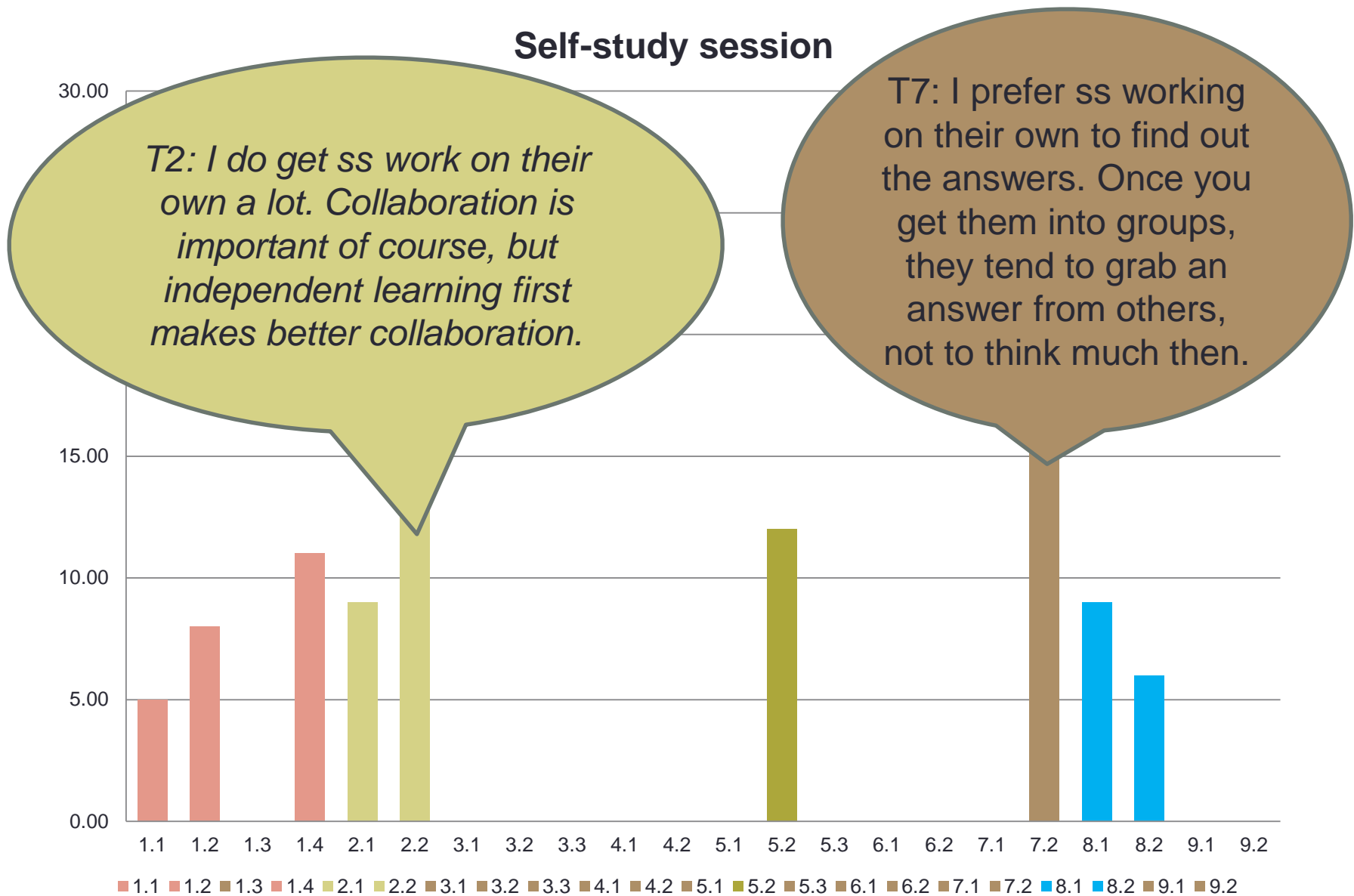
- You look bored with my lecturing.
- Sth different? But are you ok?
- Let's have a try, but take this guide with you in case you get lost.
- How is it going?
- Oh, no, you're not really fine.
- What's next? ? ?

*Ss have great potential. As long as you TEACH him the right stuff, as long as he acts as told, he'll surely do well.*

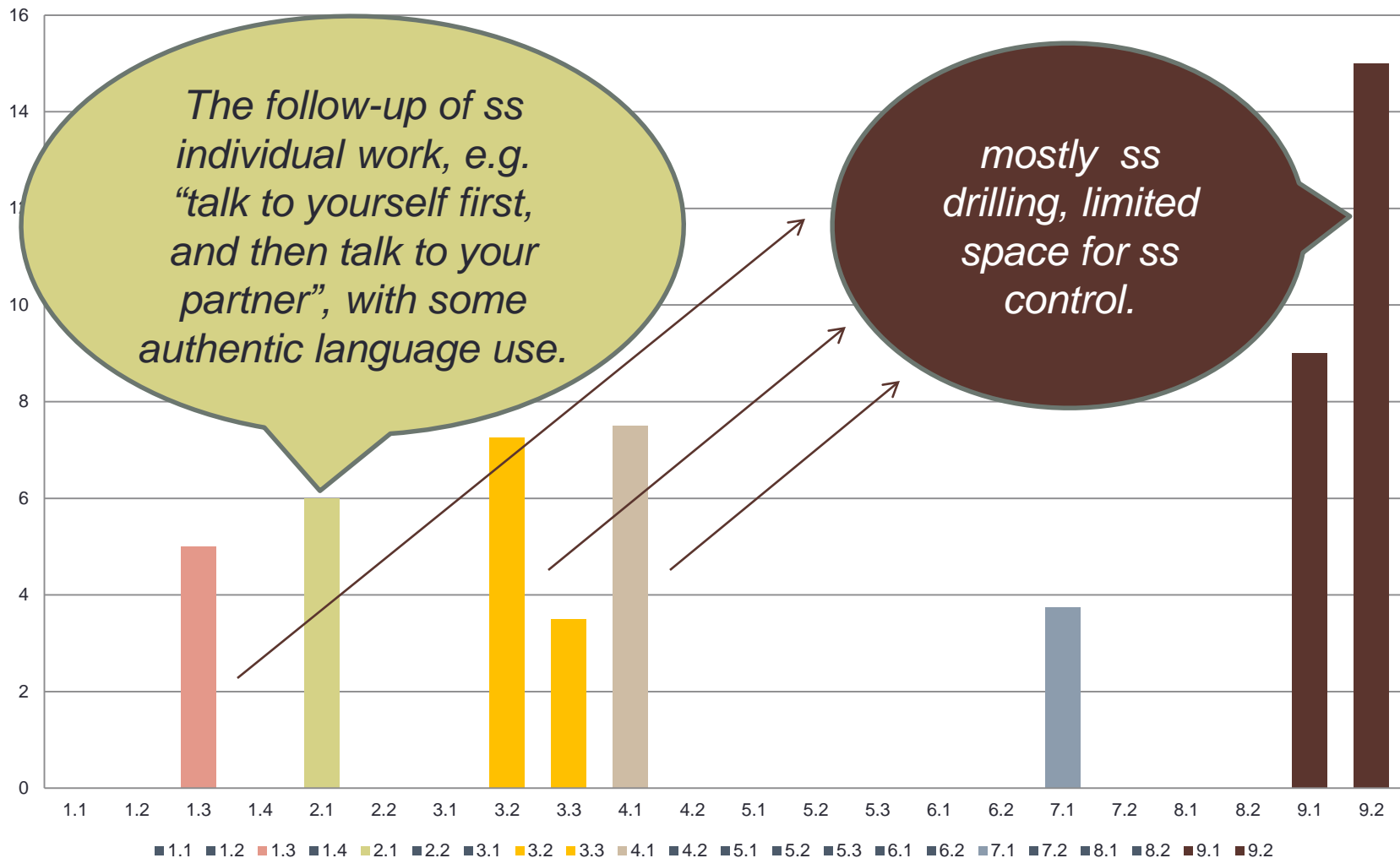
*I certainly give them opportunity, but you see, they couldn't say much, they couldn't get the point at all!*

1.1 1.2 1.3 1.4 2.1 2.2 3.1 3.2 3.3 4.1 4.2 5.1 5.2 5.3 6.1 6.2 7.1 7.2 8.1 8.2 9.1 9.2

## Self-study session



## Pair work



# Summary of findings

1. If any, to what extent and in what ways was control and power shift reflected in language learning in the given context?
  - Sign of control and power shift from teacher to students was seen in most of the observed lessons, but the extent of such shift varied from lesson to lesson and from teacher to teacher. Sign of false empowerment was detected, in which the teacher relinquished control to students on the surface, but withdrew it in actuality.
  - Students were seen taking control in various activities such as giving presentations, studying by themselves, doing pair or group work, and even playing the role of the teacher. However, the extent to which these activities were autonomy-oriented varied, depending on the open-endedness of the tasks/questions involved and the degree of authentic language use.

# Summary of findings

2. If any, to what extent were the teachers aware of such shift in their classroom practices, and how did they perceive this?
  - Teachers' awareness of the control and power shift in their practice varied considerably, ranging from fully conscious to almost unconscious. Contradictory cognitions and practices were detected in some teachers.
  - 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.

# Discussions and implications

- The study provides an example of weak version of autonomy (Smith, 2003) in classroom, which shows that autonomy can be usable in everyday instruction without necessarily challenging the constraints of classroom and curriculum organization to which they are subject (Benson, 2007).
- The findings demonstrate that teachers can relinquish a certain degree of control to students over learning management, cognitive processing and learning content (Benson, 2001) in everyday classroom. Collaborative control (White, 2003) is feasible between learners and teachers and between learners and learners.
- The findings display the complexity and the uniqueness of each individual teacher's cognitions and classroom practices, and the significant impact of the former on the latter (Borg, 2006).



# Discussions and implications

- The variety and divergences shown in teachers' understandings and practices about developing learner autonomy questions the value and necessity of an instruction MODEL. The evidence of "false empowerment" implies a more urgent need for a real understanding of the notion of autonomy than a blind implementation in some superficial 'seeming-autonomy-oriented' forms.
- The findings provide real-world pictures of teachers' practices of developing learner autonomy, which differs to an extent from the self-reported practices reported in previous studies in this area. This resonates 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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