Field: Learner/Teacher Autonomous Development

Challenges for Communicative Language Teaching to Large Classes: The Paradox of Controlled Autonomy

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Japan's current English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) education policy envisions the development of the nation's practical English communication abilities (Nishio & Watanabe 2008), pulling to the foreground the importance of communicative language teaching (CLT). The goal of CLT is to develop learners' communicative competence by providing learning opportunities that engage the students in meaningful and authentic language use rather than in the merely mechanical practice of language patterns (Larsen-Freeman 1986). However, it has been reported that the implementation of CLT faces many difficulties, particularly when dealing with large classes (e.g., Ellis 1996; Holliday 1997; LoCastro 2001; Nishio & Watanabe 2008; Sarwar 2001). Yet, EFL classes in Japan often consist of large numbers of students, especially at university level. The present study introduces problems related to the large class size, and suggests solutions. I discuss the difficulties in carrying out communicative activities targeted for students with low oral skills, in establishing rapport, and in motivating the students. The principal approach to these issues relies on the paradoxical exercise of teacher-controlled learner autonomy, which is based on the sustained negotiation between teacher and student about the learner's degrees of freedom (i.e., learner autonomy) and reciprocal responsibilities (e.g., concrete objectives for the student to achieve; specific learning opportunities for the teacher to provide).

Three major problems typically occur in large classes. (1) *With respect to communicative activities*: It takes time to set up a task, and it is nearly impossible to carry out individualized activities or to provide teacher's assistance when

required. The students easily feel nervous or intimidated when talking in front of a large class. (2) *With respect to establishing rapport with students, and among students*: Since the students are not familiar with each other, it is difficult for the students to have relaxed and cooperative interactions. (3) *With respect to student motivation:* The students may lack integrative motivation and self-confidence to perform tasks in L2 (due to language use anxiety and low self-efficacy). Since the students can not receive individual attention from the teacher, they tend to lose their interest in classroom activities. Further issues may include the maintenance of discipline and classroom management.

Despite the obstacles, it is important for the students to have as many opportunities as possible to practice and develop their English communicative competence. To facilitate the students' maximum active involvement in learning activities, my proposed approach is to offer four styles of learning contexts for the class: (1) teacher-directed activities with the whole class; (2) individual work outside the class; (3) work in pairs; and (4) group projects. The first of these styles might sound contradictory to the current theme of learner autonomy, but can help to establish the teacher's active presence as a primary source of guidance and support, and can be helpful for shy and novice learners to acquire basic proficiency and confidence, which in turn may facilitate the other styles of learning contexts (see also Holliday 1997; Nishio & Watanabe 2008). The remaining three styles all rely on the continued dialogue between learner and teacher, in a cooperative effort to design valid and efficient learning opportunities that elicit the student's enthusiasm and engagement. The activities are all compatible with large classes and appropriate also for students with low communicative skills, low confidence, and various needs. Finally, suggestions are made on how the proposed goals are measurable with effective means of evaluation, including self-report questionnaires and classroom observation using objective instruments. In conclusion, the combination of the teacher's and students' leadership is the key to create a realistic and effective CLT context. Limitations posed by large classes can not be overcome completely, but it is possible to provide meaningful and stimulating learning opportunities.