

Doing it for Themselves: The Impact of Learners in Organised Groups

By Terry Greatrex

Introduction

The study of language teaching and learning focuses on the behaviour and gains of individual learners. Recent work in applying Socio-Cultural Theory (Langolf & Beckett, 2009), Dynamic Systems Theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997) and others, which integrate the context in which language learning occurs, still place the individual learner at the centre of the learning process. It is suggested in this paper that a deeper understanding of how groups of learners behave may also be helpful, not only to the learners themselves, but to their teachers and administrators. As a case study, a university student group activity is examined and it is proposed that an extension of the concept of autonomy from the individual to the group may be useful in understanding how to respond to the efforts of language learners in some situations.

The context and the activity

The University of Nottingham in Ningbo, China (UNNC), has taught a number of degree courses to a largely Chinese student body since 2006. The students at UNNC, as do students in domestic Chinese universities, take an active

part in clubs and societies over a range of interests including sport and performance, study, volunteering and self-help. In 2008, a student group (SG), one of whose purposes was to help new students adjust to life at UNNC, approached the Self Access Centre (SAC) to see if there was a way that the group could work with the SAC. They had identified a need among Year 1 students for help with spoken English and were investigating how this need could be addressed.

After a series of meetings between the SG and the SAC, it was decided to form a number of discussion groups comprising six Year 1 students, each led by a senior student. The groups would come together at the start of a semester and meet once a week throughout. The SG would recruit the senior students (called Mentors) and the Year 1 students (Members), and the SAC would find Tutors to provide training and support for the Mentors, each Tutor being responsible for 4 Mentors. The administrative tasks – promotion, room booking, attendance, liaison with the university – were divided between the SG and the SAC. The initial structure of the project, called Passport to Autonomy in Collaboration with Tutors (PACT), is presented in Figure 1.

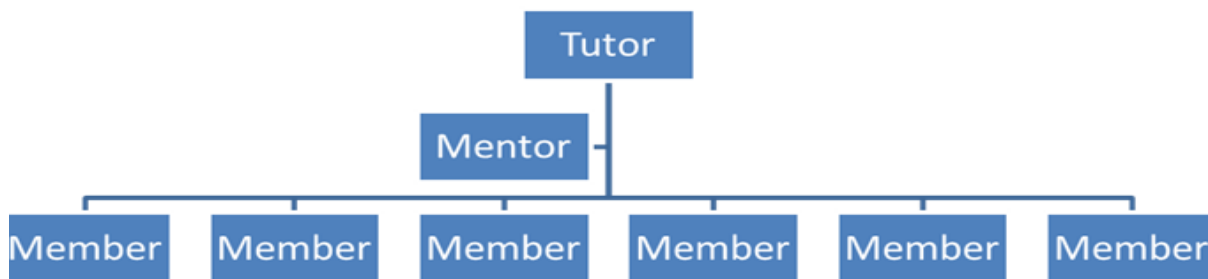


Figure 1: The Initial Structure of PACT

In the first year, PACT involved five Tutors, 20 Mentors, and 120 Year 1 Members. The activity proved to be popular with both Year 1 and senior students and by 2012, numbers had grown to 24 Mentors and 144 Members with a new level of six Senior Mentors to take over some of the training and administrative tasks of the Tutors. In Semester 1, 2012, 89 students applied for the 24 Mentor positions and 342 students applied for the 144 Member positions.

Initial reflections

As PACT developed and the groups and sub-groups involved addressed and solved various logistical, training and other issues, it was not clear how best to view it. Which theoretical perspective on learning or human behaviour would best explain the impulses that initiated and grew the project? The author became the Lead Tutor in 2010 and was immediately impressed by the imagination and determination of participating students to make the activity succeed. There seemed to be something happening beyond the usual dynamics of an active Chinese university society. A number of theoretical frameworks were considered:

- “Learner involvement is fundamental to developing learner autonomy” (Little, 2007, p. 1). The students were heavily involved in the project and undertook much of the management of it themselves so it could be viewed in terms of individual learner autonomy.
- “Motivation may lead to autonomy or be a precondition for it” (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002, p. 262). Why were the students so interested in helping themselves learn? Perhaps the concept of learner motivation was applicable.
- “Peer tutoring [is] training and resourcing successful, more experienced students to tutor novice students in a collaborative learning experience in which both parties richly benefit” (Beasley, 1997, p. 21). But it was not only a matter of students helping themselves learn; they were helping each other learn. Was it a student-initiated version of peer tutoring?
- “In order for SALL [Self-Access Language Learning] to be successful, teachers must

prepare their students to accept more responsibility for their learning than they may be accustomed to” (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p. 43). When the Student Group approached the SAC, they were looking for access to resources, human and material, to help them achieve the language goals they had already identified. So was it an example of Self Access Language Learning? “Each self-access center should know its users, their culture and educational background, and allow this knowledge to influence the design of facilities and services” (Jones, 1995, p. 233). Then again, this was China and a particular campus with a particular history and particular students. Whether viewed as an instance of Holliday’s (1999) small culture or of larger national culture, was the activity largely an expression of culture?

- “Some generic skills and abilities (notably communication skills, problem solving, analysis and teamwork skills) lend themselves to development at university” (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragolini, 2004, p. 161). Or was it, more pragmatically but not more simply, an effort by students to increase their employability?

It did not seem that any of these approaches fully captured the collective, collaborative aspect of the activity where groups and sub-groups of students developed a system to achieve an agreed language learning goal for some of them. Certainly, there were benefits for every student involved; gains in spoken English fluency for Members, experience in managing and leading discussion groups for Mentors, experience in administering a campus wide project for those in the Student Group. The two distinguishing features of the activity, however, appeared to be that this was a language learning activity managed to a significant degree by a student group, albeit involving some teachers, and that it had continued to grow and evolve over a number of semesters. PACT now appeared to be a largely independent and self-regulating, or autonomous, entity.

Learner group autonomy

The idea of individual learner autonomy is an established concept in the research into and teaching of English as an additional language (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Benson, 2007). Benson (2001, p. 105) concluded, after reviewing the current research, that “the assumption ... that autonomy is beneficial to learning does ... appear to be supported by convincing arguments”. If autonomy can be characterized as the capacity to take control of one’s own learning (Benson, 2001), then perhaps a *group* of learners can also be autonomous. Could a group with learning as its primary purpose be considered in terms of learner autonomy? Little (2009, p. 223), referring to the research, summarized various characteristics or criteria of language learner autonomy, stating that in formal educational contexts, autonomous language learners

- are able to take charge of their own learning;
- develop a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action;
- can manage the affective dimension of their learning experience to their motivational advantage;
- become more autonomous in language learning in proportion as they become more autonomous in language use, and vice versa.

If these are the criteria of autonomous individual learners, can they also be applied then, in formal educational contexts, to *groups* of language learners? And if so, are these criteria met by PACT?

It should be remembered that the object of study here is the group, not the individuals that compose the group. We are looking at collective characteristics in the anthropomorphic way we use the terms ‘a learning organization’ or ‘organizational memory’. Just as there may be individuals in a learning organisation who do not themselves learn, there may be individuals in an autonomous group of learners who are not in themselves autonomous learners. We are looking at the learning gains of the group represented by changes in whole group behaviour towards a group goal.

Applying the criteria

The four criteria identified by Little (2009) above were applied in retrospect to PACT to test whether the activity could be seen as an instance of learner group autonomy.

- Was PACT able to take charge of its own learning? Learning for PACT would be the growing ability to self-regulate and re-structure in order to better achieve its goals and to present itself as a persistent entity to other groups such as the SAC and the university as a whole. Once formed, PACT tested various discussion activities, retaining those that worked and discarding those that did not. At the end of each semester the group conducted surveys of Mentors and Members for feedback which they incorporated in planning for the following semester. PACT became a student body with a growing presence on campus and with which at least two university offices regularly corresponded. PACT appeared to have taken significant charge of its own learning.
- Did PACT develop a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action? This is perhaps less clear but supportable. When detached views were taken and decisions made they were often done so by individuals or committees acting as members of the Student Group or the SAC, particularly when involved in managing PACT functions such as Mentor and Member recruitment or corresponding with offices of the university. However, even in these capacities, the individuals acted nominally in their roles within PACT. They would have identified themselves as participants of PACT. Habits of critical reflection and independent action were also observed that became part of group culture over time.
- Could PACT manage the affective dimension of its learning experience to its motivational advantage? PACT Mentors were supported by a team of Tutors who held several training meetings each

semester and were available at any time. Mentors themselves formed groups of four for mutual support and the sharing of ideas. After discussions with the university, official recognition of PACT activities was recorded on Mentor graduate transcripts as non-academic credit, which provided added motivation to succeed as a PACT Mentor.

- Did PACT become more autonomous in language learning in proportion as it became more autonomous in language use, and vice versa? This criterion refers to the mechanism of feedback and asks, more or less, if autonomy bred further autonomy. After being formed by the Student Group and the SAC, PACT became more autonomous in achieving its group goals. From being an activity run by the SG and the SAC, it evolved to become a group to which representatives of the SG and the SAC were assigned to take particular roles. An 'organizational memory' developed based on records of meetings and correspondence and on semester reviews. It was mentioned on the university website as a group which students can join. It became more autonomous over time and it would be reasonable to attribute part of this to the positive experience of previous autonomy.

Discussion

Although this application of the attributes of individual language learner autonomy to a group of language learners is not conclusive, there are indications that such a group can learn, and that it can do so with increasing autonomy to the benefit of its members. If this is so, there are implications for the teaching and management of groups of language learners in formal educational contexts.

PACT was a group situated in a university in China populated largely with Chinese students. There is evidence (Wang, 2009) that Chinese high school graduates do not enter university with as much experience of individual learner autonomy as Western students. This suggests that, while encouraging individual autonomy among Chinese university students, there is value in providing them also with opportunities to join more-or-less autonomous student groups

whose aims include individual learning. There may be a cultural dimension (Jones, 1995) to autonomy in which senior and junior Chinese students feel comfortable in a peer tutoring relationship within the structure of a student group. If so, teachers could offer training to students in how best to act as peer tutors. As mentioned above (Spratt et al., 2002), if motivation leads to or is a precondition for autonomy, teachers and institutions could consider how to provide further motivation to groups of learners to become more autonomous.

Conclusion

These are initial reflections on fostering the autonomy of groups of language learners but the underlying idea that is proposed here is that the constitution and behaviour of learners acting in groups is worthy of study. In considering PACT, only the language learning literature was canvassed. The behaviour of groups is of central interest in a number of other academic fields – organizational behaviour in business, for example, and, of course, in sociology and related disciplines. A greater theoretical focus within language learning on how groups of learners behave and influence individual gains may yield insights into how teachers and institutions can better relate to and support them as a potentially important element in individual student learning.

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