

# Intersubjectivity Engagement in EFL Classroom in China

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**Abstract**—This article draws upon on the notion of intersubjectivity in the EFL setting in China and interpret what intersubjective EFL setting in China and interpret what intersubjective engagement is like through classroom conversational analysis. In EFL classroom, language is used to teach language. Classroom conversation extends individual mind and encourages minds interaction. Classroom observation and the statistics of intersubjectivity mechanics show what extent intersubjectivity engagement is displayed in EFL classroom.

**Keywords**- *EFL classroom intersubjectivity engagement intersubjectivity mechanics*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language learning classroom is a special educational circumstance where the students are responsible for more than language learning and the teacher has responsibility for guiding the students to engage in the language community to the largest extent. In China, it is the trend that the traditional educational philosophy of transmission of knowledge is being replaced by the dynamic collaborative conversation between teachers and students. The students' academic achievements are measured by their involvement and engagement in the teacher-student conversations. During more than 30 years' development, EFL teaching in China went through from teacher-centered to student – centered and then to intersubjectivity-oriented trends.

The concept of intersubjectivity, originated from philosophy, and developed in the psychology of communication and sociolinguistics (Rogoff, 1990; Rommetveit, 1998), are useful for analyzing classroom conversations in which the instructor and the students with traditional educational backgrounds try to develop a teaching design of a classroom functioning as a community of learners. Teaching in a classroom is a goal-directed activity of designing guidance. Teacher's cultural role identification is affected by local and global education philosophy and the teacher's personal value perception. According to the classic education philosophy, Analects of Confucius or Plato's The Republic, the ideal education happens when the harmonious relationship between teacher and students and fulfilling engagement of the students occur.

How students engage in the EFL classroom community is reflected by the teacher-students classroom conversation. I will draw upon on the notion of intersubjectivity in the

EFL setting in China and interpret what intersubjective engagement is like through classroom conversational analysis.

## II. INTERSUBJECTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN EFL CLASSROOM IN CHINA

The teacher-student relationship in EFL classroom in China develops from teacher-centered trend to student – centered and then to intersubjectivity trend. EFL classroom is a special context in which English as target language is both the teaching subject and teaching tool. Students and teacher perceive their roles, relationship, and cultural identity via perception of language use. Language interaction is an activity that allows them to coordinate actions, perceptions and attitudes, share experiences and plans, and to construct and maintain complex social relations.

In ancient Chinese traditional education philosophy, the teacher's identity is built on the basis of Confucius philosophy. The concordances from CCL Corpus show that “Shi zhe; teacher” collocates mostly with “respect” “serve” “admiration” “ritual” “gratitude”. Teacher as an authority is highly superior to students. Thus for a long period in Chinese EFL classroom there is a multimodal hierarchical linguistic structure. In recent EFL circumstances in China, this classroom hierarchical structure is changing with that of the broad social setting and educational tuitions. The last 150 years of Chinese history is a history of linguistic rationalization which is taken by extensively reading various alternative western discourses. Chinese language in the last hundreds of years, particularly starting from the May Fourth Movement, has been conceptualized by various Western ideas. Those words that is absent in the traditional Chinese language such as “concept” “ideas” “knowledge” “ideology”, now fill up today's Chinese text. Target language culture is oriented by individual interactive collaboration.

Linguistic activity is a means by which individuals come to jointly apprehend and manipulate information to create informational and behavior interpersonal synergies, which potentially outstretch the cognitive abilities of any of the individuals is they on their own. Thus, language as a skillful intersubjective activity constitutes dialogically extended minds. Language is social in nature and it is something that will be done together, reflecting individual interaction and enables skillful intersubjective engagement. As Duranti (2013) points out, the term ‘intersubjectivity’

covers a territory in scholarly usage which ranges from “acts in which one is minimally aware of the presence of another to acts in which one actively works at making sure that the other and the Self are perceptually, conceptually, and practically co-ordinated around a particular task.” Language is an activity that allows people to coordinate actions, perceptions and attitudes, share experiences and plans, and to construct and maintain complex social relations. In EFL classroom, language is used to teach language. Classroom conversation extends individual mind and encourages minds interaction.

#### A. *Language is a tool to extend individual mind*

A. Clark argues that rather than serving merely as a vehicle of existing symbolic thought, language comes to actually constitute part of the process of thinking (Clark, 1997). Memory and conceptual structures are offloaded in an external linguistic structure. In other words, linguistic patterns enable the cognitive agent to construct, and manipulate cognitive ingredients that shape and support cognitive processes. Language is material in form and cognitive in nature. Language is still primarily in support of wider communicative and cognitive practices, that is, to enable interpersonal interaction and coordination. In this sense, language (even when written) is first and foremost a dialogical and intersubjective activity. Language is an activity that allows people to coordinate actions, perceptions and attitudes, share experiences and plans, and to construct and maintain complex social relations on different time scales (Kravchenko, 2007).

#### B. *Language is a tool to interact minds*

A growing number of studies (Donald, 1991; Galantucci, 2009) are suggesting that language evolved from a pressure for increasingly sophisticated means of socio-cultural coordination and cooperation: by producing material symbols, humans manipulate public cognitive ingredients open, enabling intersubjective cognitive activities. Examples of material symbols as the vehicles of intersubjective cognitive coordination are pervasive, ranging from everyday chats to ancient manuscripts realizing the coordination of knowledge and activities. During interpersonal interactions, people readily adapt to each other by continuous reciprocal priming and mimicking (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Pickering & Ferreira, 2008). Even in absence of rich behavioural interaction, people have been argued to be very sensitive to the other's perspectives and engagement (Duran & Dale, 2013). The linguistic aspects of language are considered in continuation with other expressive behaviors such as gestures, postures and facial expressions. The term ‘language’ is thus used quite broadly about the simultaneous orchestration of many modalities all of which can be considered public, material instantiations of the conversation as a coordinative activity (Goodwin, 2011). Language enables people to do things better together, or even to do things they would not be able to do as individuals.

#### C. *Language learning is based on intercultural dialogue*

Language learning is a double-voiced discourse. The primary orientation is to self. The other orientation is to the members of the group. Teacher and learners are interested not only in talking and listening to others talk, but

exploring the intentions and reactions of the other participants in the classroom dialogue. In EFL classroom, teacher and learners are both participants and observers of a cross-cultural dialogue that takes place in the foreign language across grammatical exercises, communicative activities, and the discussion of the text.

### III. OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSIONS

#### A. *EFL classroom observation*

From three perspectives, the China English classroom in an American teacher's eyes, a Chinese English teacher's conversation and a Chinese student's conversation, the paper analyzes the intersubjectivity engagement mechanics.

Example 1: Amy was an American English teacher in our university. She had taught English in China ten years before. She said that she came to China to look for the roots of teachers' authority, which she thought was absent in American education system. She liked the respect the Chinese students pay to their teachers. She had the following account to describe her excitement when she visited an EFL class in China in 2012:

It was 8 o'clock on a Thursday morning and I will never forget the surprise I experienced as I walked in that classroom. This was a Chinese English classroom at a leading university. It was alive with listening and speaking and students' interaction. Unlike the traditional Chinese classrooms, the teacher was not at the head of the classroom, standing behind a desk reading a text aloud. She was moving among the students, encouraging, coaching and facilitating. Students were speaking and doing cooperatively, and they were speaking both in Chinese and English actively. (from interview transcript)

Example 2: Hong was a college English teacher with 9 years teaching experience. She teaches fundamental college English which is an integrated course including reading, listening, speaking and writing. The following account are used to describe one of her classroom tasks.

..... what you will talk about is “we are what we read”, Some people believe that reading is a critical part of learning and growth, a good book can open a new world, while others believe we learn by doing, and learn best from first-hand and concrete experiences. what is your opinion? All right? Group leaders, please write down the key points..... Do you have any questions?....after the group discussion, one of group members in each group needs to make a short speech.

Example 3: Han Xi was a student who had learned English for 7 years. He made a presentation representing his group:

In the author's opinion, reading has the same position as practicing.

Both of them are the ways of studying. Practicing means studying directly while reading means studying indirectly. For example, farmers do farm work for a long time then they get much experience so they can bring back lots of what they plant every year. It is called practicing. However, experts from agricultural institute have never done farm work. But they gained knowledge about farming systematically so they can guide farmers how to do well in farming. It is called reading.

The author must say that reading broadens our horizon certainly. Our predecessor summarized many what they

underwent, so some mistakes they committed can be avoided as well as what they left which is excellent be inherited and developed. .

But reading has its limitation. There are slangs saying

Intersubjectivity mechanics (in teacher's journal and video transcript)	Pearson Correlation	1	.938(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	10	10
Intersubjectivity mechanics (in interview)	Pearson Correlation	.938(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	10	10

it is better to see for oneself rather than to hear for many times and it is better to do for oneself rather than to see for many times. I believe that many people have read some books of Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. No matter how much of these books are read, their legendary lives are not ours. Sometimes it is necessary to practise on one's own. Recently, the author went to a University every Saturday to attend an optional course about using a software. As long as, the author followed the teacher to do his operation on the laptop of the author's at a time, the author can be familiar with it very much. But only listening to what the teacher said would make people forget the steps after class. So practicing is important too.

The author does not mean giving up reading. The knowledge on the books can guide readers how to practice. Nowadays there is a sentence that people like to say recently, "the world is so big and I want to see it. " It is right to read a thousand books and travel a thousand miles. However, if you don't read one thousand books, you are only a postman even if you travel one thousand miles.

Example 4: Lin Dan was a college English teacher with 5-year-teaching experience. She told the author that the loss of confidence during the discussion with her students about their topics. She felt she could not make any contribution to the discussion because she knew little about what they were talking about. She recalled:

Students have a variety of interests and needs, most of which I have no idea. Actually I have never thought about these in the past. I have thought these have nothing to do with teaching. Now I suddenly find that the students know every which I do not know. I even doubt that with that little knowledge, how can I teach my students who are smarter than me. I feel very humiliated. I feel eager to learn. I need to read in order to catch up with my students.

#### B. Discussion

Define intersubjectivity mechanics as the number of utterances showing intersubjective engagement in the observation journals and the conversation transcript. Conduct retrospective interview to avoid the one – sidedness of a single approach. The correlation between two approaches is 0.938. It is a positive correlation.

During interpersonal interactions, people readily adapt to each other and share a higher cognitive process beyond transmission of information. Here the linguistic aspects of

language are considered in continuation with other expressive behaviors such as gestures, postures, eye contact, facial expressions as well as other modalities. The term "language" is thus used in a broad sense.

The dynamics of intersubjective engagement shown by multi forms of language shapes expressive behaviors. The lexicalization of confidence correlated with individual participants' task performance. It is through the intersubjective interaction and coordination that individual participants become each other's cognitive extension.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Foreign language learning is a process of fostering intersubjective understanding and intercultural communication. According to the data from classroom observation, EFL classroom conversation shows an intersubjectivity orientation. The dynamics of intersubjective engagement shown by multi forms of language shapes expressive behaviors. The lexicalization of confidence correlated with individual participants' task performance. It is through the intersubjective interaction and coordination that individual participants become each other's cognitive extension. The unique cultural and linguistic feature of English enables target language in EFL classroom as a tool of extending individual mind and interacting collaborative minds. Education philosophy concept intersubjectivity is embedded in language being taught and used. Intercultural understanding is fostered as a result.

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