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Students' Experience in Student-Centered Learning at Higher Education Institutions in China: A Case Study

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on students' experience in student-centered learning at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in China. Socio-economic transformation and growth in China have led to unprecedented changes in higher education in the past three decades. The notion of world class university is high on the policy agenda at governmental and institutional levels in China. As a result, Chinese higher education has expanded tremendously both in quality and quantity. However, a slow progress has been made in engaging students in the teaching-learning process, both as beneficiaries and implementers. The study found out that students' experiences in student-centered learning at HEIs in China are characterized by different developments and challenges. Despite the different challenges, HEIs students in China are experiencing some benefits of student-centered class environment. The students are able to share ideas and experiences, learn collaboratively, and apply content-based knowledge into real world problems. However, there is still a major problem with regard to recognizing each and every student and embracing them to the class interaction equally. Some students are dominant, while others participate rarely in the class interaction. The interaction of students is highly influenced by the experience and perception of instructors towards students' participation. The facilitation of the instructor can recognize or marginalize students in a class and could greatly affect their participation and building up of a strong student-centered learning environment. This paper contributes in making learning more participatory, enjoyable, and meaningful.

KEY WORDS: Student-centered learning, students' experience, pedagogy, higher education institutions in China, share ideas and experiences, learn collaboratively, and apply content-based knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Enhancing student's learning experiences has become more important in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) since the mid 1990s, due to increased student enrollment and diversification (Poon, 2013). As a result, parallel to the technological, socio-economic, and political aspects, the teaching-learning process is also changing tremendously, both in nature and quality. Teachers are changing from instructors to facilitators, while students are changing from listeners to active participants (Freire, 2010).

Student-centered learning is helping students to help themselves. It is focusing on the needs and abilities of students to make

learning interesting and most meaningful. This enhances the interaction among teachers and students, among students, and among students; and the text they read, watch or listen, and simultaneously teaching-learning becomes effective. In this sense, both teachers and students become partners, learning from each other.

Many researchers have been done and handbooks prepared regarding experiences of teachers in the teaching-learning process. To mention some, teachers' roles and experiences cover different issues, such as *facilitation and mediation of classrooms* (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012), *guidance and evaluation* (Xu & Mei, 2009; and Stanulis & Ames, 2009); as well as

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motivation of students (Koç, 2012). However, little has been done focusing on the experiences of students in student-centered learning.

Different studies show that student-centered learning environment brings a lot of changes in the teaching-learning process, which helps not only students but also teachers to boost their experience (Freire, 2010; Tongsakul, Jitgarun & Chaokumnerd, 2011; and Van Uden, Ritzen & Pieters, 2013). On the other hand, despite of its important contribution, students and teachers face many challenges to bring up student-centered learning atmosphere (Torres, 1998; Lizzio & Wilson, 2005; Freire, 2010; and Lu, 2012).

Although these and other researchers have touched students' experiences in teaching-learning, a little has been done focusing on student-centered learning and the existing ones are done from different perspective and regions. For example, N. Entwistle, V. McCune & J. Hounsell (2002) conducted a research to define the most salient aspects of teaching-learning environments in higher education. However, the study was done with a quantitative approach in Britain.

Therefore, a detailed research is needed to understand students' experience in student-centered learning in general and in China in particular. This study focuses on the experiences of students in student-centered learning at HEIs in China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theme for the literature review is set based on the case this research focus to analyze. Accordingly, related and relevant literatures are reviewed to understand the participants' realities and responses regarding students' experiences in student-centered learning at HEIs (Higher Education Institutions). Country specific writings that serve as case studies are also included in the literature.

What is student-centered learning?

According to M.I. Bhutto (2011), student-centered learning formally started by the philosophical work of the French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, after publishing his educational treatise "Emile" in 1762. Jean Jacques Rousseau (2009) stated that a child

is born naturally good as he/she comes out of the hands of creator (nature), but society turns him/her into evil. From Jean Jacques Rousseau's argument, we can infer that student-centered learning is engaging students with nature, with each other and with circumstances.

Others have also defined student-centered learning in different ways. It is "*engaging the mind and heart of students*" (Hooks, 2010); "*the eager and continuing learning that human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other*" (Freire, 2010); "*use and interpretation of lessons for students with participation of the students*" (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012); and "*motivating students to be responsible on self-learning*" (Zabit, 2010).

However, all these writers share one thing in common. Student-centered learning is engaging every student to make a valuable contribution to the teaching-learning process. It is a complex process of cooperation and inter-communication rather than one-way communication from the teacher to the learners.

Characteristics of student-centered class environment. Student-centered class environment is characterized by different events and strategies. It focuses on the needs and interests of students, employs participatory teaching strategy, and changes the role of a teacher and students in the teaching-learning process.

Student-centered class environment put students at the center of its teaching-learning process. It focuses on the needs and interests of the students, both in terms of content and application of the teaching-learning process (Zabit, 2010). This is because, as in any teaching-learning process, students are not only the rational consumers or primary beneficiaries of the class activities, but they are also important precursors for learning (Van Uden, Ritzen & Pieters, 2013).

However, student-centered class environment is not about marginalizing the teacher (Hooks, 2010). Despite of the change of role from a dominant teacher to facilitator and co-learner, a teacher has an active and important role in student-centered class environment in preparing students with the skills, knowledge, and commitment that

provide them with the opportunity to shape their perspectives (Freire, 2010).

Moreover, student-centered class environment is characterized by participatory teaching strategy, which involves both the teacher and students (Freire, 2010). It is about minimizing the dominance of teachers who make all the talking by themselves, and creating two ways of communication within students, from teacher to students and vice versa. According to M.I. Bhutto (2011), this does not mean totally avoiding the lecture method as many misunderstand it, because lecture method can be used in higher education with proper modification to make it two-ways learning process. This modification basically allows frequent questioning and discussion between the teacher and the learners.

The role of a teacher in student-centered class environment is different from that of teacher-centered class. The teacher is responsible for facilitating the teaching-learning activities through various means. The teacher is “*a mediator among student, and between students and the lesson*” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012); “*a guide*” (Xu & Mei, 2009); and “*a student who learns from the students and their activities*” (Freire, 2010; and Hooks, 2010). At this stage, both the teacher and the students become persons with knowledge, understanding, feeling, and interest who come together in a shared educational process (Freire, 2010). Consequently, the role of the students also changes from passive listeners to active participants of the teaching-learning process.

Changes brought by student-centered learning environment to students and teachers. Student-centered learning brings a lot of changes, both to students and teachers. These changes include recognition of students, collaborative and critical learning, and application of knowledge into real world problems.

Student-centered learning environment enables students to be recognized as active members of the class (Hooks, 2010). Recognizing students and giving them opportunity to have input on the teaching-learning activities give students a responsibility to promote their self-learning and come to class prepared (Zabit, 2010). This is because

self-learning and preparation help students to confidently express their idea and contribute to the teaching-learning process positively. In such a way, student-centered learning environment plays a big role in students’ motivation for self-learning and interaction (Williams & Williams, 2011). It motivates students to explore, experiment, and discover on their own or in-group (Snyder & Snyder, 2008).

Student-centered class environment is collaborative, where everyone contributes to the teaching-learning (Zabit, 2010; and Tongsakul, Jitgarun & Chaokumnerd, 2011). Students use their different talents and experiences to help one another and learn from each other collaboratively. Collaboration occurs when students share their diverse thoughts and perspectives in the form of questions, answers, comments, etc. On the other side, the thinking, belief, perception, and self-knowledge of the teacher and students are challenged during the class discussion and interaction (Zabit, 2010).

Then, students start to see things critically and in different perspectives. In a class of diverse personal experience and background, they develop an atmosphere of appreciating (if not tolerating) the different positions and viewpoints of any member of the class. Hence, the teacher and students promote a sense of trust and tolerance between and among each other (Torres, 1998; Lizzio & Wilson, 2005; Freire, 2010; Hooks, 2010; and Zepke, 2013).

Student-centered class environment helps students to apply content knowledge to a practical real world problem (Flint, 2007; Zabit, 2010; and Katz, Kaplan & Buzukashvily, 2011). Students learn by integrating theoretical and practical knowledge simultaneously. Through active discussion among students and with their teacher, and through their interaction in the world and with the world, students develop a capacity to reflect on their ideas and apply it (Freire, 2010).

CHALLENGES TO STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

Firstly, Perception of students and teachers in student-centered learning. The process of knowledge transmission in China was directly

from teachers to students and its delivery was carefully sequenced for students to memorize, repeat, and understand (Lu, 2012). Many researchers, including J. Lu (2012), argue that, with the ideology and value of Confucian thinking, education in China is perceived as being reliant upon authority in the classroom. This in combination with the cultural influences of China has greatly affected the perception of students and teachers in student-centered learning.

The perception of students on respecting and obeying teachers limited students in listening to the lectures of their teachers quietly. The students do not only show a high degree of respect to their teachers, but also remain passive in the class. Through time, this develops to fear; fear of students to be seen as impolite or stupid. Then, this fear of mistake and looking silly by students develops to withholding their ideas from participation in the class discussion and interaction (Lizzio & Wilson, 2005).

Students' previous learning experience could also influence the way students perceive student-centered learning. According to Z. Yu (2012), competition in Chinese schools is fierce especially in situations, such as *Gao-kao* examination, which they influence the future life of the students. This is because the higher the students score, the better opportunity they can get in different circumstances, such as schools/universities choice and others. This is also common in many other countries, especially in developing countries like Eritrea. These situations affect the way students behave and participate in class, which sometimes results in reservation of students from participating and domination of the class by few.

Many teachers perceive that changing their role as facilitators will diminish their power and influence over their students (Freire, 2010; and Zabit, 2010); whereas others totally leave the teaching-learning process solely to students (Bhutto, 2011). It becomes difficult for teachers to understand their role change as facilitators. This is mainly associated with teacher's understanding of student-centered learning due to either cultural influence, lack of pedagogical skills, or experience in engaging students. Leaving the teaching-learning process

solely to students minimize the control of teachers in the classroom environment.

However, as Paulo Freire (2010) stated, the freedom of students in student-centered learning has its limits. Teachers have to make sure that students should avoid doing anything that could take the attention of students from teaching-learning process.

Secondly, Diversity of perceptions from students. Within the globalized world, students could have different socio-political, economic, or cultural differences which could influence their perceptions. C.A. Torres (1998) explained that diversity of perceptions from students has been a key challenge for student-centered learning. Nowadays, the world has many areas where individuals maintain different views. As a result, students and teachers could have totally different and sensitive positions on issues, such as religion, same-sex marriage, ideology, etc. which sometimes result in misunderstanding and confrontation among students, and between students and the teacher.

With the short time available in a particular class to negotiate and settle differences, these perspectives hinder the teaching-learning process. Moreover, A. Lizzio & K. Wilson (2005) noted that students' diversity of perceptions present challenges to any group work and sharing of ideas by students. Students' personal and cultural differences affect their way of acting in the teaching-learning process.

Thirdly, Type of teaching methods and materials used. In student-centered learning, a pedagogy based on participatory approach towards teaching is more effective than traditional one-way teaching (Bhutto, 2011). Different methods focused on two-way of communication can be used with regard to related topics or subject matters. Finding the most appropriate pedagogical approach promotes not only students' comprehension, and acquisition of competencies, but also facilitates their participation, communication skills, independent thinking, and team work (Tran & Lewis, 2012).

However, the same teaching methods and strategies were found to be used for teaching of diverse range of topics and disciplines (Bhutto,

2011). In addition, in China and surrounding countries, many teachers use the lecture method with minimum or no participation from learners (Bhutto, 2011; Lu, 2012; and Tran & Lewis, 2012). Therefore, such teaching methods indicate failure of pedagogical skills and hinder students' participation, and usually result students' boredom and disinterest in the teaching-learning process (Daschmann, Goetz & Stupnisky, 2013).

Student-centered learning requires more resources, than teacher-centered learning, to facilitate all the desired teaching-learning activities and make students' participation a reality. Large class size and lack of teaching-learning materials (such as printed materials, computers and internet facilities) hinder the smooth facilitation of student-centered learning (Shih & Gamon, 2001; and Bhutto, 2011).

METHODS

A sample university, Beijing Normal University (BNU), was used for collecting data on students' experience in student-centered learning at HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) in China. BNU was selected by purposeful and convenience sampling methods, because it is one of the first tier universities in China and it is close to the researcher. In BNU, a sample class was selected based on the characteristics of student-centered learning and other features.

Goals and Research Questions. This research is qualitative in nature with a case study design. The purpose of this research is to explore the experience of students in student-centered learning environment at HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) in China and share them with students, teachers, and other stakeholders of tertiary education. The study may also be applied to other levels of education, such as middle and senior secondary schools.

The key research questions, that will be focused in this study, are: (1) How student-centered learning environment influence the teaching-learning process in HEIs in China?; and (2) What are the challenges to student-centered learning in HEIs in China?

As the study is confined only in BNU

(Beijing Normal University), the sample students and teacher cannot entirely represent the diverse experiences of students and staff at HEIs in China.

Class Selection and Participants. As this research focuses on students' experience in student-centered learning at HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) in China, a student-centered class taught by Chinese instructor and attended by Chinese students was targeted for a sample. Accordingly, an international postgraduate class made of up of foreign and Chinese students, and taught by Chinese Professor was selected. The case class was selected for two reasons.

Firstly, the researcher believed that the learning environment of the case class was student-centered. This was verified against the main features of student-centered learning based on the literature review. *Secondly*, the class was the only international (English taught) class that the researcher encountered to be taught by Chinese instructor and attended by both international and Chinese students. Therefore, the combinations of these features made the class to be selected as a case class.

The class had a total of 28 students. The number of respondents selected for interview was 6 students (2 Chinese and 4 international students from both genders) and the instructor; whereas every member of the class including the instructor was included in observation. Participation to the study was voluntarily.

Data Collection, Presentation, and Analysis. Qualitative data were collected through observation and interview to investigate students' experience in student-centered learning. Face-to-face semi-structured interview was used to collect data regarding the perception of students and the instructor about the class, the influence of student-centered learning environment in the teaching-learning process, and the challenges of students and teachers to bring such learning atmosphere. This is because semi-structured interview is helpful in getting enough information by making the questions flexible and it allows asking additional questions based on what an interviewee responds (Bryman, 2008). The interviews were recorded upon permission of the interviewee.

As a participant observer, the researcher observed all the potentially relevant phenomena regarding the class atmosphere and interaction focusing on what is happening and how. Both class and online interactions were noted.

A narrative text is used to analyze the data collected through interview and observation. Through descriptive and explanatory methods, a structural skeleton is established to provide for meaningful interpretation and discussion (McNabb, 2008). Moreover, the data was interpreted with a continuous reference to previous literature and empirical studies on a theme basis.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

First, on the class environment. Almost all the interviewees believed that the sample class is more or less based on student-centered learning environment. According to the response from the instructor:

Although the students' interaction is not really interactive to my expectation due to time and other factors, a tremendous effort was done to focus on the needs and interest of students by adjusting the syllabus and content based on my prior experience and the feedback of the students obtained from the mini-survey done at the first class (interview with Instructor A, 20/5/2014).

Moreover, the instructor stated that the main focus of the class was on learning by doing; and students were encouraged to discuss not only by asking question, but also by taking the ideas of the voluntarily participating students and putting it back again to the class for further discussion.

Although the students agreed that class had many student-centered features, including independent assignments, presentations, class discussion, online (qq) discussion, etc, they raised noted that the instructor was taking more time in lecturing than in students interaction, and few students were dominating the class interaction. One of the students stated:

The instructor was giving different tasks and is encouraging questions and answers. Most importantly, students were able to raise more and more questions which was making the class more interactive. However, the class should have gone further beyond this in giving students

more control of the class, in terms of time and freedom of activities (interview with Student A, 25/5/2014).

Another respondent noted:

The class was based on student-centered learning focusing on the needs of the students. The instructor was involving students by asking questions and giving a sense of participation. The instructor also gave a sequence of exercises and handled them properly with proper feedback, which provided the right direction to students learning (interview with Student B, 25/5/2014).

Moreover, the respondents explained that the class was different from other teacher-dominated classes, in the sense that students were more involved in practical independent studies, class discussions, and cooperative learning both within and outside (through online discussion) of the class. The researcher's observation was also not entirely different from the viewpoints of the interviewees. All the features of the class, including the lecturing method, were designed to allow students to participate and create knowledge beyond rote memorization.

The instructor tried to include students to be part of the teaching-learning process as can as possible by providing different opportunities for independent study and class discussion. The researcher especially agrees with the interviewee statement that while teaching, the instructor was also raising important question for discussion.

According to the researcher's observation, the students' engagement in the class could be understood from their dissatisfaction to see the class end. When the instructor announced that the class was left with only one week, the students' response was a kind of surprise which sounded like "we need it to go longer".

Second, on the changes brought by student-centered learning environment to students and the teacher. The respondents described that student-centered learning environment brought changes both to the students and the teacher in different ways. They believed that the class promoted class interaction, which influenced the students and the teacher to work more independently and as a part of the class. The response from the instructor agreed that

the class interaction promoted the instructor's understanding from the different ideas and experiences of the students.

The students also stated that the class brought them out of their private personal atmosphere to the social and interactive learning. A response from a student explained:

My first experience in the class was a kind of confusion. I was shocked by some of the questions raised in the class, because they were totally different from my expectations and ways of thinking. Then, I realized things can be seen in different perspectives, and I said to myself "that can make sense too". Then, I really felt it because I started to get used to diverse ideas (interview with Student C, 25/5/2014).

Regardless of their active participation in the discussion, all the respondents agreed that the experiences that they got from the student-centered environment of the class go further beyond the theoretical knowledge. They noted that theoretical knowledge is not a big deal, which they believe it can be acquired simply by reading books. However, the experiences of the class is about understanding and respecting the different view points of students, learning from one another, and working hard to be part of the class.

From my observation, I concur with the respondents that through the questions that students ask and the ways they answer, students could pick up not only the subject matter related knowledge and experience, but also the art of interacting. In response to the new and diverse view points of the class, a student responded:

Despite of the benefits that I got from the class discussion, first I was feeling upset, excluded and very marginalized for not being part of the interaction. Then, I started to raise myself and my standards, and went on pushing myself that in the next class I need to express my questions and comments and be part of the class interaction (interview with Student D, 25/5/2014).

According to the respondents and my observation, another effect of the class environment was the application of theoretical knowledge into real world problems and focus in cooperative learning. The respondents noted that feeling the taste of every step of

the theoretical knowledge in practice was one of the best parts of class environment. They emphasized the effort of the instructor to engage students and provide feedback; and direction to the individual work of the students was encouraging to work more and more.

In addition to the comments from the instructor, during their presentation and discussion in class, students were able to get different critical comments and suggestions from their classmates. The instructor also made available the work of every student with its feedback open for everyone, which enabled students to learn from each other.

Third, on the challenges to student-centered learning. The response from the students and the teacher described that student-centered class atmosphere was not developed to the point that it should be able to embrace each and every student in the class. The following are some of the challenges faced by the teacher and students to develop a solid student-centered learning environment.

Students' personality: the respondents stated that students' personal behavior and perception affected the level of their participation in the class. Some students described that they prefer to communicate with the instructor in private so as to get profound and satisfactory answer. Whereas other students responded that their prior experience affects them from actively interacting in the class. A respondent noted:

I was disciplined by my high school teacher, because my teacher thought that I was dominating the class. That adjustment affected my life, because since then I fear that I might take too much time and dominate the class (interview with Student E, 25/5/2014).

Moreover, some students believe that it is not compulsory to engage in class since neither answering nor asking a question is a sign of following the class or being better than anybody else in the class. Although the respondents are not sure, whether the above personalities had to do something with their cultural backgrounds or not, they agreed that it has something to do with their family background or prior educational policy, which discourages students' creative development.

This has been manifested in one of the

students' response stating, "*I believe it is my personality, which is part of my life and which makes it much complicated to explain and figure out its relationship with culture*" (interview with Student F, 25/5/2014). The response from the instructor and Chinese students reiterated that the personality issue has something to do with students' social life and previous educational experiences in China.

On the other hand, the interviewees stated that there are students who always want to dominate a class. Hence, some of the students' response indicated that there is no need to compete with students of such personality so as to be recognized as part of the class. According to my observation, these are few and active students who usually would like to participate (to dominate) in the class; and some of them do not even wait permission from the instructor to interfere. The response from students mainly stressed that the dominant students sometimes respond to questions directed to the teacher and come up with controversial ideas, which disturb the positive classroom interaction.

Class size and time factor: the students felt that the number of students in the class was many with regard to the time and the different methods and tasks the instructor employed. This affected the inclusion and recognition of each and every student in the class. The instructor also agreed that the time was not enough to cover all the contents to give students enough theoretical background and allow detailed students discussion seeking contribution from every member of the class.

Students' preparation: according to my observation, students' failure to come to class prepared affected the class interaction. Students' failure to come prepared for class usually put the class in general and class discussions in particular at the hand of few dominant and/or prepared students.

Instructor's facilitation: the respondents reiterated that in addition to the above challenges, the instructors' could have done more in motivating students to come to class prepared and in directing and facilitating the interaction of students. The instructor didn't have any means of checking students' preparation to class (such as reading the

required materials), and was not inspiring the reserved student to participate in the class discussion; instead the instructor was relying on power point slides and voluntary participation. This problem of proper direction and facilitation was also evident in the online (qq group) discussion; students were not properly using the platform as it should be. As a result, some unnecessary and out of topic issues were appearing in the platform, as in the class discussion.

DISCUSSIONS

First, on the class environment. The result of the interview pointed out that teaching-learning environment of the case class was more or less based on student-centered learning. The respondents explained that as a teaching method, the class had many student-centered features such as participatory lecturing, independent assignments, class presentation, class discussion, online (qq group) discussion, etc.

This idea is consistent with the characteristics of student-centered learning environment argued by many educators, including B. Hooks (2010); M.N. Zabit (2010); Paulo Freire (2010); and E. Toshalis & M.J. Nakkula (2012). All these educators agree that student-centered learning environment should engage every student to make a valuable contribution to the teaching-learning process. This would mean that the teacher should use a teaching strategy that avoids domination of the class by either the teacher or few students.

According to the students' response, the lecture method that the instructor used was prepared in a way to enable students to participate. This shows that the lecture method was designed in a way to allow lecturing, asking questions, and discussion simultaneously; and this was not only consistent with but proves the argument of M.I. Bhutto (2011), who argued that lecturing method with some modifications can be used in student-centered class environment. Moreover, the class was started by identifying the needs, interests, and expectation of students in the course. This is important point in integrating the needs and interests of students, which could definitely make leaning enjoyable.

The result of the students' interviews reiterated that students were given individual assignments and proper feedback and opportunity to present their assignment. In addition to the voluntary interaction, all the students were given compulsory opportunity to present their assignment in the class.

These results concur with the central ideas of student-centered learning as "*helping students to be responsible for their self learning*" (Zabit, 2010); "*engaging in the world, with the world, and with each other*" (Freire, 2010); and "*the use and interpretation of lessons for students with participation of the students*" (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). This shows that, despite of the short time and comparatively large class size, the instructor succeeded in recognizing the contribution of every member of the class in some way.

Regardless of their perceptions about the class and other situations, the compulsory assignment encouraged every student to work hard. At the same time, the class presentation triggered the students to share their ideas with the class and get feedback from their classmates. In such a way, these activities boosted students' self learning, engaged students in the class interaction, and promoted cooperative learning.

Second, on the changes brought by student-centered learning environment to students and teachers. The response from students stated that the student-centered learning environment enhanced their self and cooperative learning simultaneously. Students were able to learn from the course materials and individual assignments, and from their classmates through interaction and discussion.

This is consistent with the ideas of K.C. Williams & C.C. Williams (2011) and A. Tongsakul, K. Jitgarun & W. Chaokumnerd (2011). In this context, K.C. Williams & C.C. Williams (2011), for example, explained that student-centered learning environment plays a big role in students' motivation for self-learning and interaction; while A. Tongsakul, K. Jitgarun & W. Chaokumnerd (2011) stated that students use their different talents and experiences to help one another and learn from each other collaboratively.

This indicates that students work harder

to be part of the student-centered class environment and strive for their voice to be heard. Then, such experiences extend further to motivation and learning better beyond taking notes and listening to the teacher. However, this is not always true with all students, because as some of the respondents noted that they prefer to be reserved.

As presented in the findings, some students were confused and shocked by the diverse ideas and thinking from the class discussion. This can be connected with personal experiences of students with regard to student-centered learning environment.

As M.N. Zabit (2010) stated that putting students in a class, that shakes their previous knowledge and perceptions, is challenging. This indicates that students are confronted with new perspective or knowledge, which they have not considered or thought about before. It could also be related to the ideas and perspectives other students share and the ways they interact. That is why the students noted that they really felt the diverse perspectives from different students. This shows that student-centered learning enable students to go further beyond the class and promote their critical thinking.

According to the respondents, the students were able to experience learning by doing, and were able to link theoretical knowledge with real practical situations. This supports the idea of Paulo Freire (2010), in the sense that students learn by integrating theoretical and practical knowledge simultaneously. It also illustrates that students learn better in student-centered class atmosphere, because students learn better by doing rather than hearing. Moreover, this opportunity of linking theory with practice goes beyond acquiring theoretical knowledge and encourages students to reflect upon and use their knowledge into practical situations in the future.

Third, on the challenges of student-centered learning. Students' personality: students' personal behavior or perceptions hinders developing a sound student-centered learning environment. As it has been shown in the result, students' low participation in the class interaction affects student-centered learning environment. Although students

were not definitely sure how to connect this to culture, the Chinese students and the instructor mainly agreed that it has something to do with students' social life and previous educational experiences in China.

These findings support the ideas of "respecting and obeying teachers" (Lu, 2012); "experience of learning based on competition" (Yu, 2012); and "fear of mistake and looking silly" (Lizzio & Wilson, 2005). This could be connected with the type of pedagogy used in primary, middle and secondary schools in China, where the teacher is a dominant figure in the class; and where competition-based learning is emphasized instead of cooperative learning.

As a result, students fail to distinguish between disobeying and disrespecting teachers, and engaging in the teaching-learning process. They perceive that discussing and arguing with the teacher is challenging the experience and knowledge of the teacher, which is equivalent to disrespecting the teacher. Therefore, they could be less active in class discussion unless they are encouraged by the instructor.

On the other side, the students explained that there are few students who are always active and dominant in the classroom interaction. These dominant students oppress the voice of the class and make other students passive. This reflects the ideas of A. Lizzio & K. Wilson (2005), which argued that students' personal and cultural differences affect the way students behave and participate which sometimes result in domination of the class by few students.

However, for the dominant group, this could be a matter of expressing their ideas and making contribution to the classroom interaction. The students might think that others are not interested to share their ideas and contribute to the teaching-learning process, instead of them dominating the class. As a result, they interfere in every step of the class.

Class size and time factor: as presented in the research findings, the instructor was struggling to coordinate the short time allotted for the course, the comparatively large class size, and the interactive class atmosphere. This illustrates the notion that large class size hinders the smooth facilitation of student-centered learning (Shih & Gamon, 2001;

and Bhutto, 2011). Large class size is not manageable to fully recognize the input and contribution of every member of the class with the short period of time available for all the activities of the class. That is why the class was merely a taste of different activities and methods.

Students' preparation: it has been noted in the findings that the class interaction was badly affected since some students were coming to class without preparation. Failure of students to come prepared to class wastes the time that the students and the teacher do not have because, as M.N. Zabit (2010) stated, that the students could not confidently express their idea and contribute to the teaching-learning process positively. Then, it is obvious that the class could also be dominated by few, whereas the others become passive observers.

Teachers' facilitation: the response from the students showed that although the instructor did a very good job in overcoming the different challenges and in creating student-centered class atmosphere, the instructor could have done better to promote the learning environment by properly directing students towards the specified topic and focusing on every student. This is consistent with the point that teachers need to facilitate the teaching-learning process in a way that students should actively interact without hijacking the topic out of track (Freire, 2010).

This indicates that some procedures are lacking to limit students from going too far out of the topic. It also illustrates that the instructor need to fully set a mechanism to encourage the students to come prepared to class so as the class interaction could embrace all the students and be meaningful. For instance, the instructor could have requested a short summary of every assignment given to students (reading, watching movie, etc.) to be reported one day before the class. Specific questions could have also been given to students to focus on discussion, so that they could use the online platform properly. If not, students can come to class unprepared and hide from class participation; they can also discuss on issues outside of the specific topic and divert the attention of others from the main point to be discussed.

CONCLUSION ¹

Although the research paper has certain limitations due to time and financial constraints, it has the changes that are brought by student-centered learning environment and the main challenges that face students and teacher to bring up such class environment at HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) in China. The study found that students' experiences in student-centered learning environment are highly connected with the facilitation and direction of the instructor. The facilitation of the instructor can recognize or marginalize students, which could greatly affect their participation and building up of a strong student-centered learning environment.

Students' experiences in student-centered learning are characterized by different developments and challenges. Despite of the different challenges, HEIs students in China are experiencing some tastes of the benefits of student-centered class environment. Students are able to share ideas and experiences, learn collaboratively, and apply content-based knowledge into real world problems. However, there is still a major problem with regard to recognizing every student and embracing them to the class interaction equally.

The study also indicated that culture or culture-based personality is a challenge to develop a solid student-centered learning environment. Nevertheless, as the study could not exactly identify the components of culture in relation to the challenges, this needs further study and investigation.²

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