

Learner resistance in metacognition training?

An exploration of mismatches between learner and teacher agendas

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This paper examines how and why learner resistance (to the teacher's goals and expectations) occurred in a metacognition-training (MT) project, which aimed to enhance reflection and autonomy in EFL learning. MT was integrated into a regular EFL reading course for second-year BA TEFL undergraduates at a Chinese university. Learner resistance in the MT project was manifested partly through mismatches between the goals and expectations on the part of the teacher and the students. After suggesting initial reasons for learner resistance, the paper explores more complex explanations. That is, at a more macro level, institutional pressures and societal expectations arising from an influential national test (TEM-4) gave rise to an examination culture; at a more micro level, these controlling pressures and expectations were realized by the pragmatic product-oriented approach in the EFL classroom and by students' positioning as examination learners. These might help explain why learner resistance occurred in the MT project. The paper notes in the end that learner resistance is also a matter of tensions and conflicts in learner and teacher agendas, and in learners' short-term and long-term priorities in learning. Based on this, implications for EFL teaching and learning are explored.

I Introduction

The term 'metacognition' (or 'thinking about thinking') is conceptualized as a broad notion consisting of two separate and distinct components - metacognitive strategies and metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1998). Metacognitive strategies are 'higher order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity' (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: 44). Metacognitive knowledge can be glossed as 'the stable, statable and sometimes fallible knowledge learners acquire about themselves as learners and the learning process' (Wenden, 1995: 185).

As a major component of learner training, metacognition training (MT) which

emphasizes reflection on learning processes and learning to learn (e.g., the development of the capacity for planning, monitoring and evaluating one's learning) is said to enhance self-direction and learner autonomy in language learning (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Hedge, 2000; Wenden, 1991; Williams and Burden, 1997). This study grew out of my own practice of MT in EFL reading at a Mainland Chinese university, in which I observed resistance from the students involved in the MT project. The purposes of this paper are to describe where learner resistance occurred, and to provide possible explanations, grounded in classroom data, for readers to consider.

In the following sections, I shall first present a broad theoretical background for the several interrelated notions that have informed the current study. These notions are learner resistance, reflection in learning, mismatches between learning and instruction (between learner and teacher agendas), and learner conceptions of language learning and classroom roles. I shall then specify the research questions of the study and describe its context and data. This will be followed by a detailed description of learner resistance in the MT project. Finally, possible explanations will be sought for the learner resistance identified.

II Theoretical background

1 Learner resistance

Resistance is defined as 'a force that opposes or retards' and 'an active construct rather than a passive absence of something' (Long, 1994: 14). This means that resistance need not be used in a negative way. In line with Giroux's (1983) political and critical discussion of resistance in education, Canagarajah (1993) distinguishes between 'resistance' and 'opposition' on the part of students, suggesting that resistance is radical, and politically conscious and liberating, while opposition is unclear, ambivalent and passive. Such a terminological distinction is not maintained in this paper, as my primary interest, at least at the current stage, is to document the development of students' oppositional behaviours to understand the nature of resistance, rather than developing a pedagogy of resistance (see Giroux, 1983). In the paper, 'learner resistance' includes what Canagarajah (1993) describes as '(ambivalent)

student opposition' to broaden the sense of resistance as a relatively neutral oppositional force.

There is not much literature about how and why learner resistance occurs. In exploring the causes of learner resistance to self-direction in adult learning, Hiemstra and Brockett (1994: 90-91) highlight two factors:

For learners, there are at least two factors that can be linked with resistance: self-concept and self-awareness. Many adults enter a teaching-learning transaction with low confidence and poor self-concept, making it difficult to take a high degree of personal responsibility for learning. Other learners, perhaps because of previous experiences with education, are simply not aware of the power they possess as learners and thus make the assumption that a highly teacher-directed approach is the way education should happen.

The above comments point to the psychological and educational sources of learner resistance, but say little about the complexities of classroom culture and the wider socio-political context in which resistance may occur.

In the field of second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) learning, Canagarajah (1993) calls for a closer scrutiny of 'the day-to-day functioning of the classroom and the lived culture of the students' in order to critically examine the 'confusing range of accommodative and oppositional tendencies' displayed within student response (p. 603). He found that students' examination-oriented motivation and their alternative desire for grammar-based, product-oriented learning constituted one way for them to reconcile a conflict between, on the one hand, the threats of cultural alienation resulting from speaking the foreign (English) language and using the U.S. textbook, and on the other hand, the pressure from the educational system to display proficiency in English (to pass the English course) and the promises of English as a socioeconomic necessity acknowledged at a more conscious level.

In the context of tertiary-level self-access language learning in Hong Kong, Tsang (1999) examined why learners resisted the reflective teaching approach and the idea of autonomy advocated in self-access programmes. She raised concerns about

whether priorities should be given to learning the language skills or learning to learn and whether learning should be results-oriented or process-oriented, if learner needs and expectations were taken into account. The chief reasons she suggested for learner resistance to the type of autonomy offered to learners were:

- Learners did not feel the type of autonomy offered to them would bring about any favourable changes in their learning;
- They did not ask for autonomy but for the acquisition of particular language skills and they wanted to see short-term results;
- They did not see the gaining of autonomy as relating to their progress towards their learning goal.

Although Canagarajah (1993) and Tsang (1999) investigated the issue of learner resistance in different socio-cultural and political contexts, they both identified a link between resistance and product- and results-oriented learning. Tsang's study also suggests that reflective learning might not be well received by learners in an examination-oriented educational system.

The above studies illustrate that learner resistance may originate from a variety of sources and is played out in a complex way. The challenges of this study are to clarify how learner resistance was manifested, and to explore why it might come into being in the Chinese EFL classroom.

2 Reflection in learning

The value of reflection in education has long been recognized (e.g., Dewey, 1910, 1933). According to Dewey, reflection ('reflective thought/thinking') involves 'active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge' (1910: 6) and 'turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration' (1933: 3). Similarly, Boud et al (1985) define reflection as 'an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it' (p. 19). They define 'reflection in the context of learning'

as:

a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations. It may take place in isolation or in association with others. It can be done well or badly, successfully or unsuccessfully. (p. 19)

Boud et al emphasize conscious reflection and argue that only by bringing our ideas to our consciousness can we evaluate them and begin to make choices about what we will and will not do (p. 19). Therefore, it is easy to perceive a strong link between conscious reflection and metacognition (especially the capacity for planning, monitoring and evaluating one's learning). Despite the educational value of reflection and metacognition, learners may not necessarily welcome the mode of learning that involves either reflection or metacognition, as suggested by Tsang's (1999) study presented above. Also in a Hong Kong tertiary-level context, Ho (1997) examined students' reactions towards reflective learning in a technical report-writing course. She found that students did not really like the reflective tasks at the metacognitive level (e.g., planning and evaluating reflections), although they found those tasks helpful and relevant to their learning. The reasons for their dislike were said to arise from the design of the tasks. Ho's suggestions for solving these problems included two points: (1) a change in pedagogy: reflective tasks should be introduced more gradually (to start with reflective tasks at the cognitive level first and then extend the students' reflective capacity to the metacognitive level when appropriate); (2) students should be given sufficient guidance (as their previous exposure to the transmission approach to teaching in the secondary school affected their acceptance of reflective way of learning). Since the educational systems of the Mainland and Hong Kong share a lot of similarities in teaching approaches and classroom culture, it would be enlightening to investigate how learners react to reflective learning in the Mainland Chinese EFL classroom. However, research to date has offered little insight into this issue.

3 Learning-instruction mismatches and learner conceptions of learning

Learning-instruction mismatches in the language classroom have been noted by many researchers (e.g., Allwright, 1987; Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Nunan, 1989, 1995). Empirical evidence of such mismatches is reported by Barkhuizen (1998), Block (1994, 1996) and Slimani (1992), focusing on learners' and teachers' different perceptions of lesson purposes, classroom activities, and learning outcomes (claimed learning). These latter classroom-based investigations demonstrate that learners tend to follow their own agendas rather than those of their teachers in language learning (see also a review by Benson, 2001). Learner agendas are concerned with learners' goal-setting and action-planning to manage their own learning. According to Nunan (1995), mismatches between learners' and teachers' agendas are the main causes for mismatches between learning and instruction:

I should like to argue that the principal reason for the mismatch between teachers and learners, which gives rise to a disparity between what is taught and what is learned, is that there is a mismatch between the pedagogical agenda of the teacher and that of the learner. While the teacher is busily teaching one thing, the learner is very often focusing on something else. (pp. 134-135)

Nunan's comments point to the importance of learner agendas in language teaching research. However, research to date does not indicate how learner agendas work in the longer term (previous studies tended to examine learner agendas within single class sessions), how classroom learning fits in learner agendas, or how these agendas affect the overall direction of language learning (see Benson, 2001: 67). One purpose of this paper is to examine how teacher and learner agendas were in conflict in a one-semester course and how the disparity of teacher and learner agendas might give rise to learner resistance in a MT project that the teacher perceived to be beneficial to learning.

Another issue potentially related to learner resistance is the concept of learner

conceptions of language learning. According to Benson and Lor (1999), conceptions of learning are ‘concerned with what the learner thinks the objects and processes of learning *are*’ and ‘can be characterized in terms of a basic distinction between quantitative and qualitative’ (p. 464). Ellis (2004) adds a third general conception to the two broad quantitative-qualitative categories - self-efficacy/confidence in language learning, which ‘has more to do with how learners perceive their ability as language learners and their progress in relation to the particular context in which they are learning’ (p. 543). Research on autonomy in language learning has demonstrated that learners’ conceptions of language learning and their conceptions of learner-teacher roles may affect their readiness for autonomy (Benson and Lor, 1988; Cotterall, 1995). To enquire further, this paper explores whether learners’ conceptions, which are often different from those of the teacher, can also provide a basis for learner resistance to the teacher’s classroom innovations.

III The study

1 Research Questions

Bearing in mind the aims of the study described above, this paper addresses two research questions:

- In what ways were the students resistant to the teacher’s goals and expectations in a metacognition-training (MT) project (which was incorporated into a regular EFL reading course)?
- What were the possible explanations for this resistance?

2 Classroom context of MT

Motivated by a perception of students’ over-dependence on teachers for prescribing ‘best’ methods and their lack of confidence and autonomy in EFL learning, a MT project was incorporated by the author into a regular one-semester (18 teaching weeks) EFL reading curriculum for second-year BA TEFL undergraduates (English majors) in three classes (38 students each) at Zhanjiang Teachers University, China. My intension was not just introducing the project as teacher, but investigating it as

teacher-researcher. The objectives of the MT project were to enhance students' metacognitive knowledge, and to familiarize them with basic metacognitive strategies (e.g. *planning, monitoring* and *evaluating*), in both EFL reading and general EFL learning. A broader goal was to enhance reflection and autonomy in EFL learning. Special attention was given to *comprehension monitoring* in EFL reading – the evaluating of the success or failure of the meaning-making process and the regulating of strategies to remedy comprehension problems (Irwin, 1991), as it is regarded as one of the most important aspects of metacognitive control and an essential strategy in second/foreign language reading comprehension (Block, 1992; Casanave, 1988). Classroom procedures of MT included mini-lectures on EFL reading processes (using chapters from Irwin, 1991), a process-oriented approach in teaching reading comprehension, explicit and incidental instruction in comprehension monitoring, practice with think-alouds, and reflective diary-keeping.

The MT project included two writing assignments which combined to make up 20% of the final grades for the EFL reading course: (1) students were expected to read beyond classroom teaching materials and to write reading reports (summary and critique of what they had read); (2) in parallel to the process-oriented approach adopted in classroom instruction, students were required to keep a reading/learning journal to reflect on their reading comprehension processes and the acquisition of other language skills (listening, speaking, writing, grammar, and vocabulary). In the case of diary-keeping, students were provided with simple guidelines (emphasizing true reflection instead of good composition, and meaning rather than grammatical correctness), exemplified by diary extracts quoted in Goh's (1997) investigation into metacognitive awareness of Chinese ESL learners (listeners) enrolled in an intensive ESL programme in the National Institute of Education, Singapore. In both assignments, students were expected to write in English, but in the case of journals, students were told that they could write in Chinese when they found it difficult to express complicated thoughts in English. While reading-report writing was a usual form of assignment for a reading course, reading/learning journal-keeping had not been used previously either as a learning tool or as a form of course requirement in

our context. The rationale for using learning journals was based on the idea that they could be utilized as a learning tool to enhance metacognitive awareness (and thus learner autonomy) in the ESL/EFL classroom (Goh, 1997; Matsumoto, 1996).

3 The Influential Examination - TEM-4 (Band-4)

To build a fuller picture of our classroom context, it is necessary to provide sufficient information about an influential examination – TEM-4 (Test for English Majors, Band 4). During the period of MT, students had begun to prepare for TEM-4 scheduled shortly after the middle of the next semester. TEM-4 is a national proficiency test that English majors in Chinese universities are supposed to pass in their second year in the four-year BA degree programme. Like many other universities, our university related conferment of the BA degree to passing the TEM-4. Students were told that, if they did not pass TEM-4, they would not be awarded the BA degree, even if they succeeded in meeting all the course requirements of the BA degree programme. Therefore, to pass or achieve high scores on the TEM-4 was usually their most important goal in their four-year university life.

4 Data

The major data used in the present study consisted of 275 diary entries kept by 65 diarists. To ensure multiple perspectives, the study also employed data from other sources: class observations, informal group interviews with students, and a questionnaire (see *Appendix*) administered to all course participants (N = 92) to investigate students' views regarding the impact of the MT project.

IV Learner resistance in MT: Nuances of 'how'

This section shows how learner resistance occurred in the MT project; explanations for such resistance will be sought later.

1 Mismatches between teacher expectations and learner responses

As the overall goal of MT was to promote students' metacognitive awareness and autonomy in EFL learning, I was anxious to review their diaries to see whether and how these aspects of learning were represented in their diaries. However, I found that students did not report their metacognitive awareness and processes of reading (or general learning) to the extent that I had expected. In the diary data the most frequent references were: (1) the importance of vocabulary and reading speed; (2) efforts to search for short-cuts in EFL learning; (3) difficulties in memorizing new words and in improving reading speed; (4) mistakes in doing exercises (finding correct answers in multiple-choice items); (5) the treatment of each practice of EFL reading and listening as a preparation for TEM-4; and (6) teacher-learner role relationships.

In addition to this somewhat unexpected content of journal entries, there was also a mismatch between students' clear preference for reading-report writing and my eager expectation of more entries in learning journals. Although I emphasized learning journals as a learning tool and encouraged them to reflect on learning as much as possible in their learning journals, students wrote much more in reading reports than in journals (I did not count the entries to give an exact number, but the difference in quantity was easy to perceive).

2 What did students say about reading-report writing in their learning journals?

In students' learning journals, I could hardly find any comments on the (in)effectiveness of the MT procedures (including using journal-keeping as a reflective learning tool). On the other hand, I did find a number of positive comments on reading-report-writing which was not originally conceptualized as a way to enhance metacognitive awareness and learner autonomy. This may suggest the power of standard classroom activities to influence learners' attitudes and behaviour. The three extracts below illustrated this point (extracts quoted hereafter are kept unedited):

Extract 1

First, thank you for my teacher. Because he give me assignment of reading report. It forced me

to read novels...Now, I've finished one. I am becoming interested in reading them. Thank you, my teacher. So now I write reading report. But it's not for the assignment, it's for reading well. I'll do my best and try to read more. I hope it can improve my reading and enlarge my vocabulary.

Extract 2

...At the beginning, when we were told to write reading report, we all thought it was rather difficult to keep on writing. It seemed that we didn't have so much time spending on writing essays... So we were passive to accept this assignment. But now, I see the effect of doing so. Under the assignment "pressure", I had planned to read as much as I can, if not for writing, I would not have read so many books...So, I think, to write reading report is a good way to improve our thinking and writing, and knowledge, too.

Both diarists felt that the reading report assignment was first a burden, but they found it useful to enhance word power, reading and writing. And eventually, it was not an imposition anymore. This substantiates our common observation that students might need external force to push them to learn. The external force could be an examination (e.g. the TEM-4), or a course requirement of some sort.

3 Class observation vs end-of-course questionnaire

The informal class observation notes I wrote after class and the brief remarks about students' classroom behaviour I jotted down on the margins of teaching materials during class time both indicated that many students appeared doubtful about the usefulness of metacognitive strategies, e.g., planning, monitoring and evaluating in EFL reading, when these strategies were explained and demonstrated in class (e.g., by means of the teacher's or students' thinking-aloud while reading, or class discussion of how students had arrived at a correct/wrong answer through students' recalling of their own processes in understanding a certain question). These observation notes also revealed that many students were reluctant to join class activities which aimed to promote their metacognitive control of EFL reading, e.g., class discussion on (un)successful reading strategies used by different students, and students' reflection

on the success/failure of their reading processing in a group. Students' apparent doubtfulness and reluctance could be inferred from their verbal responses (e.g., 'do we have to...?') and non-verbal reactions (e.g., extreme slowness and facial expressions of displeasure). Here resistance might be manifest, not so much as direct refusal, but rather as quiet but determined subversion of the (teacher-)intended purpose of an activity.

However, insights from class observation were not supported by overall questionnaire responses (see Appendix A), which indicated that evaluation of the MT project was generally positive. On the other hand, questionnaire responses to the items concerning diary-writing might partly explain why there were fewer entries in learning journals than in reading reports. In responding to Item 7B, a majority of students (70%) stated that they were not interested in writing reading diaries, although more than half of them (Item 4 = 59%) considered keeping a reading diary to be useful in raising consciousness of reading processes (unfortunately, there was no item in the questionnaire investigating learners' attitudes towards reading-report writing). This questionnaire investigation supported Ho's (1997) findings presented earlier (her students found the reflective tasks at the metacognitive level relevant but did not like these tasks).

4 Group interviews

Throughout the MT project, I conducted three informal group interviews with students (8 students randomly selected from each of the three classes each time), from the analysis of which three dominant views emerged. One view held was that the metacognitive concepts and processes (e.g., planning, monitoring and evaluating) tended to be abstract and thus difficult to talk or to write about. This was true as some entries contained Chinese words. That means that their 'non-cooperation' in reflective journal-keeping (fewer entries in reading/learning journals) might not be necessarily indicative of their resistance to anything in the MT project.

In contrast, another view was that, 'some students' (I am not sure whether the interviewees themselves were included when they made the judgement) did not 'like'

the idea of becoming 'reflective' and acquiring 'metacognitive' strategies in their learning from the first week of the MT programme, so 'these students' were reluctant to tell stories of their reading processing and general EFL learning in their journals. That might explain why on various occasions, students often made comments like 'reflect what' and 'why reflect'. The reasons behind such dislikes and reluctance, from the interviewees' perspectives, were that students did not easily see how reflection and metacognitive knowledge could contribute to progress in their learning goals (compare Tsang, 1999). Their goals, were mainly, "a 'fundamental leap' in the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and doing well in examinations". And they argued that, 'even if we become aware of our learning processes, this does not help our learning'. When I asked how I could improve the MT programme, interviewees' responses were straightforward: if reflection and those kinds of metacognitive strategies could not bring about favourable changes (e.g., rapid improvements in basic language skills), MT would not be well received. The interviewees even said that 'some students' considered involvement in reflective and metacognitive tasks to be 'a waste of time' and tried to avoid doing them. That might amount to learner resistance.

Nevertheless, the three group interviews revealed one perspective shared by all the students: reading-report-writing activity was more beneficial to learning although the writing was a burden at the beginning (supported by the diary data; see later analysis).

5 Summary of students' views

There existed clear mismatches between the goals and expectations of the teacher and the students. While the teacher expected students to be involved more in reflective and process-oriented learning, students seemed to expect short-term, more visible results and were more interested in product-oriented learning. It was through such mismatches that learner resistance to the teacher's goals and expectations was manifested. It can be argued that the resistance was grounded in the mismatches, although it might be problematic to claim a direct and necessary relationship between the resistance and the mismatches. Having demonstrated how learner resistance was

manifested in the MT project, I now turn to the second focus of the study to explore the possible sources of such resistance.

V Initial explanations for learner resistance

To explore the possible causes of learner resistance, it is necessary to first consider whether my own teacher role might have contributed to the construction of student attitudes. In retrospect, I found myself controlling in terms of curriculum implementation during the whole period of MT. I was preoccupied with the necessarily positive outcome of MT to the extent that I had somewhat failed to create a sufficiently supportive environment in which learner-teacher roles, classroom methodologies and materials were all under negotiation between the teacher and the students to clarify possible misconceptions and to accommodate students' immediate concerns (e.g., TEM-4) at that particular time. In short, my eagerness for 'immediate change' (Allwright, 2003) was a possible source of resistance.

Another possibility for students' oppositional attitudes towards MT was that MT was conducted in our context for the first time and students might not be psychologically ready for the 'strangeness' of the concept of MT and its classroom procedures. One example was that, as pointed out earlier, reading-report writing was established and thus might be considered a 'normal' form of assignment while reflective journal-keeping was a stranger in the sense that it had never been treated as a learning tool prior to the MT project. This might affect students' psychological acceptance of journal-keeping as a legitimate task.

However, the data presented in the preceding section (e.g., students' challenging remarks like 'reflect what' and 'why reflect') suggests that teacher behaviour and the 'strangeness' of MT were not the only possible sources of resistance. To seek other explanations for learner resistance, it should be helpful to look back at students' differentiated attitudes and reactions towards reading-report writing and reflective journal-keeping. As indicated by the journal entries above, students' acceptance of reading-report writing as an effective learning tool might be derived from their conceptualization of reading-report writing as an external force. However, although

the reading/learning journal assignment constituted another external force, it was not received with equal enthusiasm from students.

Perhaps journal-keeping as another external force was taken as an added burden to compete for students' time, especially when the kind of reflective journal-keeping usually took time to generate visible results in language learning. And arguably, tangible language achievement was particularly important to students in an examination- and product-oriented educational context. That might explain why students valued reading-report writing and partly resisted reflective journal-keeping. In the diary extracts cited above, students said that reading-report writing could help address their immediate concerns: vocabulary, reading speed, reading comprehension and composition. Linking this to our context, it could be argued that improvement in these areas would help them pass the national TEM-4 (as these areas were the major components of TEM-4) in the coming semester. In other words, the reading-report task allowed them to play out a conventional role that gave them a sense of safety. To reformulate this line of argument, perhaps what was looming in students' minds was not necessarily a question of whether the activities of reading-report writing and reflective journal-keeping had value in learning, but probably a question of *what* exactly each activity was valuable *for*.

This motivates a closer analysis of the diary data. The purpose now is to seek more complex explanations for student opposition, from the perspectives of learner conceptions of language learning and classroom roles embedded within a particular socio-educational context.

VI Alternative explanations for learner resistance

As mentioned earlier, students in the MT project had an immediate concern that they had to pass TEM-4/Band-4 in the semester that followed in order to be on the safe side of being awarded the BA degree. This was reflected in their conceptions of learning:

Extract 3

At present, I am reading the book "Know America"...it's so boring that make me not want to

read more. But, on the other hand, I got more information about America... Maybe one day an essay about this will appear in examination. Maybe this kind of thought, which is that we learn something just because of certain examinations, is not good guide during the learning process. But, fact is fact! The reality forces us to get a high mark at first. Only when you pass the Band-4 Examination successfully, the bachelor's degree will belong to you naturally...

It seemed clear that the diarist's first important goal in the four-year BA programme was to pass, or to obtain good grades on TEM-4. This, however, was not an idiosyncratic case as some diarists observed that for 'most' of their classmates, the first aim was to pass TEM-4 (scheduled in the next semester).

According to my observation and experience as an insider, students' preoccupation with TEM-4 was intensified by the examination-oriented product approach pervasive in our classrooms. In our context, responsibilities of teachers who taught the second-year and even the first-year students were substantially reduced to helping students pass TEM-4 to guarantee a decent pass rate. High-score students and their 'coaches' (teachers assigned to hold more responsibility for TEM-4) were awarded prizes or given extra money. In addition, experience from previous graduates had shown that high scorers enjoyed higher chances in the employment market. This served as a job-market principle, which was often quoted by both teachers and the administration to promote student motivation for TEM-4 whenever they felt that students were lazy in study or 'indifferent' to the approaching of TEM-4. Therefore, long before TEM-4 was due, classroom rehearsals had begun:

Extract 4

Last week, the teacher of Basic English [the most important proficiency course] tested our listening level with the material of Band-4 Examination in 1998. He just wanted to know how we learn, but the result struck me fiercely and I nearly lost confidence at that moment. To be frank, I become very depressed from then on...

Evidence shown above indicated that TEM-4 grades and the discourse surrounding

TEM-4 had acquired a discorsal and ‘symbolic’ control of stakeholders’ autonomy in teaching-learning processes (Bernstein, 2000; Wu, 2004). Students were not unaware of this control, but there was little they could do about it:

Extract 5

The real aim of learning a certain language, just is communication and seeking knowledge. Such a simple principle has been puzzled [confused] by a lot of social factors, so that most of the learners have been leading to a wrong way eventually. Looking at our expression, [it was] as if we were relieved of a heavy burden after the examinations, I felt so depressed that we just study for the examinations. Actually the process is more important than the result...

In prestigious Chinese universities, TEM-4 did not create such a high level of anxiety for students, teachers and the administration, but as my college was still on the way to becoming well-known, the test was a major issue. This illustrates the fact that institutional and societal expectations, examination pressures, and educational pragmatism had conditioned students’ conceptions of how learning should be possibly directed to, and more importantly, had combined to ‘work out’ a role for this group of learners. As seen more clearly later, these learners in turn, tended to internalize and accommodate towards these institutional-societal expectations and to take on roles as examination-oriented learners, short-term passive receivers of knowledge, and pragmatic opportunists for short-cut learning methods. Therefore, the MT project aiming for enhanced reflections on learning and greater learner autonomy was received with resistance, especially for those who evaluated themselves as unsuccessful learners (in their terms, they needed to pass TEM-4 to survive before they were in the mood to consider the luxury of autonomy).

Having drawn a picture of the wider socio-educational context, I now provide further examples to illustrate how the TEM-4 discourse had shaped students’ conceptions of various aspects of EFL learning and had affected their classroom behaviours.

Extract 6

Today, I began reading the book about vocabulary. I think this book is much better than the vocabulary book X [a teacher] gave to us...Compared with the Band-4 vocabulary, the content of the book is much richer...using this book, we can enlarge our vocabulary in a short time.

Extract 7

Skimming is a new reading skill for me...Skimming will save much time. But I am always afraid if I can answer the questions accurately. When I skim a text, I am worried that I miss some message. Sometimes, after skimming a text, I forget the answers. Then I have to read it again. If there is a long complicated sentence, I will slow down and think it about, although it isn't important... Now I try to overcome my bad habit in reading.

Extract 8

These days I was reading the book "Fast reading". I remember that about 5 years ago, when I was in senior [middle] school, I bought a book for fast reading, but you know it's too difficult for me...Today, I read another "fast reading"...Now I can read faster than ever. But the following problem came along. I cannot do the exercises correctly, because I cannot understand the article. I can read fast, but I cannot understand the meaning. It's no use. I think read more will help a lot. I hope my reading speed will be improved after I have read so many articles. I find these short articles are very useful. There are several new words in one passage. So I can also learn many new words from them. I am not wasting time even if I haven't improved my reading speed.

The three diarists above reduced EFL reading to vocabulary learning through memorization, acquisition of reading speed, and locating 'correct' answers to questions, all for pragmatic reasons (obtaining good grades on TEM-4, in which vocabulary knowledge and reading speed were important components). *Extract-7* diarist regarded slowing down to read closely for meaning as a "bad habit" that should be overcome (*Extract-8* diarist also implied this). In short, the three scenarios point to the fact that EFL readers living in an examination culture were forced to learn

how to speed read and to increase the correct rate in doing multiple-choice exercises, downplaying other aspects of EFL learning (e.g., communication of meaning as mentioned in *Extract 5*). It was probably because of these orientations that in their journals, many readers recorded their repeated struggles to decide whether they should ‘*read the (multiple-choice) questions first or the text first*’ in order to obtain a higher percentage of correct answers in a given period of time.

Extract 9

Last week I listened to the tape of "VOA Standard English". Again and again, I still can't catch the main idea, I even can't follow it. I have to spend more than 15 minutes to do the exercises of each item...It took me so much time [doing] such things. But I found it useless. In TEM-4 we are just required to choose the best answer why don't we do such exercises directly?

Extract 10

If we want to improve the reading speed, we should pay attention to it even though we are just doing the practice. So, when I do some practice, I would limit the time. I think I can form a good habit in this way. Consider each practice as an exam.

The above two diarists' claims of treating ‘*each practice as an exam*’ could be interpreted, by extension, as learning for examinations (especially TEM-4). In other words, students tended to adopt an examination-learner role within a particular EFL social setting.

Extract 11

Now, the Band-4 examination is just around the corner [scheduled in mid-May each year, at least half year to go], maybe when the winter vacation [late January to mid-February] is over we should fully prepare for the examination when return to the school. I don't worry much about this examination, because many students told me that it was just a proficiency test and it was not very difficult, and also I think that we are English majors, we should and must pass it,

otherwise we'll feel guilty, we won't live up to "English-majors". It is said that nearly all the students in South China Normal University can pass their TEM-4 exams, and almost half of them can pass TEM-8 [scheduled in the final year]. Hearing this, I feel very sad. Why can't some of our English majors pass TEM-4 exams? What are they doing every day?

This last extract illustrates two points. First, the diarist had begun to feel uneasy about TEM-4 at least half year in advance (this was common among other diarists), although she claimed that she did not 'worry much about' the proficiency test. Second, she defined the learner role for "*English majors*" in terms of TEM-4 performance. This latter point was not a surprise, as many staff members and the administration also held this view. The question the diarist asked at the end was also interesting. Did she mean, 'if we devote our time to TEM-4, how can we fail?'

The diary data presented above might not demonstrate the existence of a direct and necessary relationship between learner resistance and learner conceptions of EFL learning and learner roles. Nonetheless, I would like to argue that, if students were so anxious and concerned about TEM-4 and the acquisition of tangible language skills, they would not be willing to pay serious attention to MT that emphasized reflection and the learning-to-learn process, especially when they perceived that neither reflection nor 'process' would quickly address their immediate concerns and serve their immediate purposes.

VII Conclusion and implications

In a broad sense, there existed (at least partial) learner resistance to the teacher's goals and expectations in the metacognition-training (MT) project. At first look, my own teacher role (quick decision to bring about change through MT) and the 'strangeness' of MT in our context constituted a possible source of learner resistance. However, a closer scrutiny of our context and students' journals kept over a full semester seemed to indicate that more complex explanations for student resistance should be sought. At a more macro level, institutional pressures and societal expectations seemed to be the controlling factors, which might give rise to an examination culture valued by the

university community and the contemporary Chinese society. At a more micro level, these pressures and expectations were realized by the pragmatic product-oriented approach in the EFL classroom and by students' positioning as examination learners. That might partly explain why learner resistance occurred in the MT project that emphasized process, reflection and autonomy rather than visible examination performance.

It could be argued that what I have described as 'learner resistance' is also a matter of tensions and conflicts in learner and teacher agendas, and in short-term and long-term priorities in learning. For example, students might recognize the long-term potential of MT (which intended to involve them in more reflective and process-oriented learning), but still felt that short-term priorities (e.g. improving basic language skills and taking examinations) should prevail. In an examination-oriented educational context, this might constitute a reasonable and sensible orientation towards learning.

This in turn raises questions that this paper has not fully addressed, for example:

- 1) Is 'resistance' really a good term to capture the complexity of learner *reactions* towards teacher-directed learner-training? Is 'reluctance' a more appropriate word to capture this valuable insight (as suggested by Dick Allwright in his comments on this paper)?
- 2) To what extent can we confidently say that learner resistance is manifested through mismatches between learner and teacher agendas?

None the less, implications arising from discussions on these questions could be explored, for EFL teaching and learning:

- 1) If learner resistance (or reluctance) is grounded in mismatches between teacher and learner agendas and between learners' short-term and long-term priorities in learning, these conflicting agendas and priorities should first be fully respected, taken into account, and understood before any action can be

taken for a potentially beneficial change. In the case of the MT project, unless the teacher could show that MT would actually help students' short-term priorities (passing TEM-4 and improving language skills), or could get the situation changed away from a product-oriented education system (a 'tall order'), it might be better to give in gracefully and just help learners with their short-term priorities, taking comfort from the learners' perception that product-oriented tasks (e.g. reading-report writing) could bring short-term as well as long-term benefits in terms of learning development. The point is that practitioner researchers should build on learners' perspectives and insights, and 'resist immediate and thoughtless change' in order to pursue 'fundamentally long-lasting and profound change' (Allwright, 2003: 129).

- 2) It has been suggested earlier that my eager intervention in learning for improvement (solving problems) through MT was a possible source of learner resistance in MT. Therefore, future attempts to introduce learner training (e.g. MT) should begin from learners' perceptions of their own learning, and should follow but not precede, sufficient understanding of classroom learning and life – which should be taken as a goal for professionally oriented and shared research activity and as part of teacher reflection, rather than as an aid to prescription or part of an external agenda for improvement (Allison, 2004; Allwright, 2003).

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Appendix (yield = 92, out of 104 respondents in 3 classes)

Please circle the score that best summarizes your reaction to each statement (1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Uncertain, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree) (**figures in parentheses** indicating the combined percentages of "Agree" and "Strongly Agree"):

1. The whole-class discussion about successful reading strategies used by different students has been useful to improve my reading ability. **(68%)**
2. The teacher's explicit explanation of reading processes in class has been effective to improve my reading comprehension. **(70%)**
3. When reading comprehension broke down in class, the teacher's incidental teaching of reading processes using specific paragraphs and contexts has helped me clarify the source of my comprehension problems. **(83%)**
4. Keeping a reading diary has been useful and effective in raising consciousness of my reading processes. **(59%)**
5. Reflecting on my own reading processes (sharing information) in a small group in class has helped me become aware of my strengths and weaknesses in reading and thus enhance my reading comprehension. **(83%)**
6. In class, the teacher often helped students analyze how they actually arrived at a correct/wrong answer by means of asking them to recall their processes in understanding a certain question. I think that this has been useful to improve my reading comprehension. **(79%)**

Please tick the statement that best fits you (**figures in parentheses** indicating results):

7A. ____ I have been interested in writing reading diaries throughout this course. **(30%)**

7B. ____ I have not been interested in writing reading diaries throughout this course. **(70%)**