

## Original Paper

# Critical Reflections on Student-Centered Teaching in Chinese University English Education

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### **Abstract**

*This paper offers a critical examination of student-centered teaching in Chinese university English education, focusing on how progressive pedagogical ideals interface with local constraints and highlighting misalignments between theory and practice. Grounded in constructivist and humanistic theories that prioritize active, learner-centered education (Song & Mukundan, 2025) and encourage learner autonomy, the analysis affirms the pedagogical rationale for student-centered approaches. However, China's Confucian-heritage educational culture—with its emphasis on teacher authority, rote memorization for exam preparation, and deference to hierarchy (Shah & Basnyat, 2022)—poses significant challenges for such pedagogy. An exam-oriented system and large class sizes further incentivize didactic instruction and limit opportunities for meaningful student-teacher interaction (Wright & Zheng, 2016). These contextual factors create tensions between the ideals of learner autonomy and collaborative learning and the realities of entrenched teacher-centered practices and exam-focused expectations. In response, instructors often adopt a selective adaptation of student-centered techniques: integrating group discussions and other participatory activities where feasible while retaining traditional methods to maintain control and meet test requirements (Shah & Basnyat, 2022). This pragmatic compromise underscores the persistent influence of systemic pressures on classroom practice. The paper argues for a more contextually appropriate model of student-centered pedagogy. Rather than a wholesale importation of Western models, it calls for culturally informed adaptations aligned with local traditions and structural constraints (Shah & Basnyat, 2022). Such an approach entails gradually redefining teacher and student roles, bolstering teacher training, and reforming assessment practices to support meaningful learner engagement. This critical reflection provides insights for educators and policymakers on how student-centered ideals can be judiciously*

*implemented in a Confucian-influenced, exam-driven educational environment.*

### **Keywords**

*Student-centered teaching, Chinese university English education, Constructivism, Humanistic education, Learner autonomy, Confucian heritage, Exam-oriented system*

## **1. Introduction**

In recent decades, student-centered pedagogy has gained prominence worldwide as an alternative to traditional teacher-led instruction. China has not been immune to this trend: major education reforms have called for a shift from exam-driven, teacher-dominated teaching toward a more learner-centered model (Lou, 2021). In English language education at the tertiary level, this push is part of broader curriculum reforms aiming to improve students' communicative competence and critical thinking. For example, China's National English Curriculum Standards emphasize students' "all-round development" and communicative abilities (Lou, 2021), reflecting the influence of global TESOL movements such as Communicative Language Teaching and constructivist learning theories. Accordingly, many Chinese universities have revised College English programs to encourage interactive, student-engaged learning activities in place of rote memorization and lecture-only approaches.

Despite the official rhetoric and policy support, implementing student-centered teaching in Chinese university English classrooms has proven challenging. Long-standing cultural norms and institutional constraints often hinder the realization of learner-centered ideals. Teachers and students raised in a traditionally teacher-centric system may struggle to adapt to new roles and expectations. Indeed, while student-centered education (SCE) has been "well promoted in China," its classroom enactment frequently remains de facto teacher-centered due to deep-rooted contextual factors (Zhang & Leung, 2023). This paper critically examines the philosophy of student-centered learning within Chinese higher education English instruction – questioning its philosophical foundations, contextual constraints, and practical outcomes. The following sections explore (1) the theoretical underpinnings of student-centered pedagogy, (2) the cultural and institutional context in China, (3) pedagogical tensions between ideals and realities, (4) the practical limits of student-centered methods in Chinese university English classrooms, and (5) future directions for adapting these approaches to better fit the local context.

## **2. Philosophical Foundations**

Constructivism: Student-centered teaching is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which posits that learners actively construct knowledge rather than passively receive it. In a constructivist classroom, the learner is the central agent in making meaning, and the teacher's role shifts from knowledge transmitter to facilitator of learning experiences (Wang, 2011). Pioneers like Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky emphasized that learning occurs through active engagement and social interaction.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, in particular, highlighted the zone of proximal development—the idea that learners can reach higher levels of understanding with guided support from more knowledgeable others. This implies a need for teachers to scaffold learning through dialogue and collaboration, rather than simply lecture. As one source explains, “At its core, constructivism asserts that knowledge is not passively received but built by the learner. This process of knowledge construction is driven by the individual's engagement with their environment, whereby they interpret new information through the lens of their prior experiences” (Alam, 2023). In tertiary English education, this constructivist perspective supports practices like group discussions, problem-solving tasks, and peer learning, where students actively use English to negotiate meaning under the teacher's guidance.

**Humanism:** The student-centered approach is also deeply influenced by humanistic educational philosophy, which prioritizes the learner's personal growth, needs, and agency. Carl Rogers, a leading humanist, advocated for education that is empathetic, learner-driven, and non-authoritarian. Rogers famously argued that “the primary task of the teacher is to permit the student to learn”, insisting that educators create a supportive environment in which students' natural curiosity can flourish (Rogers, 1983). In his view, meaningful learning occurs when students feel valued and empowered to direct their own learning, rather than being forced to simply absorb facts. Humanistic principles introduced concepts such as learner-centered classrooms, personal relevance in learning, and the importance of a safe, respectful teacher–student relationship. In the context of English education, a Rogerian approach would mean teachers listen to students' voices, tailor content to their interests, and foster an atmosphere of trust where students are comfortable expressing themselves in the target language.

**Learner Autonomy:** A related pillar of student-centered teaching is the development of learner autonomy—the capacity of students to take charge of their own learning. The notion of autonomy in language learning was articulated by Henri Holec, who defined it as the learner's ability “to take charge of [their] learning process” (FEDJ, & BOUHASS, 2018). This involves students setting their own goals, selecting learning strategies, and self-evaluating their progress. Autonomy is considered both a means and an end of education: by engaging learners in decision-making and self-directed activities, teachers prepare them for lifelong learning beyond the classroom. The push for autonomous learning is evident in Chinese higher education reforms that encourage out-of-class English practice, elective English courses, and use of self-access learning centers. Theoretically, constructivism supports autonomy by viewing learners as active agents, and humanism frames it as respecting students' freedom and individuality. Thus, student-centered pedagogy in the Chinese university English context rests on a blend of constructivist, humanistic, and autonomy-oriented theories – from Vygotsky's and Piaget's insights on active, social learning to Rogers' learner-centered teaching and Holec's vision of independent learners.

### 3. Cultural and Institutional Context

Implementing student-centered teaching in China's university English classrooms requires understanding the cultural and institutional landscape that shapes teacher and student behaviors. Several key contextual factors influence how feasible learner-centered approaches are:

**Confucian Heritage Culture:** Chinese education has traditionally been influenced by Confucian heritage culture, which emphasizes respect for authority, filial piety, and educational diligence. In the classroom, this heritage often translates into a teacher-centric hierarchy: the teacher is regarded as the authoritative source of knowledge, and students are expected to show deference and discipline. Many Chinese students have been socialized to be quiet, attentive, and compliant in class, rather than outspoken or inquisitive. A recent study noted that in Chinese settings, students often appear “passive when responding to questions”, as they tend to sit quietly and rarely challenge the teacher (Chan & Smith, 2024). This reticence is partly tied to cultural concepts of “face”, whereby students avoid risking embarrassment (for themselves or the teacher) by not speaking up unless sure of their answer. Such norms can clash with Western-origin student-centered methods that encourage open debate, questioning, and informal student-teacher interactions. The Confucian emphasis on harmony and order may cause both learners and instructors to feel uncomfortable with the more egalitarian, participatory dynamics that student-centered pedagogy entails. Consequently, Chinese university students may initially be less inclined to volunteer opinions or take initiative in class, which teachers must take into account when adopting new methods.

**Exam-Oriented Educational System:** Another significant constraint is the exam-driven nature of China's education system. From primary school through university, high-stakes tests have a powerful influence on teaching content and methods. At the tertiary level, although there is more flexibility than in secondary schooling, English instruction is still often geared toward standardized assessments such as the College English Test (CET) Band 4 and Band 6. Most universities require non-English majors to pass CET-4 (a national English proficiency exam) to earn their degree, and many students aim for CET-6 for competitive advantage. This leads to a “teaching to the test” mentality in many College English courses. Teachers feel pressure to cover the grammar, vocabulary, and reading skills that these exams measure, leaving less room for communicative activities or learner-led projects that might not directly yield higher test scores. Indeed, Chinese colleges traditionally place “significant emphasis on the intensive training of students' listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation skills, setting grade requirements for English proficiency, such as CET-4 and CET-6” (Luu & Lu, 2024). While these skills can be taught in student-centered ways, the quickest path to boosting test performance often seems to be drill-based practice and teacher explanations, reinforcing teacher-centered habits. The exam culture thus incentivizes a focus on measurable outcomes (scores) over less tangible outcomes like learner autonomy or oral communication confidence. Until assessment systems change to align with student-centered learning objectives, teachers face a structural dilemma in balancing exam preparation with interactive pedagogy.

**Large Class Sizes and Resource Constraints:** Practical logistical factors in Chinese universities also limit the degree to which English teaching can be student-centered. Classes for compulsory College English courses often enroll large numbers of students – commonly 40 to 60 per class, sometimes even more in lecture formats. Such large class sizes make interactive techniques (like frequent group work, presentations, or individualized feedback) harder to manage. In a typical large English class, it is challenging for the teacher to involve every student in discussion or to tailor instruction to individual needs. One consequence observed is that teachers may fall back on lecturing or choral repetition to maintain control and cover content with so many students. As one analysis noted, the logistical reality of “large classes with students of varying English backgrounds” is a major constraint, and many instructors accustomed to traditional methods struggle to engage all students under these conditions (Lou, 2021). Additionally, resources such as multimedia classrooms, teaching assistants, or accessible language labs—which could facilitate more student-centered activities – are not uniformly available across all institutions, especially lesser-funded universities in inland regions. The combination of overcrowded classrooms, limited class hours (often just a few hours per week per group), and heavy teacher workloads (instructors might teach several large classes, totaling hundreds of students) means that the intended ideal of personalized, student-driven learning often gives way to pragmatic teacher-led instruction. In summary, the Confucian-influenced expectations, exam imperatives, and practical constraints in Chinese universities form a context that can be inhospitable to pure forms of student-centered teaching, requiring careful adaptation of those methods.

#### **4. Pedagogical Tensions**

Owing to the above context, significant tensions arise when attempting to implement student-centered pedagogy in Chinese university English education. These tensions manifest as gaps between the idealized philosophy of learner-centered teaching and the on-the-ground classroom reality:

**Teacher Authority vs. Facilitator Role:** Student-centered teaching calls for a redefinition of the teacher’s role from authoritative lecturer to guide or facilitator. However, in practice this role change can be fraught with ambiguity for Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers. Many were themselves educated in teacher-fronted classrooms and may have deeply ingrained beliefs about good teaching involving explicit instruction and firm teacher control. When asked to adopt Western pedagogies, some teachers experience uncertainty about how to balance authority with learner autonomy. A mixed-method study on China’s curriculum reform found that “many teachers [knew] the content of the curriculum document, but [expressed] uncertainty about what a shift to student-centered teaching and learning means”, as well as confusion about the new expectations for their teaching practices (Lei & Medwell, 2022). This highlights an internal conflict: teachers are told to empower students, yet they fear losing classroom order or failing to cover required material if they relinquish too much control. Culturally, being an authoritative instructor is also tied to the teacher’s identity and students’ expectations—a more egalitarian, facilitator style might initially be interpreted by students

(and even supervisors) as the teacher not doing their job. Thus, on a daily basis, instructors navigate a tension between “teaching as traditionally understood” (imparting knowledge, maintaining discipline) and “teaching as facilitation” (prompting students to discover knowledge themselves). This conflict can lead to hybrid practices: for example, a teacher might orchestrate a group activity (seemingly student-centered) but tightly steer its outcome or frequently intervene, effectively maintaining a teacher-centered dynamic within the veneer of student participation.

**Low Learner Autonomy and Participation:** On the student side, a key tension lies between the ideal of autonomous, self-directed learners and the reality that many Chinese students have had little training or experience in autonomy. After years of highly structured schooling, university freshmen often expect the teacher to decide the syllabus, provide notes, and give clear guidance for every assignment. When suddenly invited to make choices or express personal opinions, students may respond with apprehension or passivity. For instance, if an English teacher adopts open-ended discussion or project-based learning, they might find that students remain quiet, avoiding engagement for fear of making mistakes or simply due to unaccustomedness to proactive learning. Research on Chinese learners consistently shows a gap in readiness for autonomy—students can become autonomous, but they need scaffolding to get there (Luu & Lu, 2024). A 2024 study on autonomous English listening practice found that Chinese university students appreciated the idea of autonomy but still “exhibited increased motivation for autonomous listening provided that they were given teacher guidance and a certain level of pressure” (Luu & Lu, 2024). In other words, students perform better when the instructor offers structure and even gentle pressure (e.g. deadlines, accountability) alongside freedom, rather than being left entirely to their own devices. This illustrates a practical tension: student-centered philosophy promotes giving learners control, but if given too much freedom too quickly, many students either flounder or disengage. Similarly, interactive pedagogy presumes students will ask questions and collaborate; yet teachers often encounter a wall of silence when posing questions to a class trained not to speak up. As one account notes, Chinese students’ habitual passivity can result in teachers receiving “insufficient student feedback to modify and optimize their teaching” during class (Chan & Smith, 2024). Without student responses, the feedback loop that student-centered methods rely on breaks down, and teachers may revert to lecturing. The tension, therefore, is that to cultivate active, autonomous learners, teachers must initially provide significant direction, training, and encouragement—a paradoxical situation where more teacher support is needed to achieve less teacher dependence.

**Innovation vs. Assessment and Accountability:** There is also a systemic tension between trying innovative student-centered activities and meeting concrete curriculum targets (such as syllabus coverage and exam results for CET or finals). University English teachers are usually required to follow a syllabus tied to textbooks and to ensure students attain certain proficiency levels. If a teacher experiments with, say, a semester-long student-selected project or extensive in-class communicative activities, they risk falling behind schedule or not adequately preparing students for standardized tests.

This creates a constant pull between process-oriented teaching (focusing on student engagement, creativity, and skills development) and product-oriented teaching (ensuring the class can pass tests and cover required content). In Chinese universities, where administrators often monitor exam pass rates and student evaluations, teachers may feel constrained to prioritize immediate results over exploratory learning. The result can be a surface adoption of student-centered techniques—for instance, adding a few pair discussions or presentations—without deeply changing the teacher-centered core of instruction. Teachers who are enthusiastic about SCL might implement it only up to the point that it does not jeopardize their students' exam performance or their own performance metrics. This delicate balancing act exemplifies the friction between educational ideals and institutional expectations. Over time, such tensions can lead to teacher frustration or cynicism about pedagogical reforms, especially if they perceive the reforms as a top-down mandate disconnected from classroom realities.

### 5. Practical Boundaries in the Chinese University EFL Classroom

Given the above tensions, it becomes clear that student-centered practices in Chinese university English classrooms often operate within certain pragmatic boundaries. In practice, some elements of learner-centered pedagogy have seen partial success, while others frequently fall short in the Chinese context:

**Selective Adoption of Student-Centered Techniques:** Chinese EFL instructors tend to adopt a blended approach – integrating student-centered activities in a controlled manner rather than overhauling their teaching style entirely. For example, many College English teachers incorporate pair work or group discussions on occasion, use task-based learning for specific units, or assign group presentations/projects to encourage active use of English. These activities can increase student engagement and are generally well-received when managed carefully. Teachers often report that students enjoy chances to interact and apply language skills in meaningful ways, breaking the monotony of lecture-plus-drill. However, such activities are typically planned and structured meticulously by the teacher to avoid chaos and ensure relevance to learning goals. In other words, the spirit of student-centered learning is embraced, but within “reasonable contextual challenges and difficulties,” leading to an “adjusted SCE adaptation” rather than a full-fledged transformation (Zhang & Leung, 2023). As Zhang and Leung (2023) observed in school settings, what might appear as a failure to implement SCE may actually be a strategic adaptation: Chinese teachers picking and choosing student-centered strategies that can work in large classes and exam contexts, while retaining teacher-led elements where necessary (Zhang & Leung, 2023). Thus, practices like guided pair dialogues, structured debates, or role-plays are finding a place in some university English classes, whereas more radical approaches (e.g., entirely student-designed curriculum or self-paced learning modules) remain rare.

**Limits of Autonomy and Student Initiative:** Certain student-centered practices have proven difficult to realize. For instance, self-directed learning components—where students independently choose

materials or set their learning tasks—often face low participation. Many universities have introduced English self-study programs or online learning platforms (sometimes as part of blended learning), but motivating students to use these resources without constant teacher oversight is challenging. The reality is that outside of class, many undergraduates do not engage deeply with autonomous learning unless it is tied to assessments or explicit incentives. In class, techniques like student-led discussions or peer teaching can also falter. Students may be unaccustomed to taking a leadership role in learning and might default to silence or off-topic chatting when put into groups without teacher monitoring. Additionally, critical thinking discussions—where students are asked to analyze or critique ideas in English—might not flourish due to prior educational experiences that emphasized finding correct answers over expressing opinions. All these illustrate a boundary: student-centered methods that rely on high learner independence or critical inquiry often underperform in an environment where learners have not been gradually trained for those responsibilities. In contrast, more controlled interactive activities (such as information-gap exercises or teacher-curated group tasks) tend to succeed because they combine student involvement with clear guidelines.

**Outcome Discrepancies:** Another practical boundary is in learning outcomes. While student-centered advocates argue that such methods improve long-term skills and motivation, in Chinese universities the measurable short-term outcomes can be mixed. Some studies have shown positive effects of active learning—for example, a 2025 study found that increasing students' Foreign Language Enjoyment (through interactive speaking tasks) positively related to their willingness to communicate in English (Lin & Wang, 2025). This suggests that student-centered approaches that make learning enjoyable can indeed boost engagement and confidence. On the other hand, when it comes to exam performance or vocabulary gains, teacher-centered techniques sometimes appear just as effective or more efficient, which reinforces teachers' hesitance to fully commit to student-centered teaching. Educators often confront cases where, despite implementing interactive methods, final exam scores or CET pass rates did not improve appreciably—in some cases because assessments themselves remained traditional. This can be discouraging and may lead instructors to revert to familiar methods. In sum, student-centered teaching in China's universities often succeeds in enhancing engagement and oral skills, but may fall short in contexts where rote learning is still the tested currency. The practical equilibrium struck in many classrooms is a semi-student-centered approach: teachers facilitate interaction and student input in a limited way, but still guide the class firmly to meet syllabus targets. This hybrid model, born of necessity, underscores that pure student-centered pedagogy has yet to fully take root under current conditions.

## **6. Future Directions for Contextualized Student-Centered Approaches**

Looking ahead, the question is how to better reconcile student-centered educational philosophy with the realities of Chinese university English education. Rather than an all-or-nothing adoption, the future



likely lies in adapted or hybrid pedagogical approaches that honor student-centered principles while fitting the local context. Several directions can be recommended:

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:** One approach is to reinterpret and integrate student-centered methods in ways that align with Chinese cultural values. For example, leveraging the Confucian emphasis on collective harmony, teachers can implement collaborative learning (group projects, team-based tasks) which allows peer support and aligns with students' comfort in group settings. By framing group work as a way to achieve collective success (a value in collectivist cultures), teachers may increase buy-in for active participation. Additionally, teachers can explicitly discuss with students the purpose of interactive learning—connecting it to students' personal growth and future professional needs—thereby making the shift in classroom norms more acceptable. It may also help to draw on Confucian humanistic ideals (which stress moral education and care for learners) to justify student-centered practices: for instance, emphasizing that a student-centered classroom cares about each individual's development, something even Confucius advocated in terms of teaching according to students' abilities. Such framing can reduce resistance by showing that student-centered learning is not a Western imposition but can be made compatible with local educational philosophy.

**Gradual Increase in Learner Autonomy:** Future implementations should adopt a step-by-step increase in student autonomy rather than expecting students to be fully self-directed overnight. This involves scaffolding learner autonomy through training and structured opportunities. For instance, first-year university students could be given short, guided tasks where they make minor decisions (choosing an essay topic from a list, or doing a brief self-evaluation of a presentation). With each successive course year, tasks could become more open-ended, gradually building students' confidence and skills in self-regulation. Teachers can integrate strategy instruction—teaching students how to learn (e.g., how to use dictionaries, plan a study schedule, practice listening independently)—thereby equipping them with tools for autonomous learning. Research indicates that students are willing to be more autonomous “provided that they [have] teacher guidance and a certain level of pressure” to keep them accountable (Luu & Lu, 2024). Therefore, a blended model of autonomy support is advisable: give students freedom, but also set checkpoints and offer feedback. Over time, as students experience success in more independent tasks, their mindset may shift to see autonomy as beneficial rather than intimidating. Universities can support this by creating a culture of learner autonomy—for example, through self-access language learning centers, English clubs, or peer mentoring systems that encourage out-of-class learning in a structured yet self-driven way.

**Alignment of Assessments with Student-Centered Learning:** A crucial systemic change for the future is aligning testing and evaluation methods with student-centered goals. If high-stakes exams remain solely focused on discrete language points and receptive skills, they will continue to backwash into teacher-centered teaching. Educational authorities and universities should therefore consider assessment reform as part of the shift. This could include incorporating more formative assessments, such as portfolios, presentations, or group project grades, into English course evaluation. For example,

some universities have started to allocate a percentage of the final grade to classroom participation or project work, signaling to students that active engagement and skills use are valued outcomes. The national CET exams have also been gradually reforming (the CET now includes an optional spoken English test), but further steps like emphasizing communicative ability and critical thinking in these exams would encourage teachers to teach accordingly. In the long run, if “quality-oriented” education is the goal (Lou, 2021), then quality must be measured with tools that reflect creative and communicative competencies, not just multiple-choice grammar knowledge. Aligning curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in this way creates a coherent environment where student-centered teaching is not at odds with what students need to achieve for academic success.

**Teacher Professional Development and Support:** Equipping teachers with the skills and mindset to implement student-centered pedagogy is fundamental. Ongoing professional development (PD) programs can help bridge the gap between theory and practice that many instructors experience (Lei & Medwell, 2022). Workshops and training could focus on practical techniques for large classes (e.g., using think-pair-share, jigsaw reading, or station activities to get all students involved), classroom management in interactive settings, and ways to scaffold student skills. Peer observation and mentoring programs within universities could allow teachers to learn from colleagues who successfully use innovative methods. Importantly, PD should address teachers’ beliefs and reservations—creating space to discuss the challenges teachers face, and collectively brainstorm context-appropriate solutions. This could foster a shared understanding that, as Fullan (2012) and others note, is vital for any reform to take root (Lei & Medwell, 2022). Additionally, institutional support in the form of reduced class sizes, better classroom facilities, or teaching assistants for oral English classes can greatly enhance what is feasible. University administrators should recognize that expecting student-centered instruction without providing enabling conditions sets teachers up for failure; thus, investment in supportive infrastructure and reasonable teacher workloads is a forward path.

**Blended and Flipped Learning Models:** Technology offers promising avenues to realize student-centered learning in ways that bypass some classroom limitations. In recent years, China has made strides in adopting blended learning and flipped classroom models in tertiary English education (Zheng & Lee, 2023). In a flipped classroom, lecture content (e.g., grammar explanations or text introductions) is delivered via online videos or materials for students to study outside class at their own pace, while in-class time is devoted to interactive activities, problem-solving, and practice—essentially putting student-centered learning at the heart of classroom time. Early implementations of flipped English classrooms in China have shown improved student engagement and more time on communicative tasks. Likewise, online platforms and apps (for instance, those that allow real-time quizzes, discussion forums, or AI-driven language practice) enable a more personalized learning experience. Students can practice listening or speaking with online modules independently, freeing class time for collaborative and higher-order tasks. Studies have noted that integrating technology can “diminish the influence of teachers’ dominance” by giving learners control over aspects of their

learning (such as the pace of reviewing listening exercises) (Luu & Lu, 2024). Moving forward, combining face-to-face instruction with digital tools can create a “middle space” for student-centered learning – one where large class sizes can be managed by using online breakout discussions or quizzes to gather feedback from everyone, and where shy students might participate more via digital platforms than they would in a crowded physical classroom. Universities should continue exploring and investing in these blended models, while also ensuring students are trained to make effective use of them (e.g., not all students initially know how to learn from video lectures on their own, so guidance is needed).

In conclusion, the philosophy of student-centered teaching offers valuable aspirations for Chinese university English education—fostering greater student engagement, autonomy, and communicative ability. However, its wholesale application must be moderated by a sensitive understanding of context. The future lies in contextualized student-centered pedagogy: approaches that retain the core idea of active, learner-driven education but adapt it to fit cultural expectations, institutional constraints, and student readiness levels. This might involve hybrid teaching methods, gradual implementation, and systemic shifts in assessment and teacher development. As China’s educational landscape continues to evolve, with increasing exposure to global pedagogical ideas and strong national impetus for innovation, it is likely that the gap between student-centered ideals and classroom reality will narrow. By critically reflecting on both the benefits and the boundaries of student-centered teaching, stakeholders can work towards an English education model that is both effective and contextually appropriate – a model where students are indeed at the center of learning, supported by teachers who are guides on the side rather than sages on the stage, all within a framework that respects China’s unique educational ecosystem. Such a balanced model will enable Chinese university students not only to pass their exams, but to become competent, confident users of English and lifelong learners in an interconnected world.

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