

College English Learning Strategies Based on Communicative Teaching Platform

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Abstract

With the comprehensive reform of college English teaching method and strategy, communicative teaching platform, a complement to the autonomous learning, plays a significant role in the whole teaching process. Based on internet, the new teaching method aims at strengthening the interaction, which not only helps to solve the problem of lacking class hours as well as teachers in universities, but also arouses students' interest and broadens their horizon effectively. Accordingly, in this teaching patterns, students have to change their traditional ways of study into more updated learning strategies with the guidance of the teachers, so that the benefits of communicative teaching platform can be maximized and the learning effect can be improved comprehensively.

Key words: Communicative teaching platform; College English learning strategies; Online autonomous learning

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2004, colleges and universities in China have reformed and tested the college English teaching method on a grand scale according to *College English Curriculum Requirements* proposed by Ministry of Education. The traditional "teacher-centered teaching" which simply

focused on imparting language knowledge has gradually been changed into the "student-centered learning", which attaches great importance to students' ability of using the foreign language and learning autonomously. Consequently, the teaching methodologies that have profound impact, such as "cognitive approach", "task-based language teaching", "interactive language teaching" and "autonomous learning", are adopted widely in college English classes.

The communicative teaching platform, built in accordance with autonomous learning, has provided college English teaching with more communication opportunities, more abundant teaching resources as well as more options. Therefore, it helps English teaching break the limitations of time and space. Meanwhile, the platform, stimulating the online study, enhances the communication between teacher and student as well as between students themselves, which greatly arouses the students' interest and promotes the efficiency of English learning.

Along with the constant innovation of teaching paradigms and the steady advance of teaching methods, the learning strategies, especially the second language learning strategies, are bound to be changed. Only with the guidance of teachers and the practice of students, can students develop their awareness of learning strategies, which can be better applied in real life. As a result, the learning quality can be improved and the goals set by *College English Curriculum Requirements* can be reached.

2. THE APPLICATION OF THE COMMUNICATIVE TEACHING PLATFORM

The limited classes, along with the shortage of teachers, leads to the fact that college English learning, to some extent, depends on autonomy and voluntariness of the students after class, so it can be said that the establishment and application of the online autonomous learning is the right choice to meet the high requirements for college students. By taking advantages of modern technology,

the new mode develops students' ability of self-learning, while the communicative teaching platform plays a role as the complement to the online autonomous learning.

2.1 The Communicative Teaching Platform and the Online Autonomous Learning

Nowadays, the online autonomous learning has been considerably mature and has been widely adopted in colleges and universities, however, there still exist problems, mainly including:

(1) the online autonomous learning puts emphasis on the repeated training of the contents that students have learned in class, which are mainly about grammar and vocabulary;

(2) the online autonomous learning just focuses on tests and exercises, lacking the extension of knowledge;

(3) despite the abundant learning resources and supplementary materials, the online autonomous learning simply depends on the one-sided supervision and monitoring of teachers while students have to study alone without any interaction with teacher or each other;

(4) concentrating on the grammatical mistakes, the feedback from the online system is lack of emotional and

humanistic care, which is likely to bring about the sense of frustration;

(5) the online learning system works on a fixed program without flexibility and variability, which fails to make corresponding evaluation and give corresponding response to the differences of students;

(6) the online autonomous learning can only record the learning results instead of supervising and guiding the whole learning process and learning effect, which also fails to prevent plagiarism.

Hence, it is clear that the online autonomous learning is far away from being ideal in the aspects of stimulating students' interest, promoting learning motivation, alleviating students' anxiety, and so on.

In order to better the current learning model, the communicative teaching platform is built, aiming at promoting the communication between teacher and student, enhancing the interaction among students, and improving the effectiveness of the online learning system. The communicative teaching platform can be regarded as the extension and evolution of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), and the specific teaching pattern is shown in Figure 1:

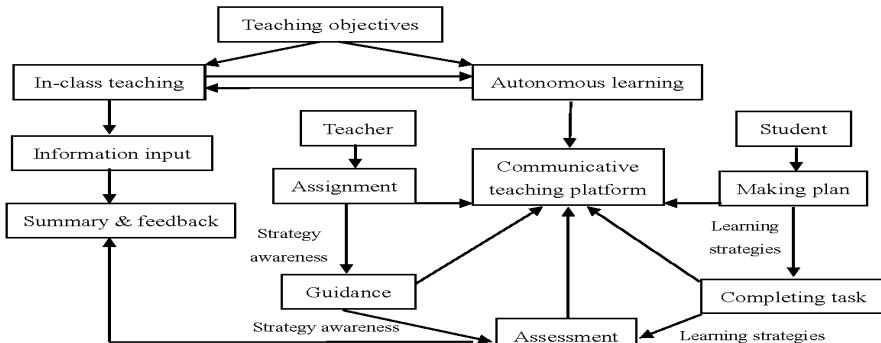


Figure 1
Teaching pattern based on the communicative teaching platform

Compared with the online autonomous learning, the communicative teaching platform has the unique features, including:

(1) most of the exercises and tests are open-ended questions without standard answers so that students can share various opinions based on their own understandings;

(2) the platform provides opportunities for students to discuss openly and express their opinions freely;

(3) the online materials are not only provided by teachers, but also selected and added by students, which truly reflects different interests of students;

(4) students are given chances to ask questions both about English study and about daily life;

(5) students are required to make mutual assessment and self-evaluation, which enables students to reflect on their learning process, make reasonable plans, set learning goals and learn from each other.

Obviously, the purpose of the communicative teaching platform is not to test students but to guide them. It aims

at leading students to further understanding, full digestion, as well as assimilation of the in-put knowledge through interaction and communication, and finally a complete knowledge system of their own can be built. In this way, language learning is no longer a boring and monotonous process but an experience of language acquisition full of fun.

2.2 The Operation of the Communicative Teaching Platform

The communicative teaching platform mainly consists of several sections with different functions and different emphasis so as to help students improve their ability of using English comprehensively through interaction, especially in the aspects of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

2.2.1 The Section of Writing

First of all, in order to improve writing skills, an interactive micro-blog section is designed on the platform,

where students are required to write and post one or two compositions (more than 50 words) each week. The topics are diverse, ranging from the formal writing in examinations, the discussion based on in-class teaching, and the reflection on life to a summary or a review of a book or a movie. Meanwhile, teacher regularly reads and marks the most popular and the best compositions and analyze them in class. In this way, students' initiative of writing can be enhanced. In addition, students also need to make comments on the compositions written by others (more than 15 words). By doing so, students will develop the habit of writing in English and cultivate their ability of thinking critically.

In the past, compositions were usually corrected and marked by teacher, which is the typical mode of the traditional "teacher-centered", "knowledge-feeding" and "grammar-oriented" teaching method. As a result, the effect it is far from being satisfactory. To be exact, students either only concern themselves about teacher's remarks and their grades, ignoring the mistakes made by themselves or just focus on the details of their compositions, ignoring the key ideas as well as the structures. Neither of the results can be considered as effective to improving the writing skills. In contrast, through the mutual assessment between students and self-evaluation on the micro-blog, students can get rid of tension and anxiety of expressing their ideas in English. Instead, they can gain a sense of identity and achievement in the process of using the target language in a relaxing, harmonious, and friendly atmosphere without just worrying about the grades given by teacher. Besides, originality and creativity are also highlighted.

2.2.2 The Section of Reading

As for the enhancement of reading, the communicative teaching platform features the recommended reading column. When a semester begins, teacher requires that every student recommend one article at the beginning of each month and share it on the platform. The articles can be news reports, current affairs reviews, beautiful proses, sample compositions and so on. Based on the articles recommended by students, teacher may irregularly ask students to explain why they recommend the articles and analyze the shining points of them in class. Consequently, students can not only elaborate the delicate words and expressions but also learn how to analyze the main ideas and appreciate the beauty of language. At the same time, teachers can invite other students to make comment to further the understanding of the reading materials. In the end of each month, with all the articles recommended by students being classified according to their different themes, a specific reading seminar is held in class, where students have the chance to review and summarize the main ideas and attractions of the articles. Besides, the most-liked article of the month can be elected, which is popularized as a sample and will be the test questions in the final examination.

In traditional teaching mode, the reading materials, reading methods and even reading time were suggested by teacher while the majority of students had to read as what teacher suggested. Therefore, they might have the sense of rejection and couldn't enjoy reading. On the contrary, on the communicative teaching platform, reading is not limited to enlarging vocabulary, understanding the key ideas, or answering the questions any longer. On the contrary, students can choose the materials according to their personal preference, which enables them to fully experience the glamour of a language, broaden their horizon from different perspectives, and arouse their interest in reading.

2.2.3 The Section of Listening and Speaking

In listening and speaking, we cannot deny the fact that for quite a long time, it is one of the headaches that students suffer most in English learning. Even those who score high in exams or listening tests sometimes cannot express themselves fluently. It is not difficult to find that many students, when taking the listening tests, merely rely on test skills rather than their comprehensive ability.

In such cases, the section "My Voice" is set up on the communicative teaching platform, where students should regularly upload their own audio or video, the contents of which can be chosen freely based on their different hobbies, interest, or talents. In other words, students can either shoot a video, imitating a famous speech individually, or present a sitcom, performed by a group, and they can even prepare a unique dancing and singing show. Furthermore, students uploading their audio and video should set two to three thought-provoking questions for the other classmates. Meanwhile, teacher instructs students to evaluate these materials, summarize the advantages, elect and reward the best individual or the best team. In this way, students, on the one hand, are encouraged to speak bravely, and on the other hand, they are also motivated to listen actively so that the listening and speaking practice will be changed from an examination-oriented training to a lively and interesting learning process which is closely associated with real life.

3. THE APPLICATION OF LEARNING STRATEGIES

In 1956, American psychologist Bruno proposed that the application of learning strategies could massively better learning effect. The study on the second language learning strategies, which began in the mid-1970s, has found a way for many foreign language learners to improve efficiency and optimize result. Learning strategies primarily refer to those strategies about second language learning, especially college English learning.

3.1 Problems in Traditional Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are influenced by numerous factors, for example, external factors including cultural background, studying conditions, and teaching environments. Even in the similar external background, the nature, the type and the difficulty of specific tasks also lead to different applications of learning strategies. In the traditional teaching pattern, tasks available for students and types of questions are both limited, which inevitably block the flexible implementation of learning strategies. As for the individual factor, due to the deeply-rooted cultural background, most Chinese students are introverted and field-independent. To a large extent, these internal characteristics contribute to the fact that they are good at analyzing limited inputs precisely and understanding language rules as well as the single words. Besides, students are mostly driven by instrumental motivation, such as passing the exam, getting scholarship, and landing good jobs, rather than be motivated by interest. It also directly limits the number of learning strategies as well as the ways to put them in practice.

Influenced by both internal and external factors, most students unconsciously adopt the traditional language learning strategies, which mainly consist of formal practice strategy, accuracy strategy and mother-tongue strategy. It turns out that, under the guidance of traditional learning strategies, students meet serious problems in their English learning, which can be summarized as follows:

(1) priority is given to the form of a language while the use of language is ignored, and the language practice is not more than written exercises;

(2) students are unable to get rid of the effect of mother language and unable to use the target language naturally and fluently;

(3) being unfamiliar with communicative learning strategies, students have been accustomed to studying independently as an individual, which means they seldom communicate and cooperate with each other;

(4) students are skilled in static tasks like reading, writing and translating, however, they are not proficient enough in dynamic communication like listening and speaking;

(5) students can't apply the advanced learning strategies accordingly;

(6) ignoring the application of metacognitive strategies, students are incapable of setting exact goals and making exact learning plans so that they fail to manage the whole learning process efficiently.

Obviously, the traditional learning strategies that can't meet the new teaching requirements are one of the roots for the widespread trend, that is, "dumb English", which has negative impact on the effectiveness of students' long-term learning.

Many experts, represented by Rubin and Stern, have compared the characteristics of the good learners and the bad learners, and found a system of learning strategies from the "good learners". Although differences exist in

details, in general, all of the successful learners share the common feature that they are apt to treat language learning as a way to communicate with others, and they are willing to use the second language in real life. More importantly, they are ready to apply multiple learning strategies to solve the problems they may meet in study.

3.2 The Application of Learning Strategies

As is known, all the learning strategies have advantages and disadvantages, and they can be used in accordance with different targets, tasks and contexts. However, it is undeniable that the more learning strategies students can use and the more flexibly they can apply the learning strategies, the more satisfactory their learning result will be. On the communicative teaching platform, based on autonomous learning model, various tasks are assigned for students and more opportunities of communicating freely are provided for them, which help students realize the importance of learning strategies during the process of finishing the tasks. Gradually, students not only can learn how to adopt different learning strategies accordingly but also can enhance their awareness of learning strategies.

The study on learning strategies has a long history. At present, the classification of learning strategies proposed by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) has a profound impact on academic research and has been widely accepted. On the basis of the theory on information processing, they classified strategies into "Metacognitive Strategies", "Cognitive Strategies" and "Social/Affective Strategies", which are applied to the study on the communicative teaching platform.

3.2.1 The Application of Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive Strategies refer to the knowledge, belief, supervision and management of the cognitive process. It mainly includes the self-monitoring strategy which means assessing one's learning progress by a certain standard, the self-guiding strategy which means presenting learning procedures and learning methods either verbally or in writing in order to stimulate oneself to study, and the self-evaluating strategy which means evaluating one's learning activities according to certain criteria.

Among the three learning strategies categorized by O'Malley and Chamot, Metacognitive Strategies are considered to be superior to the other two strategies. As a kind of advanced management skill, they require the learners to program, standardize and supervise the learning process on their own initiative. In other words, with Metacognitive Strategies, students can set goals, make plans, supervise learning process, adjust learning methods, and make summary as well as reflection. As a result, students can have a clear picture and comprehensive understanding about their learning objectives, learning methods, deficiencies and specific tasks.

On the communicative teaching platform, students enjoy considerable autonomy to decide what to learn and

how to learn independently. In addition to making plans and decisions on their own, students also need to find the problems, analyze the problems, and solve the problems when they are learning the second language. Finally, they should combine the evaluation given by teacher and classmates with their own reflection on their performance, and review what they have learned. The whole process of learning when students study initiatively and actively according to their interest and ability basically reflects the key concepts of Metacognitive Strategies put forward by O'Malley and Chamot, that is, "selective attention", "advance organizers", "directed attention", "self-management", "advance preparation", "self-monitoring", "delayed production" and "self-evaluation". The specific application of Metacognitive Strategies is illustrated by Figure 2.

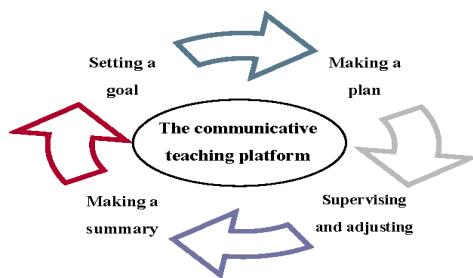


Figure 2
The specific application of Metacognitive Strategies

Apparently, learning on the communicative teaching platforms, students can gradually be familiar with Metacognitive Strategies and develop their awareness of applying the strategies initiatively in their learning. To be exact, they not only learn how to accomplish the specific tasks, but also learn how to develop strengths while avoiding weaknesses with a clear goal and how to make a reasonable overall plan.

3.2.2 The Application of Cognitive Strategies

In terms of Metacognitive Strategies, the communicative teaching platform encourages students to set learning goals, make learning plans, supervise learning process and evaluate learning effect in a better way. However, the formulation and application of Cognitive Strategies have the most profound influence on students' English learning. Different from Metacognitive Strategies, Cognitive Strategies affect the processing of language information directly, encouraging students to adopt different approaches for different learning tasks. Therefore, Cognitive Strategies are more diverse and each kind of strategy has different functions. Through comparative research, it can be clearly found that the teaching pattern based on the communicative teaching platform has significantly changed the application of Cognitive Strategies in different aspects of English learning, which can be shown in Table 1:

Table 1
Changes of students' learning strategies on the communicative teaching platform

Basic skills	Learning strategies in traditional teaching pattern	Learning strategies on the communicative teaching platform
Listening	Focusing on keyword strategy Translation strategy	Focus on key words strategy Mental adjustment strategy Content prediction strategy Global listening strategy
Speaking	Reading strategy Repeating strategy	Conversation-simulating strategy Role-play strategy Euphemistic expression strategy
Reading	Key words analysis strategy Intensive reading strategy	Theme generalization strategy Word-guessing strategy Skip-and-scan reading strategy
Writing	Mother language strategy Grammar strategy	Active thinking strategy Language sense strategy Sentence and paragraph expressing strategy
Vocabulary	Dictionary strategy Word-list strategy	Learning-in-context strategy Word-guessing strategy

Obviously, the application of Cognitive Strategies is a dynamic process to solve problems and finish tasks. Making use of these strategies in learning will notably improve learning efficiency and optimize learning effect. When adapting themselves to learning on the communicative teaching platform, students will use these diverse and flexible strategies more frequently and more purposefully, which helps to improve students' ability in English learning ability and cultivate students' consciousness in using strategies.

3.2.3 The Application of Social/ Affective Strategies

The effective application of learning strategies is influenced by emotional factors to some extent. In the learning process, students will be troubled with stress, anxiety, self-doubt and disappointment if they cannot reach their goals or overcome their fear of obstacles, which makes students feel afraid of expressing themselves in public, avoid being engaged in necessary social activities, lose confidence in English learning, and fail to adopt appropriate learning strategies. Correspondingly, worries about their image also hinder the application of learning strategies: the students with positive image are more willing to show their talents in English and involve themselves in activities voluntarily; on the contrary, those who fail to achieve an excellent image often feel anxious about others' comments and unwilling to show themselves so that they study in a passive way. Social/ Affective Strategies, focusing on cooperation, clarification, and confidence, put emphasis on the communication with each other and the adjustment of emotions. Proper application of these strategies can help students get over their anxiety about learning as well as self-image, and ensure the better application of Metacognitive Strategies along with Cognitive Strategies.

To sum up, the communicative teaching platform creates a relaxing and natural atmosphere for student,

where students needn't worry about their current knowledge level. What's more, the top students have the opportunities to deliver their views freely while the other students also have the chance to share their opinions after full preparation. In other words, equal opportunities are given to each student to practice English on the same platform without any worry. In such a friendly atmosphere, students can overcome their shyness, think critically and finally learn with ease. Moreover, the mutual assessment system on the communicative teaching platform enables students to appreciate each other and inspire one another. Undoubtedly, the appreciation from classmates and teacher enhance the confidence of students and they can be more willing to indulge themselves into communication. Furthermore, teacher can interact with students, answer the questions and make positive comments on students' homework in real time, which can strengthen the emotional connection between teacher and students. To sum up, the communicative teaching platform effectively stimulates students to make proper use of multiple Social/ Affective Strategies in the face of the emotional problems in learning.

4. CONCLUSION

As Stern said, mastering a foreign language not only means understanding its formal features and grammatical rules, but also means the flexible use on any specific occasions, so communication in a variety of forms serves as an indispensable approach in language learning. In the process of reforming college English teaching, the principle of "student-centered" has been widely accepted and practiced, which reflects the fact that students are no longer the passive receiver of language information and knowledge but the active information processor and constructor of knowledge system. Moreover, students are required to apply the learning strategies actively to solve problems and form their own strategy system. Therefore, developing the awareness of applying learning strategies effectively is necessary to improve the ability of learning foreign language. College English teaching based on the communicative teaching platform provides students with free and open space, which inspires the active interaction between teachers and students, and the communication as well as cooperation among students themselves in the process of learning. In addition, the breadth and depth of mutual communication are expanded

by the communicative teaching platform, the habit of autonomous learning is developed, and the abilities of listening, speaking, critical thinking, creating along with applying learning strategies are improved. All in all, with the application of learning strategies on the communicative teaching platform, students can further improve their learning effect.

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