A Case Study on the Effectiveness of Learner Autonomy in British and American Literature Study

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Abstract

It is generally acknowledged that learners should play an active role for themselves and take more responsibilities in studying a foreign language in order to improve learning efficiency. However, learner autonomy has not been paid much attention to in the present British and American literature teaching in Chinese universities. This situation has prevented British and American Literature teaching from playing its important role of cultivating students' independent and creative thinking ability. Therefore, the author conducted an experiment in the classes of British and American literature in Foreign Language School of Inner Mongolian university for Nationalities, aiming at exploring the feasibility and effectiveness of cultivating learner autonomy in this course. In the research, a pretest (test before the experiment) and a post test (test after the experiment) were used as a comparision to collect data, and SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) were used to analyze the results after the experiment. The analysis of the results and data shows that cultivating learner autonomy in British and American literature teaching can stimulate the students' interest in this course and accordingly improve their strategies of learning this course. Besides, it can also improve their comprehensive ability of English study.

Key words: British and American literature teaching; Cultivating learner autonomy; Strategy of learning; comprehensive ability

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, learner autonomy has become an important factor to be studied for educators and researchers . Now it is generally acknowledged that the culivation of learner autonomy should be the goal of education. However, so for learner autonomy has not been paid much attention to in the present teaching in Chinese universities, especially in British and American literature teaching. According to the survey conducted by the author, students lack learner autonomy in British and American literature study because of the outmoded teaching method. In the process of teaching, students are not provided with a framework to develop the ability for autonomous learning. This situation has prevented British and American literature teaching from playing its important role of cultivating students' independent and creative thinking ability. So it's necessary to create a supportive environment in which students can be given various opportunities to develop their learner autonomy. Therefore, the author conducted an experiment in the classes of British and American Literature at the School of Foreign Languages of Inner Mongolian university for Nationalities, aiming at exploring the feasibility and effectiveness of fostering learner autonomy in this course

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The cultivation of learner autonomy has been regarded as a major goal of education since an early time both at home and abroad. A lot of scholars have published

a series of monographs and articles to show their viewpoints on learner autonomy. They studied the topic from various aspects, such as the principles, theoretical basis and conditions of learner autonomy, the facilitating or restricting factors of cultivating learner autonomy and the ways of cultivating learner autonomy in teaching practice (Holec, McGarry, Benson, & Voller, et al.). These studies have provided sound theoretical framework for the empirical researches.

The researchers abroad have suggested several ways to promote learner autonomy, such as reforming the syllabus and course design, combining promoting learner autonomy with classroom teaching, applying multi-media and so on (Cotteral 2000, Masuni-So & Osho 2001, McClure 2001, Hart 2002, et al.); and they have proved with experiments in U.S., U.K. , as well as in Japan that learner autonomy dose not only apply to the western cultural background, but suits the eastern environment as well. Their academic researches have covered a wide range of topics. And they all seem to attach equal importance to both theoretical and empirical researches and even place more weight on the latter in some cases, which show the feasibility of learner autonomy in practical teaching.

Relevant researches appeared at home after the teaching theory of learner autonomy was introduced to China decades ago. Since then there has been a significant increase on the academic achievements in this field, for example, Fan (1999), Li (2001), Xiao (2002), and He (2003) explored the approaches and methods of cultivating learner autonomy in foreign language teaching from perspectives of both theories and practices; Hua and Tan (2001) explained the teachers' roles in autonomous learning mode; Hui, Chen and Zhang (2003) analyzed the necessity and feasibility of cultivating leaner autonomy in Chinese college English teaching. A lot of other scholars have also contributed a lot to the study of learner autonomy at home. Through their joint efforts, the relevant researches in our country accomplished great academic achievements. But from the aspect of the quantity and proportion of empirical researches on this topic, there're still more that we should study further in this field in China.

2. WAYS OF CULTIVATING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE CLASS

In cultivating learner autonomy, Heloc suggested that "two preconditions were necessary: first, the learner must be capable of making decisions about learning; second, there must be a structure for learning within which a learner can take responsibility for those decisions" (Heloc, 1981, p.84). Heloc's view highlights the importance of providing students with effective learning strategies, which refer to the conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners

with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding a target language. Wenden (1985) also advocates that learning strategies are the key factor to promote learner autonomy. Therefore, we should conduct a kind of strategy training to arm students with useful strategies they favor and facilitate their current learning as well as future needs. To achieve this, we should establish a proper condition for students, which may include the following aspects:

2.1 Positive Class Environment Catering to Learners' Affective Needs

As we know, positive class environment can stimulate students' motivation and self-confidence, which are very important for language learning and developing learner autonomy. Motivation mainly includes instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. Among them, the latter is relatively more important, for it presupposes a positive attitude towards the target language, its speakers and their culture, while a learner who is instrumentally motivated may not have a positive attitude towards the target language. Self-confidence, on another hand, is also important to language learning. In case that all the other conditions are equal, self-confidence will act as a decisive factor to some extent. It means that the self-confident people will be more successful learners because they are more likely to get involved into the learning process. So a positive class environment catering to learners' affective needs is preliminary for cultivating learner autonomy.

2.2 Classroom Teaching With High Efficiency

To enhance the efficiency of classroom teaching, we must change the traditional "cramming" way of teaching into the student-oriented "Participating Learning", that is, classroom teaching should transform from infusing templet to heuristic one, as the latter can, to the most degree, help students acquire knowledge and activate their thoughts.

2.3 Supervision of Out-of-Class Learning

Besides the high efficient classroom teaching , the supervision of out-of-class learning is also an indispensable part of British and American Literature teaching, for it can cultivate students' awareness of autonomous learning and help them deepen what they learned in class. The feasible practice is to encourage them to write formative evaluations such as daily or weekly diaries to monitor and analyze their learning process.

Except for the above mentioned ways of cultivating Learner Autonomy, Benson (2001) also points out that cultivating learner autonomy does not mean to take a particular approach to practice, instead, it may include any practice that encourages and enables learners to take greater control of any aspect of their learning. Thus, Benson classifies these practices which are associated with the development of autonomy by six approaches:
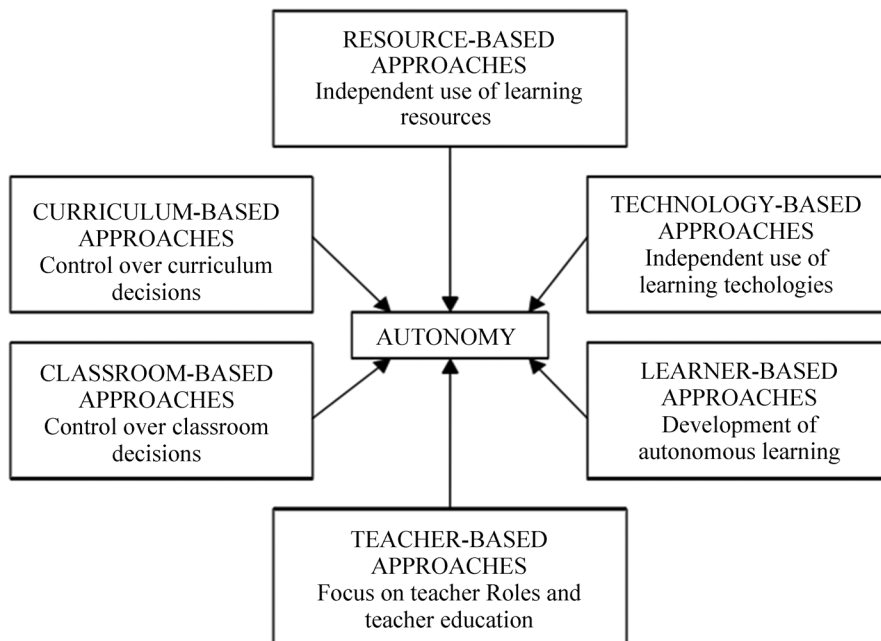
Figure 1
Approaches to Develop Learning Autonomy (Benson, 2005, p.112)

Benson points out that the distinctions made in his classification are largely a matter of focus. In practice, different approaches are often combined, sometimes in selective ways, for no single way of fostering autonomy can be judged as the best.

3. AN CASE STUDY ON FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE TEACHING

3.1 Participants

The participants in the study were English major students from Inner Mongolian University for Nationalities, among which about 20% are male and 80% females. They have been English-majors for more than two years. Among them Class 1101 was the controlling class, which still used the traditional teaching method. Class 1102 was the experimental class, in which learner autonomy was cultivated purposefully. There were thirty students in each class. Both classes used the same textbook: History and Anthology of English Literature published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press Volume 1 and Volume 2 and History and Anthology of American Literature published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press Volume 1 and Volume 2.

3.2 Research Hypothesis

Before the empirical research, the author has formulated a hypothesis that through the cultivation of learner autonomy in British and American Literature teaching,

students would make some progress in the academic achievements after the experiment.

3.3 Method

First, a 100-point scale test paper of English literature was designed, which consisted of various types of questions, such as blank filling, multiple choices, critical reading and commenting, etc.. This would offer a criteria to test the students' professional knowledge as well as their language skill. It was used as a pre-test to test the students'overall level of literature study. Second, the teacher tried every means to cultivate students' learner autonomy in Class 1102, the experimental class, and the traditional method continued to be used in Class 1101, the controlling class.Then at the end of the term, a post-test was conducted. At last the scores of the two classes were compared. And by so doing, the author wanted to see whether this experiment could help improve students' academic achievements.

3.4 Process of the Research

In the experimental class, the teacher took measures to cultivating students'creative thinking by involving them into different activities, such as pre-reading, group work and after-class in-depth study, etc., which can stimulate students' studying motivation and widen their horizon on literature works, thus facilitate the dialogue between the teacher and students as well as the dialogic relationship between students and literature works. And in the class, presentation, group discussion and individual comments concerning some brainstorming questions were conducted. Then students' spirit of reflecting, questioning, and

criticizing would be gradually cultivated, along with the improvement of their English language competence.

Gardner and Miller put forward a list of strategies for promoting independence in the classroom in their study, from which the author selected some to apply to the experimental class.

Table 1
Techniques for Promoting Independence in the Classroom

Technique	Description
Self-monitoring	Learners keep a record of their language learning and perhaps rate themselves.
Self-correction	Correcting or checking one'work:this may most easily be done in writing, but can also be applied to the other skills also.
Variable pacing	Learners work at their own pace during a lesson.
Group work	Learners work in groups of 3 or 4 to complete a task.
Project-work	An extended piece of work where learners co-operate to gather and organize information; this may then be presented or ally or as a written report.
Trouble-shooting sessions	Learners are encouraged to talk about their language learning problems.
Extensive reading and listening	Learners are encouraged to read novels or extended texts for pleasure, they may also be exposed to TV or radio programmes.
Choices of activities	Learners have the freedom to choose which activities to do. Can be related to homework tasks or voluntary attendance at an English club, for exanmple.
Use of pupil teachers	Learners may be encouraged to teach each other.
Sharing objectives	Teachers involve the learners in helping to plan or order the teaching objectives for a periond of study.

Note. See Gardner & Miller, 2002. p.44.

Considering the condition of our practical teaching, the author applied some of the techniques mentioned above into the English literature class, which includes use of the pupil teachers, self-monitoring, group work, project work and the supervision of out-of-class learning. After one term's application of these stretegies in the class, we witnessed with great pleasure the gradual progress of the students.

3.5 Use of Pupil Teachers

Asking students to do a presentation is a commonly used method of the technique, especially in literature class. However, at the beginning of the experiment, the students were not used to make a presentation in front of the class. Most of them just lowered the heads, reading the paper they prepared before class. There was no interaction with the classmates at all. Besides, the language they used was stereotyped because what they read was all copied from various the reference materials, with little understanding of their own. However, under the guidance of the teacher, asking them to finish some pre-reading questions before each class, and giving timely feedback to students' comments, the students showed some progress after several presentations. For example, in a presentation of *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, the student not only summarized the plot of the novel in her words briefly, but also quoted some important lines to analyze the characters. The author was glad to see that those quotations were very appropriate for the analysis. For example, to show the arrogance of Darcy, the student quoted Darcy's reaction at the Meryton ball in Chapter 3 to Bingley's suggestion that he dances with Elizabeth.

Which do you mean?" and turning round, he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said, "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me.

From this, we can see the student has learned to analyze literary works logically, rather than just taking notes and accepting their people's opinion blindly. As a routine, the teacher also asked the student a question after the presentation: "How do you understand the first sentence of the novel?"And the students' performance was amazingly excellent. She correctly pointed out the ironic tone of the sentence and further illustrates its role to the whole novel, that is, this sentence is ironic, offering a miniature sketch of the entire plot and to some extent reflects the attitudes towards love and marriage in the early 19th century. Besides, several students were also asked to raise questions concerning the presentation. In this way, both the student who did the presentation and the others were actively involved in the teaching process. And some questions from the students were quite challenging, such as "What's the role of Jane and Bingley in the novel?" "whom do you like better, Mr. Bennet or Mrs. Bennet?" Through the idialogic interaction between the teacher and students and also between students themselves, the students' studying motivation was stimulated and their horizon on literature works were widened. What's more, they began to think critically and expressed ideas with their own language. Although sometimes the answer was not satisfactory enough, the studying atmosphere was good and everyone seemed to learn something form

the presentation. After the teacher's final comments, the students would realize their shortcomings,and gradually they would improve.

3.6 Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring is another important means to cultivate learner autonomy. In the traditional mode of teaching, students usually assume it teacher's responsibility to assess and take responsibility for their language learning. However, Myers (1990) states that teachers "need to provide learners with ongoing opportunities to reflect upon and articulate what it is they're learning, why they are learning it, and how the learning is helping them to acquire new information, strategies, and skills" (Gardner & Miller, 2002, p.175). Therefore, During the process of learning, the students were asked to keep a learner logs or diary. During the whole semester, each student was required to write at least five logs or diaries in their Qzone and interacted with other students concerning some topics in their Qzone at least five times. By keeping a written account of their work and reflection on the internet , the students could share their views about literature study and get responding comments from their classmates, which added the fun of this task and also gain deeper insights

into their learning processes, then "progress towards a more autonomous way of learning" (Gardner & Miller, 2002, p.177).

3.7 Group Work

Group work was also an important part of this teaching experiment. Different student groupings, such as pair work, group work and individual study, can help to create a dynamic language classroom and thus improve learning efficiency. Among these forms, group work plays a crucial role in offering students the opportunity to share their views concerning some tough questions. As Hedge (2002) points out that

> in maintaining a conversation with appropriate turn-taking conversations and, at the same time, allows them to establish how well they can understand and make themselves understood; it provides students more input and stimulates them to produce more output and it has the value of collaborative work and the importance of reducing independence on teachers. (Hedge, 2002, p.62)

And accordingly both their oral English and creative thinking would be improved.

The group work adopted in the experimental class is illustrated as follows:

Table 2

Stages of the task	Learner activity	Teacher's role
1.Teacher explains task and invites questions	Students listen and ask questions to clarify	Manager of activity
2.Teacher organizes students into groups	Students move into groups	classroom organizer
3.Students work in groups to read text, etc.	Individual reading	Cuide Language resource
4.Students exchange ideas and generalize some key points	—Checking meanings with peers —Generalizing the key points —Deciding the representative	Guide Language resource
5.Choose one representative to write the key points on the blackboard and the others are ready for the oral reports	—The representative writes the key points on the blackboard —The other students either explain some key points or answer the questions raised by the teacher or other groups	Corrector of errors Monitor Diagnoser Manage
6.Class and teacher check	Students give feedback as the teacher elicits	Corrector of errors Evaluator

Note. See Hedge, 2002, p.66.

We adopted the method of group work for students to solve some complicated open-ended questions in the literature study and found this method worked very effectively. For example, before studying Baron's poem "When we two parted", the students in the experimental class were divided into five groups and each group were required to answer the following questions by themselves:

a) What images does Baron use in this poem?

b) What kind of mood can you sense in the poem?

c) Is there any similarity between this poem and "Hairpin phoenix" written by Chinese poet Luyou?

Amazingly, each group showed their unique viewpoints. They pointed out almost all the images such as "The dew of the morning", "Pale grew thy cheek and cold, Colder thy kiss", "In secret we met, In silence I

grieve", etc.. What's more, they all sensed the function of these images by saying they felt sad after the poem, and the images help to form a pathetic picture in their mind. As for the comparison between the two poems, some groups found the similarity in the general mood, some groups found the similarity in the application of images, and one group even went a step further, stating that they also found the two poems both used the technique of contrast: contrast between the past and the present. So from above we can see, the proper application of group work has many merits: First, it can arouse the enthusiasm of each group member to get actively involved in the study; Second, in the process, the students learn to work as a team ,sharing their views with each other and deciding on the best answers; Third, it helps the

students form an open and creative thinking pattern by transcending the confinement of the so-called authentic answers from either the teacher or textbooks, hence the students' confidence were strengthened and their learning interests were enhanced.

3.8 Project Work

Another effective strategy we applied in the experimental teaching is "project work", the theory of which is from Kilpatrick (1921). Based on his theory, students should plan and execute their own learning projects, which consists of four types: constructive projects require the development of a theoretical plan and its execution, such as writing and performing a drama; enjoyment projects include activities like reading a novel or seeing a film; problem projects require the students to solve an intellectual or social problem; and specific learning projects involve learning a skill such as swimming or writing. Legutke and Thomas (1991) acknowledge Kilpatrick as a source for their work on project learning and argue that project work provides a principled and practicable route towards autonomy (Benson, 2005, p.27).

In British and American literature teaching, the most feasible project work may be constructive projects. So when teaching English dramas, the students from the experimental class were required to perform their favorite episodes from a play written by William Shakespeare based on their own understanding. The length of the presentation should not exceed 20 minutes. This requires their thorough understanding of a play before they can select an episode and perform it well. In our practical teaching, the project work was assigned as one part of the final examination. Besides, all these five groups took part in the mass-election for the annual drama competition held by foreign language school of our university, and in the end, one group won the first prize by performing "A Midsummer Night's Dream", two other groups won the second and the third prize respectively.

So the fact has shown that "project work" is an effective way to exploit students' potentials for it offers an opportunity for students to use the language and and their own understanding of cetain plays, free from the constraints of the fixed answers in the reference books.

3.9 The Supervision of Out-of-Class Learning

British and American literature class must emphasize reading process by offering students adequate time to know the content of works and their deeper meaning rather than making students passive listeners in the class. This task is fulfilled mainly through pre-reading and after-class in-depth study. Therefore, besides the high efficient classroom teaching, the supervision of out-of-class learning is also an indispensable part of British and American literature teaching, for it can stimulate students' studying motivation and deepen their understanding of literature works, thus facilitate the interaction between the teacher and students as well as the dialogic relationship between students and literature works. Finally, students' spirit of reflecting, questioning, and criticizing will be cultivated. The feasible practice is to encourage them to write summaries or some formative evaluations such as book reports or comments concerning some aspects of the literary works they have studied. In this way, students' out-of-class learning can be supervised and offer timely feedback to the teacher regarding students' efforts and their ultimate mastery of this course. And if there're problems in some students' learning, the teacher will find them in time and try to find solutions to solve them.

4. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

4.1 Academic Achievements Before and After the Experiment

The two classes selected in this teaching experiment are two parallel ones being taught by the same teacher. There are no remarkable differences between their levels of British and American literature knowledge at the beginning, as is shown by the results of the pretests. After the experiment, we take a final examination of as the post test, and use SPSS to analyze both of the results and illustrate them by the following tables (1 represents the controlling class and 2 for the experimental class):

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation	Variance
Pretest1	30	62	92	79.5000	9.68521	93.520
Pretest2	30	60	92	78.453	9.97625	100.651
Valid N (listwise)	30					

Table 4
One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Pretest1	30	79.5000	9.68521	1.79632
Pretest2	30	78.453	9.97625	1.85426

Table 5
One-Sample Test

	t	*df*	Test value = 0		95% confidence interval of the difference	
			Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Lower	Upper
Pretest1	46.325	30	.000	79.5000	75.365	83.234
Pretest2	43.421	30	.000	78.453	74.581	82.191

Table 6
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation	Variance
Posttest1	30	64	91	78.453	10.13761	99.773
Posttest2	30	61	94	83.968	8.86016	98.740
Valid N (listwise)	30					

Table 7
One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Posttest1	30	78.453	10.13761	1.84078
Posttest2	30	83.968	8.86016	1.62337

Table 8
One-Sample Test

	t	df	Test value = 0		95% confidence interval of the difference	
			Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Lower	Upper
Posttest1	44.911	30	.000	78.453	77.4317	83.934
Posttest2	53.815	30	.000	83.968	79.9958	87.291

4.2 Results

From Tables 3, 4 and 5, we can see that the average score of the experimental class is 1.047 lower than that of the controlling class in the pretest. But the average score of the experimental class is 5.515 higher than that of the control class in the post test, which is shown in Table 6, 7 and 8. The results show that the students in the experimental class have made some progress on academic achievements, which in turn prove that cultivating learner autonomy has had a positive effect in promoting the students' academic achievements in British and American teaching to some extent. However, judging from the score variance of the experimental class before the experiment and after the experiment, there are still some discrepancies between different students' academic achievements.

CONCLUSION

According to the new Outline of English Teaching for English Majors of Colleges and Universities in China, the aim of British and American literature is to train students' ability to read, appreciate and understand the original English literary works, and master the basic knowledge and methods of literary criticism, promote the improvement of students' linguistic basic skills and the humanistic qualities. So cultivating learner autonomy is very essential for British and American literature teaching. Just as what Rodgers said,

The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. (Rodgers, 1969, p.104)

Through the findings of the experiment conducted in Foreign Language School of Inner Mongolian University for Nationalities, this paper has shown that the cultivation of learner autonomy has resulted in improvement of the students' academic achievements, which is in accordance with the hypothesis of the research. However, during the process, we also found some students who could not adapt themselves to automous learning very well. So in the future teaching practice, we should strengthen the supportive measures for fostering learner autonomy by equipping them with appropriate learning strategies beforehand and build an optimal studying atmosphere for autonomous learning by meeting learners' affective needs for a positive class environment, enhancing the efficiency of classroom teaching and supervising out-of-class learning more effectively. Then British and American literature will play a more important role in cultivating students' humanistic literacy and promoting their comprehensive English abilities.

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