The Cultivation of College Students' English Autonomous Learning

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Abstract
The concept of autonomous learning has been widely discussed by educators all over the world. For Chinese College English learners, developing autonomous learning capacity is especially necessary and important, which requires efforts not only from students' part but also from the teacher and the management of the university. This paper mainly explores some practical approaches and steps in cultivating this capacity for students.

Key words: College English learning; Autonomous learning; Approaches

1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DEVELOPING ENGLISH AUTONOMOUS LEARNING FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS IN CHINA

In this age of information explosion, knowledge evolvement greatly surpasses the innovation of textbooks. Everybody is required to cultivate the autonomous, continual and lifelong learning competence. In foreign language teaching, the traditional classroom pattern can hardly meet the requirement of the new condition. In recent decades, researchers in the academic field from home and abroad have given increasing importance to cultivate autonomous learning competence in their studies. In China, the significance of cultivating learners' autonomous learning for non-English majors in the university can be discussed from three aspects as follows.

First, it is an important part of the new teaching requirements put forward by China's Ministry of Education in 2007. College English Curriculum Requirements raised the proposal on autonomous learning, innovating traditional college English teaching with computer and network. According to the requirements, college English as an integral part of higher learning is one of the required basic courses for undergraduate students. As a systematic whole, college English teaching embraces such contents as its main component knowledge and practical skills of the English language, learning strategies and intercultural communication; it takes theories of foreign language teaching as its guide and incorporates different teaching models and approaches. The objective of college English is to develop students' ability to use English in an all-around way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future career and studies as well as social interactions, they will be able to communicate effectively and improve their general cultural awareness to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges.

This new requirement marked the beginning of a new round of college English teaching reform. According to the requirement, the new teaching reform should be aimed at the formation of students' individual learning methods and the development of students' autonomous learning competence. In the new teaching method, students should be allowed to choose their own learning materials and methods, at the same time necessary instructions for learning strategies should be accessed by students. Therefore, their autonomous learning competence can be improved gradually. In the field of English teaching, with the shift of emphasis from language knowledge to language competence, autonomous learning is especially important.

Secondly, the college stage of English learning is unique in its feature, with the application of language skills, learning strategies and intercultural-communication as its main contents. Emphasis should be given to the improvement of overall skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating and the command of different learning strategies. That is to say, only knowledge in vocabulary and grammar is not enough. In order to improve different skills, learners need to have a systematic plan to find opportunities to practice and to learn in use. Provided the fact that language is taught and learnt through practice, students should not merely passively receive knowledge; instead, they should be ready to participate and even devise relevant learning activities all the time. They improve their language skills in various activities, which are mostly reflected in autonomous learning.

Thirdly, learners are different in their language levels, learning purposes and personalities. At the college phase, students do not learn English just to pass tests to graduate, but, more importantly, they want to be able to use English in their future career and studies, which lead to differences in individual needs. Some students want to be fluent in speaking and listening; some want to be able to read academic literature in their specialization and still some others want to be proficient in translating and interpreting. What's more, learners are greatly different in their learning abilities, learning speed and they may prefer different learning strategies.

Lastly, the traditional classroom-oriented and teacher-centered teaching methods that have dominated the college English teaching field are increasingly showing their disadvantages and inefficiency. a) It becomes hindrance to the improvement of students' comprehensive English language abilities; b) It compromises the teaching quality and effects. c) It is no longer adaptable to the changes of social and linguistic environment. In addition, China is experiencing explosive expansion of college students' population and drastic asymmetry in college educational resources. Due to these factors, a new teaching method that shifts focus from the teacher to the student, from transmission of knowledge to students' autonomous study is of great value and necessity to English teaching reform.

2. THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEORY OF AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

Ever since 1960s, western educators have advocated that the ultimate goal of education is to develop learners' learning responsibility, or in another word, to develop autonomous learning. From then on, the concept of "autonomy" is being discussed frequently in the educational field. The concept has been described in various terms, such as self-directed learning, self-access learning, self-disciplined learning, independent learning, and autonomous learning, self-monitoring learning strategies, learning autonomy, self-helping learning strategies and self-assessment learning strategies. These terms have one element in common, that is, learner-centered approaches which regard learners as individuals with individual needs and rights. Many scholars and theorists have attempted to define autonomous learning in many different ways, and they have carried out different studies and obtained many fruitful findings on autonomous learning. Hence, there are various definitions and characteristics of autonomous learning. However, no complete consensus about its concepts has been made, because different scholars have their different interpretations from various aspects.

It is Henri Holic who really introduced the concept of the autonomous learning into the realm of language teaching. As one set of the earliest and most frequently quoted theories, Holec's view on autonomy is seen as "the capability or ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec, 1981), and it determines one's own learning goal as well as the means for assessment. Ability is emphasized in his definition of autonomous learning. In his definition, Holec emphasized two major dimensions, capacity and responsibility for making decisions, i.e., the autonomous learner is himself capable of and responsible for making all the decisions concerning the learning. For Holec, autonomous learning is not an action but a capacity that potentially exists in a person.

In the same way, Little described autonomous learning as a capacity for independent action which is not confined to any one learning context and "the learners psychological relation to the process and content of learning" (Little, 1991). It's easy to find that Little complements and expands Holec's concepts by underlying the significance of cognitive capacities in the development of autonomous learning.

However, unlike Holec and Little, Dickinson puts autonomy in terms of situation, "in which the learner is solely responsible for all decisions" (Dickinson, 1987). Bond argued the main characteristic of autonomy "is that students take some significant responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to instruction" (Bond, 1988).

Furthermore, this notion is seen in more political terms as "the freedom to control the content and process of one's own learning" (Benson, 1997). Benson also states that autonomous learning represents a recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems" and "a recognition of the rights of non-native speakers in relation to the native-speakers" within the context of TEFL. Benson talks about autonomous learning in language education from three perspectives: a technical perspective, a psychological perspective, and a political perspective. A technical perspective lays emphasis

on strategies such as the meta-cognitive, cognitive, social strategies and explores the effect these strategies may have on language learning. A psychological perspective stresses the learner's attitudes and cognitive capacities that enable him to be responsible for his own learning. A political perspective emphasizes the rights given to learners by taking control of the content and process of their learning practice. Compared to former studies, Benson's theoretical framework is more comprehensive.

Generally speaking, the term of autonomous learning is defined differently. Nevertheless, its definition concerns some features, which can be concluded as follows: A situation in which learners study entirely on their own; a capacity which is for guiding learning objective and contents, making decisions and steering independent actions; a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning, the right to determine the directions of learning.

According to Xu (2004), as far as Chinese learners are concerned, autonomous English learning capacity includes five aspects: The capacity to understand teaching objectives and requirements; the capacity to set goals and make a plan for one's learning; the capacity to employ learning strategies effectively; the capacity to monitor the effect of one's learning strategies; the capacity to monitor and assess the English learning process.

3. HOW TO CULTIVATE AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

3.1 To Improve Students' Motivation for English Learning

Learning motivation is internal drive that pushes students to make efforts, and is a necessity to encourage and guide students. So to cultivate students' autonomous learning, the first and most important task is to improve their motivation. This can be conducted through the following steps.

3.1.1 To Increase Students Interests in English Learning

Survey shows that most Chinese college students learn English for practical purposes: To graduate, to pass the tests, to gain more advantages in job-hunting and so on. They seldom think about the original function of language: to communicate. Very few students claim to learn English for the sake of love and interest. This will surely have a negative influence upon the learning effect. It's urgent for teachers to help students to improve their interests in English learning. In the teaching process, teachers can devise various class activities to lighten the atmosphere in classes. Assigning challenging tasks can also help to improve learners' interests.

3.1.2 To Set Clear and Accessible Goal

Learning goal is the expectation learners have the result of their own efforts, which can be divided into immediate goal and long-term goal based on the duration of learning. At different stages of autonomous learning, students should set specific goals. At the same time, they need to give due consideration to the long-term goal. Learners can decide what they can do with their English upon university graduation, and make it their long-term goal. Then they can subdivide this goal into some specific small goals and make plans for every semester, every week and even every day.

When setting goals, students need to bring their own ability into consideration, making sure their goals are in accordance with their ability. If the goal is too high or there is a too big gap between their goal and their actual ability, it will have very little motivating effect; instead, it even discourages and frustrates the learner. If the goal is too low and not very challenging, it will produce very little sense of accomplishment and can hardly motivate the learner either. Only those goals that are reachable after certain efforts and difficulties can maximally motivate learners.

3.1.3 To Make Learning Assessments in Time

Assessments or evaluations do not merely mean feedbacks for teachers, but they also help students to know how much progress they have made, to what extent they have reached their goals, and this will in turn further motivate students. There are different ways to conduct an assessment. It can be either written or oral in form. It can be carried out in a formal test, or in daily class performance. The test can be made by students individually or by their classes or universities collectively. If the result is good enough, the learner can get some reward. Learning assessment and the afterward reward or punishment can stimulate the student to work harder from a different perspective.

3.1.4 To Encourage Students to Take Part in Contests

College students should be encouraged to take part in some English contests, which could be either held national wide or in the university. In the contests, students are stimulated to win, to overcome difficulties and to be more capable of resisting setbacks, which will have positive impact on their learning and motivation. Furthermore, since different contests set different priorities on language skills, learner will get more experience of autonomous learning.

3.2 To Make an Intensive Training in Cognitive Strategies for Learners

Cognitive strategies include different aspects, such as how to preview before classes, how to stay focused on learning, how to think critically, how to enhance the memory and so on. Cognitive strategies can facilitate autonomous learning process in such language skills as listening, speaking, reading and writing.

3.2.1 Cognitive Strategies for the Training of Listening

First, practice regularly. For various reasons, college students in China fail to give due emphasis to the training of listening by investing insufficient energy and time. Even though some students have made efforts to train their own listening comprehension by different means, it is really hard for them to persist in the practice. More often than not, they attempt to have intensive training before tests for immediate reward. It is wiser that they have to train daily and regularly.

Secondly, make use of different materials and channels to practice. The development in modern science and technology makes it possible for learners to find more materials and more channels to have training in listening comprehension. They should not only practice for test, but also make full use of radio, television, lecture, the Internet and so on to practice.

Besides, cultural knowledge in the relevant field of the listening material can help with learners' comprehension. Students can make full use of this knowledge. Finally, while listening, due attention should be given to speakers' intonation, which can help to convey their intention and meaning.

3.2.2 Cognitive Strategies for the Training of Speaking

First, students should be aware that the real purpose of speaking is to convey ideas, so as long as the speaker is understood, the aim is reached. So learners should not be discouraged to speak up for fear of grammatical mistakes. They should encourage each other and create lightening and relaxing atmosphere to overcome their nervousness and shyness.

Secondly, learners should create and take advantage of various language environments. Ideally, they can try to find opportunities to talk to native speakers face to face and even to have studied program in countries where English is spoken as the native language. Among their peers, they can form the habit of communicating in English in fixed times. Training in speaking can be conducted in different forms, for example, discussion in pairs or in groups. It can also be done individually with such activities as reciting, retelling, describing pictures, delivering public speeches and so on.

Lastly, speaking can be facilitated by listening. To improve speaking, students need to increase the variety and quantity of language input. For example, they can read after the recording to imitate accurate pronunciation and intonation, by which they can improve both their listening and speaking.

3.2.3 Cognitive Strategies for the Training of Reading

First, choosing appropriate reading material is a very important step in developing autonomous learning. If the material is neither too difficult nor too easy for the learner, it will naturally contain relevant vocabulary and grammatical structure. It will provide proper language input, at the same time it will not hinder comprehension.

Subjects of the reading material should also be taken into consideration. Choosing materials whose subjects are familiar and interesting to learners can help to inspire learners' confidence.

Secondly, vocabulary is one of the hindrances of reading comprehension. Learners should be trained to guess the meaning of a new word through such context clues as grammatical structure and word formation.

Besides, language is one aspect of culture, so a certain amount of knowledge in history, geography, society and politics of English-speaking country can facilitate reading comprehension. Learners should consciously accumulate relevant cultural background knowledge to improve their interest and motivation.

In a word, besides helping students in self-discipline and self-control, teachers should give a series of training in reading strategies to improve their autonomy and efficiency.

3.2.4 Cognitive Strategies for the Training of Writing

Before writing, the design of outline or structure is very important. Students should be aware of the difference in the thinking mode between their mother language and English and be familiar with the basic structure of certain genres.

While writing, cohesion should be given due attention to. To make an essay more cohesive, some conjunctions, adverbs and propositional phrases should be effectively used. Many learners can write grammatically correct sentences, but the article may lack cohesion between sentences and paragraphs. To help readers to follow the writer's pace, effective cohesion and transition are necessary.

In daily learning, students should practice writing regularly. Writing capacity needs a long process of accumulation of experience. A long-term plan of regular practice is needed. When finishing the writing work, students can ask their teachers and peers to review and evaluate it. They can keep a journal to take down what happens every day to practice writing, which can also be a memory of the past.

3.3 The Teacher's Role Should Be Stressed

in traditional English teaching mode, the teacher is the absolute authority, who needs to take the student's place to set learning goals, select learning materials, decide the learning pace, monitor and evaluate progress. In this way, students will develop too much reliance upon teachers, which are against the principle of autonomous learning. In class, students listen passively to what teachers are talking, and their creation is suppressed. Gradually they lose their interests and motivation to make efforts. Therefore, teachers should take every opportunity to advocate the importance of autonomous learning at different stages to help students to change their notion, to reduce their reliance upon teachers, to realize that only they themselves should be responsible for their own learning.

For example, at the goal-setting stage, teachers should communicate with students as friends to understand their learning purposes, awareness of autonomous learning, motivation and difficulties. Based on the knowledge, teachers can encourage students to set their own short-term goals and long-term goals according to their own personality and situation. In the learning process, teachers should respect each student's individual pace and self-discipline, at the same time they should observe and acknowledge students' progress and urge them to further efforts. In this way, students will feel that their autonomous learning is under guidance, so their interest and confidence will be strengthened.

Teachers should train students in conducting their autonomous learning, help them to evaluate their own performance in fulfilling their plan, and give necessary feedbacks. Students will gradually find a suitable way of learning, and decrease their reliance on teachers.

Besides, Teachers need to help students to choose learning materials and to increase channels of communication. They can recommend resources from the net.

The traditional teacher-oriented class model must be changed to motivate students to participate. The teacher should help to create a relaxing and friendly class atmosphere where everybody can communicate on equal basis.

CONCLUSION

Foreign language learning is a long process, in which developing autonomous learning is very important and necessary. Teachers' mission is to coach students to get the learning method in limited time. Autonomous learning is a complicated notion, which involves such elements as learners' motivation and attitude, learning strategies, learning environment. Through the above steps, teachers may help students to increase their confidence, motivation, and to grasp necessary learning strategies. The teacher-guided language learning mode will gradually change into autonomous language learning.

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