

On the cultivation of Non-English Majors' Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning and to take charge of one's own learning is to have and hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning. As the main idea of college English teaching reform, more and more attention has been paid to it. This paper analyzes the main factors, which affect non-English majors' learner autonomy, from two aspects --- internal factors such as learning strategies, learning attitudes and learning motivation, and external factors such as teachers and learning environment and so on. According to these factors, some suggestions are made to cultivate non-English majors' learner autonomy: stimulating students' interest and help students to form a lasting learning motivation, encouraging students to cooperate with each other, enhancing monitoring. Through the cultivation of learner autonomy, it is expected that non-English majors can achieve the best learning effect.

Key words: learner autonomy; cultivation; factors

1. Introduction

In recent years, as a new teaching concept, learner autonomy has become the main idea of college English teaching reform. One goal of the reform of the English teaching mode is to promote the formation of students' individualized learning methods and the development of students' autonomous learning ability. The new teaching model should be able to make the students choose the materials and methods they need to learn, get the guidance of learning strategies, and gradually improve their ability to learn independently. Most of the researchers and educators in the field of ESL or EFL hold the point of view that cultivating learner autonomy is one of the most important goals in language teaching. Similarly, in China, the development of learner autonomy has received more and more attention.

But for a long time in China, the traditional teaching methods are still used in Chinese college English classroom. Even though student-centeredness has been emphasized and studied abroad and at home, in college English classroom, the teacher dominates and controls the whole English class and the students passively receive the knowledge from the teacher. So to guide the students to make effective learning is not only the goal of college English teaching, but also the way to improve college English teaching (Bai Guifen, 2005). In such a situation in which the students have been accustomed to the traditional teaching, what are the main factors that affect non-English majors' autonomy and how to cultivate their autonomous learning are the key points that will be discussed in this paper.

2. Definition of learner autonomy

In order to develop students' autonomous learning, it is necessary for us to know what learner autonomy is.

Learner autonomy is also called autonomous learning, self-study or self-learning. As for learner autonomy, researchers gave the following definitions:

Learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning and to take charge of one's own learning is to have and hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning. The ability to learn independently was able to be responsible for one's own learning, this ability was not born, one could acquire it through natural or formal ways, systematical and conscious learning (Holec, 1981). He elaborated on this fundamental definition in five aspects: determining the objectives; defining the contents and processions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly (rhythm, time, place, etc);

and evaluating what has been acquired. This definition stressed the responsibility for learning and was proved to be the most widely accepted and the most influential definition in the field.

Autonomy, in fact, is a learner's psychological relationship to the learning process and content (Little, 1990). Learner autonomy is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action (Little, 1991:4). It is learners' ability and willingness to make choice independently and the ability depends on possessing both knowledge about the alternatives from which choice have to be made and necessary skills for carrying out whatever choices seem more appropriate. Willingness depends on having both the motivation and confidence to take responsibility for the choices required (Littlewood, 1996: 97). Autonomous learning was to admit the rights the students should have in the education system (Benson, 1997). It was a kind of ability to control self-learning, which emphasized the teacher's control over the content and process of the learner's practice, which highlights the teacher's ability or influence. When referring to language education, Benson (1997) thinks that autonomy learning should be understood from three aspects: from the technical level, from the psychological level, from the political level. From a technical point, autonomous learning emphasizes on strategies such as 'meta cognition', 'cognition', 'social', and it explores the effect of these strategies on the learning of language, which often referred to as 'learning training' (Oxford, 1990). From the psychological perspective, it emphasizes the learners' attitude and cognitive ability, so that he or she is responsible for his or her own learning. In other words, the view from psychological point often has more emphasis on psychological character and ability. From a political point, it stresses the teacher's control over the content and process of the learner's practice, which highlights the teacher's ability or influence. Wenden (1991) holds the view that successful or expert or intelligent learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous. Wenden's definition highlights that learners ought to probe at their own learning strategies and be willing to apply it independently. Learners who have reached a point where they are able to define their own goals and create their own learning opportunities have become autonomous (Nunan, 1995: 145). According to Nunan's definition, clarifying goals and creating opportunities are seen as the most important characteristics for autonomous learners. Dickinson (1993:330-31) clarifies five characteristics of autonomous learners in terms of the learning process:

- a. they understand what is being taught, i.e. they have sufficient understanding of language learning to understand the purpose of pedagogical choices;
- b. they are able to formulate their own learning objectives;
- c. they are able to select and make use of appropriate learning strategies;
- d. they are able to monitor their use f these strategies;
- e. they are able to self-assess, or monitor their own learning.

Autonomous learning was a situation in which the learners were totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his (or her) learning and the implementation of those decisions (Dickinson, 1987). Later, Dickinson extends his definition to 'a good learning attitude' (Dickinson, 1995). In Dickinson's definition, 'learning state', 'responsibility' and 'learner's attitude' is equally important. What makes Dickinson's definition special is that it seems to highlight the 'learning state', rather than the 'responsibility' or 'freedom' in Benson's and Holec's definition.

Learner autonomy was built upon 'want to learn' (on the basis of the self consciousness development), built upon 'learning' (on the basis of mastering some certain learning strategies), and built upon 'persist in learning' (on the

basis of the consciousness efforts) (Pang Weiguo, 2003), which emphasized learning motivation, learning strategies and learning volition. Also, Pang Weiguo (2003) summarized the characteristics of autonomous learning as follows: initiative, independence, validity and relativity. And foreign language autonomous learning is a conscious learning process for learners to plan, monitor, implement, test and introspect. Foreign language autonomous learning is a process, which should be planned and organized, because paying more attention to the process is more likely to get good results (Fan Jieping, 2004). It is a process that the learners have the willingness and ability to determine their learning goals, choose learning method, monitor learning process and evaluate learning outcome according to their own actual situation (Lin Chongde, 2000).

In conclusion, learner autonomy is the sum of the learner's willingness and ability to learn and to be responsible for their own learning, which indicates that the students have strong learning motivation and appropriate learning strategies or plans, and they clearly know their purposes and needs. Learner autonomy is not only a sort of learning attitude, but also an excellent learning method.

3. Previous studies about learner autonomy

Learner autonomy has aroused attention from researchers and educationalists who studied the factors that affect learner autonomy in EFL class.

Littlejohn (1983) set up an experiment, in which the subjects were given a certain degree of freedom, the learners themselves reviewed the contents of the study, reported learning difficulties, introduced their findings and carried out their activities. The teacher just provided some assistance when necessary. Then, he found that the students' learning motivation and sense of responsibility are improved, as well as their examination results. Littlejohn (1985) studied the nature of the extracurricular learning, that is, how to control the learners, how to evaluate their autonomy and independence and other issues. Wenden (1995) explains how to cultivate the cognitive strategies and meta-cognitive strategies of the students in the self-leading learning process. Wenden (1995) advocates a method based on the tasks, introduces the relationship strategy of functional meta-cognition, and summarizes the meaning and use of the relationship between the cognitive and self-development. Finally, he made a conclusion that the learning strategies and the training of the necessary knowledge learning are equally important. This principle is also reflected in the Wenden's (1995) claim that the need of the autonomous learners is a kind of self-oriented ability, and thinking actively. At the same time, in the practice of education, the development of cognitive self instruction mode, language self training procedures and other aspects of research has greatly promote the students' autonomous learning ability, and then set up the teaching modes to improve autonomous learning.

Wang Duqin (2002) had a systematic research on English teaching strategies, he proposed target card strategy, optional reading strategy, role-player strategy, hot seat strategy, 'known-want to know-learnt' strategy, and brainstorm strategy, which were to stimulate learning motivation. He also raised one-minute questionnaire strategy, learning monitoring table strategy, and activities reflection strategy, which were for monitoring and evaluating. These strategies are considered to have a positive role in promoting students' autonomous learning. His study adopted random sampling of experimental and control groups, and a five-step recursive training model. Evaluation of the study indicates that strategy training is effective in enriching the subjects' metacognitive knowledge and promoting the establishment of learner autonomy. There is also high co-efficiency between the development of metacognitive performance and academic record (Wang Du qin, 2002). Li Zihua (2005) put forward his five teaching strategies to develop students' autonomy learning: first, convert the teaching concept and establish

people-oriented teaching idea; second, stimulate students' intrinsic motivation by cultivating learning interest and timely encouragement; third, develop metacognition through the guidance of learning method, penetration, and evaluation correction; fourth, let the students learn to think independently through stimulating students' thinking, showing thinking process and training thinking strategy; fifth, make students become the real masters of learning through optimization of inquiry and discussion teaching mode.

Based on the above mentioned researches, it can be found that the researches about learner autonomy abroad and at home cover many aspects such as learning strategies, the activities in the teaching, learning strategies and so on. In a word, no matter at home or abroad, there have been considerable studies on autonomous learning so far all over the world.

4. The factors affecting learner autonomy

Many factors affect students' autonomous language learning. For Chinese college English students, the factors are analyzed into two categories: internal factors and external factors. Internal factors include learning strategies, learning attitudes and learning motivation, while external factors mainly consists of teachers and learning environment.

4.1 Internal factors

Learning strategies have been differentiated into three categories depending on the level or type of processing involved (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990): cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, social/affective strategies. The cognitive strategies used by the learners are repetition, induction, inference, conversion, questioning, and so on. Meta cognitive strategies are used to plan, monitor and evaluate the skills of learning activities rather than learning strategies themselves. Meta cognitive strategies include directed attention, selective attention, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-reinforcement, and so on. At the planning stage, the learner determines his or her goal and decides the steps to achieve the goal. In the monitoring phase, the language learner is an observer and the supervisor role in his study. In the evaluation stage, learners use some kind of strategy to evaluate the results (He Lianzhen, 2003).

The success of learning activities in a sense depends on learners' attitude towards the world, especially towards learning activities, and on the attitude towards themselves and their desire to learn (Benson & Voller 1997). The role of affective factors in language learning can not be ignored. Self-esteem and learning desire are the most important factors in the foreign language acquisition, and these two kinds of emotions can help learners to overcome the difficulties they encountered in learning (Tarone & Yule, 1989).

Learning motivation includes the desire to achieve a certain goal, the efforts to achieve the goal, and satisfaction with the completion of the task. The learner's motivation varies from person to person, and the degree is different (He Lianzhen, 2003). Learning motivation includes instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. Learners with instrumental motivation regards language learning as a way to get a job, reading a foreign newspaper or passing an examination, while the learners with integrative motivation learn a foreign language because they are interested in the culture of the target language and want to to communicate with people of another culture who speak it and be a part of it.

4.2 External factors

The great influence of teachers' role on learner autonomy has been observed by lots of researchers. Teachers need to be aware of their roles in equipping the learner with the necessary learning strategies in dealing with EFL learning tasks. An ideal teacher in learner autonomy needs to take the roles as 'facilitator' to be 'caring, supportive, patient, tolerant, empathic, open, non-judgmental', as 'resource' to be 'knowledgeable about the target language and the materials available for learning it' (Voller, 1997).

The survey by Cheng Shilu & Gong Youzhi (2005) showed that learning conditions and social environment have an impact on Autonomous learning. Of the respondents, 72.5% believe that learning conditions has great impact on autonomous learning. 71% think that the learning environment has an impact on the independent study. Society and individuals should make joint efforts to create a good condition and atmosphere for the learning society.

5. Suggestions to cultivate learner autonomy

The process of cultivating learner autonomy is actually a process of training teachers' autonomy, because teachers' autonomy will affect students' autonomy. In the classroom of English as a second language or foreign language, it is important to recognize the importance of autonomous learning and to encourage students to learn independently. By analyzing the factors affecting learner autonomy, it is necessary for teachers to know how to cultivate non-English majors' autonomous learning. The following are some suggestions.

First, stimulating students' interest and help students to form a lasting learning motivation. Once learners interests are stimulated, they can have certain intrinsic motivation. So motivation and interests are closely related. Also, motivation and attitude are the two constructive elements for learner autonomy (Littlewood, 1996). Wang Duqin's survey (2002) showed that 47.5% of the respondents planned to pass CET-6, 65% to attend TOFEL and to become a true language user. The survey also indicated that the students knew the importance of English learning but they spent less time in studying it. Only 42.5 % of the students can spend 4 to 6 hours studying English every week, 15% can guarantee 7 hours to study English. That is to say, the average time that the student spend in studying English is only about half an hour or so. It is quite necessary for students to be aware of their learning motivation and intrigue their interest in English studying. To develop non-English majors' interest in English study, the teacher, in the specific teaching process, can create an active English classroom atmosphere, provide more chances for students to practice English and assign some challenging tasks.

Second, encouraging students to cooperate with each other. The less the students depend on the teachers, the more strengthened the students' ability of autonomous learning will be. The experiment shows that the students are willing to participate in group activities so that they can learn from each other and improve themselves. It is important to make students understand that the teacher is not the only source of knowledge. The feedback from both the teacher and the students is equally important.

Third, enhancing monitoring. Wang duqin's research (2002) found that the reasons that the effect of students' learning strategy is not satisfying and the development of their autonomous learning is not fast are related to the lack of monitoring. Self-monitoring and self-evaluating are very important during the autonomous learning process. They help learners become critical about their own work and elevate the status of learner from a passive learner to an assessor. Also, autonomous learning is absolutely not the learning without teachers' participation; on the contrary, teachers play a crucial role in facilitating learners' self-realization and offering regular guidance (Hedge, 2002; Benson & Voller, 1997).

6. Conclusion

Learner autonomy is a hot issue in modern education. For Chinese non-English majors, learner autonomy plays a critical role in their English learning. But non-English majors' learner autonomy is affected by the following factors: learning strategies, learning attitudes and learning motivation, teachers and learning environment. For students, learning strategies are very important in cultivating their learning autonomy; meanwhile, students should be aware of their motivations and work out learning plans. What the teacher should do is transform their traditional roles such as from parent, instructor, director, manager, leader, or controller to consultant, advisor, coordinator, idea person, helper, communicator, guide, facilitator, and organizer. They become active participants, monitors, consultants and guides when they work closely with their students' language learning and help students develop better techniques for learning (Nunan, 1992). In order to cultivate students' learner autonomy, the following suggestions are made: stimulating students' interest and help students to form a lasting learning motivation, encouraging students to cooperate with each other, enhancing monitoring. No matter what the teachers and students do, the purpose is to cultivate non-English majors' learner autonomy.

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