

Cultivating Students' Learning Autonomy via Call: Application of Team Project and Presentation

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Abstract - By literature and case study this paper explores how CALL helps students to construct the autonomous study effectively through in-class and after-class task "team project and presentation". It concludes the positive effects on students as follows: achieving a student-centered mode in teaching; strengthening student's motivation and sense of satisfaction; improving their academic achievement.

Index Terms - autonomy, CALL, project, presentation, cooperative

1. Introduction

In intensive reading class in college, teachers usually give reading material in the textbook, and most class time is spent listening to the teacher's lectures. Teachers serve as purveyors of information and wielder of power. They lecture, pose questions, assign homework, evaluate students' performance and test their language proficiency, whereas students are seen as containers to be filled with the knowledge held by the teacher [1]. They listen to the teacher's lectures, take notes, review lessons and try to memorize what is taught. Classroom activities are mostly teacher-oriented and students rarely participate in them. This teacher-oriented approach, which has affected curriculum and instruction in China for so many years, is based on the behaviorist learning theory. Of course, with the application of the computer technology and development of CALL(Computer-assisted Language Learning) , the setting for students to learn English are quite different from the ones ten years or even five years ago, to be exactly, with richer approaches than before. Many audible materials and multimedia software are available, each text book has matched disc, which make students less dependent on their teacher, and form challenges to the traditional teaching mode [2]. Remarks about the English teaching reforms are so prevailing that we assume that our English teaching has stepped into a new era. However, in reality, greater importance has still been attached to the traditional teacher-centered approach instead of student-oriented approach which lays great emphasis on learner autonomy by the way of task-based teaching and cooperative learning. According to the investigation in several universities in Xi'an, we find that college English teaching is still using the traditional mode, even some teachers who employ multimedia approach, simply use the projector as a blackboard. *College English Curriculum Requirements* (For trial implement) (2004) says, the objective of college English teaching is to develop the students' ability to use English in an all-round way so that in their future work and social interactions they

will be able to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels, and at the same time they will be able to enhance their ability to study independently and improve their cultural quality so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges. Thus applying student-oriented approach by enhancing their cooperative learning and autonomous learning via CALL is urgent in our teaching. From September 2012 to March 2013, I designed and practiced in-class and after-class task--- team project and presentation, which proved to be effective in nurturing students' autonomous learning. Team project and presentation refers to the project finished by a group of students outside class and then presented in class by a representative.

2. Theoretical Bases

Autonomous learning is based on the theory of Constructivism, which believes that knowledge is not taught but learned by the learner himself through constructing new knowledge on the base of old knowledge, under a certain setting, with the help of others, such as teachers or study partners, utilizing certain resources. The concept of "autonomous learning" originated in the 1960s when there were debates about the development of life-long learning skills and independent thinking. Holec defines autonomy as "the ability take charge of one's own learning" [3]. Dickinson states that autonomy is a "situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his or her learning and implementation of those decisions" Autonomous learning is quite different from self study. It doesn't mean studying without teachers' guidance and lectures. In fact, learner autonomy means students set their goal and pace of study, learn to cooperate with others to fulfill their tasks, change from passive learners to active learners, from "what I expect to do" to "what I want to do". Teachers must play the role of informants, designers, and facilitators, and evaluators. Teachers should try to understand learners' needs and interest, understand the resources with the school, help the learners to be aware of and make the best use of them; teachers also should provide learners with a learning environment and develop a curriculum which enable them to take charge of their learning; teachers should design tasks and activities to facilitate students autonomous learning; teachers should assist learners in setting goals for learning, monitoring their progress, and evaluating their work. In short, teacher-centered mode should shift to student-centered mode.

Another theoretical basis for developing students' autonomous learning is cooperative learning. Olsen and Kagan defined cooperative learning as "group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others" [5]. Cooperative learning is based on interaction and cooperation. Johnson, Johnson and Holubec assert that "What we know about effective instruction indicates that cooperative learning should be used when we want students to learn more, like school better, like each other better, like themselves better, and learn more effective social skills" [6]. Learning takes place when students realize they belong to a certain group or a given culture.

Team project and presentation is carried out on the basis of the above theories.

3. Application of Team Project and Presentation

With the changing educational notion in China, Computer-assisted Language learning (CALL) is widely used in both English class teaching and students' after-class study. CALL can provide students with such a learning setting in which knowledge is learned through autonomous study. CALL provides students with plenty of chances to use English in audio-visual communicative setting both in and outside class classroom. It makes possible for the students to watch the real situation, listen to the native speaker and in turn to be familiar with communicative strategy. Students learn with the help of multimedia facilities, overhead projector, local network, internet, etc. Thus in such a setting team project and presentation could be both feasible and effective in cultivating students' learning autonomy. Team project and presentation is used in two B-average classes (whose scores in Band-1 test were below 65.), totaling 80 students. Each semester students are required to conduct four projects.

A. Designing the team project

What team project the teacher designs is a decisive factor. It affects whether the students can fulfill the task successfully or not. Usually, there are three principles to follow: First, design the team project according to the passage students learn. In this way, the students can not only better understand what they learn in the book but also broaden their horizon. ; Second, the topic of the team project should be neither too general nor too specific. If the topic is too general, students always feel puzzled about what they are going to do, or they can't focus on one topic and explain it fully. On the other hand, if the topic is too specific, students will feel restrained and thus can't supply enough information. Third, the team project should be interesting and demanding as well. Deci and Ryan hold that interest plays "an important direct role in intrinsically motivated behavior in that people naturally approach activities that attract them" [7]. And we know that it could well be that a little nervous tension in the learning process is a good thing.

The form of team project should be varied. It can be a report, a role play, a dialogue, or a PPT. It all depends on the

passage they learn. When the students get the topic, they will do some research work together with the help of computer, local network, internet, etc. So, without CALL team project and presentation can not really be carried out. Take Unit 4(New horizon English Book3) as an example: Passage A is *Five Famous Symbols of American Culture*. Then the students are required to search for the information about symbols of China or their hometown and then use PowerPoint to present it. Outside classroom, the students must search for the related information and pictures and even movies in the library and internet, download or copy print them. Then the students organize, simplify the materials that best suit their needs. And the students are required to use PPT to write their report. Students showed great enthusiasm though they said it was a little bit challenging.

B. Grouping

Since it is team project, it can not be finished individually. Students have to cooperate with their peers. Appropriate grouping is essential. Kagan (1992) recommends heterogeneous team, reflecting varied learning abilities, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and gender mixes. Generally, four students form a group. Several groups have five members. Each group has a group leader who helps to communicate with the teacher and organize group activities. Other members assume specific roles such as group facilitator, group recorder/folder monitor, group representative and so on.

Each member will be graded according to their contribution to the project in order to avoid "hitchhiker" (student who does not do a fair share of assigned group work) or "overachiever" or "workhorse" (student who takes on too much workload), which are not appropriate in cooperative learning. Each group member should obey the following rules: You have the right to ask questions or ask for help in your group, and you also have the obligation to provide help and assistance for others. It is the group leader's responsibility to record what each member does in the project, discuss the amount of contribution with the members and decide the position of each member together. Of course, it does not mean that the teacher is a bystander. Under the condition of CALL, students learn from their peers, discuss their problems with the teacher through e-mail, MSN, etc.

C. Presentation

After preparation, each group selects a representative to present their team project. Usually they have to finish their presentation within ten minutes. The presentation should be given in English only no matter it is in oral or written forms. If there is the need, they can employ multimedia facilities in the classroom. When they once were asked to present the symbols of China or their hometown, students use computer and overhead projector to help them. The result displays the students' talent and ability. Some of them did very well, which amazed teachers greatly. One group presented the symbols of Sichuan including Chuan Opera, facial change, hot pot, tea culture. They did their presentation in English with the background music of Chuan Opera, and the PPT was linked with a short movie that best interprets the local culture. The

materials were mainly from internet. How can they have it done in the traditional way of learning? Only CALL can make it.

After their presentation, it is important for the teacher to evaluate their work and encourage them. Sometimes teacher needs to point out their weakness. If other students are interested, they can ask questions and further discuss it. The teacher grades the presentation according to the content (50%) including selection of materials, creation or adaptation; delivery (30%) including expressiveness, pronunciation, intonation; individual contribution (20%) referring to each member's contribution.

4. Discussion

The essence of the team project and presentation method is that it gives task-based interaction which is effective in language learning. There are positive effects on students' learning autonomy.

First, it helps to achieve a student-centered mode in teaching. When we apply the team project and presentation method, every students has an opportunity to use English in a real sense when conducts the project. Teacher's role has been changed from a lecturer to a facilitator. Students can actively involve in learning within the environment offered by CALL [8]. Most students like this kind of activity. (According to the questionnaire which was conducted among the 80 students in December this year, 32.5% like it very much, and 53.75% like it)

Second, Students feel that they are strongly motivated and have a sense of satisfaction when they can fulfill the project and present it in class. This kind of task can help ease their tension and fear, which in turn stimulate their initiative and motivation. They are no longer passive learners but active learners. Furthermore, the sense of satisfaction improves their self-confidence. After one and half years training they are more confident when they speak English in front of others. More than half the students investigated say this method is very helpful in building up their confidence.

In addition, students' academic achievement has been improved. Discussing with the groups and observing their classroom performance, it is not difficult to find that the students can speak English better and write better compositions. Most important of all, by accomplishing this creative task, they get to know how to learn. Therefore they achieve a lot.

5. Conclusions

Team project and presentation proves effective in promoting autonomous learning. But since the method must be carried with the help of CALL, the university must provide facilities and students have access to these facilities. Sometimes students still feel inconvenient for them to use these facilities. Besides, Teacher must change their deep-rooted concept of teaching. But it is not easy because the new role requires responsibility, extensive knowledge and ability of organization. It also requires the teacher be responsible for the teaching both inside and outside the classroom. Therefore how to be a good facilitator need to be further explored.

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