

Research on the Promotion of Students' Autonomous English Reading Ability through Reflective E-journal

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ABSTRACT

How to promote college students' autonomous English reading ability has become an important teaching practice in today's college English education. Based on Pavlovich's theoretical framework on multi-dimensional reflection, this study designs a general format of reflective e-journal which is used after reading tests to stimulate students' self-reflection to cultivate students' autonomous English reading ability. After 17-week teaching practice, students' levels of self-reflection have been improved, and students' autonomous English reading ability has been significantly promoted, especially students' self-efficacy, reading strategy, learning management, learning solution, learning evaluation. Therefore, the teaching practice of regular English reading testing matched with reflective e-journals is of great significance in the promotion of students' autonomous English reading ability.

Keywords: reflective e-journal, autonomous English reading ability, teaching practice, college English education

1. INTRODUCTION

Test and evaluation play an important role in college English education, not only for teaching practice in that it can reflect timely teaching effect and provide guidance for the following teaching activities accordingly but also for students' autonomous learning in that it can stimulate students' self-motivation and promote students' in-depth learning. According to the evaluation theory of "CIPP" (context—input—process—product), the ultimate goal of evaluation is not to "prove", but to "improve" [1]. Therefore, teachers should not take testing results as teaching destinations, but a starting point for a new journey where students are alert to the urgency of problem-solving and are willing to make improvements for a better self. It has been seven years for Tianjin Agricultural University to fully utilize the iTEST Testing and Evaluation System. In these seven years of practice, college English teachers have been exploring the scientific path of combining testing and teaching together through online platforms so that testing can be utilized beyond a tool for measure and assessment but as a trigger for students' learning progress, so as to provide empirical evidence and lay a sound foundation for college English teaching and learning.

Currently, college English education is faced with the reduction of class hours which have been cut by more than 20% from 280 to 220 for every two academic years. But meanwhile, the teaching objectives set in College English Curriculum Requirements remain unchanged [2]. Thus teachers have to actively adopt new teaching methods, adjust the proportion of offline and online teaching and learning activities, promote students' autonomous learning

ability, and guide students to make full use of their spare time for self-planning, self-management, self-monitoring and self-assessment in English learning, so as to enhance teaching quality and learning efficiency despite class hour reduction.

In this case, this study starts with the idea of "testing for learning" and explores practical and feasible ways of how to improve students' English autonomous reading ability through testing. We hold the belief that testing itself cannot directly promote the efficiency of learning. The realization of "learning by testing" actually results from students' continuous self-reflection and corresponding self-improving behaviours based on the testing scores and feedbacks. Thus reflective learning activities play an indispensable mediating role between testing and learning, without which "learning by testing" could only end up in vain. On the one hand, reflective thinking can help students with the discovery and analysis of learning problems; on the other hand, it can assist students' exploration of targeted solutions. The role of teachers is to find out a proper mediator to establish a linear relationship between testing and learning, and in this study, reflective journaling is the answer.

2. RESEARCH SITUATION OF REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Reflective thinking is systematically introduced and explained by American psychologist and educator John Dewey in his book *How we Think*, which elaborates that reflective thinking is to meditate on a problem carefully and deeply for a long time and it has the characteristics of self-consciousness, continuity, purposefulness, certainty

and self-motivation [3]. Reflective learning thereby believes that learning derives from students' own experiences and can be constantly updated through the process of reviewing and analysing the experiences they have so as to learn about themselves and then learn how to learn. From the perspective of metacognition, Zheng proposes a reflective cycle that identifies seven stages of reflection, namely the stage of reviewing, of evaluating, of problem-detecting, of problem-defining, of strategy-making, of practice-verifying and of experience-summarizing, which help students to make sense of their learning experiences [4]. In a word, reflective learning is a self-guided learning process based on the past and looking into the future. Reflective e-journal is proved the very carrier and effective way to realize reflective learning. Mansor points out that reflective e-journal is a good way for students to learn new concepts, facilitating their expression of thoughts, learning and sharing of each other's knowledge, and enhancing their understanding of concepts that they learned in class, so that students can have a deeper understanding in their learning activities [5]. Langley & Brown find that reflective journal can cultivate students' awareness of autonomous learning, improve their recognition of strengths and weaknesses, and develop their ability to discover new ideas and concepts [6]. Chia-chien Chang through the implementation of public learning journal confirms that reflective journal can help advanced English learners become more autonomous learners [7]. So reflective journaling is a good way for students to evaluate their learning critically and to identify areas of their learning that need further development so that they can make changes and improvements accordingly. As for college English education, it is of great significance to apply reflective journaling into the teaching practice of promoting students' autonomous English learning ability.

3. TEACHING RESEARCH

3.1. Research Objective

In the first semester of college English, students are found to rely heavily on classroom teaching, and they tend to limit their reading to English textbooks, let alone autonomous English reading. In order to find out the reason behind the phenomenon, researchers surveyed autonomous English reading ability among freshmen in the middle of the first semester, mainly from six dimensions, namely learning objective, self-efficacy, reading strategy, learning management, problem solution and learning evaluation, basically in the form of Likert five level scale. According to the results, students have clear learning objectives (mean=3.83) and relatively effective reading strategies (mean=3.37), but low ability in learning management (mean=3.01), problem solving (mean=3.05), learning evaluation (mean=3.07) and self-efficacy (mean=3.06). In a word, even though students have a relatively good command of English and are willing to

learn English better, they still cannot carry out autonomous English reading behaviour through reflective activities of self-planning, self-supervising, self-adjusting, self-evaluating or self-improving. Professor Lee from the Chinese University of Hong Kong believes that the success of learning a foreign language largely depends on the initiative of learners to find opportunities to practice it beyond classroom teaching [8]. Classroom teaching is far from enough to develop students' English reading ability. So teachers should try every possible means to arouse students' enthusiasm to learn by themselves. This study applies the method of reflective e-journaling and reading tests to stimulate students' targeted reflection with their testing scores in order to promote students' autonomous learning and to build a virtuous teaching and learning cycle of "learning by test-driven self-reflection".

3.2. Research Subjects

One hundred non-English freshmen of Tianjin Agricultural University participate in the research with gender ratio 1:1. The experimental period is the second half of the first college year consisting of 17 weeks (72 class hours) during which 16 reading tests were conducted (one test per week from Week 1 to Week 16), 8 reflective e-journals were distributed (one journal per every two weeks from Week 2 to Week 16) and a survey of autonomous English reading ability was conducted on Week 17.

3.3. Reflective E-journal Design

Based on the theoretical framework of Pavlovich on multi-dimensional reflection [9], researchers summarize the reflective behaviours driven by reading tests into the following four dimensions.

The first dimension: experience description. In this case, students are required to review and describe how they finish the reading test, i.e. "What did I do?" Students' objective description is the premise of self-reflection. Asking students to describe the testing process is actually to take them into the context of reflective activity step by step, which makes it smooth to carry out the following three dimensions.

The second dimension: problem detection. Here students begin to reflect on the testing process and results, i.e. "How did I do?" Students are expected to place their focus on the difficulties and obstacles encountered in reading tests. This dimension aims at immersing students deeply in the reflection activity.

The third dimension: solution-finding. Based on the problems detected in the second dimension, students are expected to seek countermeasures against the problems and form their reading plans and strategies, i.e. "What should I do?" Reflective activity makes sense from this dimension on in that students begin to think about themselves and be willing to take actions according to the test feedbacks.

The fourth dimension: action taking. Students put the plans and strategies they made into action for self-improvement in the next reading tests, i.e. "I can do better." This dimension is the ultimate goal of reflective activity and the key to decide whether reflection activities can get the desired results.

From the reflective e-journals collected in Week 1, researchers notice a sharp decrease of student number from the first to the fourth dimension, with 100 students (100%) reaching the first dimension, 85 students (85%) reaching the second dimension, 40 students (40%) reaching the third dimension, and 21 students (21%) reaching the fourth dimension. It can be seen that students' self-reflection on English reading tests basically stays at the primary level of problem comprehension and detection, far from the advanced level of problem analysis and settlement. Therefore, researchers decide to guide students into deeper and more comprehensive reflection by providing them with a specific format of reflective e-journal consisting of the following four aspects.

- ① Test result: How do you feel about the reading test? You can talk about it from time arrangement to difficulties in knowledge or skills.
- ② Test process: Please talk about your learning problems reflected by the test, and analyze the reason for your progress or regression, then decide which problems can be solved by yourself, and for which ones you have to ask for help.
- ③ Further plans: Any adjustment you would like to make, such as your learning motivation, strategy, scheme or any new plan?
- ④ Reflection effect: Please talk about whether you put your adjustment into practice. If not, why?

3.4. Research Implementation

Researchers select 16 reading comprehension tests of the same type from CET-4 database and release one test consisting of 10 multiple choices each week through iTEST system. Students are required to finish the test within 20 minutes and a following reflective e-journal issued by Super Star Learning APP. Reading test starts from Week 1 to Week 16, with one per week, and reflective e-journal starts from Week 2 to Week 16, with one per every two weeks. That means reflective journals are collected on every dual week, and on every odd week teachers read students' journals, give feedbacks and responses, providing corresponding help and guidance, and offer affirmation and encouragement to students. Thus students can deeply realize the good use and value of reflective journaling, and the backwash effect of reflection on autonomous English reading ability. With the help of continuous reflection, students can develop the habit of "I am willing to learn" and finally achieve the purpose of "I am able to learn".

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1. Improvement of Students' Reflection Level

Through the teaching practice of 17 weeks, it is noticeable that there is an obvious increase of the number of students in the third and fourth reflective dimensions, with a rise from 40% to 80% in the third dimension, and from 21% to 61% in the fourth dimension when researchers compare the first journals with the eighth ones. What's more, the length of reflective journal is longer, the content is more detailed and the depth is improved. One student in her journal reflects that "Since the first reading test, I started my self-rescue plan. I memorize English vocabulary and do reading every day. Although I cannot guarantee a full score in the next reading test, I feel I am on the right path, which gives me confidence and lessen my worry." It's happy to see that students begin to shift themselves from superficial descriptive reflection to analytical and action-oriented reflection.

4.2. Improvement of Students' Autonomous English Reading Ability

At the end of the 17-week teaching practice, researchers again distribute questionnaire of the autonomous English reading ability which was once issued 8 months ago. A paired t-test was conducted by SPSS. Students' self-efficacy, reading strategy, learning management, problem solution and learning evaluation have been significantly improved. Among them, the improvement of self-efficacy is the largest ($D=0.77$, $P=0.000$), that is to say, students' internal driving force of English reading is stronger. The second is reading strategy ($D=0.63$, $P=0.000$), indicating that students have tried more effective reading methods and put them into practice. The third one is learning management ($D=0.53$, $P=0.001$), illustrating that students' awareness of self-planning and self-discipline is enhanced which promote their autonomous ability in turn. The fourth one is learning evaluation ($D=0.47$, $P=0.001$), demonstrating that more emphasis has been put to the implication of test results. Students shift their focus from the testing score itself to the reason behind it. The last one is problem solving ($D=0.42$, $P=0.014$), signifying that when encountering problems or difficulties in autonomous reading, students know how to get help in various ways rather than only rely on teachers for help. With no significant change in students' learning objective, their awareness of autonomous learning has been enhanced, autonomous reading behaviour has been gradually developed, and autonomous English reading ability has been improved overall.

5. CONCLUSION

Journal-based reflective learning is an important mediating agent between test behaviour and autonomous learning, which is also the fundamental difference between test-driven learning and exam-oriented education. In this research, the destination of the reading test is by no means the testing score itself but the ignition of students' inter energy, the development of students' learning quality and the promotion of students' knowledge, skills and ability to learn to pave the way for their lifelong learning.

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