

On Cultivation of non-English Majors' Autonomous English Learning Capacity

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Abstract. This paper analyzes non-English college major's autonomous learning capacity, the purpose and requirements of teaching knowledge, establishing learning goals and learning program development, learning strategy use and monitoring, the monitoring process of learning English. Finally, the results of the study are concluded, to enhance students from the five aspects of self-learning measures, i.e. stimulating the learners' intrinsic motivation, paying attention to strategy training, handling the relationship between teaching and learning correctly, making use of internet multimedia resources extensively, and building the self-access learning centers.

Introduction

The autonomy learning capacity's raise is one of language teaching most profitable targets. As learning, autonomy study will not only help improve students' performance at school, and graduation of its life-long learning and development. In China, with the progressive realization of the subject of teaching from teacher-centered to student-centered transition to student-centered autonomous learning of foreign language education has become a hot content.

Along with the development of global communication, the coming of the information age, English has played a more and more important role in our social and economic life. More and more Chinese teachers and students are aware of the significance of learning the international language and are trying to master it as a tool and as an opportunity for their further development.

Teacher-centered approaches and spoon-fed methods have been prevalent for a long time in China. Teachers have been regarded as authorities, knowledge-givers and error correctors, while students have tended to limit their work to what was taught in class. As a result, many learners have been accustomed to the teachers' feeling. Without teachers' timely and adequate help, students would have felt disoriented, lost confidence and failed to pinpoint their goals in learning. So there has been need for a shift in English leaning from focusing on how to teach language to how to learn it, with a consequent change of perspective from the teacher to the learner. (Wenden 1991, O'Malley and Chamot 1990, Rubin and Thompson 1982)

Only when learners are able to know their situation, their learning strength and weaknesses and avail themselves of each learning opportunity rather than simply react to various stimuli from the teacher can they be confident enough to involve into their learning and eventually become successful language learners. The situation calls for the urgent need of cultivating learners' initiatives and learner autonomy in English teaching and learning [1].

Research background: main concept of autonomy learning

Many attempts have been made to define the concept of learner autonomy since the very beginning .However, it is difficult to define concepts like "autonomy" and "independent learning" for

three reasons [2]. First, different writers have defined the concepts in different ways. Secondly, they are areas of ongoing debate and therefore definitions are continuing to mature as more discussion takes place. Thirdly, these concepts have developed independently in different geographical areas and therefore they have been defined by using different (but often similar) terminology [3]. Linguists and researchers link autonomy with "self-instruction" (it is regarded as a type of learning in which the learner takes responsibility for the decisions about what, when and where to learn), "self-directed learning" (it is regarded as a conscious form of learning), "Learner-centeredness", "individualization", "independent language learning" and "self-access" etc. Learner autonomy, independent/autonomous language learning are regarded as synonyms in this paper.

The concept of "autonomous learning" stemmed from debates about the development of life-long learning skills and the development of independent thinkers, both of which originated in the 1960s. (David, G& Lindsay, M, 2002) By 1981, Holec (1981) defined autonomy as "the capacity to take charge of one's learning", He developed this definition further in 1985 by talking about autonomy as a conceptual tool [4]. Holec has been a major influence in the debate about autonomy in language learning and his initial definition has been taken as a starting point in much subsequent work in the area [5]. Dickinson (1987), for example, accepts the definition of autonomy as a situation in which the learner is not only responsible for all the decisions concerned with learning but also -for the implementation of those decisions. In the same way, Leni Dam, drawing upon Holec, defines autonomy in terms of the learner's willingness and capacity to control or oversee his or her own learning [6]. More specifically, she, like Holec, holds that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently sets goals; chooses aims and purposes; selects materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation.

Dickinson (1995), however, considers autonomy as "both an attitude towards learning and a capacity for, independent learning" .He elaborates the attitude as responsibility that the learner is prepared to take for decision-making in the learning process. That is, "they can identify, formulate and change goals to suit their own learning needs and interests and are able to use learning strategies and monitor their own learning"[7]. According to him, although autonomy may not necessarily have many external, observable features, autonomous learners are supposed to have the following five characteristics: (1) they are able to recognize what has been taught. (2) they are able to formulate their own learning objectives.(3) they are able to select and implement appropriate learning strategies.(4) they are able to identify strategies that are not working for them and use others.(5) they are able to consciously involve themselves in monitoring their own learning[8]. In a word, an autonomous learner is one who can very skillfully self-manage or monitor his or her own learning in a holistic or all-round way.

Little (2003) gives us a working definition. According to him, autonomous learners "understand the purpose of their learning program, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals ,take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness (cf. Holec 1981, Little 1991)"[9]. In other words, the practice of learner autonomy requires an insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be practical in self-management and in interaction with others.

However, "the fully autonomous learner is an ideal, rather than a reality"(Nunan, 1997). There are different degrees of autonomy. Most researchers use the term "self-access" to refer to the approach that assists learners to move from teacher dependence to autonomy. Self-access learning includes, but is not limited to "learning without a teacher", which usually happens in uncontrolled environments like students' residences and English corners [10]. When students learn in controlled or semi-controlled environments like self-access centers and libraries, counseling service may be provided. In this case, teachers take on new roles of counselors, facilitators, assessors and administrators.

Main features of learner autonomy

After exploring the definitions of learner autonomy above, let's review some of the main features contained in the scope of learner autonomy:

(1) Learner autonomy has its inherent qualities that exist in the whole process of learning. Learning is the inherent activity of the learners who also view it as a part of their life. Initiative in learner autonomy is the innate quality of learners, rather than the result of extrinsic force. Learners' learning behaviors tend to be motivated by their innate needs of learning with a clear objective in mind. Learners are capable of working out a feasible plan of study in accordance with their previous knowledge and make some adjustment of their learning strategies in terms of the changes of the internal and external circumstances. Moreover, learners hold positive attitudes towards English learning and are motivated to learn the language innately [11].

(2) Autonomous learners are aware of their responsibilities in the process of autonomous learning. Learners are expected to see to their learning conditions and take control over their learning behaviors. They should make use of their advantages and realize what they can accomplish and achieve. They should be clear about their learning objectives and move on to achieve them with a strong faith and confidence.

(3) Autonomous learners are aware of the importance of the use of learning strategies and are able to put them into practice to improve their language learning. Learners take charge of their own learning by means of making plans, monitoring and evaluating the whole process of their learning. They can choose the proper cognitive strategies to improve their English skills and make some adjustments of the strategies to make full use of them in the process of learning [12].

We now live in the age of knowledge and information, and the capacity to do lifelong learning has been an inevitable demand, which also requires the universities to focus their attention not only on knowledge transmission, but also on cultivating a habit and capacity of learning to take control over one's own learning independently and effectively.

Conclusions

This paper provides an investigation into the current situation of learner autonomy among non-English majors in two different universities. It first focuses on the literature review of learner autonomy and elaborates on the factors that may influence the promotion of learner autonomy, then a survey is conducted to probe into the students' beliefs for learner autonomy and students' use of learning strategies through a questionnaire. The whole study is conducted based on three research questions. And through the analysis of data and survey, these questions can be answered [13].

(1) Students have a low level of autonomous English learning capacity, especially in terms of monitoring the learning process, getting teacher's teaching goal and setting learning goals.

(2) Although the facilitative external learning facilities are taken advantage of by college students to foster their autonomy to some extent, they are not virtually prepared for learner autonomy in English learning.

(3) The present situation of non-English majors' learner autonomy capacity is far from satisfactory. The results of the survey reveal that students generally lack the awareness and application of learning strategies. They did not know much about learning strategies and how to exercise them in reality. Because of these problems existed above, it is suggested that they should enhance themselves from the five aspects of self-learning measures, i.e., stimulating the learners' intrinsic motivation, paying attention to strategy training, handling the relationship between teaching and learning correctly, making use of internet multimedia resources extensively, and building the self-access learning centers [14].

It is necessary to notice that there are some limitations in the present study. Firstly, the sample of this study was not large (altogether 221 students), and the subjects the author selected are from four

majors of two universities. So maybe the findings were not representative. To get a more accurate picture of non-English majors' beliefs about learner autonomy, future research should be conducted in a larger scale with subjects randomly sampled from different types of high schools so that findings could be more reliable and valid [15].

Secondly, the research findings were based on only quantitative data, and most of the answers were from subjective judgments, which were probably inconsistent with the students' actuality. As learner beliefs about learner autonomy involve complex mental activities, and only a questionnaire is not enough to investigate it. It is necessary to be provided with qualitative data which help to clarify the subjects' ideas and validate the data. Other instruments, such as in-depth interviews, observations, diary studies, etc. should be involved in the investigation so as to illustrate and supplement these findings from the questionnaire information.

Finally, not all the subjects invested the same meaning and there exist some possible misunderstandings of the questionnaire items. Besides these, it is not guaranteed that every subject is serious and cooperative enough in the filling out of questionnaires, which may affect the accuracy of the data analysis. These problems should be avoided as far as possibly in future researches.

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