

An Empirical Study on the Pertinent Degree of Autonomous Learning among Polytechnic Non-English Majors

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Abstract. Learner autonomy has become an important orientation in polytechnic English teaching reforms. However, there exists some blind tendency in the practice of fostering autonomous learning. The results of a survey in Ji'nan Engineering Polytechnic suggest that the pertinent degree of learner autonomy should be controlled moderately according to the reality of learners themselves and the teaching aims of autonomous learning should be achieved gradually.

1. Introduction

Autonomous learning is an important value orientation of college teaching reform. However, learner autonomy requires students to have a certain level of cognition and learning strategy ability. Students should not blindly pursue the form of “autonomy”, but should correctly grasp the degree of learner autonomy in combination with specific teaching environment and students' own quality, so as to realize learner autonomy to the maximum extent and improve the learning effect. Based on the investigation of students in Ji'nan Engineering Polytechnic, this paper attempts to discuss the suitability of vocational college students' independent English learning from the perspective of learners, so as to put forward feasible suggestions for further developing vocational college students' independent English learning according to local conditions.

2. The essence and conditions of autonomous learning

In the field of foreign language teaching, the concept of “independent learning” has different interpretations and understandings. Henri Holec (1981) holds that learner autonomy means that learners are responsible for their own learning in the process of learning. He pointed out that learners' self-learning mainly has two preconditions: one is that learners must be able to take charge of their own learning; the other is that learners must be able to control their own learning in a learning institution. Dickinson (1995) believes that independent learning is “both a learning attitude and an independent learning ability”, in which attitude and ability are the core and key factors in determining independent learning. Littlewood (1996) argued that independent learners should have “the ability and willingness to make independent choices”. Social cognitive scientist Zimmerman (1997) integrated the views of various theoretical schools and proposed that learners are autonomous only when they are active participants in metacognition, motivation and behavior. Pang Weiguo (2001), a Chinese scholar, summarized autonomous learning as “four learning”, namely “ability to learn”, “desire to learn”, “ability to learn” and “constant learning”. He pointed out that students' autonomous learning needs not only internal conditions such as self-awareness, internal learning motivation, learning strategies and will control, but also external conditions such as educational guidance. Shu Dingfang (2004) pointed out that the main components of autonomous learning in foreign language learning include attitude, ability and environment. Benson (2001) believes that most independent learning researches are centered on the classroom, while the nature of extracurricular learning and its relationship with classroom learning are relatively new research fields, which have great enlightenment to the theory of independent learning.

Although scholars at home and abroad have different understandings of learner autonomy, all researchers emphasize the transfer of learning responsibilities from teachers to students. Learners' internal conditions such as learning attitude, will, ability and tenacity are key elements of

autonomous learning. Learners must be able to choose their own learning knowledge reserves and to take responsibility for their own learning consciousness and skills, and responsibility for their own choice for lasting power, otherwise their learning is passive, machinery and their autonomous learning will never happen.

Based on the mentioned above, through the case study of 1,000 college students in Ji'nan Engineering Polytechnic, this paper tries to describe the impact of the autonomy of extracurricular English learning on the learning effect of the college students, and to explore the suitability of vocational college students' autonomous extracurricular English learning.

3. Survey on students' independent English learning

3.1 Respondents

The survey was conducted among 1,000 non-English major students from Ji'nan Engineering Polytechnic. Respondents were selected from 31 different majors in the college's three specialty groups. Therefore, the respondents are representative.

3.2 Survey tools

This research mainly uses questionnaire survey method, involving four aspects that affect college English learners' autonomous learning: the attitude, will, ability and will control, respectively to investigate learners' self-awareness (can "learn"), learning motivation ("want to learn"), metacognitive strategy use ability ("will learn") and tenacity ("constant"), including 12 points and 40 topics ranging from the main body consciousness, the consciousness of mission, the consciousness of strategy and self-efficacy. The questionnaire basically covers all aspects of the autonomous learning from eight aspects.

Each question uses the Likert five-level scale scoring system, requiring the subjects to choose the option closest to their actual situation: 1= completely or almost completely inconsistent; 2= usually not; 3= sometimes; 4= generally true; 5= complete or almost complete consistent. There are some negative questions in the scale, which are scored in reverse during calculation.

3.3 Data analysis

A total of 1,000 questionnaires were issued and 1,000 valid questionnaires were collected, with an effective rate of 100%. The author input the data from the valid questionnaire into the computer, and used SPSS (17.0) to conduct descriptive statistics on the obtained data, and calculated the mean value (M) and standard deviation (SD) of each item respectively. Referring to Oxford's (1990) classification standard for the frequency of learning strategies, the average value higher than 3.5 indicates a higher degree of autonomy. The average value is between 2.5 and 3.4, which means the corresponding degree of autonomy is general. Below 2.5, it is lower.

4. Results and discussions

The statistical analysis of the relevant questionnaire data shows that college English learners show some awareness and ability of independent learning, but the overall degree of autonomy is not high (M=2.92). The average values of attitude, intention, ability and will control are 3.30, 3.03, 2.77 and 2.73 respectively, all failing to reach the higher level of 3.5.

Among the 12 observation points to investigate the degree of autonomy of college English learners, the average value of most observation points is between 2.5 and 3.4, reflecting the general degree of autonomy, which is consistent with the analysis results of the overall situation of autonomy of college English learners. Among them, those with strong overall levels have "subject consciousness", "strategy consciousness" and "value consciousness", while those with weak overall levels have "self-reflection", "self-adjustment" and "persistence".

The following is a discussion based on the general situation of college English learner autonomy and the specific situation of each observation point.

4.1 Attitude

According to the survey results, among the learner factors that affect the independent learning of college English, attitude is the highest. Most students have a strong sense of subject and strategy,

and can realize that the key to learn English well lies in their own hard work and perseverance. However, they have a vague understanding of the characteristics, applicable situations and possible effects of various cognitive strategies, as well as the characteristics and requirements of various learning tasks.

4.2 Strategy

Metacognitive strategies are strategies used by learners to monitor, regulate and guide learning behaviors, such as making learning plans, monitoring learning process and evaluating learning effects, and are advanced management methods or tools for learners to assume their own learning responsibilities. The survey results show that college English learners' metacognitive strategy use ability is generally low, and the six relevant observation points reflect low strategy use ability, among which "self-reflection" and "self-regulation" ability are low. This result forms a significant contrast with learners' strong "self-consciousness", especially the high "subject consciousness" and "strategy consciousness", which indicates that learners' "knowledge and action are inconsistent" in independent learning. Therefore, it requires teachers to think and explore further on how to guide students to turn their positive self-consciousness into practical actions

For learners to establish long term and short term goals, they may have characteristics such as "craving for something high and out of reach" or "ambiguous". Their self-efficacy will decrease once their direction of trying and their established target appear deviation during their learning activities, or if their established goals have to be changed because of some problems. In addition, English learners are not strong in learning process monitoring, evaluation and adjustment ability as a whole. Their weaknesses mainly lie in their inability of good at keeping learning log to reflect on their own learning process and their timely summarizing learning result, enough reflection of learning and adjusting learning plans and strategies at any time according to their learning effect.

Most of the metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies used by students are focused on having clear learning objectives, making English learning plans, paying attention to their own progress and shortcomings in learning, making use of native language knowledge and realizing & correcting mistakes, while emotional strategies & communicative strategies are basically not used. The effective use of learning strategies and methods is the embodiment of students' autonomy, while the tested students lack this ability, which requires teachers to consciously cultivate students' learning methods and strategies in class.

4.3 Willingness

The results of the survey show that the learner's "willingness" of autonomous learning is not very strong, and the level of motivation is not high. Generally speaking, students' instrumental motivation is stronger than fusion motivation, and students' self-efficacy and goal orientation are at a relatively low level. Learners lack confidence in their learning ability, so they are passive in the learning process and tend to choose easier task and to give up when encountering problems and difficulties (negative question). Their English learning goal orientation is not targeting the master skills such as the mastery for the knowledge and mind growth, but to show their performance goal orientation (negative question) such as showing off their ability to obtain approval from others and their strong instrumental motivation for identification or finding a good job in the future through the higher vocational college English application ability test, CET - 4, CET - 6 test and so on.

4.4 Ability

According to the survey, most students lack confidence. Only some students who have passed CET - 4 think they are feeling well. Even some students who have passed CET - 4 say their English is still poor. Those who failed CET - 4 thought their English was "terrible". This shows that some students evaluate their English ability only by their examination results, while some students have realized the importance of comprehensive English application ability, oral and conversational ability in particular.

4.5 Will control

In the process of learning, learners will inevitably encounter learning difficulties and disturbances of one kind or another. At this time, learners need to use the will to control their own efforts and make their learning persist. However, the above survey results show that college English

learners do not have a high degree of will control. Though most learners say they can study English hard, they can't actively seek solutions when they encounter problems and difficulties. They often choose to avoid something rather difficult or give up (negative question). In general, they lack the characteristics of insisting on autonomous learning strong perseverance, never giving up, toughness and endurance. Perhaps that is related to the learners' low self-efficacy, the lack of their positive emotional experience in the learning process and the lack of their exercise in real life.

5. Discussion and revelation

To sum up, this survey shows that the tested students show some awareness, ability and will of independent learning. On the one hand, learners' self-consciousness is vague, their metacognitive strategy application ability is low, and there are contradictions between their knowledge and their action. The learners' motivation, confidence and willpower are at a low level, and they lack positive emotional experience in the learning process. Obviously, from the perspective of learner factors, the tested students lack the positive learning attitude and motivation necessary for autonomous learning, the knowledge reserve needed to make the choice for their own learning, the skills needed to make the choice come true and the lasting motivation needed to take responsibility for their choice.

Based on the content of independent learning, the author conducted a survey on English extracurricular learning from eight aspects, combined with learning weekly notes and interviews, and conducted research on three major issues. The results showed as follows:

(1) Students can determine the learning objectives, but the objectives are not in line with the teaching objectives of higher vocational colleges. That is to say, their learning objectives cannot aim to cultivate their comprehensive English application ability. The establishment of students' learning goal is influenced by examination, classroom teaching and social development. Teachers should guide them to set correct goals in class.

(2) Students spend a certain amount of time on learning English after class, but the time spent varies with their majors.

(3) Students can decide their own learning content, but mainly focus on learning, memorizing words, practicing listening, reading and other passive input activities. There are little or no speaking, writing and translation and other active output activities. This is not consistent with our comprehensive development of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating abilities.

(4) The main way for students to learn independently after class is independent learning. It is a waste of resources not to be good at using various resources for learning. We should encourage cooperative learning among students and encourage teachers to communicate with students more after class. For example, we can make full use of effective communication platforms such as E-mail and blog.

(5) Students can use some metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies to monitor and evaluate their own learning, but cannot actively and scientifically evaluate or reflect on their learning process. Basically they do not use emotional strategies to regulate their shyness, anxiety and other common psychological mood or emotion. We learn English mainly for communication, but students don't use any communication strategies. Teachers should deliberately cultivate students' learning strategies in class.

(6) Students generally believe that extracurricular independent learning is very important. As Nunan (1991) concluded after studying successful language learners from various contexts and backgrounds, "extracurricular application of their developed language skills plays a decisive role in second language learning".

(7) Students with good learning effect and high academic performance have clear learning objectives, long learning time, wide learning content and remarkable ability to use certain learning strategies in learning with strong autonomy. So there is a positive correlation between learning effectiveness and autonomy. Teachers should also deliberately cultivate students' learning autonomy in class.

To sum up, we believe that the vocational students in this college still have many mistakes although they have some autonomy in extracurricular English learning. They also need

self-reflection on learning strategies and other aspects as well as teachers' guidance and help.

6. Conclusion

Extracurricular autonomous learning is one of the effective ways to improve the quality of English learning. The current reform of college English teaching in higher vocational colleges emphasizes learner autonomy, which is of practical significance to correct the deviation of traditional teaching concepts. However, there is a certain amount of moderation in everything. More haste, less speed. Therefore, English teachers and teaching management departments in higher vocational colleges should strengthen students' extracurricular English learning under the guidance of teachers and actively create favorable conditions for developing their independent English learning ability. Therefore, the author believes that the independent English learning of the students from Ji'nan Engineering Polytechnic should be the "medium and long-term" development goal of college English teaching. Currently theirs can only be reactive independent learning under the guidance of teachers. Of course, the limitation of this study is that although the samples are representative to some extent, the research scope is limited to our college and the duration is not long enough, which may result in some results that are not convincing and need to be further discussed.

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