An Investigation Into Freshmen's Autonomous Learning of English Major*

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Autonomous learning has been attracting more and more attention in the field of second language teaching and learning since it was put forward. In order to get a better understanding about autonomous learning competence of freshmen of English major in university, this investigation was conducted in the form of questionnaire and was analyzed according to the data collected. The investigation found that autonomous learning competence of freshmen is poor and worrying. Freshmen have strong motivation for English learning, but they keep old learning habit and more rely on teachers. They are incapable of employing metacognitive strategies in their language learning and are not good at utilizing related learning resources available to them. All these deficiencies hinder improvement of them. So they are in great need of fostering the competence of autonomous learning.

Keywords: autonomous learning, freshmen of English major, investigation, analysis

Introduction

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 1960s (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p. 6). It has been an advocating way in foreign language teaching since 1970s, and aroused more attention of educational researchers since 1980s. In its development, autonomous learning in language education is interpreted from various perspectives with different terms, such as “autonomy”, “self-access learning”, and “self-regulated learning”. But they share the core meaning, i.e., learners’ formulating learning objectives and planning for language study, learners’ choosing learning strategies, and learners’ monitoring and assessing and reflecting on language study.

In China, autonomous learning has been greatly focused on recently. As for teachers, cultivating autonomous learning ability of language learners has become an important and appropriate goal in language education. As for language learners, autonomous learning can guarantee them to study language efficiently and effectively in university. It can also ensure language learners a life-long education. Littlewood (1999) argues no students, anywhere, will have their teachers accompany them throughout their life. Therefore, it is essential and crucial to develop autonomous learning competence for language learners.

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Methodology

In order to get a better understanding of the general status of autonomous learning among freshmen of English major, an investigation is conducted in the form of questionnaire.

The questionnaire is anonymous. It comprises 36 items to be answered using five-point Linkert-type scale, which ranges from scale 1 (never or almost never true of me) to scale 5 (always or almost always true of me). It mainly centers on four aspects: learners' motivation, learning belief, metacognitive strategies including planning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation in language study, and utilization of learning resources.

The questionnaire is to undergo qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis with the figure of mean and SD (standard deviation). The mean score shows the intensity with one lowest and five highest.

The subjects of the questionnaire are 150 freshmen of English major in Changchun University. They participate in this study at the end of the first half academic calendar because at that time they are more adapted to college life and study and could have learned autonomously to some degree.

Results and Analysis

Learners' Motivation

According to Dornyei, motivation is "one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second or foreign language learning" (Dornyei, 1998, p. 117). So a learner will be successful with the proper motivation in second language learning. From Table 1, it clearly shows strong motivation of students. They learn English out of self-development (Items 4, 5, and 6), and then their interest (Items 1 and 2). Only some of students plan to go broad (Item 7). The strong motivation can inspire the potential of autonomous learning of students.

Table 1

Measures of Learners' Motivation

Item	Content	Mean	SD
1	I learn English because I like English itself.	3.83	1.25
2	I am interested in English people and their culture.	3.46	1.22
3	It is my parents who ask me to learn English.	1.58	1.04
4	English is a stepping-stone on one's way to success.	4.29	0.97
5	Speaking English fluently shows a person's self-cultivation.	4.13	1.20
6	Learning English well is important for me, because it is a very useful communicative tool.	4.33	1.03
7	I learn English only because I want to go abroad.	3.00	1.47

Learning Belief

Students' learning belief reflects their understanding about their roles as well as teachers' role in language learning. From Table 2, on one hand, it shows that the students, successful or unsuccessful, have realized that they themselves should take the responsibility for and play an active role in their language study (Items 12 and 13). On the other hand, they are eager to get instruction and evaluation from teachers. That reveals their old learning habits which originate from middle school. That is, they more believe in the authority of teachers, would like to wait for teachers' order, and lack autonomous learning ability. Therefore, helping students to cultivate the correct learning belief is key to fostering autonomous learning ability of students.

Table 2

Measures of Learning Belief

Item	Content	Mean	SD
8	I hope teachers can point out the difficulties in my study.	4.71	0.61
9	I hope teachers can tell me what to learn and how to learn.	3.96	1.02
10	Teachers should impel students to learn hard.	3.79	0.96
11	Teachers should be mainly responsible for the low score of students.	1.33	0.55
12	Students themselves are keys to the success of language learning.	4.63	0.67
13	The key to success of language learning lies in self hard-working and perseverance.	4.79	0.41

Metacognitive Strategies

O'Malley and Chamot (2001) defined "metacognitive strategies involve thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring the learning task and evaluating how well one has learned" (p. 137). So the metacognitive strategies employed by students reflect the general situation of autonomous learning.

Planning is a key metacognitive strategy for second language acquisition (O'Malley & Chamot, 2001, p. 47). As listed in Table 3, students are incapable of making a plan for language learning and more depend on teachers (Items 14 and 15). Although some have a plan for their study (Item 16), they do not know what plan means to them (Item 17). The plan is not feasible enough, so they cannot carry out or fulfill the plan completely (Items 18 and 19). That reflects why their autonomous learning ability is not good and the students really need a lot of improvement in managing their language learning.

Table 3

Measures of Planning for Study

Item	Content	Mean	SD
14	I have my own plan for study besides assignments of teachers.	2.75	1.09
15	I have no plan for study, and I just do things as teachers require.	2.63	1.07
16	The plan for my self-study is simple. I just concern about what to do, but I do not care about when to do it, how to do it, or why to do it.	2.96	0.98
17	I do not know how to plan time. Every day I am just busy in dealing with finishing all assignments.	3.79	0.81
18	Usually I cannot complete my plan, leaving it unsettled.	3.54	1.04
19	Every day I check whether I complete study plan or not.	2.21	0.96

O'Malley and Chamot (2001) pointed out self-monitoring is checking, verifying, or correcting one's comprehension or performance in the course of a language task; self-evaluation is checking the outcomes of one's own language performance against an internal measure of completeness and accuracy (p. 137). So effective self-monitoring and self-assessing can guarantee the effectiveness and efficiency of their language learning.

From Table 4, it directly reveals the serious deficiency of students in these two aspects. Although in their language learning some of students are able to monitor their study, realizing the mistakes (Item 21), taking the corresponding measures (Item 22), choosing different methods (Item 23), and drawing inferences from language law (Item 25), they are incapable of applying new knowledge (Item 20) or update the former learned knowledge (Item 24). As far as self-evaluating is concerned, the students seem to lack this ability seriously. In the process of language learning, the majority of students have no self-evaluation in study methods (Item 26), or gain and loss after examination (Item 27) as well as self-examination (Item 28).

Although there are many factors causing this situation, the main reason lies in the lack of guides of teachers. In secondary education, teachers seldom guide the students to monitor or evaluate their language study, although possibly often, it is not systematic. So the good habit of self-monitoring and self-evaluation is not formed, and the consciousness of self-monitoring and self-evaluation is less, which leads to the incapability of autonomous learning of freshmen.

Table 4

Measures of Self-monitoring and Self-evaluation

Item	Content	Mean	SD
20	I can put the new knowledge into practice initiatively.	2.92	1.11
21	I can realize my own mistakes in course of language learning.	3.42	0.81
22	I can be aware of my own mistakes, find the reasons of them, and adopt the corresponding measures to correct them.	3.17	0.80
23	I can choose different study methods according to the characteristics of learning tasks.	3.25	0.83
24	In course of completing language task, I can check and update the comprehension of former learned knowledge.	2.79	0.91
25	I pay attention to the law of language and draw inferences from it.	3.08	1.04
26	I evaluate the study methods to find the problems and solutions.	2.79	0.91
27	I analyze gain and loss after examination every time, and sum up the experience.	2.92	1.00
28	I often look for some tests to check English level.	2.29	0.84

Utilization of Learning Resources

This part is to get to know how students use the learning resources on their own. Nowadays there are many channels to learn English after class, and the resources are quite abundant. Full utilization of those materials can facilitate language learning. As listed in Table 5, it shows that students do not employ the resources widely and completely. They are just more willing to watch English movies and TV series (Item 31). Besides textbooks, they less dabble at other extracurricular reading materials like English newspapers magazines, English novels, and English TV programs. So such kind of language input is too little and single. What is more, the students are not good at cooperative study (Item 35), at the same time, they do not often consult dictionary or internet (Items 33 and 34). All these elements hinder the improvement of students.

Table 5

Measures of Utilization of Learning Resources

Item	Content	Mean	SD
29	I often read and English newspapers and magazines.	2.04	1.17
30	I often read English novels.	2.04	0.93
31	I often watch English movies and TV series.	3.70	1.31
32	I often listen to English broadcast and watch English TV programs.	2.58	1.18
33	I often search English materials in Internet.	3.00	1.26
34	I often consult the dictionary.	3.13	1.20
35	I often communicate with teachers and classmates about the learning experience. When meeting with difficulties, I will consult to teachers, foreign teachers, and overseas students.	2.83	1.03
36	I choose extracurricular reading materials according to my interest, but I do not know whether the content or the language difficulty is suitable for me or not.	1.19	1.19

Conclusion

Through above investigation, we can apparently see that the autonomous learning status of freshmen is not satisfactory, and they are in great need of help from teachers to cultivate their autonomous learning competence. The awareness of autonomous learning should be built up. Metacognitive strategies in their language learning is supposed to be trained and instructed. The related learning resources available to them should be completely employed. Thus the students can foster their autonomous learning ability, change the present situation, and learn the language effectively and efficiently.

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