The Cultivation of Non-English Majors' Autonomous Learning in China*

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Cultivating the capacity for autonomy learning is not only the inner need of learners but the final aim of ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching and learning as well. Most researchers concentrate on ESL classroom interaction, learning strategies on autonomy learning, learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, and so on. Little research considers various aspects of autonomous learning meanwhile, let alone how to guide a Chinese college English teacher to cultivate autonomy learners on the basis of relevant findings. It is proved that to promote learner autonomy is an important direction and breakthrough of College English Teaching reform in China. Thus, the paper is intended to offer a series of operational, accessible, and effective suggestions for the development of learner autonomy in China. It is expected hopefully that these suggestions can promote learners to become successful autonomy learners and improve their language learning efficiency.

Keywords: autonomous learning, learner autonomy, learning strategies, teachers' roles

Introduction

With the development of science and technology, with the popularity of the Internet, the information explosion has become a problem we have to face. It must be admitted that news, facts, opinions are generating from every corner of the world at a lighting flash speed. Nowadays, we are living in the era of information explosion, in which one needs to learn to how to learn on one's initiatives in a lifetime and to become a successful autonomy learner.

Autonomous learning is always attached great importance to in the field of education. As a Chinese proverb goes: Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. It is indeed vital to teach learners how to learn during the language teaching for ESL teachers (English as a Second Language). The reason is that the ultimate purpose of language teaching and learning is not just to learn a language for its own sake. Instead, the goal is to learn how to communicate with people from other cultures effectively, how to become the owner of learning, as well as how to nurture an autonomous learner for lifelong learning. Cultivating the capacity for autonomy learning is not only the inner need of learners but the final aim of ESL teaching and learning as well.

In recent years, the passion for English learning of non-English majors in China has aroused great concern among educators and teachers. It is found that an increasing number of non-English majors in China are less interested in English learning. It is much worse that their English level has been even lower since they made

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their way to college. The reasons can be estimated as follows. For one thing, the traditional English teaching methods cannot vary with the needs of learners or satisfy their desire for English learning. For another, learners have not mastered some effective and useful learning strategies. They are tired of learning English by memorization and translation. They are bored about the old teaching approach that teachers explain in front of classroom and learners listen and make notes in their seats. Most importantly, they do not have a clear-cut aim of learning. This picture can be seen in the majority of College English Teaching. Therefore, it is high time to change the situation. No one can deny the fact that to promote learner autonomy is an important direction and breakthrough of College English Teaching reform in China. However, promoting learner autonomy is an everlasting and complicated teaching process. In addition, developing successfully learner autonomy needs many efforts and endeavors not only from learners themselves but from teachers as well. Based on what are mentioned above, the paper is intended to offer some suggestions for the development of learner autonomy.

Learners Having a Clear Learning Aim and Its Effective Strategy Management

Above all, learners must have a well-defined clear aim. Having a clear aim is only a strategic planning which means one takes the first step forward to a successful autonomy learner. For learning is a process of the strategy management which includes strategic planning, strategic implementation, and strategic evaluation. The second step is to have a variety of tactics in place to implement the aim. During the implementation of your aim, you are ready to make every possible effort to work on your task and keep pushing calmly ahead. In this way, you are gradually approaching an autonomous learner because you are willing to take all responsibilities of your learning. The last step but not the end is to evaluate your learning outcome, deciding whether you are capable of thinking critically, analyzing logically, and sifting out the true from the false. The learning process creates its own virtuous circle. Once the learning behavior enters the virtuous circle of learning, it is highly likely to grow a learning habit. On the condition you develop the good habit of learning, you are a successful autonomous learner.

Learners Being a Planner and Participant in the Learning Process

Another way to generate learner autonomy is to invite the students to participate in the whole procedure of teaching and learning. Teachers need to discuss and negotiate curriculum and learning tasks with students to develop ownership of their own learning. Teachers ought to meet various needs of their students including self-confidence, curiosity, and the desire to knowledge, even self-esteem. Moreover, a pleasant and harmonious learning atmosphere and environment should be created. On the condition that they have the ownership of their learning, they will become involved, interested, active, and even immersed in learning because they are the owners in the language learning classroom. For instance, a discussion and negotiation between teacher and students before new semester is held to have a list of books to read or movies to watch. A meeting or a forum should be held on a regular basis to exchange or share what they have learned. Study group can get together to report their learning performance at regular intervals. In this way, a healthy and active learning environment with pleasure is established to promote learner autonomy.

Learners Being a Knowledge Seeker and Problem Solver

Learners are supposed to be encouraged to experiment that learning pleasure by solving problems on their own. In the era of the information explosion, the Internet points a way to an important reason why college

students are so easily losing their patience with learning difficulty. Whenever encountering learning obstacles, learners will turn to the Internet without any hesitation and thought. They seldom experience the enjoyment which solving problems by themselves brings. Learning is a gradual process in which learners gain how to reflect puzzles, pose questions, analyze conditions, settle questions, and experiment pleasure of accomplishment. Furthermore, that learning contentment brings them more motivation, interests, and confidence for more complex puzzles and confusions. In fact, the learning approaches and knowledge explored by learners themselves are the most suitable to learners themselves, for those ways are something individual and effective. That is exactly what autonomy learners need for their lifelong education. It is also a key aspect of deciding learner autonomy. Thus, teachers ought to inspire learners how to think, how to seek the clue of thought, how to solve problems via a variety of ways but not to convey knowledge and answers directly. The teaching style mentioned can graduate into a marvelous lasting habit of teaching and learning.

Teachers Being an Autonomous Learner and Practitioner

The most crucial part of cultivating learner autonomy is that the teacher personally is a successful autonomous learner and an autonomous practitioner. Learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are closely relevant. Developing teacher autonomy is a prerequisite for the development of learner autonomy. Teachers cannot be expected to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they do not themselves know what it is to be an autonomous learner (Little, 1995; Little, 2004). First, teachers should have full confidence in learners and trust their learning potential. Then, teachers permit learners to learn freely and autonomously. What teachers do is to offer learning resources, to teach learners how to learn, and to offer necessary help and advice with the intention of producing autonomy learners.

Teachers Taking the Role of a Facilitator to Create Development Room for Learner Autonomy

Teachers' roles have been playing the most important role in promoting learner autonomy. Teachers' role should be shifted from traditional instructors to facilitators. In any traditional teaching, teachers are views as knowledge transmitters and providers. Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" offers the idea of collaboration as a key factor in the development of autonomy (Benson, 2005, p. 39) and it shows that the teacher should be a helper or guide in students' autonomous learning. In class, a teacher not only facilitates group study but guides learners to teach themselves respectively. Take class activities as an example. Learning tasks should have been assigned in advance of lectures. In this way, well-motivated students have previewed the tasks and they will go to the lecture with their opinions or confusions in their mind. When conducting pair work or group work, teachers should go around the class, offering help and encouragements, making sure all group members are participating and helping with confusions, puzzles, and vocabulary as needed. Whenever students have finished their presentation or performance, a teacher may give some feedbacks and make suggestions for ways they can improve their activities better later. Meanwhile, according to their performance, encourage them to be creative, offering constructive advice as necessary. Remember to praise them for doing their best. It is expectant for students to hear what they have done a good job, too. In the process, learners participate in learning, experiment learning, assess learning, reflect learning, and even explore more learning. Thus, the teacher' role should be changed to be a facilitator to create development room for learner autonomy in a learner-centered classroom.

Teachers Functioning a Trainer and Supervisor of Learning Strategies

In the process language teaching, teachers should offer students some instructions on learning strategies to turn out learner autonomy. Generally speaking, a successful learner has a strong capability to manage his own learning and does well in employing learning strategies to improve learning efficiency. However, many findings show that the vast majority of junior college students lack the awareness of using learning strategies and the knowledge associated to learning strategies. As a result, their capacity for autonomous learning is worrying. As it turns out, knowledge on learning strategies is both teachable and acquisitive. Teachers are supposed to teach and practice learning strategies by means of various learning tasks. ESL teachers are expected to not only explain the concept and usage of learning strategies but also the conditions for using them. It is more important to teach learners how to practice and use these strategies. Even it is necessary to teach learners how to assess the outcome of practicing learning strategies in order to promote to be lifelong autonomous learners. In terms of intensive reading, the majority of readers will stop reading when they know the general meaning, article organization structure and writing style. Actually, learners can go on tasting words and sentences, even till to take them in heart. In addition, in dealing with what they are learning, they can also make notes, make comments, make journals, make a summary, add an ending, and so on. In this way, not only learning quality can be improved, but also learning skills can be promoted and enhanced. As time goes on, students can be lifelong autonomous learners.

Last but not least, learners should develop a strong awareness for autonomy learning. They should keep it in heart that knowledge cannot be gained from teachers but by themselves. Sometimes, learners need patience and perseverance in pursuit of knowledge and skills as well.

Conclusion

To sum up, the development of learner autonomy involves efforts and endeavors from both teachers and students. First of all, learners must have a well-defined clear aim and take a variety of tactics in place to implement the aim. Then, teachers should be an autonomous practitioner, instruct learning strategies to learners step by step and make sure that these strategies have been digested and employed properly and frequently. Meanwhile, the teacher's role should also be changed to be a facilitator to promote learner autonomy in a learner-centered classroom. Learners are supposed to be encouraged to experiment that learning pleasure by solving problems on their own. Teachers facilitate learners to think critically and solve problems and then foster the capability of learner autonomy. Moreover, learners are expected to have a strong desire to become an autonomy learner with hard work and eagerness. Eventually, teachers' facilitation and learners' autonomous participation in a pleasant and healthy learner-centered learning environment are able to make learner autonomy possible sooner or later. Although the study has some theoretical and practical implications for College English teaching and learning in China, yet it can be more persuasive and convincing with some statistics. It is hopefully expected that further study will be made.

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