



A Study on the Construction of a Multi-Level Autonomous Learning Mode in College English Teaching

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Abstract

This article probes into the construction of a multi-level autonomous learning mode in the light of the problems existing in the college English teaching in China. A tentative study has been conducted to facilitate students’ personalized learning and autonomous learning by the establishment and operation of this learning mode, and the principles of guiding autonomous learning, emphasizing responsive interaction, advocating collaborative constructivism and manifesting humanistic atmosphere are also elaborated on for reference.

Key word: Multi-level; Autonomous learning; Teaching mode

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INTRODUCTION

At present, various colleges and universities in China are adapting to the new situation of the development of higher

education and deepening the college English teaching reform. The main trend is to implement the “classroom instruction + Internet autonomous learning” mode by taking advantage of modern information technology, in the hope that the single teacher-centered traditional teaching mode can be transformed and the English teaching and learning will never be restricted by time and place and a personalized and autonomous learning can be achieved.

But because of the impact of exam-oriented education through the ages, the college English teaching still focuses on classroom instruction and the teaching of basic knowledge and skills, which are obviously not conducive to the students’ personalized learning and autonomous learning. The resulting problems such as students’ lack of motivation in English learning and insufficient ability in autonomous learning and in English application are still serious. Therefore, how to make full use of modern information technology to innovate the college English teaching mode, so as to solve the problems of personalized learning and autonomous learning will determine the success or failure of our college English teaching reform.

1. PROBLEMS AND REASONS

Gratifying achievements have been made in the English teaching reform in China but there are also many problems, which can be summed up as “great achievements, various problems; there is progress, but there need to be a breakthrough” (Liu, 2012). These problems and reasons are as follows:

(a) Students’ individual needs are not met, and they lack enthusiasm and motivation in English learning. In psychology, needs refer to a state of imbalance in the human body, and the reaction to the objective conditions necessary to maintain the development of life. Learning needs are people’s desire for the unknown, a series of

reactions driven by learning motivation for the sake of the needs in production, living and development. Needs are the driving force of all behaviors, so are they to foreign language learning. But after entering university, the non-English major students have lost their goal in English learning. And because the pressure from the College English Test Band 4 (CET4) and Band 6 (CET6) is not big enough, students lack motives in English learning, aiming at passing the examinations only. They are satisfied with learning some English in the class period, without putting any more time and efforts in English learning after class. On the one hand, a considerable proportion of non-English major college students are not aware of their English learning needs (what should they learn in terms of their current level of English; what do they want to learn; what should they learn with regard to their future professional learning and vocational development). On the other hand, the stereotyped curriculum and teaching mode in many universities can not meet the individual needs of students. Where students are not aware of their learning needs or their learning needs are not satisfied, there will be no higher goal and lasting learning motivation.

(b) Students' personalized learning is not guaranteed, and their English learning efficiency is unsatisfying. College English teaching reform should not be the transformation in teaching media and teaching method only, and it should be the transformation of teaching concept. But exam-oriented education leads to the emphasis on rote learning of basic knowledge and repeated drilling of examination skills. Moreover, because of the lack of scientific and reasonable learning methods and personalized instruction, students waste a lot of time and energy in rote learning, and can not do as "using in learning, learning in using", which results in the low learning efficiency and insignificant learning effect. On the other hand, the college English teaching in most universities at present focuses on the general English teaching in the elementary stage (freshmen and sophomores) which accounts for the vast majority in terms of credit allocation or course arrangement and is conducted mainly in compulsory curriculum. The college English teaching in the subsequent stage is mainly in the form of elective courses for the purpose of ability expansion, but students can not get many credits from these courses and don't have sufficient courses to choose from. The stereotyped curriculum and uniformed teaching mode cannot meet the needs of individual students and guarantee their personalized development. Students are complaining that they can not learn much in college English, and gradually they lose interest and motive in learning English.

(c) Students' ability in autonomous learning is not cultivated effectively, and their ability in English learning is insufficient. In the present environment of information

technology, the progress of science and technology and the renewal of knowledge are speeding continuously, and the importance of autonomous English learning has been paid more and more attention to. "Learning is a life-long process, and the ultimate goal of education is to cultivate the students' learning autonomy, and make them autonomous learners." (Zhu, 2007) But because of the profound influence of the exam-oriented education and the utilitarian, the cultivation of autonomous English learning abilities has always been neglected and students' abilities are generally not strong. Besides, there is always a tendency of "emphasizing exams, ignoring abilities" in our college English teaching, which results in the fact that our college English teaching still centers around strengthening students' language knowledge and cultivating students' ability for tests, and ignores the cultivation of students' ability in using English. In the present case, the demand for students' autonomous learning is high, while we are not effective and successful in cultivating students' autonomous learning abilities which lead to the widespread phenomenon of "the alleged autonomous learning" (Chen, 2014). Students who have been accustomed to traditional classroom instruction lack the awareness and ability in autonomous learning. Their time and resources for autonomous learning have not been fully taken advantage of and learning effect can not be guaranteed. The outcome is that a large percentage of students can pass the exam, but they are poor in comprehensive ability in English application, especially the ability in listening and speaking, and they are also poor in autonomous learning abilities.

2. THE INNOVATIVE MULTI-LEVEL AUTONOMOUS LEARNING MODE

As discussed above, the root causes of the existing problems are that the learning needs of students have not been excavated and mobilized, and our stereotyped and uniformed teaching mode can not meet the individual needs of students and promote their personalized development and autonomous learning. Therefore, how to establish a learning mode that can facilitate the students' personalized learning and autonomous learning will be critical to solving the problems and the success of the college English teaching reform.

Because of the impact of exam-oriented education, our college students generally lack the awareness and ability of autonomous language learning, but the cultivation of autonomous learning ability can not be accomplished at one stroke. There's no absolute autonomous learning. It is a concept of different extents, and it is a long-term dynamic process. So, we try establishing a multi-level autonomous learning mode as is illustrated in Figure 1.

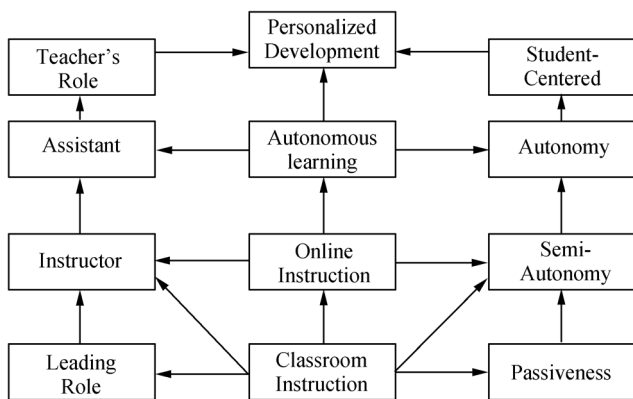


Figure 1
The Multi-Level Autonomous Learning Mode

(a) Reform the classroom instruction to facilitate students' transference from "passiveness" to "autonomy". In the comprehensive lesson, the advantages of multimedia in teaching and traditional classroom teaching are combined and brought into full play, with students being the center of class while teachers playing the controlling role. At the same time, more time and efforts are spared on the elaboration of autonomous learning strategies and students' autonomous learning strategies are strengthened. In the audiovisual lesson, the semi-autonomous learning mode is tried with students learning autonomously according to the assignment and teachers guiding and supervising at the side. The personalized instruction and training of autonomous learning strategies have been emphasized, thus laying a foundation for students' real autonomous learning after class.

(b) Innovate the online instruction to realize students' semi-autonomy. Through the homework distributing module of our campus network language learning platform, teachers assign homework regularly. Students must accomplish their homework and submit them through the network in time, while teachers review the homework, feed back through the network, record their performance and include them as a certain proportion into students' semester grades. At the same time, through the learning program module of the platform, teachers can recommend learning materials for students and students learn according to their actual needs and interests. This part is not compulsory, with only the learning time recorded. Under the inspection and monitoring of teachers, semi-autonomy is achieved. The semi-autonomous learning mode bridges the classroom instruction and after-class autonomous learning naturally. At the same time, by strengthening the monitoring and guidance for autonomous learning via the network, students' abilities in autonomous learning have been gradually elevated.

(c) Reinforce the autonomous learning to promote students' higher-level autonomy. At present the college English teaching is faced with the reality of reduction in credits and class periods, and more and more limited

classroom instruction can not guarantee the fulfillment of the teaching target. Consequently, the role of autonomous learning is becoming increasingly significant. Similarly, for the students' after-class autonomous learning, teachers should give full play to the role of guide, supervisor, cooperater and facilitator, ensuring a desirable effect. By strengthening the guidance and supervision of students' autonomous learning through the campus network language learning platform, the effect of autonomous learning has been guaranteed and personalized cultivation has been realized. By taking advantage of all the Internet and natural learning environment such as the learning resources on the platform, other cyber sources, libraries, reading rooms and the foreign language corners, proactive autonomy, a much higher level of autonomy is fulfilled.

3. PRINCIPLES OF CONSTRUCTION

Aside from teachers' giving lectures in classrooms, the college English teaching and learning should provide students with a variety of tools and information resources in their pursuit of learning goals and activities of solving problems, and become their platform for mutual cooperation and support. It is not only a place where learning tools and information resources work, but also includes the atmosphere of learning, learner motivation, interpersonal relationship, teaching strategies and other non-physical forms. Therefore, in the design of the multi-level autonomous learning mode, we follow the principles of guiding autonomous learning, emphasizing responsive interaction, advocating collaborative constructivism and manifesting humanistic atmosphere.

3.1 Guiding Autonomous Learning

In the era of knowledge economy when science and technology are developing dramatically, autonomous learning, as a kind of ability responsible for one's own learning, is more important to the current English learners. In the environment of online learning, it is more important for learners to determine their own learning goals, content and schedule, choose learning methods and skills, monitor the process of learning and evaluate the outcome. But autonomous learning ability is not born with, it should be based on educational background and achieved through continuous "intervention" and efforts at different period and with different degree. Nunan (1996) argues that a fully autonomous learner exists only in ideality, but not in reality. But a learner can attain different levels of autonomous learning. Pang et al. (2004) also believe that, as an individual learner, his learning autonomy is not immutable and frozen. In a certain stage of development, learners need to develop their learner autonomy; in other stage or on the other hand, learners may need more guidance and help from teachers or others to achieve autonomy. Autonomy and not autonomy are not two isolated endpoint; on the contrary, they are a continuum. At present, our

problem is students' "degree" in autonomy is more on the passiveness side, and the goal of the teaching reform is to move this point towards the end of autonomy continuously. Therefore, the college English classroom instruction should be able to meet the different learning needs of students at the different levels. Besides emphasizing the knowledge delivery and skills drilling, it is more important to reinforce the instruction in students' autonomous learning. Through guidance, it is necessary to enable students to master the strategies, form the habit and improve the abilities in autonomous learning. The ultimate goal is to develop the learners into communicator, learner and lifelong learner.

3.2 Emphasizing Responsive Interaction

According to interaction theory, modern technology is composed of three basic elements: teachers, modern educational resources and students. The three basic elements are not isolated, but interrelated. The quality of education can only be ensured by achieving the three kinds of interactive relationships: the relationship between students and teachers, students and resources, students and students. Constructivism learning theory also emphasizes the collaboration and communication between students and students, teachers and students, and the interaction between students and teaching content and teaching media. The transformation of teaching goals, the advocating of new teaching ethics, and the application of modern teaching methods such as the autonomous online learning platform and multimedia facilitate the fundamental changes in the roles of English teachers. Teachers have changed from the instructor and crammer of knowledge into the organizer, instructor and assistant of students' learning activities. Constructivism also emphasizes that students are the subject of information processing, but the teachers' involvement and guidance are equally important. Advances in technology have caused the estrangement between people, and loneliness in learning will have a direct impact on the learning efficiency. Therefore, exchanges and collaboration are more important, and English learning in new era should attach more importance to the exchanges and interactions besides the emphasis on technology innovation and construction of information resources.

3.3 Advocating Collaborative Constructivism

Vgotsky, the advocator of constructivism believes students are the subjects of learning, cognition and information processing, and the active constructors of knowledge. Learning is an active process of "construction" of knowledge, but not a process of passive acceptance and application of knowledge given by others. Constructivism emphasizes learner-centeredness and sufficient attention to students' active exploration and discovery of knowledge and active construction of meaning and knowledge learned, which is corresponding with the teaching ethics of "people-orientation" (Feng, 2006). At the same time,

the constructivism learning theory confirms the key role of "collaboration" in knowledge construction. The wide application of network and multimedia technology has greatly enriched the English learning methods and resources, thus providing more choices for learners to construct knowledge. But the prevailing of autonomous learning and individual learning style also makes more and more people ignore the importance of collaboration and loneliness in learning will have a direct and negative impact on the learning efficiency. Teachers, students, tasks and environment are the four key factors that are interrelated and mutual influenced in the dynamic process of social constructivism learning. Therefore, the design and running of English teaching should encourage students to learn cooperatively and fulfill the construction of knowledge and language acquisition in the process of collaboration and exchange, which is critical to eliminating learners' loneliness, creating a good atmosphere for learning, maintaining the effectiveness and duration of the learning process. In this process, teachers should also turn into the assistant and facilitator of students' active constructivism, providing various resources for learners (including all kinds of teaching media and teaching materials), encouraging the learners to take the initiative in exploring and completing the construction of meaning through collaboration.

3.4 Manifesting Humanistic Atmosphere

Humanistic Language Teaching Approach emphasizes that the focus of education should be transferred from "teaching" to "learning", with the whole person including his emotion and language knowledge and skills involved in the foreign language teaching by humanistic techniques and methods, thus highlighting the subject status of learners and facilitating the change and occurrence of learning. Therefore, it is critical to overcome the tendency of "technology-oriented" and "tool-oriented" in the design and construction of college English teaching and learning, and manifest its humanistic atmosphere under the guidance of humanistic learning theories. On the one hand, it is necessary to start from the actual needs of students and highlight their subject status abiding by the principle of "people-oriented". Whether the design of the curriculum, the innovation of the teaching mode or the improvement in teaching method and construction of information resources should center around the students, satisfy their needs and promote their application. On the other hand, it is necessary to encourage students to participate in the construction and management of information resources, giving full play to their creativity and initiative. Students should not only be the subject of college English teaching and learning and users of the information resources, but should also take an active part in the construction and management of information resources and attain language acquisition during the process. Teachers should respect, cultivate and cherish every student and interact with them

from the perspective of humanism. Students' loneliness in autonomous learning can be eliminated and learning efficiency be improved through the humanistic care. The final goal is to create a loose and stress-free learning environment and various choices for learners through the perfect fusion of technology and need, harmonious unity of humanity and utility, and dynamic interaction between teachers and students.

CONCLUSION

The multi-level autonomous learning mode is established under the principles of guiding autonomous learning, emphasizing the responsive interaction, advocating collaborative constructivism and manifesting humanistic atmosphere which has been proved to be efficient in facilitating students' personalized learning and autonomous learning. By reforming the classroom instruction, innovating the online instruction and reinforcing the autonomous learning, the students' autonomous learning has been systematically cultivated and abilities gradually elevated.

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