The Corpus Linguistics Based Study of Cultivating Autonomous Learning Ability for English Learners

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Abstract

Domestic and foreign researchers fully demonstrated the significant applicability and practicality of corpus in language teaching from theoretical and practical aspects. In another word, corpus plays a momentous role in language teaching. Cultivating student's autonomous learning ability is an important part of teaching objectives. Many researchers at home and abroad have done researches in how to improve the students' autonomous learning ability and have established some models, while corpus-based model to improve learner autonomy is seldom seen, so the paper tries to prove the feasibility of the model theoretically, also mentions the premise and the contents. Based on this paper, many original and feasible researches are expected.

Key words: Corpus linguistics; Autonomous learning ability; Corpora

INTRODUCTION

Corpus linguistics is a new subject and has shown its great value in language teaching, the burgeoning development in Corpus research in recent years leads to the development of corpus linguistics. Corpus linguistics is not only a discipline but also a language research method. Corpus with a large capacity, easy retrieval and high accuracy, has become more and more important to EFL researchers. Corpus is a large electronic library shaped by collection of naturally generated and continuous language and application of text or sound bites by random sampling method in accordance with specific linguistic principles (Gui, Yang, & Yang, 2005).

Learner autonomy has become the requirement of the students' development, also the development of the society. Modern education increasingly pays attention to improving people's comprehensive ability. With the rapid development of society, the changing knowledge and information, science, technology with each passing day, and the speedy data update, higher requirements of talents' overall capabilities are put forward. To suit the rapid development of modern society one must keep seeking self-development and self-improvement. After graduation from schools, autonomous learning ability will become the basis of self-development, self-improvement and lifelong education.

Learner autonomy means a responsible one is able to take in the learning process, and a kind of ability of critical independent thinking, independent decision-making and implementation. Since the 1970s, abundant researches on autonomous learning in foreign language have been carried out to define autonomous learning ability, elaborate and analyze its theoretical basis, implementation strategies, curriculum provision and practical results. Research on autonomous learning started late in China and a tide of research has been appearing in the last ten years. Not only have related to theories of autonomous learning been introduced from abroad, but also theoretical and empirical researches on the elements, importance and methods of improving autonomous learning have been carried out.

Corpus linguistics is a science analyzing and studying on language on the basis of corpus. Real language data

as its research object, corpus linguistics provides a new approach and ideas for language research and teaching through systematically analyzing a large number of linguistic facts. It researches on Performance, rather than Competence. In a word, it explores the rule of language application through investigating the practical use of language.

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1. AUTONOMOUS LEARNING THEORY

It seems there has not been an integrated cognition about learner autonomy. Holec (1981) considered it as a learner's ability of being responsible for his/her own study (cited in Thanasoulas, 2000). Candy (1991) defined it as a learner's personal quality, an ability of organizational learning and his/her willingness to learn. And Hill (1991) described it as a learner's responsible attitude towards his/her own learning. In summary, autonomous learning means a learner being responsible for his/her own study, determining his/her learning goals according to his/her own characteristics and needs, developing a learning plan, selecting learning materials, taking appropriate learning strategies, designing and implementing learning activities, monitoring learning process, evaluating his/her own learning outcomes. In short, autonomous learning means a learner deciding the time and the way of his/her learning according to his/her characteristics and needs. Generally, autonomous learning is considered to be more suitable for western students who emphasize on freedom, independence and individualism. While Little (1991) demonstrated that eastern students are also capable of autonomous learning.

Little also distinguished two types of learning autonomy, proactive autonomy and reactive autonomy. Proactive autonomy refers to a learner who determines his/her own learning objectives before organizing learning plan, while reactive autonomy means that learning objectives are developed by others or formed with the help of others. Once he/she sets up learning goals, he/she will take the initiative to learn and to achieve the targeted objectives. Both of these two types of learning autonomy can be found in college English students.

According to Little, factors of autonomous learning including:

(a) Voluntariness. A learner's interest, need, confidence and attitude could inspire and maintain his/her desire and motivation to learn autonomously. Voluntariness is the prerequisite for autonomous learning, because it determines whether the learner can adhere to his study and achieve his stated learning objectives or not.

(b) Self-management. A learner either decides his/her own objectives or accepts those of others according to his/her needs and characteristics. For example, learners can follow the prescribed objective of College English Teaching Syllabus, develop a learning plan, select learning materials and methods, determine learning progress, monitor themselves and evaluate their own learning outcomes. Self-management is essential to autonomous learning. For example, a student who majors in Tourism realizes that English speaking and writing ability is essential for future work, however he himself has never received any related systematic training in high school. Therefore he makes a decision to learn English step by step. He perseveres in listening to VOA or BBC tapes every day, takes part in English corner or looks for chances to practice English with foreign teachers, and then assesses his own learning progress. This is self-management.

(c) Learning Process. It refers to learner's specific learning of foreign language in listening, speaking, reading, writing and other aspects. It reflects the degree of autonomous learning.

(d) Teachers Support. In autonomous learning, teachers serve as consultant, question-answerer and information provider. As a consultant, a teacher must understand the student's learning style, personality, needs and language learning potential and so on. Besides the teacher needs to help students to develop learning objectives and plans, analyze their problems in learning, introduce successful learning experiences, and help them select appropriate learning strategies. As the question-answerer, the teacher helps students to solve difficult problems encountered in their learning. These two roles mentioned above can be achieved through public office. That's to say, students can seek advice from teachers during a fixed time weekly. As an information provider, the teacher is required to recommend or provide learning materials for students. Foreign teachers always help students to set up a preference-learning center including books and audio-visual materials.

(e) Peer Support. Autonomous learning is both an individual and social behavior. Learners can exchange learning experience, methods and materials, help each other to solve problems, and do exercises together. These will further improve the efficiency of autonomous learning.

(f) Learning Materials. Finding necessary learning materials is an essence of autonomous learning. Learning

materials can be obtained from the preference-learning center, or bought by oneself, or borrow from others. Job demands a higher English reading and writing ability, but college English can only develop students' English ability at the secondary or lower level. In this case, only when undergraduates carry out effective autonomous learning according to their desired job requirements, can they be competent for their future jobs.

Finally, English learning is a long-term process. Good autonomous learning ability and methods developed in college will lay a solid foundation for further improvement in English level after graduation. College English is suitable for autonomous learning since college students are all adults with a certain autonomous learning ability (freshmen need to develop this ability), and have plenty of time at their own disposal.

2. THE APPLICATION OF CORPORA IN TEACHING

Corpora are large databases using computer technology to process the mass of natural language material stored for autonomous index and retrieval, statistical analysis. From the 1990s, with the rapid development of computer technology, corpora designed for foreign language learners have been established, such as Longman Learners' Corpus, International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Learner Corpus (HKUST Learner Corpus) and so on. Our first corpus, JDEST (Jiao Da English for Science and Technology) was established with a capacity of 3 million words mainly used for designing the syllabus and developing teaching materials in College English for Science and Technology in the late 1980s. The Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC) chaired by professor Shi Guichun at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and professor Yang Huizhong in Shanghai Jiaotong University was also completed in 1999.

Corpora are objective and reliable language resources which language teaching and research should rely on. They contain invaluable knowledge of language that one should use new methods and tools to acquire. Many domestic scholars have explored significant roles corpus linguistics played in language teaching. First, making use of distribution and frequency of language and other information to guide teachers in determining focal and difficult points in teaching; second, taking advantage of learners' language errors and other information to help teachers to diagnose students' learning problems; third, discussing the role corpus played in grammar teaching, vocabulary teaching, writing teaching, reading teaching, discourse analysis and other aspects; fourth, using many achievements of corpus linguistics in English description as reference for designing syllabus and developing teaching materials; fifth, discussing the role corpus

linguistics played in changing mode of teaching from teacher-centered to student-centered and cultivating students' autonomous learning ability; sixth, discussing the significance of corpus in changing teaching ideas, innovating mode of teaching, changing teachers' role and other issues. From the above it can be seen that there is only one research article concerning the use of corpora to improve students' autonomous learning ability, which seems too thin compared with its great value in teaching. Therefore, this paper aims mainly at how to use the corpus to enhance students' autonomous learning ability in teaching.

3. FRAMEWORK OF CULTIVATING CORPUS-BASED AUTONOMIC LARNING

3.1 The Feasibility and Necessity of the Framework

Cultivating international talents should be teaching objectives for College English in which an international English teaching framework included native English variants, non-native English variants and localization features as language teaching contents are proposed. Specifically, learners should meet the requirement of understanding and expressing native English variant at the initial stage such as British English or American English, and the requirement of understanding non-native English variant at the intermediate stage, such as knowing or understanding English in Japan, India, Singapore, South Korean; at the advanced stage learners should start to learn the localization features of English to meet the needs of expression. That is, learners are able to use English to introduce their own culture to foreigners. And to understand language content of native English variant, non-native English variants and localization features, the corpus is a very effective way. Learners can refer to the following corpus in their language-learning process:

Corpus of American English (BROWN), British National Corpus (BNC), LLC Corpus (London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English), COBUILD Corpus (Collins Birmingham University International Language Database), Longman Corpus (Longman Corpus, geographically speaking, crosses the UK, US and other countries), Australia Corpus (Australian Corpus of English), International Corpus of English, East African Component (ICE -EA), International Corpus of English, Indian Component (ICE-IC), International Corpus of English, New Zealand Component (ICE-NZC), International Corpus of English, Philippine Component (ICE-PC), International Corpus of English, Indian Component (ICE-IP), VOICE Corpus (Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English) ARCHER Corpus (A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers).

3.2 Practice Premise of Cultivating Mode

Corpus research should serve foreign language teaching, but, according to the author's questionnaire survey among teachers of several universities in 2010, 75% of teachers know nothing about the source, creation, principles and usage of corpus, not to mention how to apply the corpus into teaching. So to practice this model one should start from teacher training to help teachers summarized frequently used form of connection and collocations, most commonly used meaning and function in statistics of corpus; help them learn to find new language fact, which should be very beneficial for teacher's own language development as well as teaching effectiveness. The improvement of language awareness, the skilled use of corpus, and the changed concept will gradually improve teaching and, ultimately, benefit students.

3.3 Specific Example of the Training Mode

Mode of improving autonomic learning ability through corpus proposed by author is mainly composed of large class, middle class and small class. Small class refers to classroom teaching based on real language information in corpus and formed by 20 to 30 students. There are 50 or more students in the large class whose main purpose is to explain to students the source, application, use of corpus and to demonstrate to students how to retrieve information in the corpus. Middle class refers to the independent learning center in the language laboratory, formed by 30 to 50 students. As for how independent learning center works, please first refer to its functions, types, constructive elements, and relevant preparation raised by Hua Weifen (2001) and then form an independent learning center of some size when conditions allow. Large class stresses on the knowledge and pervasiveness of language; small class focuses on language practice and collaboration, while middle class reflects students' learning autonomy. Those three classes seep and supplement mutually.

CONCLUSION

Students' autonomic learning abilities are requirements of students' self-development and social development, and therefore it is a necessity to explore how to improve students' autonomous learning ability from multi-dimension. Only a hundred flowers in bloom can promote the development of theory and practice. Corpus can provide a lot of authentic language information, and the use of corpus in teaching can not only provide students with real language information and allow students to learn idiomatic usage, but also fully embody the idea of hypertext of language required by the college English teaching. This attempt to improve students' autonomic learning ability from the perspective of the corpus is just a theoretical exercise and empirical research will be carried out in the future to validate the feasibility of using corpus to improve autonomous learning. In the process of implementation, teaching contents and lecture arrangements should be determined based on specific circumstances, thereby truly reflecting the individualization and independence of students in their learning. Exploring students' autonomous learning witnesses a promising future from the perspective of corpus.

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