

Strategies for Cultivating Non-English Majors' Autonomous Learning Ability

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Abstract

Faced with the rapid development of Internet, it has become not inconvenient to be immersed in English environment. This paper attempts to explore the cultivation of non-English major students' English autonomous learning ability. Some practical strategies have been proposed based on observations over genuine English teaching and learning activities.

Keywords: non-English majors, autonomous English learning ability, constructivism

1. Introduction

With the widespread application of internet into smart phones, university students have easy access to endless information written in English, for example China Daily, let alone many useful apps for learning English. With a smart phone or portable computer, a student can learn English without being limited by time and location, a process during which reading and listening activities can simultaneously be carried out, speaking and writing included occasionally. Apparently, great changes have taken place in the field of English teaching and learning process. There appears a great possibility that autonomous learning can be adopted as an effective approach to English learners as a second language without occupying any other work time or study time due to the commonness of mobile phone usage and internet coverage.

2. Strengths and Weaknesses of Traditional Teaching and Learning Mode

A typical College English class, or a typical English class for Non-English majors, averagely consists of 50 to 60 students, a number much bigger than that of a typical English major class. With such a large number of students in a class, the role of the teacher has to be reconsidered in the IT era. Traditionally, the English teacher, regarded and acted as the center of the whole class, tends to analyze the content and structure and language points in class. Correspondingly, students tend to take notes, answer questions and memorize the key words and phrases, and even paragraphs. After class, students are assigned homework related to the language points acquired in class. As a result, the expressions students use to express themselves tend to be predictable, confined to those gained out of the texts in high school and in College English classes. It seems unchallengeable for English teachers to handle classes and students, since practically everything is put under control. This model of English teaching and learning is designed for the targeted tests. Specifically speaking, the texts that students are assigned to study in class and review after class are selected according to the national standard requirements.

There are certain characteristics of the traditional approach to English teaching and learning as a second language. Firstly, the materials for teaching and learning are written on paper and accordingly limited. It is not uncommon that teachers focus on the explanation of the targeted texts in intensive reading period, promote reading speed in extensive period, and students practice listening by listening to the same listening textbooks and finishing the same style of exercises. It is not difficult to find that the top student tends to be the one who reads more and listens more in after-class time. It seemingly denotes that the more time spent on English learning, the more rewarding the learning activity will turn out to be. In truth, another factor is hidden somewhere, which is the different materials the top student gets access to. It means that if a person finds more interesting materials written in genuine English to study in one's spare time, he or she, in fact, is more exposed in the targeted language environment, which is recognized as the second characteristic of the traditional approach. Therefore, the effects of autonomous learning in after-class time within the range of traditional approach cannot be ignored.

However, autonomous learning approach used to be only adopted by a small group of top students. The majority would still wait for the following class and exercise-like homework, which cannot ensure a high level of English proficiency.

Advantages and disadvantages coexist in the traditional approach. There are several evident advantages to list. Firstly, students devote all of their time and energy to frequently used language points, which can guarantee a pass academic record at least. Teachers and students feel certain about the teaching and learning output due to the limited materials they can draw on. Both of them are not kept busy reading and listening to up-to-date news and materials. Secondly, students get a good grasp of the grammatical structure. But, the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. Firstly, the model of traditional in-class English teaching and learning determines the passive approach taken to acquire the second language. It is a typical teacher-give-and-student-take model. Secondly, students learn English to pass examinations, so after tests English is completely thrown away and out of their life. English learning is regarded as a painful experience. Thirdly, teachers explain the same texts year by year and their passion for English and English things has been exhausted more or less. Can a bored teacher cheer up the drowsy students? Least but not the last, English class remains a silent one-directional one in the traditional process, during which students passively receives what the teacher gives. Assessments on teachers' teaching effects and students' achievements center on the scores students ultimately obtain at the end of a semester. It seems that English learning does not influence our mind despite the fact that it takes much time and energy. At present, English learning can be carried out without being confined to the classroom or the class time. Students can motivate themselves to pick up English with the help of the teacher. On the condition that students involve themselves in English discourse, their inner world cannot be kept unchanged, since language is a code of thinking. Their way of thinking is bound to be impacted by exposure to English environment. The philosophical theory Constructivism has no difficulty in finding its application in the cultivation of Non-English major students' autonomous learning ability. Thanks to the appearance of IT era and smart mobile terminals, students can access English learning materials under the guidance and organization of the teacher. Modern technology provides the external possibility. Furthermore, students' and teachers' needs for a real grasp of a foreign language provide the inner motivating force. Constructivism helps to offer theoretical foundation for explanation and direction in English teaching and learning practice under the circumstances of modern mobile and global society.

3. Activities to Cultivate Non-English Major Students' Autonomous Learning Ability

Thanks to the continuing College English teaching and learning reform in North China Electric Power University, non-English major students are given tasks to work on in a group or in a pair in class and sometimes after class. Students now feel more free to talk in English that is related to the fact that they have begun to learn English by listening more and speaking more, although a few are still unable to adjust to the interactive mode of English class. I am usually assigned three English courses for first-year non-English majors: Comprehensive English, English Reading and Writing, English Listening and Speaking. A variety of activities are designed for students to work on individually, in a pair or in a group in class and sometimes after class. Due to the popularity of smart phones, students join the QQ group to submit their homework, ask questions and express views. In one word, students and the English teacher can keep in touch for learning English all the time.

The first class of students' first academic year in university witnesses that freshmen can be actively involved in the activity of self-introduction. Each student is asked to write down their Chinese name on the blackboard for his or her classmates and me to form a clearer idea. Can this step be neglected since some students have actually known each other before they come into the classroom? The answer is no for the majority are eager to show off their oral English after the long summer vacation spent on hanging around. Moreover, they want the teacher to know them. As a College English teacher for more than ten years, I have found out that students are moved and have a sense of belonging if the teacher can easily remember their names. One student even wrote in his diary like the following. No teacher except my English teacher knows me in university because there are too many students in a class once or twice a week and I like to go to English class although it is sometimes really difficult. Least but not last, after the self-introduction activity, the teacher can make a brief evaluation of students' proficiency of English. Students can also have a general idea about their classmates' English proficiency level. As a result, some feel confident and others feel motivated. Hopefully, they would get motivated to spend more time and energy on English learning. Hence, English class cannot be set for monotonous multiple-choice or fill-in-blank exercises. It is a fact that English is a language, a tool for communication, oral or written, something alive and ought-to-be interesting. A common self-introduction activity works as a stimulus to motivate students to learn more after class. Being inspired is the first step to stimulate the desire for learning, students then move into the process of autonomous learning and their ability of English autonomous learning is being cultivated in the process.

The course Comprehensive English covers listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating skills trainings. Students are demanded to preview texts before coming to class. They decide on the time and place for study and choose their own approach. However, autonomous study not only involves individual autonomous learning but also cooperative study and interactions between different factors concerned in the process of learning. What interactive and cooperative activities are involved in this course? The most common one is task-based ask-and-answer, teacher asking questions and students answering them voluntarily or reluctantly, which is typically an interaction in class between the teacher and students. The interactive activity is also encouraged is that group work, in which a group of four or three work on the same question. The outcome is a presentation or a speech prepared by all the members of the group. The newly developed form is that students practice listening by working with the computer. In general, students are asked to finish one unit in an hour. A fast student can work faster and a slow student can work slower. Reading and writing course center around cultivating reading and writing skills. Peer review of homework, group discussions and presentations are adopted. In listening and speaking course, students never stop to participate in the discussions and presentations. Students are involved I group work, making speeches or presentations all through the course. Cooperative study willingness and strategies are needed here.

4. Concluding remarks

Autonomous learning ability is not a mysterious thing. It means a shift of attitudes of students from being passive into being active. Motivating the students to want to learn is considered as a good start for the lifelong learning life. English autonomous learning is not totally autonomously carried out without the assistance of the teacher. However, the cultivation of English autonomous learning ability aims to equip students with the ability to arrange their English study on their own in the future. Even after graduation, they are still able to pick up English. In conclusion, the ability of autonomous learning can benefit us all through our life.

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