

The Changing Role of Teachers in the Development of Learner Autonomy—Based on a Survey of “English Dorm Activity”

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Abstract— College English aims at improving the learners' ability to take charge of his or her own learning. In view of this, the role of teachers is crucial in helping promote learner autonomy. This thesis discusses the responsibilities of teachers in the exercise of autonomy by analyzing the concept of autonomous learning and the difficulties the students meet in English dorm activity.

Index Terms— learner autonomy, English dormitory, the role of teachers

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the concept of autonomous learning was introduced into the field of education in 1950's, a wide research at home and abroad has been made in this field. Linguistic scholars began their study on autonomous learning in 1970's, gradually it was accepted that another goal in language learning is to cultivate students' ability of autonomous learning. These researches reflected the transition of teaching emphasis from teacher-centered to students-centered learning. The cause of this transition stemmed from the flaws in traditional teaching methods for instance, those methods couldn't be in accordance with the requirements and learning style of every student, with the consequence that learning became very passive and boring. In order to promote their initiative and creativity, learners must have the ability to manage their learning process, to set a sensible goal, and to evaluate their effectiveness and adjust accordingly. Only under this condition can a learner find different chance of learning, make good use of his (her) time in and outside classroom according to his own requirements and style in learning, and finally enhance the ability of language learning. This ability is more important when a learner graduates from school and enters into society for “learning for lifetime” has become essential for modern personnel.

Based on the theory above, the English Dorm Activity (EDA) carried out in Zhejiang Gongshang University aims to promote and improve students' oral activity by assigning some oral homework related to the texts. Students can decide how to practice, and mostly, the practice takes place in their dormitory. That's why the activity is so called. In the next class, teachers examine what students have done by asking them to make a presentation. The form of the presentation is up to students, e.g. a short speech, a role play, a report, etc. After the presentation, teachers evaluate it and give some comments. The evaluation of the performance is put into the learner's file and calculated in proportion into every student's final performance. In this way, students find stimulation in learning English and autonomously practice English in dorms. When this is realized, a culture of speaking English in dorms will emerge, which helps form learner autonomy in a real sense.

II. AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

A. The Definition of Autonomous Learning

It was Henri Holec (1981:3) who first introduced the concept of autonomous learning in foreign language teaching. His definition of learner autonomy is “learners' ability to manage his learning”, that is, a learner is able to make learning strategies appropriate to his personal situation, including: 1. Setting learning objectives and schedule; 2. Deciding the content and procedure of learning; 3. Finding learning methods and techniques; 4. Supervising the whole process of learning, e.g. learning time, place and procedure; 5. Self-evaluation.

Other researchers may not agree with this definition. Peng Dingjin (2002:16), from the perspective of Chinese students' characteristics, holds that learner autonomy has the following five aspects: “ 1. Taking responsibility for learning; 2. Having a clear objective; 3. Making schedules; 4. Evaluating the effectiveness of learning; 5. Adjusting learning strategy.”

B. Learner Autonomy and the EDA

In the EDA, teachers take charge of evaluating the effectiveness of learning and direct students in shaping their own learning objective. However, learners are still responsible for their learning, including making schedules and adjusting

strategies. Considering the tradition and characteristic of Chinese learners, it is impractical for them to supervise the whole learning process and evaluate the effectiveness by themselves. A teacher is no longer a source of knowledge, but still an instructor or a supervisor in learning. A teacher's monologue, which has long been a tradition especially in English teaching in China, disappears as well. Student-centered classroom activity takes the place of teacher's long lecture. Students are no longer soldiers waiting for orders from their commander but actors and actress taking part in every thing under the instruction of their "director". However, without originality, creativity and diligence, no one can be a good actor.

Yet, the importance of a good director can never be neglected.

C. *Autonomous Learning and Teacher's Role*

English learner autonomy puts significant emphasis on learner's control of his learning; nevertheless, this does not mean that learners should take the task independently. The premise of learner autonomy in SLA is learners' helpful dependence on one another, Little (Aoki, 2000:143) pointed out, because the development of language ability involves a great deal of communication. Without surrounding language environment and learners' cooperation, it is impossible to enhance the language communicative competence.

The existence and implementation of autonomous learning is also dependent on social relations. Nedesky (1989:25) observes that autonomy is an ability existing under the condition of certain social surroundings and dependent on social relations. Thus negotiation and cooperation between teacher and student has a very strong influence on the way of autonomous learning. Taylor (Guan Shuhong, 2004:143) holds the point that autonomous learning emphasizes learner's own responsibility for his learning, but that does not mean that a teacher should abandon his right of organizing and directing the class. In comparison with traditional teaching method, autonomy does not deprive teachers of their responsibility, but redistributes the decision-making rights between teachers and students in the learning process. In autonomous learning, learners have more rights in making learning strategies. Accordingly, teachers do not control the whole learning procedure like a commander, but take many other roles like directors or advisors.

To attain a path to learner autonomy, a direct and practical instruction is essential (Pang Weiguo, 2003:86). A systematic instruction is necessary in cultivating the ability of autonomous learning. In China, for a very long time, teachers have dominated the English classroom. Consequently, Chinese students become passive and dependent on teachers too much, lacking the ability of managing his study. On the other hand, influenced by our traditional culture and ethics, students tend to believe that teachers are authorities as a source of knowledge and information. As learners, they neglected their responsibility in learning. Therefore, learners in China need more instruction from their teachers on the way to autonomous learning.

In the EDA in Zhejiang Gongshang University, a teacher makes the teaching schedule, but he leaves many other aspects to students. For example, after a teacher designs and assigns the oral work, students must decide where and how to begin, what kind of presentation they will make, how to cooperate with other students, etc. The teacher also evaluates students' work by marking their presentation, and giving advices as well.

However, a teacher's role changes in different aspects and different stages of learning. The following are some problems and obstacles in implementing the EDA, through which I try to discuss the role a teacher should take in this teaching process and in autonomous learning.

III. STUDENTS' PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES IN THE EDA

The English Dormitory Activity has a full name as Interaction between English dormitory Activity and Class-room teaching (IEDC), a project carried out in Zhejiang Gongshang University since 2004 (Zhang Junying, 2006:6). The characteristic of this project is to promote English learning, especially oral practice, outside classroom. The policies and strategies are mentioned in the Introduction at the beginning of this essay.

The implementation of the EDA is another way of autonomous learning. When assigning tasks for oral practice, teachers do not confine the form of oral work into a certain one. It is open and up to students. For example, when learning the text unit with the name "Psychology in Our Daily Life", some students find some psychological tests to test their peer students; some interview a psychologist (played by another student); some have a group discussion about how to ease pressure; some make a role play (one giving psychological support to another), etc. The variety of presentation forms enhances the classroom atmosphere, and allows students to show their originality and creativity. In order to accomplish the task, first, students have to be familiar with the test. And search some language information is also necessary. Then most importantly, practice with roommates until they are ready for presentation, in this way, students' oral English improves, which leads to the improvement of their ability of autonomous learning.

I designed a questionnaire, aiming to know the difficulties and problems in the EDA. 8 classes, about 320 students, took the survey. They are second-year students, non-English major, having been trained under the EDA program for one year. The following points are a summary of what the students expressed in the questionnaire:

1. They found it difficult to arrange their time of learning. They always couldn't agree on a time to practice oral English, leaving the homework until next morning before the second class when they had to make a presentation. So they prepare the presentation in a hurry.

2. Many students felt that they couldn't express what they wanted to say freely and precisely mainly due to lack of

vocabulary and grammatical structure.

3. Some students found themselves tongue-tied when talking about certain topics, hoping that the teacher could provide some related vocabulary and information to help the practice.

4. Students also complained that it was not easy to organize the oral practice. Some room members were quite reluctant in taking part in the activity, saying that they didn't have time. This negative attitude influenced the whole group and directly led to a poor presentation in the second class.

5. Many students admitted that they felt extremely nervous when presenting the work. Even though they prepared presentation very sufficiently, it turned out to be a poor one.

From the problems and obstacles above, we can see that students don't have a clear idea about the EDA, or in a sense, autonomous learning. At the same time, their ability of autonomous learning is still to be developed. This is a new challenge to teachers. How to encourage and organize autonomous learning? How to help students take more responsibility in their learning?

IV. THE CHANGE OF A TEACHER'S ROLE

In autonomous learning, the function of a teacher is not only passing along knowledge, but taking different roles in accordance with the requirement of developing learner's ability needed in learner autonomy. Little pointed out that learner's autonomy is to a great extent dependent on teacher's autonomy, while teacher's consciousness of changing his roles is the basis of teacher's autonomy (Liu Wanqiu, 2004:105).

Generally, a teacher plays three different roles: facilitator, counselor and resource (Voller, 1997). Voller argues that a teacher should provide students with psycho-social support and technical support as a facilitator and counselor. The former is to promote students' learning motivation, and enhance their consciousness of autonomy (Aoki, 2000:147). The latter is to help learners make and carry out the learning schedule, evaluate the effectiveness, and attain necessary knowledge and techniques in autonomous learning.

Based on the obstacles students met in EDA, I concluded that a teacher should help students manage their learning through the following 5 aspects:

A. *Develop the Consciousness of Autonomous Learning*

Learner's idea about learning has a big influence on his way of learning. Autonomous learners must be reflectively engaged with their learning. If learners are proactively committed to their learning, the problem of motivation is naturally solved.

The students surveyed apparently lack the motivation of autonomy. They hope for teacher's help in a very specific way, e.g. providing associated vocabulary and information, which can be found in a library or the Internet easily. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to make it clear at the beginning of the learning program that a teacher is only a director, guiding students in their learning, not a knowledge or information provider. Students, particularly Chinese students, should change his habitual thinking, stop being too much dependent on teachers.

To be more specific, a teacher should make students understand the nature of language learning, and the basic requirements in the College English course. This may be carried out by the form questionnaire and discussion. Teachers may talk with students about the theories of language learning and autonomous learning, with the purpose that students realize an important path to successful language learning is autonomy. Thus students may take the responsibility for their learning.

B. *Motivate Students in Their Learning*

A premise of participating actively in learning activities is a strong will to achieve the goal. Students' unwillingness to do the oral English homework is originated from lack of interest in learning English. How to motivate students becomes a main challenge to teachers.

Learning motivation originates from many aspects, including inner motives and outer motives. Inner motives arise from personal focus and interests, e.g. learner's interests in cultures of the English-speaking countries. Outer motives stems from some outside aspects like getting a high score. Researches show that the former is more important in maintaining learner's enthusiasm in learning. So teachers have the responsibility to arouse learner's real interest in English learning.

A good way to arouse students' interest is to create an appropriate environment in which learners realize the importance of English as a communication tool and thus become curious about the content. Teachers may emphasize the communicational function of English, abandon the traditional spoon-feed method, and encourage students to use the language to talk about some familiar things in their life. Vocabulary and language itself are not the only content of teaching, because there are other information and knowledge like culture, literature and history under the words and language. Teachers may direct students' attention into those respects, trying to discover their interest. On the other hand, teachers may also create a learning environment outside the classroom, such as English song contest, English corner, English speech, etc. A teacher's recommendation of certain magazines, films or web-sites has a comparatively deep influence on students.

One part of the EDA program is activities outside the classroom, speaking English in dormitories. If students have

real interest in the language and spend time searching for relative information instead of confining themselves in the text content, this activity is surely not a problem, at least well-motivated.

C. *Develop the Ability of Autonomous Learning*

The development of the ability of autonomous learning consists of two parts—the training of metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies. The former includes learning planning, set the contents and goals, monitoring the whole process of learning, and assess the effectiveness. It can be realized by making learner profiles. Cognitive strategies training refers to various techniques in learning.

1. Learner Profile

Gardner and Miller (1999:84) define learner profile as “a series of information related to learners”. On one hand, the learner profile may help learners understand his current situation of learning, as well as goals in the future, and monitor his process of learning. On the other, it helps teachers know and understand students’ personal situation, their requirements and problems, thus recognize and praise their improvements and analyze the setbacks in learning, redirecting the learners into the correct path. The profile may include the following:

a). Learner’s self-analysis

With the help of teachers, a learner may recognize his strengths and weaknesses, thus be able to set a clear and practical goal. In the EDA program, this is not completely done due to some realistic reasons, for example, big classes up to 45 students make it extremely inconvenient for teachers to make profiles. And usually one teacher has 3 to 4 classes. The alternative might be dividing students into groups, and making group profiles rather than personal ones.

b). Personal Requirements and Goals

Goals are a reference point of autonomous learning, therefore a core part of learner autonomy. Learning goals are usually combined with teaching schedules. In English class in China might weigh more in teaching schedules, so it is more important to make student understand the teaching schedules and arrangements. Every student’s goal should be different from one another because of different personal situations. Once goals are set, students’ motives in learning will be strengthened.

c). Learning Schedules

Some students complain that they don’t have time to finish the oral homework. In most cases, it is a result of inappropriate arrangement of time. Learners should make a learning schedule according to his goals, which will greatly improve the efficiency of learning. Teachers may help students make the schedule, the more detailed, the better. With the learning schedule, teachers will find it convenient to supervise students learning. If a group is formed, students in the same group may help each other accomplish the goals.

d). Accomplishments and Reflections

In the College English course in China, students need to learn how to evaluate his learning and supervise his learning process. First, it is impossible for teachers to know every student’s small improvement, while learners should know better about himself than teachers. Teacher may provide some advises on how to do the evaluation. Second, many students are used to assess himself through test results. In college, there are fewer tests than high schools. In this case, students might neglect his progress. So teachers should introduce various method of assessment to ensure that students are evaluating themselves precisely.

The specific method of self-assessment might be a self-test questionnaire, a diary or a peer assessment. Through these, learners know his progress and setbacks. They can also consider whether the plan is carried out or not, whether the learning method is effective or not, etc. teachers, on the other hand, should make students sure that test scores are not the only assessment of students learning. Other experiences in learning can also be documented in the profile, such as the happiness and bitterness in learning, peer judgments, classroom performance, and teacher’s comments, etc. a teacher might organize discussion regularly to share and solve problems students have.

A correct method of assessment is very important in helping learners establish self-confidence. In this aspect, teachers should “help students find a good and appropriate standard to assess himself (Aoki, 2000:153)”. In this way, from the feedbacks in assessment, students enjoy a sense of achievement, and will become more motivated and confident.

In the EDA practice, each learning groups may set a group profile, which will contribute to the cooperation and progress inside the group.

2. Cognitive Strategies Training

Surveys indicate that few students know confidently how to learn English. Many hope that teachers could provide a reasonable and efficient way of learning. For example, in the EDA practice, many groups write down the draft of the oral work, recite it. As a result, the presentation becomes a contest of recitation. This is similar to learning swimming by reciting the swimming techniques rather than by practicing swimming. Teachers thus should guide students into correct ways of practicing oral English.

During the teaching process, teachers should convey to students the importance of cognitive strategies in improving learning efficiency in order to motivate students to learn different techniques in learning (Pang Weiguo, 2003: 223). Through a long-time training of cognitive training, learner’s consciousness of strategies will be enhanced. As a result, learners will be more confident and autonomous in learning.

D. Provide Learning-related Information

In autonomous learning, teachers' function as "resource" is still very important. Teachers are more professional and sensible in choosing the appropriate materials for students in accordance with their language levels, which prevents students from wasting time on some inappropriate materials. When assigning tasks, a teacher may provide students with some related materials, or at least tell students how and where to find the material. When a learning group meets some problems, a teacher may help them solve the problem regularly. When students are communicating in English, a teacher should always be a supporter and corrector. One important task of teachers is to be aware which student needs what help, and provide help and information accordingly (Aoki, 2000:152)

E. Providing Psychological Support

It is normal for students learning a foreign language to feel nervous when they are making an oral presentation. This has a negative influence on their participation in class-room activities. Rogers, the American humanistic psychologist, pointed out that a harmonious class-room atmosphere provided an important psychological environment for students to express their ideas freely and creatively (Liu Wanqiu, 2004:106).

In order to create such an environment, it is essential for teachers to establish a smooth and equal relation with students. Teachers should treat every student equally, avoiding neglecting some poor students, giving the equal opportunities to present themselves. Appropriate praise and stimulation is very helpful in promoting learners' sense of achievement and enhancing their motives in learning. Some non-verbal languages, such as gestures, also have a significant function in easing students' nervousness and anxiety. Kelly listed some teachers' gestures students felt comfortable: body tilting toward students, nodding, smiling, facing students, maintaining encouraging eye contact, pausing; listening to students calmly, etc ((Aoki, 2000:151).

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, autonomous learning puts forward a new challenge to English teachers. Teachers need to improve themselves in order to be qualified for the multi-roles.

In the EDA practice in Zhejiang Gongshang University, according the questionnaire and survey mentioned above, teachers particularly need to improve their teaching method in motivating students, establishing learner profiles and cognitive strategies training. In this way, the program will gradually perfect itself and become a successful example of autonomous learning.

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