

Improve College Students' Autonomous English Learning Effectiveness with New Learning Model

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Abstract—Studies on autonomous learning based on the theories of constructivism and the advantages of technology present new ideas for modern English teaching in China. In this paper, we put forward a new learning model in developing learner autonomous learning in Henan College of Finance and Taxation (HCFT), taking English reading course as an example. The most significant findings are that in the new learning model the guided experimentation promoted students' English language much better than that of traditional ways of learning, and that most of the experimental students became more positive and effective in college English language learning.

Index Terms—joint-program college student, autonomous English learning, learning model, learning content, learning advancement

I. INTRODUCTION

“Teaching is a complex act because it deals with a complex organism, human beings” according to Armstrong *et al.* (2009). In fact, in a teaching class which consists of thirty or more students, teaching is a much more complex job since these students usually come with varying needs, abilities, motivations and prior experiences. According to Biggs (1999), engaging with preferred individual learning styles is regarded as an important aspect for promoting the learning process.

Many foreign researchers studied autonomous learning by classroom case studies such as Lee (1998) and Spratt *et al.* (2003). However, autonomous learning studies in China were mainly conducted on a theoretical level and case studies are not adequate for a long time according to Gao (2005), who claimed that case studies in this field in China should be encouraged and strengthened. Still, the studies on autonomous English learning were focused on traditional college English education program.

With the development of joint-program college education in China, the special curriculum requirements of the program and the needs of the students made it necessary to study the proper and effective way of English teaching and learning in college education. However, very few studies on this topic have been conducted in China till now.

A. Research Background

In 1981, Holec Henry introduced the concept of “autonomous learning” in his book named *Autonomy and Foreign language learning*. After that, many scholars such as Lee (1998), Littlewood (2000), Gardner and Miller (2002) studied the issue and made greater contribution to the field.

In China, studies on autonomous English learning began in 1990s. From 2004, scholars who studied the issue from different perspectives have been making heated discussions on this topic:

(1) Studies on the ways and methods of developing autonomy: for example, Liang (2004) claimed that the learning responsibility should be transferred to students from teachers.

(2) Studies on the strategies in autonomous English learning: O'Malley and Chamot (1990) studied the foreign language learning strategies; Wen (1995) studied the great importance of meta-cognitive learning strategies in learning a foreign language; Wan (2004) and Zhou (2005) studied the teaching and learning strategies in calling for and conducting autonomous English learning.

(3) Other studies such as the relationship between teachers and students in autonomous English learning, and gender differences in autonomous English learning also gave us new idea on the topic and are helpful with college English teaching and learning practices.

B. The Significance of the Study

In our research, the English language level of the joint-program students had faced even greater challenges. The joint program referred to here is that between Henan College of Finance and Taxation (HCFT) and Victoria University. The students were first-year college students in HCFT.

As a whole, the existing college English language teaching has some problems. Specially speaking, the traditional college teaching method does not take the special needs of individual students into account and pays little attention to

the learning strategies of the learners. Zhao (2008) found that many Chinese College students spend as many as 12 years studying English, but students who are just taught in classroom environment by teachers “are more likely to hold a somewhat passive attitude, and low motivation, towards what is being learnt”. Just because students have not been exposed to the actual communicative environment for so many years, they are not able to communicate in English with a real target language community or environment. In a word, the problem with them was that their English language learning habits needed great improvement since they had been less able to manage their English learning effectively in their English learning activities for several years in middle school.

It was important to consider how best to improve the teaching and learning styles in order to qualify them to an adequate degree in English language competence during the first year of their college education. Therefore, in the experiments, autonomous English learning was introduced at the beginning of their first year. The experimental students were informed that computer-aided autonomous English learning was quite different from the teaching style of the middle school and also quite new in Chinese college teaching system.

C. *The research Purposes and Questions*

It was expected that students would learn to manage their English language learning activities during the first-year, and over time became independent of teachers, which would make a better preparation for their future study abroad.

In our teaching and learning experiments during the year, the research questions were:

(1) Could the new teaching and learning model save classroom teaching time? If so, how much time could be saved in our experiments?

(2) What were the benefits that the experimental students would get from the new learning model psychologically?

D. *The Theoretical Framework*

Constructivist Teaching: Constructivism is a philosophical orientation in teaching theories. According to the theory, learning is constructed by the brain as it seeks to relate new knowledge to prior knowledge. Therefore, each student will have a unique construction.

Autonomous-learning: Autonomous-learning is a modern learning theory based on the theory of constructivism. It is also a student-focused learning model which emphasizes the learning environment and cooperative learning. Autonomous learning was first developed by Holec (1981), which means that students take charge of their own learning by carrying out their own learning plans according to their own needs. Furthermore, Learners acquire knowledge actively in a structured learning environment, and over time become independent of teachers. While teachers act as mediators during the process, learners take responsibility for planning, regulating, evaluating and managing their learning process.

Cooperative learning theory: Cooperative learning theory was developed in America in the 1970s as a teaching theory and strategy system. Cooperative learning emphasizes class communicative activities and is aimed at developing students' social skills and language abilities. Millis et al. (1997) suggested that there are two key characteristics of cooperative learning. The first is its ability to create genuine communities within classrooms. The second characteristic is equally compelling. Deep learning is promoted by well-structured, sequenced assignments where students learn independently outside of class and then “process” the material cooperatively, in meaningful ways, to receive feedback on learning.

Information technology applied in education: Online education is now an established phenomenon and a growing industry. Researches carried out by an American psychologist suggest that information technology can be very helpful with education. It can save between 30%-50% of the learner's time in accomplishing the courses and between 40%-50% of the education expense for the institution; at the same time, learners can have access to approximately 30% more information about the courses and be 80% more efficient during the learning process (Tan, 2002; Zhou, 2009).

II. THE DESIGN OF THE EXPERIMENTS

A. *The Subjects*

The students were from four teaching classes: two classes (Group A, 64 students) were involved in the experiments while the other two classes (Group B, 62 students) were taught in a traditional way. The teaching material was those already designated by the faculty to teach these students.

B. *Data Analysis*

In this paper, the independent sample t-test in SPSS software was used to determine whether the means of the students' English scores (including reading scores and listening scores) of the two groups were statistically different from each other.

In our research, the two groups were compared on the outcome of the whole year's study. The students' English scores of Group A and B in the examinations during the process were compared by statistical method using t-tests. The second comparison was based on the fact that the two groups were at the same level statistically in their English competence when they were admitted to the college as joint-program students.

At the same time, the relationship of autonomous learning time spent by the experimental group and the learning

effectiveness would help to find out how much classroom teaching time was saved by adopting autonomous learning model.

III. THE SPECIFIC TEACHING PRACTICES IN CLASS IN DEVELOPING STUDENTS' COMPUTER-AIDED AUTONOMOUS ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING SKILLS

In the second semester, the classroom time of Group A was shortened to 6 periods, but another 4 periods of computer-aided learning were offered per week in order to strengthen the students' autonomous learning competence. The students in Group B were still taught in a traditional way, working in classrooms for 8 periods and in computer-room for 2 hours each week.

A. *Teaching Contents and Learning Materials*

In order to prepare students for their computer-aided English language learning and give them adequate information support during the process, the teaching and learning contents through the first year were organized like the following table. Especially, the learning materials on IELTS were expected to help the joint-program students in their future tests for studying abroad, while the learning materials on College English Test were served to prepare students who would stay in China in the future. See table 2.

B. *Teacher's Role and Teaching Methods in Both Settings*

Teacher's role and teaching methods in this empirical study varied according to different teaching and learning settings. Teachers made use of the texts to warm up students for the new teaching and learning model. In this sense, this unit was also used as a good training of English learning skills as well as to make students aware of the new learning process. In learning this unit, students were asked to discuss questions related to learning strategies in English to perceive the differences between traditional learning model and the computer-aided learning model.

Generally speaking, students were encouraged to make best use of the learning materials selected via Internet in exploring each topic, which is offered in each unit in their course books. Teachers also required them to analyze and re-organize these materials for their classroom presentation to check their language level. After evaluating students learning outcome, further suggestions from the teachers would be given to individual student for their future learning. See table 3.

C. *Teaching and Learning Advancement-Exemplified by Unit 6 As His Name Is, So Is He! (In Book 2 of New Horizon College English)*

According to the teaching plan for the second semester during the year, each unit was covered during one and half a week. In another word, it took teachers and students about 3 or 4 periods in computer-rooms. During the learning of a unit, students were required to fulfill different tasks step by step. Combining the learning and practicing activities both in classrooms and computer-rooms, students experienced data selecting and digesting, language practicing, evaluating and being evaluated, and eventually being helped and suggested by the peers and the teachers based on the process. See table 4.

Notes:

1. The questions can be asked as following:

- (1) Do you think a person's name is important? Why or why not?
- (2) Try to tell the differences between Chinese names and English names.
- (3) Do you know the meanings of some Chinese and English names? Try to explain using examples.
- (4) What do parents consider when giving a name to a baby in China?
- (5) Talk about the meaning of your own name and guess your parents' expectations for your future.

2. The suggested titles of the essay are as follows:

- (1) I Love My Name
- (2) Your Name and Your Future
- (3) How to Choose a Beautiful Name?

D. *Class Monitoring*

Over one hundred years ago, an educational research claimed that "to teach well is to question well" (De Garmo, 1903). In autonomous English Language learning, "learners must be free to monitor and evaluate" (David et al., 2009) their learning activities.

In our reading classroom teaching, questions were raised by teachers before they had explored a certain topic or theme. After students' autonomous learning and exploring, they were expected to construct their own knowledge. Teachers also encouraged students to raise questions if they have any. Teachers also asked more questions to check and promote their learning. Therefore, questioning acted as an important step in developing and ensuring students' autonomy.

Teachers in the joint-program reported that they must carefully monitor learners when students used computers, particularly when the computers are connected to the Internet. If even a single learner, either accidentally or purposefully, contacts a pornographic site during a class period, bad effects are almost certain. Equally seriously,

students might survey the materials in Chinese to have fun or something.

E. Student Assessment

Generally, student assessment is divided into two parts: one is by examination scores and the other is to measure students' daily working performance. However, the former has been too much emphasized in the traditional education system in China. Stiggins et al. (2004) pointed out that "assessment is an important dimension of the learning process and should also be defined as assessment for learning". That is to say, "sound assessment procedures become a learning experience" eventually. Besides, learners usually "desire indications of success" and "data gathered from fair and appropriate assessment procedures can provide these affirmations. Stiggins (1997) also claimed that "evidence of success motivates learners to continue working and creates an expectation of future success". Performance assessment is especially useful in evaluating learner behaviors associated with such tasks as working with others, giving oral presentations, participating in discussions, using computers, etc according to Armstrong et al. (2009).

Although many important education objectives require performance assessment, the more important point is that in our experimental teaching, the purpose of assessment was not to judge a student's once and for all, but to recognize and help her/him to develop her/his autonomous English learning competence.

1. Self-assessment

Besides using weekly working log to reflect on learning performance, students were required to answer questions at the end of each semester. By answering these questions, students were directed to conduct self-assessment about the each semester's English learning and prepare the next semester's work according to their existing conditions in autonomous English learning and the final learning objects and requirements.

These questions were designed for students by the teachers both from Australia and China to help each joint-program student to assess himself/herself:

- (1) Check your weekly autonomous learning log. Did you complete the planned activities in reading and vocabulary?
- (2) How would you evaluate your autonomous English learning work this semester?
- (3) Has your English reading and vocabulary improved as a result of your autonomous learning? Describe these improvements.
- (4) Which activity or activities have been the most useful during this period?
- (5) Was there anything you needed to change in your original plan this semester?
- (6) What else could you do to improve your autonomous learning in English course?
- (7) Next semester what changes will you make to your autonomous learning plan?

2. Assessment by study team

There were also some questions designed by joint-program teachers for study teams to review the individual student:

- (1) Has the student answered the self-evaluation questions thoughtfully and in detail?
- (2) Has the student used correct grammar in report sentences?
- (3) Is the spelling accurate?
- (4) How would your study team evaluate the student's autonomous English learning work this semester?
- (5) Do you have any suggestions for how this student could improve her/his autonomous English learning next semester?

Apart from giving more perspectives about each student's learning performance, assessment by study teams could be more objective and helpful for the joint-program teacher in understanding and recognizing the students' all kinds of achievements and problems during the learning process.

3. Assessment by teachers

Traditionally, teachers evaluate students mainly by the scores in an examination, which cannot give a true picture of an individual student's learning performance. In the new model, examination was still used as a means in measuring students' advancement. However, by observation, daily communication, interviews and questionnaires, teachers evaluated students also in several other aspects:

- (1) Student's learning attitude and habit development in autonomous learning.
- (2) Student's involvement in cooperative learning.
- (3) Student's performance in computer-rooms.
- (4) Student's improvement in language skills.
- (5) The evaluating information from her/his study team.
- (6) Scores in tests and examinations.

The combination of the six aspects was recognized in the final marks of the individual students. However, each aspect is usually interacted with other aspects. This comprehensive and detailed teacher assessment system also noticed and respected the differences during the learning process within an individual student and between different students. The practices were also in agreement with the theory of constructivism.

IV. OUTCOMES AND FINDINGS OF THE TEACHING EXPERIMENTS

A. Post-tests and Scores Comparing between Group A and B

At the end of the first semester and the second semester, all the first-year joint-program students took the final

examination in English reading, listening and writing using the same papers. Score compared were conducted in reading scores, between Group A and B were showed in table 5.

From the table, it was found that, at the end of the first semester, the reading scores of Group A have significant difference from that of Group B, with the former group being higher than the latter one in the two courses. This suggested that the English language level of Group A, the experimental group, was higher than Group B after three months' computer-aided autonomous learning.

Equally important, at the end of the second semester, the scores of the two groups had no significant difference, which suggested that the advancement of Group A was the same as Group B during the whole year's learning. Given 2 hours' decrease of classroom teaching time and 2 hours' increase of computer-aided autonomous each week in the second semester, it meant the higher effectiveness of English learning of Group A.

B. *Post-interviews of the Students*

At the end of the second semester, twelve students with different language levels from Group A were chosen at random to be interviewed about the autonomous learning process and their self-evaluation during it.

The questions asked in the interview are as followed:

(1) Have you realized the differences between computer-aided autonomous English learning and traditional learning in terms of your responsibility?

(2) Have you fully got involved in computer-aided autonomous English learning up till now?

(3) Have you applied the autonomous learning strategies into your daily learning activities? If so, how to?

(4) Please give an overall comment on your first year college English learning and your language improvement.

(5) What are your ideas and feelings about the future English learning?

From the interview, it was noted that 90% of the students who were involved in the experiments claimed that they had gained knowledge about the responsibility of themselves in college English language learning and had been trying to apply more and more of the strategies into their daily learning activities. Each student perceived and told about their different advancement in English level and English learning skills, with most of who felt satisfied with the whole years' English learning process and outcomes. All the experimental students showed an active and expecting attitude towards the future language learning and using.

On the other hand, according to the teachers who taught the classes, the students in Group B, who experienced the traditional learning process, showed much less awareness and tended to be less proactive in their English learning.

C. *Questionnaires*

In the second semester, the second questionnaire was given to Group A to find out the further developments of their computer-aided autonomous English learning skills and their learning attitudes, with 60 copies of the questionnaire being available. Answers to Questionnaire 2 were shown at the end of the paper. From the students' answers to the questionnaire, it was noticed that most of the students understood more about autonomous English learning and the majority of the students got more involved in it. See table 6.

D. *Teachers' Findings in Class during the Teaching Process*

It is found that the classroom teaching became more and more active and efficient. Experimental students learned more about each unit before class and they could explore further during the classroom learning and co-working. Teachers found it easier to achieve the teaching purposes working with the experimental students since both teachers and students have enjoyed class with the new teaching and learning model.

E. *Answers to the Research Questions in this Paper*

According to above mentioned data, the answers to the research question (1), (2) and (3) are:

(1) Teaching experiments also suggested that the new teaching and learning model saved classroom time. Specifically speaking, 2 periods' time was saved each week, which would up to 32 periods in the whole semester.

(2) According to the time spent on autonomous English learning and the activities taken part in by the students during the time, the findings of the interviews and questionnaires, the experimental students (in Group A) felt quite positive about computer-aided autonomous English language learning and got more motivated during the first year. After the students found that they had learned a lot they eventually became proactive not only during the process but also in the future English learning.

APPENDIX TABLES

TABLE 1
MARKS COMPARISON BETWEEN GROUP A AND B IN THE FIRST TEST GIVEN IN OCTOBER, 2008

Course Scores	Group	Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	Variances	t-test for Equality of Means	
							T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Reading Score	A	64	20.33	6.999	.875	Equal variances assumed	.663	.509
	B	62	19.53	6.457	.820			

TABLE 2
TEACHING CONTENTS AND LEARNING MATERIALS

contents and Materials	Functions and purposes
Theories on autonomous English learning	Preparation students for their first-year English learning
Computer working skills	Technology supporting for computer-aided learning activities
New horizontal Reading and Writing(Second Edition)	Main course book on students' reading and writing skills development
Reading materials selected by teachers via Internet	Expanding students reading scope and developing their autonomous learning interests
Reading materials selected by individual students via Internet	Practicing student's autonomous learning skills and developing their autonomous learning motivation
Learning materials on IELTS	Preparation students for IELTS
Learning materials on College English Test	Preparation students for College English Tests

TABLE 3
TEACHER'S ROLE AND TEACHING METHODS IN BOTH SETTINGS

Teaching and learning settings	Teacher's role and teaching methods
Classroom setting	1 giving students directions on meta-recognition and recognition strategies and English learning methods; 2 advising and supervising students on their weekly learning plan and learning log; 3 suggesting questions to be explored by students in each unit; 4 organizing group work such as discussion and presentation; 5 evaluating individual and group work of students.
Computer-room setting	1 helping solving students' problems in using a computer; 2 offering relevant network stations; 3 helping individual student select appropriate learning materials and work on them; 4 supervising students' Internet-surfing activities; 5 evaluating students' learning process and outcomes via Internet and giving further suggestions

TABLE 4
TEACHING AND LEARNING ADVANCEMENT OF UNIT 6

Time	Teaching settings	Teaching and learning methods	Teaching and learning contents	Teaching goals or purposes
1-2 periods	Classroom setting	Warming up activities	5 or more questions (see note 1)	Preparation for the learning of the unit
3-4 periods (teacher supervising ,direct ing)	Computer-room setting	Autonomous learning including listening, reading, speaking and writing	Searching for the relevant materials on the topic and do all kinds of practices in English	Practicing autonomous language learning skills and preparing for the future classroom activities
5-6 periods	Classroom setting	Oral presentation on some topics	1 the meaning of some names 2 stories about the influence of one's name on his/her life	Practicing oral English skills, helping develop students' cultural sense in learning a language, peers evaluation
7-8 periods	Classroom setting	Text-reading (discussing among students, teachers' questioning and directing)	Focusing on the language points and the writing strategies of the texts	Teachers evaluating students' language level and their learning progress, giving needed direction to individual student
Autonomous learning via Internet (teacher supervising)	Computer-room setting	Autonomous language learning activities	English learning and practicing via Internet by listening, reading, speaking and writing	Offering an opportunity for students to enjoy all kinds of learning materials
9-10 periods	Classroom setting	Doing exercises	important language points in this unit (omitted)	Students consolidating on language points, knowledge expanding and self-evaluation
11-12 periods	Classroom setting	Group discussion and working with partners On writing an essay	Summarizing the learning of the unit, writing an essay with partners about names. (see note 2)	Reflecting on the whole learning process, giving and receiving advice from peers and teachers.

TABLE 5
READING MARKS COMPARING BETWEEN GROUP A AND B

Date	Group	Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	Variances	t-test for Equality of Means	
							T	Sig. (2-tailed)
08-12-31	A	64	70.41	9.742	1.218	Equal variances assumed	3.951	.000
	B	62	63.71	9.360	1.179			
09-06-31	A	64	23.08	6.701	.838	Equal variances assumed	.538	.592
	B	62	22.47	6.002	.762			

TABLE 6
RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE IN THE SECOND SEMESTER

Questions and answers	Results (Student number and percentage)			
	Answer A	Answer B	Answer C	Answer D
Question 1	33(55%)	22(37%)	5(8%)	
Question 2	25(42%)	30(50%)	5(8%)	
Question 3	35(58%)	17(28%)	14(23%)	3(5%)
Question 4	9(15%)	25(42%)	18(30%)	15(25%)
Question 5	48(80%)	12(20%)	18(30%)	16(27%)
Question 6	25(42%)	24(40%)	11(18%)	
Question 7	30(50%)	15(25%)	15(25%)	
Question 8	10(17%)	41(68%)	9(15%)	
Question 9	15(25%)	40(67%)	5(8%)	
Question 10	39(65%)	16(27%)	5(8%)	
Question 11	20(33%)	23(38%)	17(28%)	
Question 12	12(20%)	32(53%)	16(27%)	
Question 13	28(47%)	21(35%)	22(37%)	
Question 14	24(40%)	14(23%)	22(37%)	
Question 15	25(42%)	32(53%)	3(5%)	
Question 16	10(17%)	47(78%)	3(5%)	
Question 17	31(52%)	28(47%)	15(25%)	
Question 18	37(62%)	10(17%)	13(22%)	
Question 19	37(62%)	12 (20%)	11(18%)	
Question 20	17(28%)	33(55%)	10(17%)	
Question 21	20(33%)	39(65%)	1(2%)	
Question 22	12(20%)	12(20%)	36(60%)	
Question 23	13(22%)	43(72%)	4(7%)	

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