Application of Learner's Autonomy to College English Learning

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Abstract—During the process of college English teaching and learning, the enthusiasm and initiative of the students should be fully mobilized in order to maximize the teaching and learning effects. After introducing the relative theory, an article suggests the roles and necessary steps to cultivate one's autonomous learning ability in order to improve the language proficiency to meet the demands of the changing world of internationalization.

*Index Terms*—learner's autonomy, College English learning, language proficiency

During the teaching and learning process of any language, the learners' involvement is the most critical factor to maximize the teaching and learning effect. But in our college English class, the teacher has been a dominator rather than a coordinator or counselor in the classroom from the first day they took English, taking care of all the issues regarding both the teaching and the learning, which leaves less room for the students to develop their autonomy in learning. In fact, the same situation happens to almost all other subjects. The subsequent result is that most of the students are passive learners who only learn the language as what, where and when they are required to. What is more worse is that after several years — probably 10 years — of learning, a big portion of our students may have gained a high volume of vocabulary, or they may have mastered pretty good reading competence but cannot or even are afraid to communicate in English with native speakers of English, let alone not native speakers, which are described by some scholars as "deaf English" or "dumb English". This situation is far from satisfaction compared to what has been stated in *Outline of National Medium and Long Term Program for Education Reform and Development (2010--2020)* as we should cultivate a great number of high quality talents with international visions, familiar with international rules and competent in international affairs and competition. In order to serve that goal, something must be done to change our existing teaching and learning mode from a teacher-oriented one to a student-centered one to let the teacher do what they should do and to encourage the students to get more involved in the teaching and learning to give full play to the students' potentials.

I. LEARNER'S AUTONOMY

Learner's autonomy has been receiving dramatically increased attraction in both the theoretical and practical fields in language education in the past decades, because we all agree that helping the student to develop the competence for self directed learning is a crucial task in our education to lay a solid foundation for the students to gain knowledge or to collect necessary information in the coming years, after graduation or even for the whole life, and by this he/she can build a stronger sense of responsibility over his/her learning, so that he/she can be fully motivated to achieve more and more, and finally become an autonomous learner. An autonomous learner is one who takes full responsibilities for his/her own learning. And according to Holec (1981), taking full responsibilities means one can manage his/her own learning from the following five aspects: (1) determining objectives, (2) defining content and progressions, (3) selecting methods and techniques to be used, (4) monitoring procedure of acquisition, and (5) evaluating what has happened. So, only those who can completely take control over their own learning or accomplish the above learning circle can be regarded as autonomous learners. So learner's autonomy focuses on how the learning is conducted and this is the ultimate difference between autonomous learning and other ways of learning such as e-learning.

II. SUGGESTIONS TO THE CULTIVATION OF AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN COLLEGE ENGLISH LEARNING

GAI Fangpeng (2014) argues that when we apply this theory to our college English learning, most of or all the following steps should be considered: (1) generating one's own learning goal, (2) setting one's own learning plan, (3) choosing one's own learning strategies, (4) monitoring one's own learning process, (5) self-evaluating one's own learning progression and (6) making necessary adjustment to the existing goal, plan or learning strategies according to the evaluation. And the following diagram can better illustrate the circle.

1. Generating one's learning goal	2. Setting one's learning plan
6. Making necessary adjustment	3. Choosing one's learning strategies
5. Self-evaluating one's learning progression	4. Monitoring one's learning process
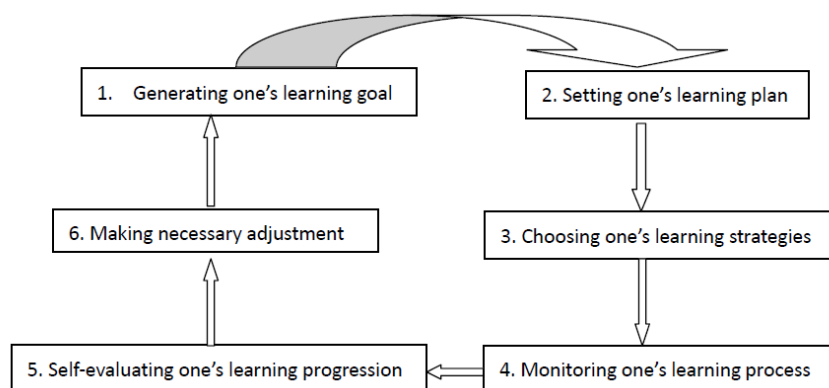
A.   Generating One's Own Learning Goal

To generate one's own learning goal is not an easy job. Right now, under the existing teaching and learning model, most students do not or need not pay attention to the teaching goal of each course which will be automatically taken care of by the teacher, and what they need to do is just to sit in the classroom and listen to the teacher passively, and some students may even not preview what is going to be taught in advance. But to an autonomous learner, the first step to cultivate his/her autonomy is to generate his/her own learning goal, which is the starting point and foundation of autonomous learning.

1. Being aware of the teaching goal of each course

The teaching goal of each course can be easily found in the syllabus. But there are two points the students should bear in mind when they get to understand it. The first one is that some of the requirements in the syllabus may just be descriptive statements, for example, the teaching goal of college English is to foster the students' comprehensive application abilities, especially their oral and listening competence to lay a sound foundation for their future communication in learning, work and social activities. This is an example of descriptive requirements which are only general guideline for reference and are hard to be precisely measured The second one is that even those concrete and specified requirements are set for an average level, which should not be necessarily treated identically to all the students. Let's also take the above mentioned document as an example, which states that for those medium level learners their vocabulary should count up to 6395 and 1200 phrases as well. Although these are concrete numbers, they are set for medium level students, which means the better students may have a larger vocabulary while others may have a smaller one.

2. Being conscious of one's own situation

After a full and complete understanding of the teaching goal of a course, the second step is to come to know one's own situation or level. Students can take several ways to accomplish that. For instance, they can turn to the teacher. After a certain period of time of teaching, the teacher may have a general idea about which group one student is in, the higher, the medium or the lower in a class. To get a precise conclusion, they can have a self-test to get an accurate understanding of his/her level in listening, writing, translation and other fields, and these kinds of tests or exercises can be easily found online and some universities have established autonomous learning centers which can be used for that.

After a comparison between his/her own level and the teaching goal of the course, the gap----the goal for a certain period of time will turn out to be very clear and easily understandable to the student. Of course, to be exact, the goals can be divided into two kinds: long-term goals and short-term goals. Short-term goals are those can be reached within a short time such as in a period, a week, a month or even a semester. Otherwise, they can be regarded as long-term goals, and usually it takes more efforts to accomplish those long-term goals in a comparatively longer time.

3. Setting applicable learning goal

Both the long-term goals and the short-term goals should be applicable to the student himself/herself, which means the goals should be neither too easy nor too difficult, but moderate or challenging. If the goals are too easy to accomplish, the driving force will not last for a long time or the driving force will expire in a very short time; on the contrary, if the goals are too difficult, the driving force will not last for a long time either, because it seems that the goals are impossible for him/her to accomplish in this fixed period regardless how hard he/she works. So both the long-term goals and the short-germ goals should be challenging. Only this challenging goals can help the learner to generate continuous enthusiasm, and only this challenging goals can let the learner find his/her effort rewarding when parts of the goals are turned into reality in the past certain period of time, thus induce him/her to a higher level of learning in the future. And according to McShane (2003) the correlation between them can be better shown in the following figure.

Effect of Goal Difficulty on Performance
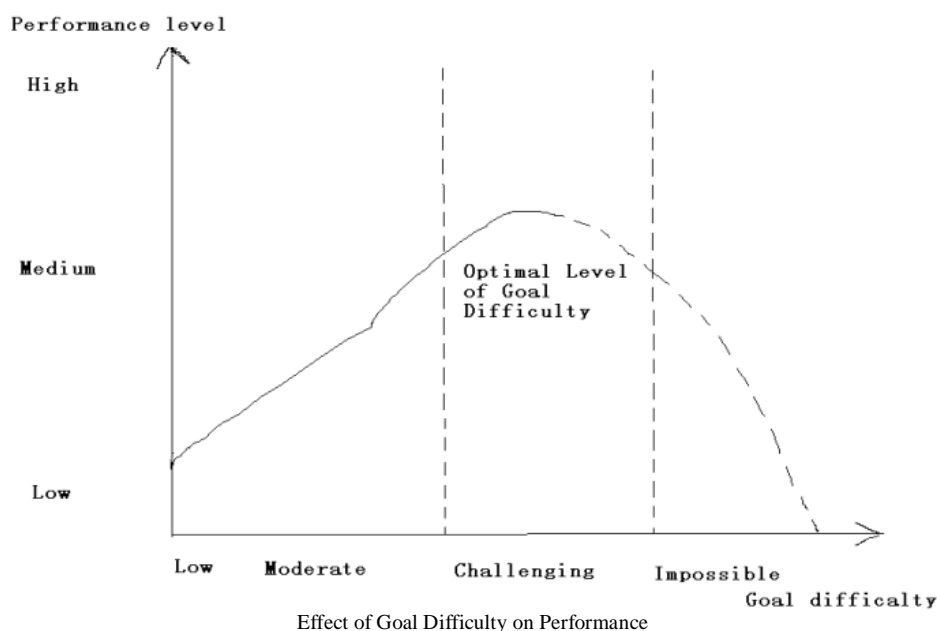
B. Setting One's Own Learning Plan

Learning plan is a very individual and personalized document to help one set and meet one's academic development goals for a period of time, which can tell one now where he/she is and where he/she should head. And at the same time, it can help one to stay on track towards the skills or qualifications one wants. After having a clear, accurate and objective understanding of one's level, the next step is to set one's own learning plan for the approaching month, semester, year or even longer time according to his/her short-term goals or long-term goals. Of course, the student can develop his/her learning plan by himself/herself or in collaboration with the teacher, his/her classmates or even with his/her parents. Apart from assessing one's learning needs, usually any or all the following components should be covered when setting one's learning plan.

1. Maintaining necessary learning resource

Learning resource is anything that one can learn from such as text books, videos, academic papers, lectures, radios and etc. Obviously, text books are the most important resource to the students to learn a foreign language which can provide authoritative information from pronunciation, spelling to grammar and even cultural knowledge to meet the need of acquiring a standard foreign language. So the students should firstly make full use of the text books at hand to gain the basic facts about a foreign language. But to learn the text books well does not necessarily mean one has mastered the language, for the ultimate goal of learning a foreign language is to communicate, so in fact practice also plays a more important role in building one's language proficiency. And that is to say, any form of practice, for instance, internship and travelling abroad can serve as learning resource to a foreign language learner.

2. Deciding one's learning priorities

The learning plan can be set for a week, a month or even a year in which one should analyze what he/she has academically achieved and what he/she has been struggling with in the past period so as to be aware of his/her traits and weaknesses as well. Especially for those weaknesses, he/she should always bear in mind and do a thorough and careful analysis in the learning plan which will become the priorities to pay special attention to in the coming days.

Often course, those listed as key points in the syllabus which will be taught by the teacher in the coming days automatically fall into this category, coupled with anything that he/she assumes important to himself/herself according to his/her own situation.

3. Adhering to one's learning plan faithfully

To some extent, the learning plan reminds the learner of the learning gap, indicating what he/she have got, what he/she hopes for in the future and how he/she plans to get there. Based on this, once a learning plan is set, one should adhere to it faithfully until most or all of the goals have been satisfied. While adhering to the learning plan, one should not treat the learning plan as a dead, fixed and unchangeable document, which should be reviewed regularly to be updated. Because some goals listed in the plan can be easily achieved and sometimes there will be new goals which should be covered by it.

III. CHOOSING ONE'S OWN LEARNING STRATEGIES

From 1970s, the scholars began to pay more attention to the learner's roles rather than the teacher's roles in the research of language teaching and learning, thus from then on, learning strategies have become a heated topic. But what

are learning strategies in the field of language learning? What are the key factors and what kind of roles learning strategies play in the course of language learning? Different scholars hold different understandings to these questions. Although we have not reached fixed and universal accepted answers, some shared ideas can be concluded. For example, Oxford (1990) defined learning strategies as the specific actions taken by the learner to make the learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations. And according to Stern (1983), there are three sorts of learning strategies: form-focused strategy, function-focused strategy and using-mother-tongue strategy.

For form-focused strategy, a learner usually consciously learns words, phrases and grammar, putting much emphasis on the accuracy of the above mentioned issues, and the learning patterns will be like he/she tries to understand each new word, phrase, or proverb that appears in the textbook; he/she tries to learn the text by heart; he/she tries to make clear every word that the teacher uses in class; or he/she tries to learn all the meanings of a word when looking it up in a dictionary.

For function-focused strategy, a learner usually wants to obtain necessary information when he/she learns. For example, he/she will volunteer to take notes in English in class; he/she will watch movies or videos to learn the cultural knowledge and customs about English-speaking countries; he/she will read English newspapers or magazines to be updated with the current situation outside; or he/she will listen to radios to practice listening comprehension.

For using-mother-tongue strategy, a learner will make use of his/her mother language when learning a foreign language. For example, in order to have a better understanding of a text, he/she tries to translate it into his/her mother language; or when communicating with foreigners, before opening his/her mouth, he/she expresses his/her ideas in the first language in heart first.

The above mentioned three learning strategies do not exist separately. They function as a combination during one's learning process, but at different stage, there are developmental changes in the learning strategies, and according to WEN Qiufang (1996), who did a research on the usage of learning strategies among 62 majors of English in Nanjing University in 1993, the changes were significant in the first year.

At the same time, we should realize that the consciousness of foreign language learning strategies can be trained, which means no one is born skilled at adopting one or all the strategies. A student or a learner can only become skilled at using the language learning strategies. But which strategy is most effective for a particular person can only be decided by the factors such as age, gender, personality, learning basis, learning content and etc. And that is to say it is impossible for us to work out a universal learning strategy that can benefit each language learner.

IV. MONITORING ONE'S LEARNING PROCESS

Generally speaking, the monitor process can be divided into external monitor and internal monitor. Monitor from others, for instance, from the family, the teacher or the school falls into the external one. Internal monitor, which also can be called self-monitor, is the process that a learner plans, implements, reflects and modifies his/her learning plan by himself/herself. To an autonomous learner, after he/she has set his/her learning plan and has implemented certain learning strategies, the next important step is to monitor his/her learning process by himself/herself. Whether one can accomplish the monitor process independently or not is a decisive factor in deciding whether a learner can be called autonomous learner, because the course of monitor can provide constant reminding of what has been done, what has not been done and how it should be done, which means only by self-monitor can one turn the dead document of learning plan into vivid practice, and only by this monitor can one be aware of how the plan is implemented.

But there is one thing we should discuss that is what can be the behind incentive that pushes a learner to constantly move forward to do all the above mentioned and upcoming procedures. That is motivation, the motivation of learning English. Motivation is the internal and external factors which initiate, guide and maintain goal-oriented behaviors, or the interaction of both conscious and unconscious factors which cause us to be continually interested in and devoted to a job, a task or anything else. Now, we have four different kinds of motivation: extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, social motivation and achievement motivation. The four kinds of motivation explain why we do something from different perspectives, for example, extrinsic motivation tells us the reason a student to learn English is to get a reward, degree or just to avoid the punishment of not learning it; intrinsic motivation tells us the reason a student to learn English is that he/she is interested in it and the process of learning makes him/her happy; social motivation tells us the reason is to please those people who are important to him, for example, his family or friends; achievement motivation tells us the reason is to compete against others. So the teacher should educate the learner or the learner should self-educate him/herself to maintain strong motivation, regardless out of which kind, during the learning process of a foreign language, especially when the freshness or curiosity of learning a new language gradually fades away, because it is not difficult for us to imagine that there will be various kinds of subjective and objective obstacles happening. Whether the motivation is strong or not can be decided by the intensity of desire or need, value of the goal and expectations of the individual. So after he/she understands the critical importance of mastering English in such a rapid developing internationalization world, to maintain strong motivation is expectable, especially to an autonomous learner.

V. SELF-EVALUATING ONE'S LEARNING PROGRESSION

The aim of monitor is to find out whether the learning plan is faithfully implemented as stated but the effect of learning is not included. The function of self-evaluation is to test what kind of outcome one can get after the implementation of the learning plan and certain kinds of learning strategies and whether the learning plan and the strategies are applicable. So the result of this evaluation provides pretty essential information not only for the adjustment of the existing learning plan and strategies but also for the next stage of learning.

Self-evaluation is a kind of meta-cognitive strategy, which is carried out by the learner by applying relative techniques, tools and criteria to evaluate the learning process and outcome. Any autonomous learner should be trained to learn how to do this evaluation because of the following significance. Firstly, it can arouse the learner's intrinsic motivation, confidence and enthusiasm to learn English more actively; secondly, it can improve the learner's ability of reflection and adjustment of learning strategies; thirdly, it can enable the learner to have an objective understanding of his own level.

Then, what are the effective or suggested ways to do self-evaluation? Learner profile is the most popular and widely used way. According to Gardner and Miller (2002), leaner profile refers to all the information that can be collected about the learner during the learning. And the information include the learner's need, learning goal, learning plan, learning style, learning strategy, evaluation records of language knowledge, scores of formal and informal tests and etc. All the collected information can help the learner to do an overall and integrated evaluation in order to easily find out the problems existing in the current learning plan or strategies, thus to lay a sound foundation for the next step of adjustment.

And another recommended way is learner's diary. The learner can evaluate the implementation of the learning plan by recording his/her learning experience. By writing the diary, the learner can concentrate more on his/her learning and build up his/her responsibility. At the same time, as a form of output, writing the diary is also a tool of learning.

Of course, the learner can take use of any quiz, test, internship and even travelling abroad to evaluate his/her learning.

And there is one point we should make clear that is self-evaluation does not literally mean the evaluation can only be done by the learner himself/herself. Peer-evaluation is also an option for the learner, which means the evaluation can be done with the assistance of someone from his/her dormitory, studying group or class. This kind of peer evaluation provides both parties with a platform to know each other's situation.

VI. MAKING NECESSARY ADJUSTMENT

To an autonomous learner, the significance of evaluation and self-evaluation lies in providing information not only to make necessary adjustment to the current learning plan and the adopted strategies but also to the improvement in each or most steps in next circle of learning. If the goals listed in the learning goal are not achieved, then he/she should work out what the reasons are. Are the goals too difficult to accomplish in a short time? Are the goals appropriate? Is the learning plan strictly implemented? Are the learning strategies suitable for me? Are the evaluation tools and the result reliable? All the mentioned questions can contribute to the failure of his/her goals. After a thorough consideration of the learning from the very beginning to the end, one may find out the reasons, which need to be paid more, special or constant attention to in the next circle of learning.

Learning a foreign language well is by no means an easy task, especially when one cannot get access to an immersive environment, which means his/her learning driving force can only rely on kinds of motivations. No one is born skilled at autonomous learning and the ability of autonomous learning can only be the result of constant training and practice. The above mentioned suggestions only serve as an example or general guidance, which means how to train, cultivate and improve one's autonomous learning ability is rather a complex question, that may vary greatly from individual to individual. Anyway, autonomous learning not only is a critical and effective way for college students to improve their English competence, but also can be applied to the learning of other subjects. The more important significance of taking more even complete control over one's learning lies in laying a solid foundation for the way of acquisition of knowledge and information after graduation.

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