Study on Cultivation of Autonomy in College English Students

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Abstract. Autonomy is a vital ability in second/foreign language acquisition. This paper attempts to first discuss the definition of autonomy, the necessity and urgency of cultivating it in college English students in China. Then based on the analysis of the important factors influencing autonomy, this paper proposes a three-step method of cultivating autonomy in college English students that can adapt to the particular situation of college English teaching in China.

Introduction

The study of autonomy has originally been an issue for educational psychology. Since the 1950s, many psychologists and philosophers have carried on studies on it from the perspective of operationalism, phenomenology, social cognition, etc., and made various inspiring findings. The early history of autonomy in language education begins with the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project, which led to the publication of Holec’s (1981) seminal report, in which he gave autonomy a widely cited definition [1]. Since then research on autonomy in language education has developed quickly.

English-related autonomy research in China began at the end of the 1990s [2]. In the past years, it has aroused the interest of many Chinese psychologists, linguists and language educators. They have introduced and discussed the theory of autonomy, and made some empirical studies on Chinese college students’ English autonomous learning.

Definition of Autonomy and Necessity of Cultivating It

Definition of Autonomy

The definition of autonomy has not yet been reached an agreement by different schools. Since the 1990s, western scholars tried to synthesize different views and propose a more precise concept of it, of which Zimmerman’s definition is a representative. Zimmerman holds that a student’s learning is autonomous when he is an active participant in metacognition, motivation and behavior [3]. After synthesizing findings of various researchers, Chinese scholar Pang Weiguo puts forward his definition of autonomy from the dimension of study and process. From the dimension of study, if a student’s motivation is self-motivated, learning content is self-chosen, learning strategies are self-regulated, learning time is self-planned and managed, he can create favorable learning conditions and make self-assessment on his learning outcome, his study is sufficiently autonomous. From the dimension of process, autonomy means student can set goals, make plans and preparations before study, monitor, feedback and regulate his learning process and methods while study, examine, summarize, assess and remedy his learning outcome after study [3]. Therefore, autonomy, as an ability and attribute of the learner, should present itself during the whole learning process, before, while and after.

As for autonomy in language education, Holec’s definition has proved remarkably robust
and remains the most widely cited definition in the field [1]. Holec defined learner autonomy as the ability to take charge of one’s own learning [4]. To be more specific, a student should set goals, decide leaning content and schedule, choose leaning strategies, monitor learning process and assess learning effect independently [5]. Therefore, the key feature of autonomous learning is to manage one’s study by oneself, from setting goals, making plans, to assessing learning effects and readjusting the study.

**Necessity of Cultivating Autonomy**

To cultivate Chinese college English students’ autonomy is both necessary and urgent. Traditionally, Chinese approach of education tends to be teacher-centered. The most widely socially accepted teacher’s role has been interpreted as to “propagate the doctrine, impart professional knowledge, and resolve doubts”, which is passed down from Chinese ancestors. Teacher’s authoritative position has seldom been questioned. For students, before they go to college, their study has primarily been carefully and strictly arranged by teachers. Teachers’ role functions from setting goals, choosing content, planning time, to regulating strategies, assessing effects. Since education is basically test-oriented, getting high grades becomes the goals of study and doing repeated and enormous exercises is the general learning strategy. Therefore, when students enter college, the majority do not know how to take charge of their study by themselves. Students are so accustomed to rely on teachers that when they have the freedom to study by themselves in college, most experience only confusion, frustration and idleness. In the 21st century, lifelong learning has become the demand of the modern society, and autonomy must be acquired in higher education so that college graduates can better adjust to the future.

For Chinese college students, English is a compulsory course which they have studied for about ten years before college. The importance of English is unquestionable. However, college students’ awareness of the importance of English seems to surpass the degree they effectively study it. English, as a language, should be more effectively acquired by active learning and using, and learner plays a more important role than teacher. College students tend to be more accustomed to high school approach of English learning, which focuses on leaning language knowledge through repeated drills, and cannot adjust to college English study, which focuses on practical using. Besides, with the class hour of college English being cut gradually in recent years and a large number of students, the average time an English teacher spends with students is decreasing, which may be another reason for the unsatisfying effect of college English teaching and learning. How to improve college students ability of using English and how to make their leaning more effective have become an urgent issue. Therefore, a nationwide reform on college English teaching has been carried out and in 2007 the Higher Education Department of Ministry of Education of China published a new College English Curriculum Requirements, in which to foster college students comprehensive ability of using English and enhance their autonomy are two major goals of college English teaching and learning. Researchers have found the correlation between autonomy and learning effects. Therefore, considering the general lack of autonomy among college English students, to cultivate it may be the key to the effective and successful English study.

**Factors Influencing Autonomy**

Autonomy is affected by many different factors, of which the most common ones include gender, age, learning strategies, motivations, self-efficacy, learning environment, culture, etc. To find out in what way and to what extent those factors will influence autonomy, researchers have conducted some empirical studies. The important function of learning strategies and
motivation to English autonomous learning has been proved by many empirical studies. Dr. Yan Ming finds that students’ autonomy is positively correlated with weekly time on English learning after class, metacognitive knowledge, learning strategies, motivation and self-efficacy [6]. Ni Qingquan, in his empirical research, proves that both learning motivations and strategies are highly positively correlated with autonomy in English learning, and strategies are more closely correlated with autonomy than motivations. For strategies, metacognitive ones are more closely correlated with autonomy than other strategies, and instrumental motivation is more closely correlated with autonomy than integrative motivation [5].

Besides learning motivations and strategies, learners’ psychological condition is also an important factor. During the learning process, learners will undoubtedly encounter various difficulties and interference, and they need a strong will to control themselves so that their learning can continue. Generally speaking, learners all have certain initial motivations, but with the learning continuing and difficulties increasing, the driving effect of motivations will decrease gradually, and it is a strong will that controls and pushes the learning to continue. In other words, motivations have a stronger triggering function to autonomy, while a strong will a more powerful sustaining function [3].

**Three-step Method to Cultivate Autonomy**

**Step One, Reshaping Students’ Idea**

When students first come to college English class, they actually do not know much about college English and how to study it. Some of them even have the false idea that after hard working in high school, finally entering college means happy life without study. To cultivate students’ autonomy, the first step is to correct their false idea and reshape it.

College English teachers, at the beginning of the course, should explain the goals of college English study to students clearly. According to College English Curriculum Requirements, college English aims to foster the students’ comprehensive ability of using English, especially listening and speaking ability, and enhance students’ autonomous learning ability. It is suggested that teachers should further explain why they are the goals and the importance of achieving them, which may help to increase students’ motivation to learn English.

Besides, teachers must make clear to students the differences between high school and college English study. High school education is so deep-rooted in students’ minds that they can hardly accept a different approach in college English study. The differences are closely related to the different goals of high school and college English study. The emphasis of high school English study is primarily on vocabulary and grammar, which involves a lot of memorizing and drills. In college students should be ready to change their role from a passive listener and knowledge learner to an active participant and language user. As a language, English can be better acquired through constant practice rather than doing test papers, especially for spoken English. With less time in class with teachers and more free time after class, students have to learn to manage their time and study by themselves. Teachers can also introduce different sources of English learning to students, such as library, websites, newspapers, books, radio and TV programs, English corner, etc. Students should understand, both the goals and learning situation in college encourage them to manage their English study primarily by themselves. A correct idea of college English is the basis of cultivating students’ autonomy.
Step Two, Teaching Students Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are classified as metacognitive, cognitive and social affective strategies based on information processing theory by O’Malley & Chamot. Oxford, in view of the relationship between language learning strategies and language material, classifies the strategies as direct and indirect ones, in which direct strategies include memory, cognitive and compensation strategies, while indirect include metacognitive, affective and social strategies [7]. Ni Qingquan, in his empirical study, investigates the correlation between six learning strategies, namely, memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social, affective strategies, and autonomy, and finds that metacognitive strategies are more closely correlated with autonomy than other strategies [5]. His findings prove metacognitive strategies play a key role in autonomy. Metacognitive strategies comprise setting goals, making plans, self-monitoring, self-assessing, and self-adjusting, and function as regulating cognitive process [5]. Therefore, teaching students metacognitive strategies should be the key to cultivating their autonomy.

Teaching Students Metacognitive Strategies. To teach students metacognitive strategies, first teachers can divide students into groups, with each group 3 to 5 students, and give each group a specific task which they should prepare after class and present in class in one week. During this week, each group should try to work on the task by themselves so that they can experience the whole process of learning. Students should be required to keep a detailed working record of how they finish the task, such as their goal, plan, schedule, division of labor, difficulties, etc. Second, each group gives a presentation of the fruit of their task, and each should make comments on how other groups finish their tasks. Based on the working record, groups should also discuss how they perform in finishing the task themselves, the merits and shortcomings, and how they can modify their working process to improve it. Third, teachers make comments on students’ performance, including their working process and outcome, and explain metacognitive strategies to students. Students should be asked to write a report on the process and outcome of working on the task. When students try to finish the task, they have experienced setting goals, making plans and monitoring their study. After commenting on other groups’ presentation and discussing their own, they have experienced assessing and adjusting. Therefore teachers’ explanation of metacognitive strategies can be better understood by them. The first three steps can help students to have a general understanding of metacognitive strategies.

Fourth, teachers give students a second task, in which students can practice the metacognitive strategies they have learned. The process of doing the task should be carefully recorded, discussed and assessed. Students should also be given chances to assess how they use the metacognitive strategies and the effects. This step can be repeated so that students can learn the strategies skillfully and find out the most suitable and effective strategies for themselves.

Finally, after students learn the suitable and effective metacognitive strategies for themselves, ask them to apply them to the study of each unit of the English textbook and make an English learning plan for the entire term. Teachers should help students to find out their individual needs for studying English, the goal of two-year college English study, and subdivide it into sub-goals that they should try to achieve in each term. The sub-goals, in turn, can be correlated with the contents of units, which can be made into specific learning plan. Make sure the plan can be modified whenever is necessary. During the whole term, students’ metacognitive strategies can be practiced, modified and reinforced.

Teaching Students Cognitive Strategies. The training of specific cognitive strategies can be integrated into the normal English class teaching, following five steps which can be recycled. First, teacher’s presentation of the specific strategy, for example, skimming and
scanning. Second, teacher’s modeling of it. Third, providing students with material to practice the strategy. Fourth, evaluating how students grasp the strategy. Fifth, expansion, giving chances for students to use different strategies comprehensively [8]. This five-step method is traditional and highly dependent on teacher’s instruction. It can be modified by adding one step before. Teacher can give students exercises first, in doing which a specific strategy should be used. After students finish the exercises, teacher should check how they do it, and then begin to present and explain the strategy to students and have them practice it. The advantage of this method is that students can learn from their own experiences, can have deeper awareness for the effect of using a strategy and teacher’s instruction can be more specific and targeted. Besides, different cognitive strategies, such as strategies of memorizing vocabulary, guessing the meaning of new words from the context, predicting, fast-reading, listening, communicating, etc., should be introduced systematically and practiced repeatedly so that students can find out suitable ones for themselves. Ask students to evaluate the effects of using the strategy and work out those effective ones and apply them to their English learning.

The training of metacognitive and cognitive strategies are not separated. Although it is suggested that metacognitive strategies should be taught intensively at the beginning of college English class, it should also be practiced and used during the course and even holidays, since metacognitive strategies are supposed to regulate the learning process.

**Step Three, Monitoring Students after Class Learning**

Even when students have the correct idea of college English learning, and related learning strategies, autonomous learning and its effect cannot be guaranteed. In college, the goals of English learning become less clear, students have less pressure of exams, fewer English classes every week, less time with teachers, but more free time, activities and interference, so many, if not all, may not be able to study as hard as in high school. However, language learning is time-consuming. It needs lasting and persistent efforts and involves daily repetition. English cannot be leaned well by only studying it in class. Therefore, before students have a strong self-discipline and good learning habits, teachers should monitor their learning, especially after class learning carefully.

First, teachers should pay due attention to discipline in class. If teachers can record and check students’ attendance, participation, presentation and homework carefully, this responsible attitude and strict discipline can encourage students to take this course more seriously and urge them to work harder on it, both in and after class.

Second, teachers should organize students’ learning in groups. The class can be divided into several groups at the beginning of a term, with each group three to five students of different sexes, characters, and English levels. Each group should also select a responsible group leader who will help the teacher to monitor individual’s study. When a learning task is assigned, teachers should monitor how they work on it, check their achievement from time to time. Ask group leaders to monitor the work of each member, urge the members to finish it according to the plan on time. The total process should be carefully recorded as well.

Third, teachers can ask students to keep a diary of their English study. Students should record how much time they spend on English learning every day, what and how they learn, what problems they encounter, in what way they can improve, etc. It will be more convenient and effective if the diary is in a table form. With the help of group leaders, teachers should check students’ diary every week, review monthly, and make a summary every term. This is not only a practical application of metacognitive strategies, but also an evidence to explain students’ learning effects. While making comments on students’ English study based on the diary, teachers should focus on students’ effort, progress and achievement, and draw their
attention to their strengths and abilities. As for failure, teachers should guide students to attribute it to controllable factors such as insufficient time and effort or the use of inappropriate strategies. In this way, students can understand the links between effort and success, view success and failure as controllable things, so that they can have the confidence to achieve success through efforts and study harder.

**Conclusion**

The intent of this paper is to find out method of cultivating autonomy in college English students that can be convenient and practical for college English teachers to use in the particular teaching situation in China. Based on previous research on autonomy, as well as on the particular findings related to college English teaching in China, a three-step method is put forward, namely, reshaping students’ idea, teaching students learning strategies, and monitoring students after class learning. The first step is to help students establish a correct concept of learning English so as to make them ready for college English study. Teaching students metacognitive strategies is the key to cultivate their autonomy, while cognitive strategies training is to help them how to learn effectively. Before students have a strong self-discipline and good learning habits, teachers should monitor their after class learning carefully to guarantee their learning effect, which is where step three works.

The proposed three-step method tries to integrate many findings of research and become comprehensive. However, it is at this stage no more than a theoretical possibility since not much empirical research has been done on it. Group work plays an important role in this method, and it deserves more detailed discussion. There is clearly a need for much further research on autonomy. Hopefully, this paper will result in more elaborate and verified study on autonomy in college English teaching in the future.

**References**


