Exploration and Practice of Autonomous Learning Based English Classroom Teaching for Non-English Major Students

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Abstract: Autonomous learning has been a buzzword in foreign language learning in recent years. Author put forward a new model of English classroom teaching based on autonomous learning theories as well as the characteristics of Non-English major students. To testify the effect of new model, an experiment was conducted in Zhejiang Foreign Languages College. The results of experiment shows that:(1) The new model can increase students’ interest and confidence.(2)The new model can increase students’ autonomous learning ability.(3)The new model has good effects on classroom teaching. At the end of thesis, author gave some suggestions on the practice of autonomous learning based English classroom teaching in the college.

1. Introduction

English Curriculum Requirements (Requirements) sets “Developing students’ English ability in a round way” and “Cultivating students’ autonomous learning ability” as the main aim of college English education. According to new Requirements, the traditional teacher-centered teaching model is no longer catering for the present reform of College English teaching and learning. Developing students’ autonomous learning ability becomes a very important task for college English teaching.

To develop college students’ autonomous learning ability, author put forward a new model of English classroom teaching based on autonomous learning theories as well as the characteristics of Non-English major students. The present study was undertaken to explore the feasibility of a new autonomous learning model in the Chinese college setting.

The model selected two classes in International Business Faulty of ZYU. One class (40 students) is major in International Business, the other one (35 students) is major in Business Administrative Studies. Both classes are first year non-English majors. This autonomous learning model lasted for one and half years from September 2012 to January 2014(3 semesters). This model is applied to the course of integrative English. The text book used is College English Intensive Reading.

This model consists of five parts: preparation stage, autonomous text learning, Web-based autonomous English–learning center, extra activities, and autonomous extracurricular learning.

2. Preparation Stage

Since they are first year students in the college, they are easy to adapt the new changes in their
learning style. The primary task of autonomous learning process is to determine their learning goals. Because they are fresh men, they have little experience in study independently, so teacher should give them some guides, help students to set up their learning goals. After they have designed long-term goal, teacher should help students to develop short term goal. Doing this has many advantages. It can help students to focus their attentions on the tasks and enhance their motivation. Besides these, teacher should teach them a series of autonomous learning methods. These methods include working out learning plans, giving learner choices, monitoring learning process, self-assessment, reflection, giving presentation strategies, how to use library resources, how to do research on the Internet etc. These strategies are integrated into learning content and learner strategy training later.

3. Autonomous Text Learning

Autonomous Text learning is very important part of classroom learning. Before learning of each lesson, students need to do the preview work. Nunan (1988) believes that making goal explicit to learners help them to focus attention to the task, which enhance motivation. To ensure students do it well, they have to do written preview work. It includes five parts. 1) Collect background information about the text, through internet and library, and make PPT (individual or group) and present in the class. 2) Use dictionary to find out the meaning of new words and phrases. Then select some examples from the dictionary and copy them in their exercise books, try to make one sentence by themselves. 3) Go through the text. Find out the main idea and structure of the text and write down in the exercise book. 4) Before the class, teacher prepares several questions for the students. Students need to consider the questions and write down their answers in the exercise book. 5) When students are previewing the text, they will find some difficulties in book, they write their questions down and discuss in the class.

During the experiment, I found most students did their preview work very carefully. They average spent 2 hours on the preview work. They always do it in the group, so they enjoy doing this. When I checked their preview work, I am surprised that they have collected so much background information of the text, sometimes even more than I prepared. For example, once, I asked students to find out important festivals in the west. Then when we met in the class, what they had done was really beyond my expectation. Every group presented by PowerPoint. Some of them found the different origins of same holiday. After class, they told me that they learned a lot from this class, since before they only know few of them. The other thing I found is that if I want to involve all the students into the discussion, I must choose an interesting topic, which can attract students’ interest. For “important new words and phrases”, they usually list dozens of them, with detailed explanation and sample sentences from the dictionary.

Based on the preview work, autonomous text learning is carried out. The classroom text learning then goes through these steps: 1) warm up. Teacher lead in the topic of the text and asked several students to talk about what they found. They can do it individually or in the group by PPT. Then the teacher give some comments or add more information. 2) text analysis. Teacher will divide class into several groups, then asks students to discuss the main idea and structure in the group. After their discussion, each group leader will express their opinion in the class. 3) exercise. The students finish the exercises after class. There are answer keys which in the CD. The higher-form students mostly rely on the answer keys and self-and peer assessment. The lower-form students can ask their teacher for help in assessing their work.

The content of autonomous text learning model is the same as traditional classroom teaching, but has different form. The students change from audience to main speakers. After they have done the preview, they are very familiar with the text. They are willing to exchange these ideas and questions
with their classmates as well as the teacher. After class, they need to fill in an self-evaluation form. Zimmerman (Zimmerman, 1986) pointed out, self-evaluation is very important autonomous learning strategy. The following is an self-evaluation form.

Table 1 Format Of student’s Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Good 3  Average 3  Poor 1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Have you done a good preview work? (  )
2. Did you do your homework on time? (  )
3. Did you pay attention to your class? (  )
4. Did you participate actively in the class? (  )
5. Did you cooperate with your classmate? (  )
6. Were you interested in the class materials? (  )
7. Did you finish your learning task in the class? (  )
8. Write down your achievement in this unit
9. Problems (Reflection)
10. Plan for next unit

Meanwhile, the teacher changes their roles from the main speaker to an organizer and counselor. She always stands by and listens to the students, or joins in one group in a discussion or walk around the classroom to offer help wherever she is needed. There is obvious change in her language. The sentences she often use are, “Excellent”, “Wonderful”, “Thank you very much” and “Oh, it’s a very good idea!” “You are very smart.” This short language can encourage students to take part in the class.

The classroom setting has been changed to

Table 2 Classroom Setting
4. Web-Based Autonomous English – Learning Center

Recently, our college completed web-based autonomous English – learning center. This center can facilitate students’ English learning in class and after class. The Center is composed of 3 autonomous learning classrooms and more than 120 computers which are installed LanGe LBD 5800 on-line College English learning systems to facilitate the students’ English learning on any computer covered by our campus internet. Students are easy assess to the system and operate on it. It has offered a very good environment for the change from traditional classroom model to the learner autonomous model. This Lange platform provides students many English learning materials, such as CET 4,6 listening materials, reading materials etc. Students also can discuss questions in the BBS with classmates and teachers.

All the students studied on the internet, after each unit, teacher will post the assignment on the Internet, then students can work on these by themselves or with their partner. This language system will automatically mark their answers and give marks. During the interviews, most students expressed that they can learn a lot of knowledge from this platform, and it is very convenient for them, since they can do it in their dormitories.

5. Extra Activities

1) Daily news:
   Student is required to give daily news at the beginning of the class. The reporter would choose interesting news, collect information through the internet or newspapers and work out a PPT before class. Then at the beginning of the class, the reporter delivers his news, with PPT, which the rest students take notes about this news. When this is over, there will be a free change between the reporter and the audiences. The last step is the comment step, some audience give comments on this news, and gives suggestions for improvement.

   All the students participated in this activity. During the interview, most students said that they were interested in this activity. Most students were new to this activity, cause in the high school, they always did a lot of exam papers in the English class. They thought PPT is very useful skill for them.

2) Native- speaker contacts:
   Every Wednesday, there is English night. Students are encouraged to go to the English Salon to...
chat with foreign teachers (there are 50 foreign teachers in the college). During the interview, students expressed that they liked it. They like to engage themselves in a wonderful English atmosphere. They can learn a lot from other students and their teachers.

6. Extracurricular Learning

Student also needs to do self-study in their free time. Teacher in this activity plays as counselor. This role is reflected in the following aspects. 1) to help students to make reasonable learning plan. 2) to Plan; (2) provide students with good English learning materials such as New Concept English, Three days to see etc. (3) give the feedbacks through diary feedback. (4) encourage students to monitor and evaluate their learning by writing learning diary, keeping English record, and setting up an personal file. At the same time, teachers should set an good example for students.

This first step is sign a learner contract. Learner contract is a contract between teacher and student. A learner contract is as the following one:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 Format Of the Learner Contract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My learning contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time I have available to work on self-access each week ________ hours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan to do self-access work during the following times each week:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday: From________ to________.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday: From________ to________.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday: From_________ to________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday: From_________ to________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday: From________ to________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday: From________ to________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday: From________ to________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan to achieve the following in the coming month:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After students make the contract, Contract can be placed under the consent of the student agreed file folder, or posted on the classroom wall, so that students can supervise each other and create a good learning atmosphere. Teacher need to respect individual difference of students; give students sufficient right to choose learning content and methods.

The second step is to pursue self-study in their spare time. Students can choose any learning materials from library and Internet to learn accord to their learning plan. Teacher encourages students to use different learning strategy. Students need to take notes and write a review on their self-study handbook. Every two weeks, the students hand in their handbook to their course representative.

The third step is to self-monitor and evaluation. 1) Make a learning diary. The reflection is the key to self-study, while diary can promote students to do reflections and improve learning efficiency.
The learning diary is as following:

**Table 4 Format Of Learning Diary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>This week I read</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This week I spoke with these people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This week I listened</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This week I made these mistakes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My difficulties are</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the end of the week, students make this learning diary and hand in to teacher. The dairy given praise by the teacher and it supplies proposition and encouragement as the teacher’s feedback to the student. The teacher’s feedback suggestions can be written on the learning diary directly. The students can give general comments on the diary for each other and let diary pass around. By doing this, students start to take great control of their learning processes. 2) set up personal file. Files can help students to see their accomplishment and progress during the learning process, and increase their responsibility.

The author adopted questionnaire, interview, and observation as the main tools to collect data, then applied qualitative and quantitative analysis.

The results of experiment show that (1) New autonomous learning model can increase students’ interest and confidence in learning English. At the beginning of the experiment, students were asked to fill out the questionnaire containing 10 questions. After the experiment, they were required to do the same questionnaire in order to testify the effect of the experiment on students’ English learning. The questionnaire includes 10 items about learning interest, leaning confidence, attitude towards English class and learning abilities. The following is the analysis of the results from the two surveys. The first two questions are about the students’ learning interest and learning confidence. The data collected showed after experiment the students have more interest in English learning. The statistics reveal that after the experiment the students have more interest in English learning. 50% students (after experiment) like English very much compare to only 37.5% students (before experiment) show great interest in English. The difference is even obvious in learning confidence. Before the experiment, only 25% students think that they can learn English well, but after the experiment, 50% students are confident about it. It is safe to say the autonomous learning can develop the students’ learning interest and enhance their confidence. Question 3 is about English class. The statistics approve that autonomous class are more interesting than traditional class. What’s more, a great change is that the students are more willing to involve in the class. This change occurs probably because of the relaxing learning atmosphere and recording policy.

(2) New autonomous learning model can develop student’s learning abilities and skills. The rest questions are about students’ learning abilities and skills. The statistics show that autonomous learning has greatly improved the students’ autonomous learning awareness and abilities. Question 4-5 investigates the habit of English learning. Before the experiment, only 31.25% set the goal before learning. After the experiment, the situation is much more inspiring. 62.5% students have formed this good habit. It is similar with another important habit-plan making. Before the experiment, 31.25% students have the habit of plan making. After the experiment, 62.5% students have formed this habit. Question 6 is about learning strategy. Before the experiment, only 25% students can use learning strategy effectively. After the experiment, half students can use it effectively. Question 7 is about extracurricular learning. The data show that before the
experiment, only 37.5% students can study by themselves regularly in their free time, while after the experiment, 75% students do it. Question 8 is about students’ autonomy awareness. The data show that before the experiment, 37.5% students rely on their teacher to study while after the experiment, most students depend on themselves to learn English. Question 9 investigates students reflection and self-assessment. As can be seen from the table, before the experiment, only few students can do reflection while after experiment, 38% students have formed the habit of regular reflection. Last item is about the students’ cooperative learning. Before the experiment, 38% students often do the group work while after the experiment, half students do it.

(3) New autonomous learning model can improve the efficiency of classroom teaching. From the observation of classroom and interview with the students, we can say that the effect of classroom teaching has been improved. According to the interview, 80% students prefer new learning model. They think this new model is great, they can benefit a lot from this new model. The active and passionate atmosphere has been built, which can help students to learn English efficiently.

Through the experiment, author also found there are some problems among students. Some college students lack the ability and awareness of autonomous language learning. Though some of students are eager to be autonomous in English learning, they are far from autonomous learners. Since they lack the features of autonomous learners, most students do not achieve the goals set by themselves, nor can they use the information selected by themselves. Some of them can set goals and select information and materials on their own, but not knowing how to monitor themselves and evaluate their learning activities. Thus, they cannot persist in their learning activities. This is due to their poor learning strategies and misunderstanding of the concept of learner autonomy. Some students even do not have the right motivation to learn English, let alone become autonomous learners. Of course, some objective conditions like the environment of autonomous learning on campus, teachers’ awareness of changing roles in class are also responsible for their failure in becoming autonomous learners. Based on students performance, responses and progress, the author puts forward several countermeasures to the problems found during the study: ① students should be motivated before their language learning, or they will not be willing to take responsibility for their own learning activities, which is one of the features of autonomous learning. ② training of learning strategies is a necessary step which should be guided by teachers, the circle of strategy training process should be planned and controlled from the beginning to the end by teachers. Of course, this does not mean we return to the traditional pattern of teacher-centered pattern in which teachers are the authorities in the class, the classes are still learner-centered and require for the participation of learners with the help of teachers. ③ The college needs to create a more favorable environment for both teachers and learners if it really wants to raise learner autonomy among its students. College should give students more freedom on using internet which is very useful for their autonomous learning. Some teachers in colleges have misunderstanding about autonomous learning as well as students. So apart form raising students’ awareness of autonomous learning, teachers’ knowledge about learner autonomy should also be strengthened, because they must guide students to develop the ability of autonomous learning. As the evaluation systems in the colleges now are still the kind of traditional and not proper for autonomous learning, the college should consider changing ways of assessment.

The result of study is positive and satisfactory, but present model may have some limitations below:

(1) The sample is relatively small. In the present experiment, only 75 non-English major students in one college are involved in the study. There is the reason for this. The present researcher was teaching these 75 undergraduate subjects when the experiment was being conducted for the convenience of research.

(2) It has only been three semesters, due to time limited. Therefore, the results are just periodic
not ultimate. It is possible that some inconsistency may occur in the experiment.

(3) The countermeasures the author puts forward to overcome the obstacles in the cultivation of autonomous learning in colleges for Non-English major students have not yet been tested, whether they can work effectively or be suitable for college students is not yet sure.

As to the autonomous learning in the college, there are still many factors worthy of further investigation. Autonomous language teaching is still a new experience to both teacher and learners. Relevant study in this field is still lacking.

References
