

The Investigation and Analysis of Teachers' Involvement in Students' Autonomous Learning

Chen Guan, Feipeng Li

Department of Foreign Language, Baoding University, Baoding, China
Email: guanchen_1981@163.com, lfp19801104@163.com

Received 3 August 2014; revised 29 August 2014; accepted 6 September 2014

Copyright © 2014 by authors and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY).
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The cultivation of students' autonomous learning ability is one of the important sections of English teaching reform at college in China. However, it doesn't mean that teachers' involvement is becoming less and less necessary; instead, teachers' involvement is significant and indispensable to guarantee and promote learner autonomy. This paper firstly introduces the basic concept of students' autonomous learning and teachers' involvement briefly. Then, it analyzes the statistics of the questionnaire about teachers' involvement in Baoding University. Finally, this paper illustrates the different roles that teachers should play in and after class with the reference of questionnaire data discussed above. Hopefully, this paper may have some enlightenment for teachers' involvement in students' autonomous learning.

Keywords

Teachers' Involvement, Students' Autonomous Learning, Promoting Learner Autonomy, Questionnaire

1. Introduction

Recently, it has been widely acknowledged the importance of students' autonomous learning (hereinafter short for AL) ability in EFL. The traditional English teaching method known figuratively as spoon-feeding is far from being satisfactory to meet students' demand of independent and lifelong learning. Teacher's traditional roles as language instructor and the authority of the class are facing great challenge with the "student-centered" teaching mode being advocated. However, it doesn't necessarily mean that teachers' role has been weakened or even eliminated. In contrast, teachers should reexamine their function and readjust their role in order to intervene in

students' AL more effectively and train students to become efficient learners.

Based on the psychological theory proposed by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, autonomous learning is a kind of experiential learning. As for what autonomous learning is, different scholars present different definitions. Henri Holec defines autonomous learning as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981); Phil Benson provides the definition as "a recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems" (Benson, 2001). Although these definitions of AL may vary from one to another, they share something in common, that is, all of them emphasize the significance of learning motivation and individual responsibility. Students are encouraged to explore and discover knowledge by themselves and initiatively construct what they have learned. However, AL is by no means "teacherless learning" (Chan, 2001). By contrary, teachers' involvement is both necessary and significant to guarantee and enhance learner autonomy. Teachers' involvement is composed of two parts: one is behavioral component and the other is emotional component (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In terms of behavioral component, it can be further divided into active direction and prohibitive intervention (Jiang, 2006). The former emphasizes that teachers should actively help, encourage and advise students in the process of teaching, while the latter one requires teachers to intervene in or even prohibit students' behavior when students hold negative study attitude, such as tiredness, pessimism, or blindness, and when they have destructive behavior in study. Teachers are highly recommended to employ active direction most of the time, while prohibitive intervention is also useful when necessary. One of the striking features of AL is "student-centered" which, at the same time, emphasizes teachers' assistance and guidance when students arrange their study according to their study demand, schedule and pattern. Skinner and Belmont highlighted the emotional factors in study. Their research result shows that students' involvement in their studies is affected by their teachers' consciousness and behavior. When students sense support from their teachers, their study interest and joy could be promoted. So teachers are encouraged to handle their emotions properly in the process of helping students in their AL.

This paper is to discover the implementation of teachers' involvement in students AL process in Baoding University and discuss the different roles that teachers should play in teachers' involvement.

2. Research Method

2.1. Participants

Two hundred and fifty non-English major students are chosen at random as the research respondents and their majors cover Chinese literature, Human Resources Management, Applied Mathematics, Law, and Computer in Baoding University. And their age is between 18 and 22.

2.2. Research Methods

In order to truly reflect the situation of teachers' involvement in students' AL, the research adopts two methods, namely, questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire is composed of ten questions with the designed purpose of investigating whether teachers' involvement has efficiently implemented in the process of students' AL (some of the questions are designed with the enlightenment of Zhao Rong's investigation (Zhao, 2011)). The Likert scale is employed while the data of the questionnaire being analyzed. To be specific, respondents are required to choose one of the five choices of each question according to their personal experience, and the five choices are arranged in the following way. A = always; B = usually; C = sometimes; D = seldom; E = never. Two hundred and fifty copies of questionnaire have been handed out and the same amount has been recollected with ten invalid sheets. According to the phenomenon reflected through the questionnaire, 25 students who have done the questionnaire are chosen at random as the interviewee with the purpose to know more about teachers' involvement in students' AL. The whole process of the interview has been recorded with voice recorders. The contents of the record have been sorted out carefully after the interview.

3. Statistic Analysis

Table 1 shows the statistic of teachers' involvement in students' autonomous learning.

The first three questions are about the foundation of AL. Without clear awareness of the significance of AL, the concrete targets and practical self-learning strategy, students will not be able to achieve effective and efficient AL. However, from the figures above, it can be clearly seen that although teachers have the awareness to emphasize the importance of AL among students (47.1% usually, 43.5% sometimes), they seldom (53.4%) help

Table 1. The implementation of teachers' involvement in students' autonomous learning (%).

Teachers' Involvement	A	B	C	D	E
	always	usually	sometimes	seldom	never
1. Arouse Ss' awareness of AL and cultivate AL ability	6.0	47.1	43.5	3.4	0
2. Help Ss to set English study target and plan	3.3	13.5	26.6	53.4	3.2
3. Provide Ss with English learning strategy and methods	17.2	26.5	45.6	10.7	0
4. Help Ss to select learning material according to their individual ability	2.4	7.5	26.5	58.9	4.7
5. Organize various kinds of activities to promote cooperative learning	7.8	30.8	43.6	17.8	0
6. Help Ss to solve difficulties in study	11.3	31.6	39.4	16.6	1.1
7. Encourage Ss to make use of AL platform	0	2.7	32.9	64.4	0
8. Correspond with Ss via e-mail, wechat, etc. after class	7.1	2.1	16.6	54.5	19.7
9. Ask Ss to reflect on their AL effect	7.9	58.7	17.6	11.4	4.4
10. Assess Ss' AL performance and encourage Ss to assess themselves	18.4	34.8	45.6	1.2	0

students to make concrete English study target and plan. As for the English learning strategy and methods, respondents think highly of teachers' performance (17.2% always, 26.5% usually, 45.6% sometimes). About the third question, further survey has been carried out through interview. The interviewee students express their own idea about what learning strategy and methods they need most. To conclude, they think that listening and writing skills, how to enlarge their vocabulary and strategies for daily communication are their desperate concern.

Question 4 - 8 are designed to investigate the main procedure of AL, covering the three stages, namely, pre-class, in-class and after-class stages. The survey result of Q4 echoes with Q2, that is, teachers seldom (58.9%) help students to select learning material according to their individual demand and ability, which is an important part of setting study target. As for Q5 and Q6, relatively satisfactory answers can be appreciated. In addition, more information about what difficulties are in their study has been got after in-depth interview. Respondents say some cultural phenomenon have to be explained by teachers due to their shortage of background cultural information. According to the statistic of Q7, the striking figure 64.4% (seldom) attracts people's attention. As for the reason, the fact that our university is still lack of sufficient AL-equipped classrooms and available AL resources is an important factor. It can be easily noticed that teachers' performance of E-communication with students after class is not satisfactory either (54.5% seldom). This may be explained from the following two aspects: firstly, teachers may mainly focus on the in-class section and neglect the after-class feedback which is one of the vital parts for students' AL. However, according to Li Hong, professor of School of Foreign Languages and Cultures of Chongqing, teachers' feedback is crucial in terms of AL (Li, 2007); secondly, teachers, students may be included as well, haven't get used to taking advantage of instant messaging tools as a great assistant of AL.

Q9 and Q10 are another two indispensable questions in the whole process of AL, because the assessment of AL is directly related to the effect of AL. From the figures of Q9 and Q10, it can be suggested that teachers usually (58.7%) remind student to reflect on their AL effect and the assessment of AL has been implemented by teachers and students themselves (18.4% always, 34.8% usually, 45.6% sometimes).

4. Enlightenment and Significance

Because teachers' involvement plays an indispensable role in students' AL, it is quite necessary to make clear what the different roles are for teachers to play. The author summarizes the following several ones.

4.1. Torchbearer

Owing to Chinese traditional teaching pattern which is characterized by teacher's cramming and student's passive learning, teachers should play the role of torchbearers whose responsibility is to get students know what AL is and how to do it as well as its benefits. Only when the students shift their learning habit from passive learning to active and autonomous learning can they gain the potential of lifelong learning. Meanwhile, teachers need to provide students with necessary and practical guidance, such as setting study target according to students' per-

sonal level and ability. When teachers notice that students are lack of motivation, they should intervene promptly to stimulate students. The presentation of cultural background, local customs and practices of English-speaking countries may help them experience the cultural differences in foreign countries and in China. Various kinds of activities, including video-watching, group discussion, and drama play, may arouse students' interest of AL and motivate them to set clear English study goal. Gradually students' cultural literacy and English practical usage ability will be improved.

4.2. Manager and Organizer

To be a good manager and organizer, teachers should work hard on the following three stages, namely, pre-class preparation, in-class activities and after-class feedback. In the pre-class section, the most important thing is to help students to select suitable self-learning materials. Due to students' limitation in terms of language knowledge, pragmatic usage and cognitive ability, it may be hard for them to accomplish the task of AL. Therefore, teachers' suggestion and instruction will be crucial. Recommending different level of video-audio materials and English newspapers and magazines would be a good choice for students. While giving English class, teachers are suggested to create a harmonious classroom atmosphere which is warm and stimulating and in which students feel confident and much motivated. Teacher should take the responsibilities of organizing various kinds of activities and games which can promote students independent thinking, self-learning ability and team work spirit. It is strongly recommended for teachers to communicate with students after class via various ways, such as face-to-face talk, e-mail, blog, we chat, etc. The focus of communication should be attached to students' difficulties and confusion in the process of AL; summary of short-termed AL; sharing of valuable learning strategies and methods; assessing students' AL effect and providing suggestions for further study.

4.3. Facilitator and Supervisor

Teachers need to make the learning easier and motivate learners to play to the best of their potentials. They can help the learners to plan and carry out their independent language learning and assist learners to acquire the knowledge and skills and motivate learners to learn actively and autonomously. Because the assessment of AL is very important, teachers are encouraged to take different kinds of ways to assess students' autonomous learning effect, including teachers' assessment, students' self-assessment and peer review. Especially the latter two ones can provide excellent chance for students to reflect on their autonomous learning effect, find out deficiencies and make further improvement.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the cultivation of students' AL ability is one of the important sections of college English teaching reform. With the core value of "student-centered", teachers need to, on the one hand, avoid absolute intervention, regardless of individual differences; on the other hand, meet the different demands of students' by presenting them with instructive guidance. Only in this way can teachers help students to become genuine autonomous learners.

Acknowledgements

Sincere appreciation must be given to all the people who have given their support to the research, especially the participants of the survey. This paper is one of the research results of The Research of Study Validity Influenced by the Interaction of Teachers' Involvement and Students' Autonomous Learning, which is the Teaching-reform Project of Baoding University. So special thanks are due to Baoding University with its generous support academically and financially.

References

- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. Harlow, UK: Longman.
- Chan, V. (2001). Readiness for Learner Autonomy: What Do Our Learners Tell Us? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6, 505-518. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562510120078045>
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon

- Jiang, Q. X. (2006). The Importance of Teachers' Involvement in Students' Autonomous Learning. *Foreign Language World*, 2, 10-15.
- Li, H. (2007). The Role of Revision and Teacher Feedback in a Chinese College Context. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9, Article No. 15.
- Zhao, R. (2011). *A Study of Teacher Intervention in Second Language Learning*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Fudan University, Shanghai.
- Skinner, E. A., & Belmont, M. J. (1993). Motivation in the Classroom: Reciprocal Effects of Teacher Behavior and Student Engagement across the School Year. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 85, 571-581.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.85.4.571>

Scientific Research Publishing (SCIRP) is one of the largest Open Access journal publishers. It is currently publishing more than 200 open access, online, peer-reviewed journals covering a wide range of academic disciplines. SCIRP serves the worldwide academic communities and contributes to the progress and application of science with its publication.

Other selected journals from SCIRP are listed as below. Submit your manuscript to us via either submit@scirp.org or [Online Submission Portal](#).

