AUTONOMOUS LEARNING MODEL AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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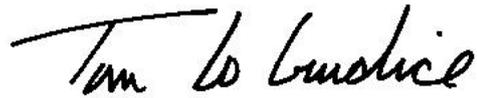
Date: May 9, 2014

Key Terms: Autonomous Learning, Second Language Acquisition

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A Seminar Paper

Presented to the

Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science

in

Education

by

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2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Abstract

Reforms on College English teaching and learning have been widely undertaken in China since the teaching requirements of Peoples' Republic of China Ministry of Education English Curriculum(2007) requirements was issued. Universities and teachers have adopted different ESL Teaching methodologies, edited textbooks under different theories, massively used computer, but few trials have been done in listening teaching and learning. In most universities, Listening teaching and learning has been moving in teacher-centered ways and at traditional pace. Under the teaching requirement, the goal of College English listening is to let students learn by Autonomous Listening Learning based on the research of students' listening level , listening strategies and habits .Reforms on listening learning and teaching have to be done boldly. Self-autonomous learning model based on Constructivism can be a good substitute for traditional listening teaching, although it is a great challenge from the perspective of management and teachers, which is also the biggest obstacle in listening reform. This thesis is to justify the effectiveness of self-autonomous learning model in listening learning on the basis of Constructivism.

Key terms: Autonomous learning, Second Language Acquisition,

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The feasibility of Autonomous Learning Model Replacing Traditional Teacher-centered Teaching Model in Listening Teaching of College English includes a brief overview about the reform taking place in China's higher education. College English as a required course for non-English majors witnesses fundamental changes in content, teaching objectives and methods, learning and teaching model. Autonomous Learning Model, or self-regulated learning model, are playing a critical part in College English teaching, especially related to listening competence.

With the overwhelming consensus about the positive role of Autonomous Learning Model, views and practice differ in different universities about how to exert its due function in listening learning and teaching, which may be partially or totally unknown to some College English teachers and administrative departments of education. To replace traditional teacher-centered listening class with this new model seems to be impossible for those who hold firmly onto the traditional learning model although they admit the fossilization ,anxiety and choked phenomenon widely existing in listening teaching and learning at college level. The dilemma of listening teaching Traditional Teacher-centered classroom encounters will be presented thoroughly from the perspective of teachers and students. To solve this problem, Refined Autonomous Learning Model in listening teaching is a tentative and constructive step toward the desired goal.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of this thesis focuses on is: "Why and how can teacher-centered listening teaching be replaced by autonomous learning model?"

Definition of Terms

Autonomous learning

The origin of the word autonomy comes from the Greek auto-nomos. The term autonomy has been largely used in cognitive science and robotics to describe an agent embodied and situated in the "real world" and without external energy supply. Autonomous learning is a school of education which sees learners as individuals who can and should be autonomous, be responsible for their own learning climate. Autonomous learning helps students develop their self-consciousness, vision and practicality. These attributes serve to aid students in their independent learning.

Constructivism.

Constructivism is a theory of learning and an approach to education that lays emphasis on the ways that people create meaning of the world through a series of individual constructs. Constructs are the different types of filters we choose to place over our realities to change our reality from chaos to order. Von Glasersfeld describes constructivism as "a theory of knowledge with roots in philosophy, psychology, and cybernetics" (Glaserfeld, E., 1989). Simply stated, it is a learning process which allows a student to experience an environment first-hand, thereby giving the student reliable, trust-worthy knowledge. The student is required to act upon the environment to both acquire and test new knowledge.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the feasibility of autonomous learning model replacing traditional teacher-centered listening teaching in China's universities. Some learning strategies and supervising measures related to autonomous learning are also reported in the paper.

Significance of the Study

To improve student's listening competence at college level has always been a dilemma for college English teachers in China. Different modern didactics and teaching strategies in the practice of teaching activities have been tried by teachers, such as dictation, computer-assisted or multi-media method, but seldom produce satisfactory effect in improving listening competence. A refined and workable learning model will switch teachers' role from traditional classroom ruler into an instructor or supervisor of students learning. It can also free students from the passive receivers without any choices about the listening materials.

Delimitation of the Study

The research was conducted in Wuhan, China. Primary literature searches will be conducted via the Internet through MINDS@UWP,,EBSCOhost with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search terms included "autonomous learning model", "learning strategy", and "listening competence".

Methodology

A brief review of literature on the studies of autonomous learning model will be conducted. A second review of literature relating factors, including learning strategy, effective supervision and assessment that contribute to autonomous learning will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations will also be made.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the early 1980s, Holec (1981) was the first to come up with the theory "Autonomous learning" in language acquisition .Since then, this learning theory has been highly valued by the scholars of western scholars. Many research scholars have devoted themselves in the field, and have been reaping a great in theory and practice. In recent years, autonomous learning has been attracting more and more attention of domestic and foreign experts and scholars.

In this chapter, some ideas of autonomy related to the study are reviewed in an attempt to lay a theoretical foundation for the current research. Learner autonomy is introduced first, and then different definitions about the characteristics of an autonomous learner are concluded. Following this is the application of learner autonomy in teaching practice.

Learner Autonomy

Holec (1981) describes learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. # unknown). Little (1991, 2000) defines learner autonomy as "essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action". Little (1991, 2000) defines the term in relation to a particular task. The scholar holds that a person is autonomous when she/he can perform that task without assistance, beyond the immediate context in which she or he acquires the necessary knowledge and skill to perform the task, and flexibly taking also account of

the special requirements under particular circumstances. From this definition, it is clear that "autonomy" is not any specific thing, rather than the capacity of learning, and like any other capacity, it will grow with practice or be lost through inactivity. Benson (1997) defines learner autonomy from the perspective of a political framework as "a recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems" and, within the context of teaching English as a foreign language, as "a recognition of the rights of the non-native speaker in relation to the native speaker within the global order of English".To develop the autonomous learning, freedom of some degree is needed in the process of learning. But it is widely accepted that the freedom here is totally different from the autonomous learning. The freedom needed is often restricted. Whatever the definition and the focus of it is, researchers are tended to define autonomous learning as the ability of learners to take charge of one's learning, in which the learner but not the teacher is put under the position of limelight.

Learner autonomy is not an absolute but a relative concept, which is a long-term moving process. As Nunan (1997) points out, "it may well be that the fully autonomous learner is an ideal, rather than a reality". Many researchers began to study the levels of learner autonomy in the late 1990s. Nunan (1997) divides learner autonomy into five phases of progression towards autonomy: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, transcendence. In the process of awareness, learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the learning materials. Learners can identify strategy implications of pedagogical task and their own preferred learning styles .At the stage of involvement, learners are involved in selecting their own goals

from a wide range of alternatives offered. They can make choices among options; at the stage of intervention, learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning program; at the stage of creation, learners create their own goals and objectives; and in the last stage of transcendence, learners can relate the content of classroom learning with the reality of many things. They become teachers and researchers. They go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond. It is obvious that the degrees of autonomous learning vary in the structure of language learning

However, Littlewood (2000) divides learner autonomy into thee levels: language acquisition, learning approach, personal development. In the situation of language acquisition, learner autonomy includes the ability of using language and the ability of expressing one's own opinions, where the learner is a communicator. In the situation of classroom setting, learner autonomy includes the responsibility of study and the ability of application of relative strategies. In the last situation, learner autonomy includes the senior goal achievement. It is an unconscious autonomous learning. Above both two approaches of dividing the degrees or levels of learner autonomy reflect the process of development of learner autonomy from junior to senior.

Reviewing the above definitions, we may find that learner autonomy is understood as both ability and an action to take the responsibility for all the decisions related to all aspects of learning process, since only to have the ability to learn autonomously does not mean that learners can learn autonomously, and being willing

to learn autonomously but without the ability to do so, for example, taking ineffective learning strategies or styles, does not mean learner autonomy.

Based on the views above, five aspects can be concluded to measure learner autonomy:

1. To identify the teacher's teaching goals and objectives, namely, to know what has been taught and what is going to be expected.

2. To formulate one's own learning objectives, that is to make plans, and decide the contents.

3. to select and implement proper learning strategies and styles consciously

4. to monitor one's own use of learning strategies and styles, identify those strategies that don't work

5. To evaluate what has been learnt and acquired, self –assessment at regular intervals is necessary.

Characteristics of the Autonomous Learner

The characteristics of an autonomous learner are defined differently from different perspectives and definitions of autonomous learning. Flavell (1978) concluded that autonomous learning had three main characteristics in language learning:

1. Use of self-adjustment on meta-cognition, motives and actions should be emphasized.

2. Autonomous learning is a process of self-correction and circulating. That's to say, it can modulate his/her learning method during whole activity. At the same

time, learner is able to assess study result and adjust his/her learning method.

    3. Autonomous learners know when and how to choose proper learning skills during study. Gardner and Miller（1991）define autonomous language learners as those who "initiate the planning and implementation of their learning program." What's more, one scholar asserts that absolute autonomous study and non-autonomous study are impossible. Most of learning is between those two points. It is advisable to recognize the level of autonomous learning rather than divide learning into autonomous and non-autonomous. It may bring much benefit to teach the students in line with their aptitude.

  Autonomous learners can identify, form and change goals to suit their   learning needs and interests and are able to use learning approaches and monitor their own learning.Wenden (1998) lists seven characteristics in the aspect of autonomous learners' language learning: they have insights into their learning styles and strategies; they take an active approach to the learning task at hand; they are willing to take risks,ie.,to communicate in the target language at all costs; They are good guessers; They attend to form as well as to content, that is, to place importance on the accuracy and appropriateness; they develop the target language into a reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; They have a tolerant and out-going approach to the target language.

The Application of Learner Autonomy

Since the 1990s, the focus of autonomous learning has transferred from in-the-classroom to out-of-the-classroom applications.

Autonomous learning out of the classroom is carried out in the following ways:

- Self-access center. The book of Gardner& Miller (1991) about the self-access center is the authoritative text in this field. After its publication, people began to focus more on the combination of the autonomous learning and the course arrangement. And the autonomous learning became a special Learning method.

- Computer assisted language learning (CALL). With the advent of the Internet, computer technology in language learning plays an increasingly important role. Recently, some scholars have stressed that application of computer-assisted instruction to provide opportunities for self-study students, emphasizing the development and application of computer-assisted teaching techniques on the importance of autonomous learning.

- Distance learning. The development of distance education brings more and more research about distance learning.   One of the important aspects is learner autonomy.

The research about application of the autonomous learning in the classroom began in the early 1990s. Small-scale classroom experiments of group activities and

cooperation are the prominent characteristics of these studies. Recently, many

researchers have studied the autonomous learning method based on the courses in the

form of large-scale classroom experiments. However, the limitations of classroom

autonomous learning have also become a major theme of the research (Benson 2003).

Current Research in China

   Scholars have begun to focus on learner autonomy since the 1980s. More and

more studies on learner autonomy mentioned the relationship between learner

autonomy and language acquisition. The research of this kind has lagged behind

compared with the western scholars' work in this field. No monographs are published.

Papers published are more concerned about the theories of learner autonomy or

introduce the research results of it home and abroad, and some papers focus on the

training methods of it in domestic context. The specific expressions of these studies

introduce some theories of learner autonomy from abroad; discuss the importance of

learner autonomy and the training method of it in theory or do surveys on learner

autonomy or some empirical study of autonomous learning. Some teachers point out

the necessity and the importance of development of learner's autonomy in college

English learning. Gao Peng & Zhang Xuezhong (2005) reported an experiment, the

result of which showed that autonomous class teaching activities could not only

develop learner autonomy but also improve students' learning efficiency. Some

emphasize the training learners' autonomy in adult education; others talk about the

role of teachers in the autonomous learning. In addition, some scholars carry out the

experimental study of learner autonomy based on the classroom. For example, Yu

Xizhen (2007) provided to classroom teachers an accumulated research-based

evidence for positive outcomes of learners＇ autonomy ability.

ESL TEACHING AND LEARNING IN CHINA

ESL teaching and learning

English as a second language (ESL) refers to the teaching of English as a

foreign to people who are living in a country in which English is either the first or

second language. Extensive research has been carried out to investigate the factors

which make a successful ESL learner and teacher. Lightbown & Spada (2006) point

out that motivation and attitudes have significant connections with the level of second

language achievement. Saville-Troike (2006) argues that differential second language

learning outcomes may also be affected by individual's learning strategies: the

behaviors and techniques they adopt in their efforts to learn a second language.

Gardner& Miller (1991) note teachers should shift their roles from the traditional one

into the counselor, evaluator materials developer, observer, researcher, administrator,

organizer, monitor and facilitator.

Present situation of Listening teaching and learning at college

In China, college English teaching must follow the syllabus made by

Department of Education. According to the requirement of Syllabus, one class period

(45 minutes) each week will be allotted to listening teaching. All the students must

pass College English Test Band 4-(CET-4) before they can get their bachelor's degree. The new CET-4 has increased the listening scores (accounting 35% of the full mark), which fully embodies the importance of listening in foreign language learning and teaching, but also reflects need and expectation of the society to English learners, students would be more strongly expected to improve their listening level. In real teaching practice, 45 minutes of listening each week is not always feasible considering the crammed schedule. Neither teachers nor students are satisfied with the present ESL education. So to encourage students to spare some extra-curricular time in Autonomous Learning of listening is a good method.

Listening comprehension has always been a challenge for English teaching and learning. With the deepening of the reform of college English, the proportion of listening testing in Cet-4 has reached 35%. With the limited time allotting to listening and rigid syllabus, teachers are faced with how to carry out effective listening in the limited time.

Under the traditional listening teaching mode, the teacher seldom teach students how to listen. Many teachers hold that students can improve their listening only by plunging themselves into the sea of the audio-visual material the teacher provide .Content outweighs listening skills in traditional teaching class. Most teachers followed the same pattern -- open the books, to explain the new words, play the tape or CD, question / answer the questions, answer. If things go on like this. Students are doomed to find their listening problems far from being settled under this teaching model. Under this monotonous teaching model, interest in learning is destroyed, and

loss of interest in learning has become the biggest obstacle in English listening.

In 2007, the Department of Education issued the "College English teaching requirements": "colleges and universities should make full use of modern information technology, the computer and web-based College English teaching model. The new teaching model should be based on modern information technology, especially network technology, which makes it possible that the learning and teaching of English is not restricted by time and place, marching toward individualized and autonomous learning direction. College English Teaching in the web-based and autonomous learning is the general trend. This new English teaching and learning model can be a powerful complement to traditional teaching mode, to help the formation of three-dimensional teaching, providing rich resources of English learning, enhancing students' English learning motivation, improving learning efficiency.

Therefore, as a teacher, it is necessary to look for new ideas in how to teach listening course.

APPLICATION OF SELF-AUTONOMOUS LEARNING MODEL IN

LISTENING TEACHING AND LEARNING

Self-autonomous Learning model in Constructivism

Constructivism theory is the theoretical basis of English listening autonomous learning. In 1990s, Constructivism learning theory has become an important theoretical field of educational technology, the basic idea is that Students actively participate in collaborative research activities to construct their knowledge.

Constructivism is the modern theory of learning further developed from Behaviorism, Advocates of constructivism emphasizes that learning is an active process of construction, an active learning according to the previously existing cognitive structure, with the help of others and the environment with the help of information processing, through the unique, selective perception of external information, construction .It advocated learner centered learning under the guidance of teacher. The teacher is to help the construction of meaning. Teachers play the role of Facilitator arousing the students' interest in learning in the teaching process, through the creation of suitable teaching content requirements of the situation, to help students to construct the knowledge significance, under the condition of the organization of collaborative learning, and guide the collaborative learning process towards the direction of development of construction. Students are the active constructors of meaning of subject, information processing, rather than the passive recipients of stimulus and the subject of external education. Knowledge is no longer treated as an isolated entity, objective, but considered to be cognitive and inseparable

; knowledge is constructed by subjects themselves rather than by the external input.

Self autonomous learning highlights the students' active role in their selectively processing information and constructing knowledge meaning, learning initiative is aroused. Under the theory of constructivism, English teachers should actively create effective English learning environment including safe and friendly network learning environment to help students' better learning.　Autonomous class teaching is a dynamic interaction among learners, teachers, tasks and resources, and defines the teacher's role as a mediator in the system. From theoretical perspectives and learner's demand, the author discusses the significance of teachers' involvement in directing and promoting learner autonomy.

The advantage of self-autonomous learning

Autonomous learning is a cognitive psychology and humanistic psychology based learning theory. Holec first introduced the concept of autonomous into foreign language learning and teaching. Through independent learning, Learners can determine their own learning goals, learning objectives, learning contents and methods.

The network learning platforms, which are widely built in every university in China, can offer students substantial real extensive language input, creating real language environment related to learning topics. Students can learn the most authentic, most practical English. Contextual input or authentic language materials input is crucial in ESL. Under the traditional classroom teaching model, students' contact of

language is restricted, affecting the rate of conversion of target language; but in multimedia network environment, students have access to many vivid listening material, have the opportunity to touch the use of different accents and a variety of scenarios.

Students have more choices about learning materials, learning initiative has been improved. The network can provide images, voice, animation, text and other forms, and can realize the cooperation between students and network interactive learning. Students can choose their own preferences and the degree of difficulty in material selection. Listening materials are adjustable, which can be played fast or slow to meet different preferences and demand. .This makes the students independent individualized learning possible.

Web-based learning platform provides students with a safe, comfortable learning space. learning anxiety can be minimized and learning efficiency maximized. A moderate degree of anxiety is helpful to improve the learning efficiency, high or low anxiety will reduce the efficiency of learning. In the network independent learning process, students do not have to worry about the questions asked by the teacher.

By autonomous learning, one can learn without the limitation of time and place, not only restricted in the classroom or library; nor does it require all students to learn at the same time. Network learning has greatly increased the students' initiative to take control of their own learning.

Methods of improving learner autonomy

Recommended model of self-autonomous learning

As can be seen from above, to reform the current teaching model is the tendency that will not be reversed. Self –autonomous learning can be a good choice to solve the difficulty in improving learners' listening competence. How self-autonomous learning is effectively conducted is another challenge we teachers face. Researchers and teachers in China have done a lot of work to improve learner autonomy. They have done monographic study in theory about how to improve learner autonomy. Also their discussion is mainly on how to set up the self-access language learning center. As noted, there are challenges to putting the model in place. What should be very clear is that self-autonomous learning is not totally free learning process without any pressure, it must be conducted under the guidance of teachers. Furthermore, self-autonomous learning model is a new kind of student-centered learning model, which advocates individual self autonomy. In this model, students are the learning center. Teachers play the role of a guide or facilitator. It requires the teachers to change the traditional teacher-centered teaching model. As a result, the role of a teacher as a speaker and initiator will be challenged dramatically .So the idea of traditional teaching and learning should be fundamentally changed.

The traditional learning and teaching model is to be transformed into semi autonomous, then into completely independent learning and teaching. Web-based autonomous learning can make learners overcome anxiety, tension and suppressed emotions due to its limited language ability in language learning, so students'

attention can be in a highly centralized state to fully mobilize all ability and potential,

Self autonomous learning is an extension of classroom, autonomous learning does not mean self study, which needs the teachers' the supervision and guidance.

The following measures to enhance students' English Autonomous learning:

1. Web-based English Autonomous Learning Platform should be established.

At present, nearly all universities in China are required to set up English language learning center. Leaning software and resources must be updated regularly. All students should have free access to the facilities. Different levels of students can control the learning process, make learning more targeted. The platform shall include a wide range of omni-directional audio and video material, covering course of study, western cultures, leisure English ,testing paper for different purposes, which can satisfy the extracurricular self-study ,stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm.

2.Soft environment should be improved, which include: abolishing the uniform requirement of College English syllabus, separating the learners into different classes according to different English proficiency, reforming the traditional assessment system, providing more open and more democratic learning surroundings. Students' autonomous learning, as the extension and expansion of the classroom teaching, should be

included in the teaching plan and teaching assessment.

2. Teachers' role in self-autonomous learning

Teachers' role in this model is mainly to check and monitor. The learning content in self autonomous learning consists of two parts: required and optional. The required part should be tested regularly, twice a month or once a month. Performance of the test accounts for a certain proportion of the final Achievement report. The optional part should be monitored and the progress should be informed statistically. Learning time is not enough will not be allowed to enter the new learning stage. Teachers can understand the situation of students' Learning through the recording time and assignment fulfillment, which can be part of the formative assessment of the students.

3. Students should be trained to equip themselves with proper learning strategies, mainly cognitive and meta-cognitive, strategies. Cognitive training is to prepare students with the knowledge of "how to learn" and different listening strategies. Training in meta-cognitive strategies involve making students aware of their characteristics and requirement of the learning task, flexibly making plans accordingly, and monitoring ,feeding back and regulating timely to apply the strategies.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Listening class can be conducted either in class or after class, or both. Both model cannot do without the pursuit of the ultimate goal, namely the students' autonomous listening learning, and in the future to realize lifelong learning .In the classroom listening model, students' autonomous learning ability in multi modal autonomous listening .In Autonomous learning model, students' autonomous learning ability is not reflected in the closed door from my learning. On the contrary, it should also be reflected in the multimodal listening. On the basis of this model, the multiple interaction with other learners and teachers is necessary.

The common of the two models is that students do multi modal autonomous listening guided by the theory of constructivism .Students must form the ecological communication model with teachers, other learners and learning resources. Students must be in the process of constructing new knowledge and listening strategies continuously with the old content. The key is that all students actively explore and discover and construct. Teachers' role in self autonomous learning is not weakened, but on the contrary, teachers' teaching ability is highly required.   In the classroom teaching model of listening, the teacher shouldn't dwell on repetition of the same material, make each word clearly understood. Lectures about strategies of listening are more desired for students, and then plunge students in actual listening. It is especially important to know the students about their listening level and listening strategy habit. In the network environment, the teacher must be present as the

supervisor and guide to answer student assistance and inquiry; but in order to create a real self autonomous learning environment, to enhance the students' autonomous learning ability, teachers must be absent at times.

Compared with traditional listening teaching model, this model highlights autonomous learning individually and selectively, which follow the trend and curriculum requirement of the government, and thus provide theoretical and practical platform for learning teaching reform. Students can really develop autonomy. In it, the combination of independent learning, interactive teaching principles and multiple evaluation principle can truly make the principle of ESL.Study on the model and the theory of constructivism focus on learner centered environment and efficient continuous learning environment. This thesis is to do tentative research on College English listening teaching in order to optimize the teaching environment.

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