

Maximizing Learner Autonomy Through Reflective Teaching

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Received 29 March 2013; accepted 12 August 2013

Abstract

Learner autonomy is a desirable goal in English teaching and learning. This paper analyzes the roles of teachers and students in EFL classroom. By studying and analyzing the dialectical relationship between the reflective teaching and learner autonomy, it further proposes some practical strategies to foster students' autonomous learning ability through reflective teaching.

Key words: Reflective teaching; Autonomous learning; Learning strategies

XU Qing (2013). Maximizing Learner Autonomy Through Reflective Teaching. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 9(4), 19-22. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020130904.2651>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020130904.2651>.

1. PROBLEMS REGARDING AUTONOMOUS LEARNING AMONG STUDENTS

In the past two decades, great changes in English teaching have taken place in our country, however, the relationship between teachers and students is still not balanced. It is characterized by teachers' dominance and control in classroom and learners' passive acceptance of whatever teachers say and do for them. Many non-English majors are used to the teacher-centered teaching pattern, they still tend to consider their teachers as the main source of learning, become dependent on teachers and have little incentive to undertake learning inside and outside the classroom, their English self-study ability is

not satisfactory and generally low, some are lack of the awareness of independent study. Thus, it is necessary to help students develop the abilities to learn autonomously.

As a matter of fact, the root comes from the traditional teaching methods and teaching modes. Examination-oriented classes made students passive. They not only limit students' self-analysis and problem-solving ability, but also hinder the development of their personality. Obviously, some students have weakness in self-efficacy which constraints their sense of responsibility, autonomy, self-regulation and cooperation in learning.

Teachers are responsible for fostering the students' autonomous ability and make them become autonomous learners. Reflective teaching implies a more systematic process of collecting, recording and analyzing our thoughts and observations, together with those of our students, and then going on to making changes and improvements about the teaching practices. The main value of reflective teaching lies in its potential to clarify our thinking. Reflective teaching is not only the need of the curriculum reform, but also the need of the improvement of students' overall quality in English.

2. PRINCIPLES OF REFLECTIVE TEACHING AND AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

2.1 Reflective Teaching

Reflection is a special mental activity of human beings. Reflective teaching originated from Dewey, plays an important role. It refers to a kind of activity that a teacher reflects his own teaching behavior during the teaching process. Reflective teaching means looking at what you do in the classroom, thinking about why you do it, and thinking about if it works, it is a process of self-observation and self-evaluation.

Reflective teaching requires teachers examine their

own course and teaching practice, review the problems consciously and propose measures for improvement, so as to make their teaching behavior wise and mature. During the process of reflection, open-mindedness, conscientiousness and involvement are very important. Besides, reflection can further develop students' language sensibility and comprehension. It is significant to develop students' potential learning ability and promote autonomous learning in EFL classrooms through reflective teaching.

2.2 Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning is an important topic in today's educational research. Holec (1981) defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". It also means an ability to think independently and critically, to make a decision and carry out an independent action (Little, 1991).

Autonomous learning focuses on the students' subjectivity and initiative, the purpose is to make students know how to study and achieve life-long learning and development. It not only helps to improve the academic performance of students in the school, but also makes the foundation for lifelong learning and development. There are at least three generally accepted aspects of autonomy in language teaching. They are: (1) Students should take responsibility for their own learning; (2) Teachers, courses and institutions influence the development of this responsibility; (3) Learner autonomy is a goal of education that learners, teachers and institutions should work together to achieve.

In most cases in college EFL classrooms, English learning is largely measured by written test scores. Consequently, it is quite difficult to establish autonomous language learning within such a conventional teaching context. Learner autonomy aims at providing learners with the ability to take on more responsibility for their own learning. It is significant to foster learner autonomy because students will not be accompanied by their teachers throughout their life. Students are expected to make decisions by themselves as to what and how they should learn. As long as learners become autonomous, they have acquired a life-long learning skill and a habit of independent thinking, which will benefit them long after leaving university. Thus, it is urgent and necessary to foster learner autonomy in English teaching and learning.

3. THE APPLICATION OF REFLECTIVE TEACHING IN FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY

Quality education concentrates on transforming education philosophy and reforming the way of the education to cultivating students' independent learning ability. Therefore, teachers are meant to cultivate learner's

autonomy ability and lifelong learning ability. By means of questionnaires, interviews, theory and practice of teaching, independent learning capabilities can stimulate students' interests in learning English and improve learning outcomes effectively. The following will include a case study from September 2012 till June 2012, it is about a hybrid of autonomous learning and reflective teaching in college English course.

3.1 Experimental Project Description

For this project, 4 natural classes (123 freshmen) were involved in this study. The four classes fell into two groups: experimental group of two classes (61 students) which took part in the "Reflective and Autonomous College English Teaching and Learning" project; and control group of two classes (62 students) which only received the traditional classroom instruction.

According to all subjects' English scores in their college entrance examination, there was no significant difference in the initial English proficiency between the experimental group and the control group. During the two semesters, all the 4 classes used the same course syllabus, textbooks, classroom activities, assignments, quizzes, and final exams with the same instructor.

In the research, as to their perceptions about the course and their learning strategies in a reflective teaching and autonomous learning environment, questionnaires were used to reveal whether there was any difference between the two groups. To ensure that the questionnaires be valid, we followed the classification proposed by O'Malley and Chamot (1990)—meta-cognitive, cognitive and social/affective strategies (quoted from Ellis, 1994).

As to the students' performances, 2 tests were used and analyzed, aiming at revealing whether autonomous learning with the assistance of reflective teaching could make any difference in improving learners' language proficiency. SPSS and SAS software were used to do the analysis of variance. Teacher's regular interviews with different students from experimental group were used as another approach. Students were asked to give their feedback about the classroom session. Teachers may try to improve their own quality, and keep exploring in the process of teaching practice. Teachers also summarize the teaching experience, and change their role in teaching English in order to make students become masters of learning.

3.2 Major Findings of the Project

The results provide implications for English teaching in EFL classrooms. It's clearly indicated that students perceive a combination of reflective classroom instruction and autonomous learning as more helpful than the traditional classroom instruction alone. The former does better in providing more useful information, solving students' doubts, and in enabling students to take an active role in learning.

On the average, the frequency of the experimental group students' employing learning strategies is higher than that of the control group. For instance, the students in experimental group are more motivated and they have more opportunities to practice autonomous learning. We also find that maximizing autonomous learning through reflective teaching can bring very significant efficacy to promote students' performance. Issues like these call for tries and should be further researched and discussed.

4. EFFECTIVE WAYS TO FOSTER AUTONOMOUS LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTIVE TEACHING

Reflective teaching's value is viewed as a practice, an attitude, a way of being professional, and as a source of potentially insightful solutions to problems. Teachers are meant to develop students' good habits and effective learning strategies that lead them know how to learn and use English, cultivate students' ability of independent learning. The following are some detailed effective ways to foster autonomous learning through reflective teaching.

4.1 Changing the Roles of Teachers and Students

Because the Chinese EFL learning and teaching have long been influenced by the traditional methods, the majority of teachers and learners are accustomed to those methods. This makes the implementation of learner autonomy difficult. The teacher's role is to create and maintain a learning environment in which learners can be autonomous. The learners need a great deal of guidance and feedback from the teacher in order to learn to organize their work on their own. Just as Cohen (2000) pointed out, teachers should shift the responsibility for learning more onto the shoulders of the students themselves, and take on a series of roles as learner trainers, coaches, coordinators, language researchers. Students are expected to take on these new roles: planner, organizer, manager and evaluator of their own learning. Both teachers and learners should raise awareness about each other's needs; compromises have to be reached between them.

4.2 Applying Effective Learning Strategies

The cultivation of learning strategies may contribute to fostering learner autonomy, teachers should provide students with adequate training to prepare them for more independent learning. Learning strategies refer to special actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations (Oxford, 1990). In general there are two parts: cognitive strategies and meta-cognitive strategies. By means of cognitive strategies, students can understand and master all kinds of learning skills such as listening skills, reading skills and so on.

In the process of cultivating meta-cognitive strategies, students can make plans, select learning modes, monitor learning process and evaluate themselves. Undoubtedly, these strategies will greatly promote and improve learner autonomy.

4.3 Innovation of Teaching Methods

Reflective teaching offers fresh vitality to the teachers, meanwhile, it also promotes innovation in English teaching by creating new models of teaching. English teachers are expected to maintain student's interest in learning English language through the innovation of teaching methods. It is helpful to create a relaxed, pleasant learning environment and use flexible teaching methods to make the lessons new. Creating a comfortable teaching atmosphere is very important for the positive interaction between teachers and students in language practice.

Language learning process starts from the feeling of language to meaning, then it goes to practice and application, finally output is achieved. Such as developing motivation is one effective way to encourage autonomy. Therefore, EFL teachers are advised to incorporate motivation into their approaches to teach autonomous practices. In order to achieve such a goal, teachers are expected to devote more time and energy to working out various kinds of motivational techniques both inside and outside of classroom. Hence, teachers may cultivate students' abilities such as innovative thinking and creative awareness.

4.4 Some Specific Strategies of Reflective Teaching

Reflective teaching begins in our classroom. It not only increases the enthusiasm of students, but also helps teachers to enhance the awareness of self-improvement. The following methods are quite effective: teaching journal, using teaching cassettes or video recordings of a lesson, asking peer to attend our class and observe our teaching ideas and process, doing action research. Generally, we are more likely to notice the reactions of some louder students. For instance, you may decide to focus on a particular class of students, or to look at a feature of your teaching – such as how to encourage students to speak more English in class. If a lesson was conducted well, we can describe it and think about why it was successful; if students got confused about a language point we introduced, we need to consider what we did and why it may have occurred; if students are not behaving well- what were they doing, when and why?

Reflective teaching requires teachers consciously concern about students' response. Teachers are responsible for capturing the subtle changes in the expression of students, then analyze whether students can self-control and regulate the emotion of learning, whether students still keep the continuing confidence and interests in learning English. Moreover, teachers can observe the

reactions of other students when someone is answering a question. Such as someone shakes his head, that means he does not agree. In addition, the effect of the previous class and the problems may also be reflected through the feelings of students after class and the quality of homework. All these can encourage teachers to pay more attention to the learning objects and explore more reasonable ways of teaching.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, as a life long mode of learning, learner autonomy plays an important role. The cultivation of the English autonomous learning ability is complex, hence we need to explore continuously from theory and practice. Reflective teaching is undoubtedly proved to be useful in improving students' autonomous learning enthusiasm and making teachers enhance their teaching practice. We will continue to explore more effective ways to foster it.

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