

High School Students' Autonomy in English Learning: The Study of Previewing

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Abstract

Previewing plays a crucial role in English learning. This paper reports a study on previewing English classes by senior high school students. A research has been done on the differences between the Group of Successful Learners (GSL) and the Group of Unsuccessful Learners (GUL) while they are previewing. The methods of questionnaire, observation and interview are employed in the study. The results indicate that the senior high school students exercised learner autonomy by setting objectives, selecting materials and approaches for their previewing and monitoring and evaluating their previewing. Although both the Group of Successful Learners and the Group of Unsuccessful Learners in the study attached great importance to previewing and exercised autonomy in previewing, differences existed between successful and unsuccessful English learners, with the former group taking more effective control of autonomous learning activity than the latter. Based on the analysis of the findings, some suggestions concerning English previewing are put forward.

Key words: Previewing; Successful learners; Unsuccessful learners; Learning strategies

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INTRODUCTION

Previewing, a kind of preparatory work by students before class, is undoubtedly an important step in formal

classroom learning. It is of great importance to a student's good performance in class and the success of a class. Besides, it is also a good indicator of and an effective approach to learner autonomy because in the process of previewing the student depends on, displays and develops his or her capacity to take control of his or her own learning. The student has to set his or her own previewing goal, decide what materials to use and how to deal with them in order to get well prepared for the coming class, plan a schedule for his or her own previewing and solve whatever problems arising in the process. It is no wonder that many educators have stressed the significance of previewing, especially its role in cultivating students' ability to study independently. In a word, previewing is of great importance to English learners' learner autonomy.

In the National English Curriculum Standard for Chinese High School Students (2001), it is stated that in the design of the new curriculum, level 6 to level 9 are designed for the senior high school phrase. Moreover, each level attaches great importance to students' autonomy. To optimize the leaning methods and to improve learners autonomy is one of the basic requirements of the National English Curriculum Standard for Chinese High School Students (2001). The National English Curriculum Standard for Chinese High School Students requires students to get the learning strategies appropriate to their needs, and be able to adjust their learning strategies according to different situations. Therefore, it is practical to guide the students to learn automatically.

Nowadays, there are still many students who do not know clearly how to preview efficiently, which will result in the fact that they can't follow their teachers in class, lose heart in English learning and even can't understand what their teachers say in class etc.. Besides, different students vary in using the learning strategies when previewing, which may cause different results. Therefore, it is important that the differences between the Group

of Successful Learners and the Group of Unsuccessful learners should be found out evidently and then some efficient ways to promote students' autonomy should be summarized systematically. In this way we can find out the good ways to preview efficiently, which contributes to the learner autonomy.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Learner Autonomy

Learner Autonomy has been a buzzword in foreign language education in the past decades, especially in relation to life-long learning skills. Many definitions have since been given to the term, depending on the writer, the context, and the level of debate educators have come to. The term "learner autonomy" was first coined in 1981 by Henri Holec, the "father" of learner autonomy. According to Holec, autonomy in the learning of language is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning", which means the learner should be responsible for all the decision-making all aspects of learning including setting up goals, looking for learning materials, choosing methods and techniques to study, monitoring learning process and evaluating the learning results. Besides the definition made by Holec, some of the most other well known definitions in present literature are:

Autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning. (David Little)

Autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his [or her] learning and the implementation of those decisions. (Leslie Dickinson)

Autonomy is the recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems. (Phil Benson)

1.2 Learner Strategies and Learner Autonomy

Wenden (1987) was among the first to make an explicit connection between learner autonomy and learner strategies. According to her, successful learners have learned how to learn, have acquired the learning strategies—the knowledge about learning, and they have the right attitude to enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher, in other words, successful learners are autonomous learners. Both theoretical and pedagogical evidence have been provided to prove that learner autonomy is vital to facilitate learning process. It has the psychological reason, and practical reasons.

Learner autonomy is one of the important objectives of English teaching. Meta-cognitive strategies are important strategies in current English teaching. Meta-cognition is one of the most important teaching theories in cultivating students' creative thinking and fostering autonomous learning. Meta-cognition, meta-cognitive strategies

become the vital contents in foreign language teaching. It is important to find out how to improve learner autonomy through the training of meta-cognitive strategies.

2. THE DESIGN OF THE STUDY

2.1 The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to study the English previewing by the senior middle school students. To be more exact, it aims to find out how the senior middle school students exercise learner autonomy in preparing for their English class and find out the similarities and differences that exist between successful and unsuccessful English learners in their learner autonomy exercised in preparing for their English lessons. All in all, there are several objectives in my research. The research questions are the following:

- (a) What are the attitudes of the English learners to prepare for their English class?
- (b) Is there any difference between the Group of Successful Learners and the Group of Unsuccessful Learners during the process of their preparing for their English class?
- (c) Is there any difference between the Group of Successful Learners and the Group of Unsuccessful Learners in the use of the meta-cognitive learning strategy?

2.2 The Subjects of the Study

The subjects of this study are a total of 60 students selected from senior 1 in the Middle School attached to Zhanjiang Normal University. They were divided into two groups in accordance with their average score on the four English tests they had taken this term. The ones with higher scores would be studied in the Group of Successful Learners (GSL) and with lower scores in the Group of Unsuccessful Learners (GUL).

2.3 The Instruments of the Study

The instruments employed in the study are questionnaire, interview and class observation.

2.3.1 Questionnaire

Based on the form of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (Oxford, R. Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know 1990), the paper has adapted for the Questionnaire on Preparation for English Classes. In order to make the questionnaire more efficient, the questionnaire was translated into Chinese for students. There are two parts in the questionnaire. The first part is the individual profiles, including the students' level of learning and the factors contributing to their English learning. The second part is 17 statements that are concerned with the meta-cognitive learning strategy and the students' attitude to English preview. The questionnaire is expected to find out the

students' attitude to English preview, to get the overall situations of the English previewing by the students and to aim at the students' use of meta-cognitive learning strategy in their English previewing.

2.3.2 Interview

Besides the questionnaire, in order to get more information, interviews will be used in the research. The questions of the interview are listed. In this part, the researchers interviewed the members of the group for the successful learners and the group of unsuccessful learners to find out the difference in the time they used and the contents they focused on when they were previewing. In the interviews, students were mainly asked about their attitudes towards English previewing, how much time they spent in their previewing and how they previewed their lessons. All the interviews were carried out in China under a casual and friendly atmosphere and there were both group interviews and individual ones. The whole interview process was recorded and transcribed for analysis.

2.3.3 Class Observation

After the questionnaire study and the interviews, class observation was used then. 60 students were required to preview the same part of the English lesson. While the students were preparing for the class, I remain staying with them, taking notes of the student's behavior in previewing. It is designed to find out the differences between GSL and GUL in their process of previewing.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

All the questionnaires and the interviews were transcribed. The questionnaires were allocated to the 60 students. Then analyses were made on data provided through the following sources: The data collected from the questionnaire and the verbal protocols in the interviews and the notes taken by the students while previewing, and the observation notes. The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively to find out how students in senior high school exercise their learner autonomy in previewing English, whether the scores of learners have anything to do with their previewing and how GSL and GUL are different from and similar to each other in this aspect.

The quantitative data came from the Questionnaire on Preparation for English classes. The analysis of the quantitative data here aims to find out the students' use of meta-cognitive learning strategy in their English previewing. There are all 15 items concerning the meta-cognitive learning strategy. For each item, there are five-likert-scale choices: from 1 point to 5 points. In order to make a clear distinction between the Group of Successful Learners and the Group of Unsuccessful Learners when they were previewing, the average results of each student who had completed the questionnaire were worked out and then the average statistics of every group were worked

out too. Finally, the paper put all the results into a form to compare with each other.

The qualitative data came from the structured interviews which were recorded and transcribed and the notes taken in the class observations. The transcription of the interviews was then analyzed to find out the types of answers to the same questions. Through the analysis of the interviews, students' attitudes towards English previewing were found out. On the other hand, through the analysis of the class observation, the differences in the process of their preparing before the English classes between the Group of Successful Learners and the Group of Unsuccessful Learners were summarized according to the notes I have taken in the observation. Then the paper will discuss the process of time used, content and objectives by the form of contrast.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the purpose of the research and the research questions, the paper will discuss the results from the following aspects.

3.1 Attitudes to Preview

A question in part I of the questionnaire "Do you think previewing before class is important? Why or why not?" is mainly designed to find out the attitudes of students to preview. Besides, another question in the interview. "Do you often preview your lesson before class?" is also designed to look for insight students' attitudes to preview.

The students' answers to the above two questions reveal that both GSL and GUL all attach great importance to preview in their English study. Though all of them would be preview before they attended an English class but some of them sometimes failed to preview due to assignments from other courses and their not knowing how to preview. From the result, one thing that we should strongly pay attention to is that although both GSL and GUL think previewing is important, compared GUL, GSL have a better perceived purpose of previewing and put their ideas into practice. In other words, GSL are the most mentally autonomy among the two groups of students. They are willing to be responsible for their own English study and want to be autonomous in their English learning. They always keep previewing. However, GUL do comparatively worse among the two groups. They don't know how to exercise their autonomy when they previewing.

To sum up, we can say that GSL do better than GUL in their previewing, but all the students are mentally autonomy and thus are in favor of autonomous English learning.

3.2 Process of Previewing

The class observation and the interviews of my research are mainly designed to find out the differences between

students of GSL and GUL in their process of previewing. The observation revealed that although both GSL and GUL seemed to take control of their previewing, they behaved differently in the process and this section provides a detailed comparison between them in

previewing method selecting, previewing monitoring and evaluating from the following several perspectives: contents of previewing and time spent in previewing and objectives of previewing. The form of the three items is shown below (Table 1).

Table 1
The Comparison Between GSL and GUL From Three Perspectives in Previewing

	Contents	Time	Objectives
GSL	The text, word list , reference book , comprehending, and the vocabulary exercises	About 1 hour.	To work actively in class and take both vocabulary and text comprehension into consideration
GUL	The text, the word list	About half an hour.	Most of them are not sure what to preview.

From the above results, we can see that there exist differences between GUL and GSL in their process of previewing. Although no previewing requirements were made to them, the students of GSL selected not only the text but also other materials to study in previewing, which contributed to their better grasp of the text. Besides, compared with the students of GUL, GSL were found to manipulate more textbook materials, even non-textbook materials, to accomplish their previewing. Besides, they differ in their attention to the context. In the present study, GSL first concentrated on text comprehension by reading the new text, which provided them with opportunities to practice their reading skills (for example, guessing new-word meaning from context), then they spent much time studying Word List, summarizing Text or doing Comprehension of the Text to check their understanding of the text, reading the tutorial to confirm their guessing, to further understand the usage of the new words and expressions and to learn effective ways of memorizing them. By doing vocabulary exercises after the text, GSL checked and consolidated their mastery of these words and expressions. In a word, they employed different means to focus on form. In contrast to GSL, GUL paid inadequate attention to the meaning of the text. Although they spent some time reading the text, they failed to figure out the main idea of the text and did not make any further efforts in this respect. They seemed to be too preoccupied with vocabulary but paid little attention to contextualize meaning of words and comprehension of the text. GUL first spent a large portion of their previewing time on Word list by reading the new words and expressions. Although they spent much more time on the new words and expressions than GSL, they failed to recall the meaning of the words and expressions they had just dwelt upon.

In a word, all the differences exhibited in the previewing process between the two groups indicate that unsuccessful learners tend to be word-list-based form-focused and meaning-focused and successful learners text-based, first meaning-focused, then form-focused. Attention to both meaning and form in proper order might explain to a certain extent why some were successful

language learners and why some are unsuccessful language learners. The contents of the students focusing on the effect, to some degree, the proficiency of the previewing, which means that previewing has something to do with the scores of English learners.

Some differences were noticed between GSL and GUL in terms of their previewing time. On the whole it took GSL more time to finish their previewing than GUL. When the activities each group engaged in are taken into consideration, it is found that GSL spent less time but accomplished more than GUL. This indicates that in a sense GSL was more efficient than GUL in previewing, which might be attributed to the former's better proficiency and effective approach to the task, which reflects that the GSL can learn more autonomically than the GUL.

Although both GSL and GUL set objectives for their previewing, the result shows that compared with GUL, GSL had a better perceived purpose of previewing. They previewed in order to work actively in class and took both vocabulary and text comprehension into consideration. But the GUL did not seem to be clear about what they should do in their previewing and their objectives were also vague and not class-oriented. Students of GUL had ill-conceived and half-hearted goals. Without a clear idea of what to achieve by previewing, it is really doubtful that GUL could be effective in their previewing. All in all, self awareness of what he should do in previewing is important to learners' efficiency in study.

From the above analysis, a conclusion can be easily drawn that GSL can learn more automatically than GUL in the process of previewing.

3.3 The Use of Meta-Cognitive Learning Strategy

According to the data got from the questionnaire (Appendix 1) in Part 2 (Q1 to Q15), the mean of the use of the meta-cognitive strategy of both the GSL and GUL are worked out as follows (Table).

Table 2
The Mean of the Use of the Meta-Cognitive Strategy

	GSL	GUL
Mean	3.98	2.12

The questionnaire results above suggested that GSL and GUL differ in their using the meta-cognitive strategy. According to Table 2, the mean of GSL is the higher than the mean of GUL. The result has investigated the relationship between meta-cognitive strategy and English proficiency of different levels, which show that there is a significant positive correlation between meta-cognitive strategies and their English proficiency.

Meta-cognitive strategies have been attracting wider attention and they play a vital role in cultivating learners' autonomy in English. Successful teaching and learning of a foreign language depends mainly on students' autonomous learning after class. Meta-cognitive strategy means a general management of procedures for successful learning of a foreign language such as planning, monitoring and evaluating. Meta-cognitive strategy training can help to cultivate students autonomous learning. Meta-cognitive strategies mainly concern the knowledge about learning, for example how to make plans, set and adjust learning goals, monitor language input and output process, and evaluate and reflect on learning performance. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p.44), meta-cognitive strategies are higher order executive skills applicable to a variety of learning tasks. Meta-cognitive strategies play the most central role in improvement of learning and have active impact on all kinds of language learning activities. The ability of using learning strategies is a major difference between Successful and Unsuccessful English learners. As learning strategies are teachable, most studies on learning strategy training (e.g. O'Malley et al., 1985; Oxford, 1990) focus on how to help unsuccessful learners use appropriate combinations of learning strategies that enable them to take responsibility for their own learning. In this way, language strategy training can enhance learner autonomy. Meta-cognitive strategy training conducted by researchers shows its positive effects in language learning and tells us the significance of meta-cognitive strategy training. So, they prove that meta-cognitive strategy training is more meaningful and necessary to unsuccessful English learners, who lack effective learning strategies and don't know how to learn English well.

Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that the successful English learners pay more attention to the use of the meta-cognitive learning strategy, that is to say, the successful English learners are more autonomous in their English learning.

4. IMPLICATION AND SUGGESTION

As is suggested in the research, previewing is an important step for English learning. Therefore, it is necessary for both learners and teachers to try to pay attention to preview.

4.1 Teaching Implications

Teachers should require students to preview so as to improve their English and develop their learner autonomy. In order to improve their capacity to take effective control of their previewing, English teachers should help students, unsuccessful learners in particular, form a correct perception of language learning and offer them instruction on why and how to preview an English text.

Firstly, one tentative solution might be explicit in-class instruction at the very beginning of their class. It is suggested that the teacher explains and demonstrates to students how to deal with previewing or invite successful learners to do so.

Secondly, another solution is to provide the students with a Teacher-Over-My-Shoulder Guide (Devine, 1987, for instance, to use a list of specific questions as guidelines for previewing).

Thirdly, still another is to require students to come up with a certain number of questions after previewing, which will help students, especially unsuccessful learners, to think actively instead of only working as a passive receptacle and/or memorizer while previewing.

Whatever approach is adopted, English teachers should organize summarizing the text to encourage previewing by students. Besides, adequate attention should be paid by the teacher to in-class instruction and training in terms of reading skills and strategies instead of only taking a very analytical approach to the text. Unsuccessful learners need more help in this respect. Only with the help of teachers can students preview their lessons better and more efficiently.

4.2 Learning Suggestions

As is surveyed, previewing does have a great effect on students' English learning proficiency. Using meta-cognitive strategy can help to cultivate the students' learning autonomy. To be autonomous learners, students have to try their best to preview English well before class. Here are some suggestions for learners to help them preview their English lessons.

One of them is to raise the awareness of the importance of English for previewing. Students must keep in mind that previewing is of great importance to a student's good performance in class and it is also a good indicator of an effective approach to learner autonomy. If a student doesn't know the importance of English previewing, he may fail to preview before class.

The second one is to try to use the meta-cognitive strategy as much as possible. Meta-cognitive strategy is vital to foster learners' autonomy. Therefore students should try to resort to Meta-cognitive strategy. To be more detailed, they should plan their learning and evaluate their learning and learn to summarize their learning experience.

The third one is to learn the wonderful learning experience from the successful English learners. The successful English learners can preview more proficiently

than the unsuccessful English learners mainly because they have better ways of previewing which is of significance for students' proficient learning.

In a word, student is the main controller of the previewing process. They should learn to get how to preview to the best.

CONCLUSION

The paper focuses on high school students' autonomy in previewing English classes. It is shown from the research that all learners think previewing the English classes is important, but compared with the GUL, the GSL can choose more learning materials, spend more time in previewing and have more clear objectives for previewing. Besides, the GSL use the meta-cognitive learning strategy more often than the GUL. It is also reflected in the paper that previewing has a great effect on students' learning, that is to say, the GSL can get higher scores in exams than the GUL because the GSU preview better than the GUL. According to the findings, both students and teachers should keep in mind the importance of previewing. It is advised that students have to raise their awareness, use the meta-cognitive strategy as much as possible and learn some experience from the GSL and teachers should not only help students to motivate their background knowledge and put forward some questions to guide them to preview but also encourage students to try to learn autonomically. There exists valuable practical significance in English teaching and learning in this paper.

Although the present study has obtained some important findings, there are still some methodological limitations, which must be born in mind in the interpretation of the results and also generalization of the conclusions. The first one is that the student subjects are all from the same school, which is a technological institute in nature. The second one is that due to the limit of time and the interviewees' patience, all the interviews were not very long and thus were not quite detailed. On basis of the results of the present study, it is expected that further study should focus on the practical ways of previewing efficiently and probing into the training of students' previewing.

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