

## A Study on College English Teaching System Characterized by Need-Oriented Cultivation and Personalized Development: Illustrated by the Reform Practice in China University of Petroleum

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### Abstract

The achievements of the college English teaching reform in China have been universally recognized, however, the phenomena of students’ “do not want to learn, do not know how to learn, fail to learn well and use efficiently” commonly exist, of which the primary cause is the failure of meeting students’ individual needs. On the basis of a full range of dynamic research and definite understanding of students’ individual needs, a personalized college English teaching system has been constructed by cultivating the students hierarchically, extending their English studies major-orientedly and adopting progressive autonomous learning mode to fully satisfy students’ multidimensional and personalized needs, foster their autonomous learning ability step by step in an attempt to achieve the goal of cultivating diversified talents.

**Key words:** Needs analysis; Personalization; Hierarchical; Major-oriented; Progressive autonomous learning

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### INTRODUCTION

English teaching has been attached great importance at all levels of education in China, for which the state and schools have input plenty of manpower, material resources and finance. Teachers and students, and even parents of the students have devoted a large amount of energy and time in English learning. However, the effects of students’ English learning are far from satisfactory. Having learned English for more than 10 years, students’ communicative competence in English still cannot meet the needs of development of themselves and the society. Problems such as “high input with low efficiency, learning but without using, learning but without communicative competence” are still prominent. Thus *the College English Curriculum Requirements (2007)* emphasizes that “The objectives of the college English teaching (CET for short) are to cultivate students’ comprehensive communicative competence in English, especially the abilities in listening and speaking so that they can use English efficiently in their future study, work or social communication, and meanwhile to enhance their autonomous learning ability and literacy to accommodate to social development and international communication.”

Currently, taking advantage of the modern information technology, universities in China are reforming their CET according to *the College English Curriculum Requirements (2007)* and their respective practical situation. With the adoption of the new teaching mode of classroom instruction + online autonomous learning, the restrictions of English teaching and learning in fixed time and places have somehow been broken, and English learning has become more personalized and autonomous.

However, because of the long influence of the traditional concepts and exam-oriented education, those problems are still prominent among college students. Many researches (Yu Hai & Zhong Xiaohua, 2008; Cai Jigang, 2010; Jiang Weiwei, 2010, etc) have found that both teachers and students have little satisfaction in current CET; some college students even find their English levels lower than before. Therefore, finding new ways to innovate the CET system by taking full advantage of modern information technology and facilitating autonomous learning will promote the transformation from “teaching” to “learning”, thus solve the problems of motivation, method and effect fundamentally, which will determine the success or failure of the CET reform in China.

## PROBLEMS AND CAUSE ANALYSES

The new round of reform and research in the CET centers around the following aspects: research in teaching objectives (Cai, 2010, 2012; Shu, 2011; Wang Shouren, 2011; Yang Huizhong, 2012); curriculum reform (Sun & Gu, 2009; Wu & Han, 2010; Huang Fang, 2011; Long Yun, 2011; Wen Qiufang, 2012; Chen Hong, 2013), reform in teaching modes (Liu & Kong, 2008; Sun Bingtang, 2008; Zhang, 2008; Yuan & Yu, 2008; Ouyang & Zhang, 2009; Wang & Wang, 2011; Liu, 2013), reform in teaching methods and contents (Deng & Bai, 2008; Ma Xiaomei, etc, 2008; Zhang, 2009; Yu & Han, 2012), reform in assessments and tests (Yin, etc, 2010; Zhan, 2010; Liu & Wang, 2010; Tang & Wu, 2012; Du & Ji, 2013), research in textbooks and teaching environment (Cai, 2011; Wang & Xu, 2013), etc. Great progresses have been made, but problems still exist, the conclusion of which is that “achievements and problems both exist; improvements are obvious but breakthroughs are expected” (Liu, 2012, p.279). Problems in the CET and the causes are as follows:

### 1.1 With English Learning Needs Not Defined And Satisfied, Students Lack Motivation (Do Not Want To Learn)

Currently, a fairly large number of non-English major college students have no goal in English learning; in other words, they lack motivation. On the one hand, with more and more attention paid to English teaching in primary and middle schools, the progress in English teaching reform, and especially the pressure from college entrance examinations, students spend a lot of time and energy in English learning, and their English levels are escalating. However, it seems that all the achievements originate from the pressures of examinations, and students fail to derive interest in English learning. The fact that students learn English but cannot use it weakens their sense of achievement. After entering universities, pressures from the college entrance examinations disappear and those from the College English Test (CET4 and CET6) are

not big enough. Long influenced by the exam-oriented education, students know little about their needs (what should they learn in terms of their current level of English; what do they want to learn; what should they learn with regard to their future professional learning and vocational development); to them, they only learn English to pass CET4 and CET6 for graduation. On the other hand, there are more diversified English learning needs among college students. Statistics show that most students learn English for passing exams, beside that, an increasing number of students learn English for their pursuit of majors or further study, and still some learn English for going abroad. Choosing what kind of work units or working at home or abroad may make a big difference in students’ English learning needs. However, the stereotyped curriculum and teaching mode in many universities cannot meet students’ individual needs. Where students are not aware of their learning needs or their learning needs are not satisfied, there will be no higher goal and lasting learning motivation. Meanwhile, the curriculum, teaching mode and teaching methods which are similar to those in middle schools deprive the students of their interest and make them only learn for examinations. Students are satisfied with learning some English only in class, without sparing much time and energy after class. Without much impetus in English learning, it is hard to expect that they can make much progress in their English.

In psychology, needs refer to a state of imbalance in human body, and the reaction to the objective conditions necessary to maintaining the development of life. Learning needs are people’s desire for the unknown, a series of reaction driven by learning motivation for the sake of the needs in production, living and development. Benson (2001) defined English learning needs as “including not only the actual needs for English in their jobs, but also the notion of their English abilities from the perspective of society”. Needs are the driving force of all behaviors, so are they to English learning. There are both subjective needs (level needs and interest needs) and objective needs (professional learning needs and occupational development needs) in students’ English learning. Only by helping and guiding students to identify their needs, can their inner motivation be activated and only by respecting their choices and helping them to make right choices, can their lasting interest and motivation in English learning be maintained.

### 1.2 With Autonomous Learning Not Cultivated Effectively, Students Lack Learning Methods (Do Not Know How To Learn)

Influenced by traditional teaching concepts, China’s primary and middle schools attach more importance to classroom instruction, knowledge explanation and teacher’s authority while neglecting students’ autonomous learning. Meanwhile, the long-existing exam-oriented education has emphasized rote learning and test skills

practices, which lead to the phenomenon that students are accustomed to classroom instruction and they center their English learning around reciting grammar, reading texts, and memorizing words. Things do not change much in universities. Currently, the compression of credits and reduction of class hours make it harder to achieve the teaching objectives, and the contradictions between the lack of autonomous learning ability and the demand for it become more and more prominent.

According to the constructivism learning theory, knowledge is not taught by teachers, but acquired by construction of meanings in a certain situation (a certain social and cultural background), with the help of other people (including teachers and learning partners), and by taking advantage of necessary learning materials. To solve the existing problems in the CET fundamentally, the key is to realize the transformation from “teaching” to “learning”. Students should not simply accept the information passively, but construct meanings actively. Students construct their own meanings according to their own experience and background by active selecting and processing the external information, so as to acquire the language in the use of it. “Learning is a life-long process, and the ultimate goal of education is to cultivate the students’ learning autonomy, and qualify them as autonomous learners.” (Zhu, 2007, p.139) So, the ability in autonomous learning can never be overemphasized. In the present environment of information technology, the progress of science and technology and the renewal of knowledge are speeding continuously, and the importance of autonomous English learning has been more and more valued. *The Ordinary High School English Curriculum Standard* explicitly points out, the general goal of English curriculum in the senior high school is “to further clarify the purpose of English learning, and develop the ability of autonomous learning and cooperative learning; to formulate effective English learning strategies; to cultivate students’ comprehensive communicative competence in using English through the study at the compulsory education stage”. While *the College English Teaching Requirements (2007)* stresses “to enhance students’ ability to study autonomously”. From “development of the ability of autonomous learning and cooperative learning; formulation of effective English learning strategies” to “enhancement of students’ ability to study autonomously”, the teaching goals at the two stages reflect the requirement for progressive and sustainable cultivation of autonomous English learning abilities. But because of the profound influence of the exam-oriented education and the utilitarian, the cultivation of autonomous English learning abilities has always been neglected and students’ abilities are generally not strong. In the present case, the demand for students’ autonomous learning is high, while we are not successful in cultivating students’ autonomous learning abilities, which lead to the widespread phenomenon of “the alleged autonomous

learning” (Chen, 2014, p.58). Without strengthening students’ autonomous learning, personalized learning and cultivation cannot actually be realized and guaranteed. Busy with rote learning, students cannot improve their learning efficiency and effectiveness by “learning to use and using in learning”. Students generally reflect that they achieve little in college English learning, and eventually they lose their interest and motivation.

### **1.3 With Personalized Learning Not Guaranteed, Students’ Learning Effects Are Far from Satisfactory (Fail to Learn Well And Use Efficiently)**

Long influenced by exam-oriented education and utilitarianism, the English teaching in China tends to “emphasize examinations but ignore abilities”. With no changes in many universities, the CET still emphasizes strengthening language knowledge and cultivating skills for test, but not cultivating students’ ability in using English. Influenced by this tendency, college students regard passing CET4 and CET6 as their sole target, without paying attention to using English. The outcome is that a large percentage of students can pass the exam, but they are poor in comprehensive communicative competence, especially the competence in listening and speaking. The phenomenon of “fail to learn well and use efficiently” universally exists, which lead to students’ lack of lasting motivation. Meanwhile, accustomed to traditional English teaching, students often lack consciousness and abilities in autonomous learning, adhering to single learning method. Without taking full advantage of the time and resources for autonomous learning, their learning efficiency is always low.

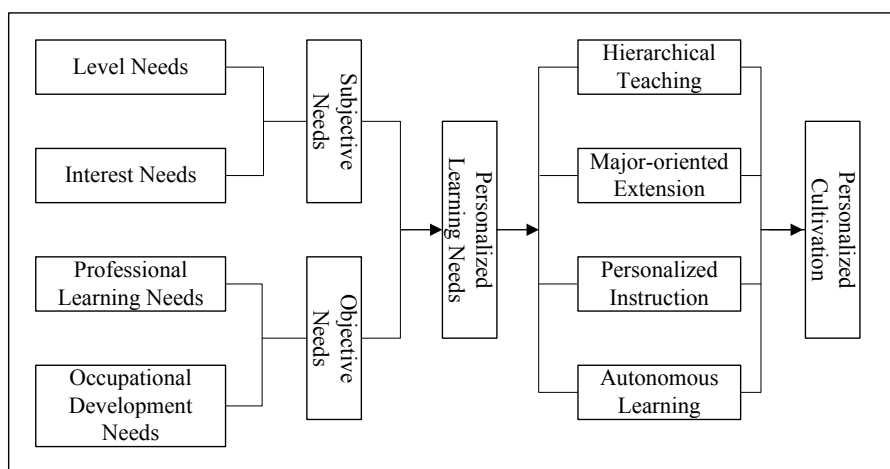
The CET reform should not be the transformation in teaching media and teaching method only, but should be the transformation of teaching concept. It is necessary to realize the transformation from the teacher-centered teaching concept and practice which focus on teaching knowledge and skills, to the student-centered teaching concept and practice which pay attention to teaching knowledge and skills but lay more emphasis on practical ability in using English and the ability of autonomous learning. It is more necessary to manifest the notion of “student-orientation”, that is, to realize students’ personalized learning and autonomous learning through the formulation and implementation of personalized teaching program on the basis of satisfying students’ learning needs and the real transformation from “teaching” to “learning”. But since the enrollment expansion of higher education, the number of undergraduates increases by 8% per year. Enrollment scale of undergraduates increased from 1.08 million in 1998 to 6.85 million in 2012. The transition from elite education to mass education is bound to bring about larger individual differences, which are reflected in more diversified learning needs as well as different English levels, learning habits and so on. An English test (the same level with

CET4) among 4800 new undergraduates in a key university shows their scores range from 28 to 92 (the total score is 100), and differences of performance in listening and speaking are more remarkable. Therefore, how to realize the personalized teaching and learning is the key to solving the problems. Currently, the CET in most universities focuses on General English (GE) teaching at the elementary stage (freshmen and sophomores). Whether in terms of credit allocation or course arrangement, English teaching in the elementary period accounts for the vast majority, and is conducted mainly in compulsory courses (reading-writing-translation lesson and audiovisual lesson). The CET at the subsequent stage is mainly in the form of elective courses for the purpose of ability extension. Students cannot get many credits from these courses and just choose according to their own interests, which do not draw enough attention from them. Although most universities have set the English for Special Purposes (ESP) as a compulsory course, not enough efforts have been spared on it, because on the one hand, the difficult content of this course is quite different from that of GE, and on the other hand, credits and time are too limited to ensure students' enough input of time and energy. Therefore, the teaching of ESP is quite superficial. The stereotyped curriculum and uniformed teaching mode cannot meet the needs of individual students, resulting in their shortage of enthusiasm and motivation in English learning.

It is obvious that presently the phenomena of students' "do not want to learn, do not know how to learn, fail to learn well and use efficiently" widely exist in the CET in China, the primary cause of which lies in the failure of excavating and mobilizing students' personalized learning needs fully. The stereotyped and uniformed curriculum, teaching mode, teaching method and assessment, as well as students' weak autonomous learning abilities can hardly meet the needs of personalized cultivation. Richards (1984) believes that needs analysis is the core in curriculum setting, and language courses must coincide with people's actual purpose of learning foreign languages according to the Language Curriculum Theory. Thus, the first and foremost step to solve these problems is to have a definite understanding of students' needs, and then make suitable cultivating plans according to their diversified needs so as to implement hierarchical cultivation and personalized guidance.

In the CET in UPC, hierarchical cultivation at the elementary stage, major-oriented extension at the subsequent stage and the progressive autonomous learning mode are combined to promote students' personalized learning and autonomous learning so as to guarantee their individual development and maximized improvement. The personalized cultivation system in UPC is shown in Figure 1.

## 2. THE CONSTRUCTION OF PERSONALIZED CULTIVATING SYSTEM



**Figure 1**  
The Personalized Cultivation System

### 2.1 Conduct Full Range of Dynamic Investigation to Fully Meet Students' Multiple Personalized English Learning Needs

Professor Wen Qiufang (2012) concludes from research that the college English curriculum objective should

be formulated according to needs for development of students, of society and of discipline as well as changes in needs. In the light of the increasingly bigger individual differences among students, a full range of dynamic investigation and a thorough analysis of students' English



learning needs have been conducted to help and guide our students to evacuate and activate their learning needs including their level needs, interest needs, professional learning needs, occupational development needs and the needs of petroleum and petrochemical industries. Moreover, through hierarchical cultivation, we try to fully satisfy students' personalized needs. In addition, at different stages, the learning needs of students will change, therefore, a regular investigation of students' learning needs and a dynamic understanding of the changes in needs are crucial to the adjustment of the English teaching scheme.

Firstly, through the English proficiency test, questionnaire investigation and interview with students and English teachers, students' level needs (what should be strengthened in their English learning in terms of their current English level) and interest needs (what are students interested in for their English learning) have been determined; Through the questionnaire investigation and interview with students, teachers in their majors and human resources department staff from industries, students' professional learning needs (which aspect of English learning should be strengthened in terms of professional learning, communication and development), their occupational development needs (which aspect of English learning should be strengthened in terms of employment and occupational development after employment) and the needs of the petroleum and petrochemical industries have been identified. In addition, it is necessary to help and guide students to explore their own learning needs. Guide students to distinguish "wants" from "needs" rationally, and be clear about their learning objectives and development direction.

Secondly, the curriculum has been continuously enriched to meet the students' individual needs. The college English curriculum system has been updated with the comprehensive course as the basis and various courses coexist, and students are encouraged to choose from the courses according to their actual needs. The diversified curriculum promotes students' multidimensional personalized development, thus contributing to the cultivation of multi-specified and diverse talents. With regard to students' personalized needs, UPC tries to satisfy their individual choices by enriching the curriculum, while students choose their own courses to extend their English learning according to the principles of combining compulsory courses with optional courses and students choosing their own courses but guided by teachers. During the hierarchical teaching at the elementary stage, the CET is mainly in the form of comprehensive courses (reading-writing-translation lesson and audiovisual lesson). As to compulsory courses, all students are obliged to attend, but the duration, content, teaching mode, teaching method are different among different levels of students. During the major-oriented teaching at the subsequent stage,

courses are offered in different categories: English for language skills, English for language culture, English for academic purpose, English for special purpose, and English training for examinations. Students choose their own courses to fully meet their own needs. Meanwhile, compulsory course of English in Science and Technology has been offered as a basis and transition to their future study of English in their respective majors. English for special purpose, which serves professional learning and development, has been offered by respective colleges for juniors and seniors, ensuring a continuous learning throughout the four years. Timely adjustment will be made according to the dynamic survey on students' English learning needs, which fully embodies the "student-oriented" principle. Since the college English curriculum in UPC is not set only by time, students can break the limit of time and space to choose according to their actual needs. The various learning modes promote students' multidimensional and personalized development, and guarantee the realization of the goal of cultivating multi-specified and diverse talents.

## **2.2 Proceed Hierarchical Teaching and Major-oriented Extension to Facilitate Student's Multidimensional Personalized Development**

Students' English levels determine the teaching objectives and hierarchical teaching has been conducted according to their different level needs in UPC. Different teaching targets has been set based on the general requirements, intermediate requirements and advanced requirements of *the College English Curriculum Requirements (2007)*, and hierarchical teaching has been conducted in three level groups: the basic level, the common level and the top level according to students' different English levels, with the principle of "different starting points, different targets, personalized cultivation, optimal development". With the general requirements being the teaching objectives, the English teaching in the basic level group emphasizes the learning and reinforcement of language knowledge; The common level group, with the intermediate requirements as the teaching objectives, emphasizes not only the consolidation of basic knowledge but the cultivation of language skills and autonomous learning strategies, as well as the interaction between teacher and students; While with the advanced requirements as the teaching objectives, the top level group emphasizes the cultivation of students' communicative competence with the purpose of meeting the needs of cultivating top-notch innovative talents and internationalized talents.

Students' different needs determine the direction of extension. According to students' interest needs, professional learning needs, occupational development needs and the needs of the petroleum and petrochemical industries, major-oriented teaching has been conducted to extend the students in different directions. Students can choose their own courses so as to bring their own

potentials into full play. Moreover, specialized cultivating programs are adopted for the top-notch class, the science experimental class and the superior engineer class to promote specialized cultivation.

Students' learning abilities determine the cultivation methods. According to students' different English levels and learning abilities, different cultivation methods have been adopted to meet the different teaching objectives. The curriculum for the basic level group is mainly in the form of comprehensive courses, and students are also encouraged to choose the optional courses. The traditional classroom instruction is the dominant teaching mode, while students are guided to pay more attention to autonomous learning. With students being the center and teacher playing a leading role, the classroom teaching centers around the explanation of language knowledge and practice of language skills to lay a solid foundation and make a preparation for their autonomous learning. In the curriculum for the common level group, class hours for comprehensive courses have been reduced, and the proportion for extension courses increased to encourage students to develop in different directions. Both classroom instructions and autonomous learning are equally valued in the teaching mode, and communicative approach has been adopted in classroom teaching to strengthen the cultivation of students' application ability. For the top level group, the curriculum is mainly in the form of extension courses, and the proportion for comprehensive courses has been greatly reduced. As for the teaching mode, autonomous learning is highly advocated to reinforce autonomous learning and personalized cultivation. With task-based teaching and probing mode, classroom teaching plays only a guiding role and a venue for students to exchange ideas. Students' communicative competence, professional abilities and innovative abilities are highly emphasized.

Teaching methods have been constantly innovated and enriched, and different teaching methods, such as the traditional method, the task-based method, and the inquiry method are combined with different teaching objectives for different level groups to guarantee the students the optimal improvements on current basis. For example, according to the requirements of hierarchical teaching, we have adopted the task-based teaching method in the top level group and elite classes. The teaching activities are designed from the perspective of students' learning and students' learning activities are endowed with clear target. In the process of accomplishing the "task", students can acquire knowledge or draw conclusions continuously and transfer their focus from language itself to language acquisition, so as to obtain the communicative competence but not just master the ready-made knowledge". With the deepening of the "task", the whole process of language learning will be more and more automated and autonomous. With the change of the traditional method of teachers' giving lectures in class and trial of the probing method in an attempt to realize the student-centeredness, students are encouraged to "using in

learning, learning in using" and develop themselves in the direction of "basic knowledge → application ability → academic ability → professional ability" so as to fulfill themselves to the maximum.

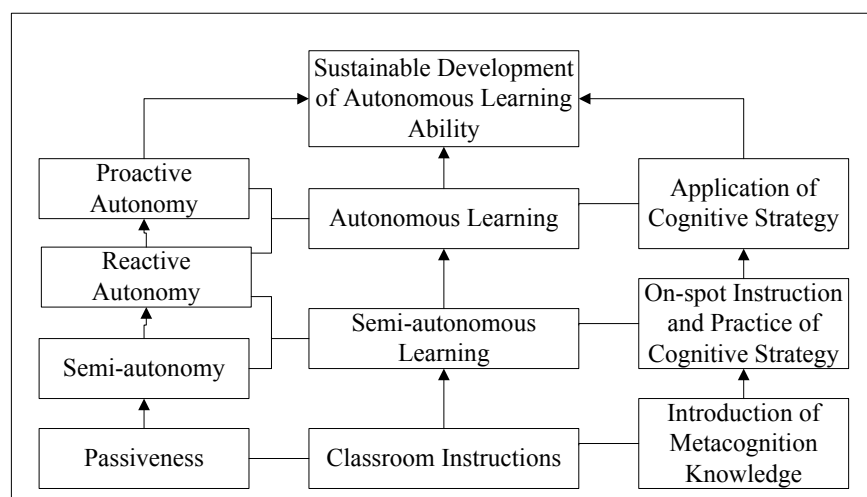
### **2.3 Establish Progressive Autonomous Learning Mode to Facilitate Students' Transformation from "Passiveness" to "Autonomy"**

According to the Constructivism Learning Theory, the key to solving the problems of the CET is to realize the transformation from teachers' "teaching" to students' "learning". In the present information era, students' abilities in autonomous learning become extremely important. But because of the impact of exam-oriented education, our college students are generally lack of the awareness and ability of autonomous language learning, and the cultivation of autonomous learning ability cannot be accomplished at one stroke. "There's no absolute autonomous learning. It is a concept of different extents, and it is a long-term dynamic process." (Zhu Yumei, 2007:137) Nunan (1997:193) believes "a completely autonomous learner does not exist. It is only an ideal, but not a reality. But a learner can achieve different levels of autonomous learning". By reforming the teaching mode in the audiovisual lesson in UPC, we have gradually constructed the progressive autonomous learning mode, realizing students' transformation from "passiveness" to "autonomy". (Chen Xiaoxin, 2014: 60)

Innovate the teaching mode to facilitate the transformation from teachers' "teaching" to students' "learning". In UPC, we have innovated the 3+1+X (3 class hours of reading-writing-translation lesson per week; 1 class hour of audiovisual lesson per week; x refers to the time for after-class autonomous learning) teaching mode based on computer / network and classroom and increase the intensity of autonomous learning. Through the teaching mode reform in the audiovisual lesson, we have constructed our progressive autonomous learning mode gradually as shown below in chart 2. In the reading-writing-translation lesson, the advantages of multimedia teaching and traditional classroom teaching have been combined and brought into full play, with students being the center of class while teachers playing the controlling role. At the same time, students' autonomous learning strategies have been strengthened. In the audiovisual lesson, the semi-autonomous learning mode has been adopted with teachers guiding and supervising at the side. The personalized instruction and training of autonomous learning strategies have been emphasized, thus laying a foundation for students' real autonomous learning after class. The semi-autonomous learning mode bridges the classroom instruction and the after-class autonomous learning naturally. At the same time, by strengthening the monitoring and guidance for autonomous learning via the network, the effect of students' after-class autonomous learning has been guaranteed. For the students' after-class autonomous learning, teachers give full play to

the role of guide, supervisor, cooperater and facilitator, ensuring a desirable effect. For example, through the homework distributing module of our campus network language learning platform, teachers assign homework regularly. Students must accomplish their assignments and submit them through the network in time, while teachers review the homework, feed back through the network, record their performance and include them as a certain proportion into students' semester grades. At the same time, through the learning program module of the platform, teachers can recommend learning materials for students and students learn according to their actual needs and interests. This part is not compulsory, with only the learning time recorded. Under the inspection and monitoring of teachers, reactive autonomy is achieved. Although this is only a low level of autonomous learning, an incomplete autonomous learning, it is an effective

transition to a higher level of autonomous learning. Finally, by taking advantage of all the Internet and natural learning environment such as the learning resources on the platform, other cyber sources, libraries, reading rooms and the foreign language corners, proactive autonomy, a much higher level of autonomy is fulfilled. After reforming the teaching mode in the audiovisual course, we have gradually constructed the "classroom instruction → semi-autonomous learning → autonomous learning(CSA)" progressive autonomous learning mode to promote the natural transaction of "passiveness → semi-autonomy → reactive autonomy → proactive autonomy" in learning process. The CSA progressive autonomous learning mode effectively strengthens students' autonomous learning, which is proved to be effective in improving students' autonomous learning ability.



**Figure 2**  
**CSA Progressive Autonomous Learning Mode**

We stress on both formative evaluation and summative evaluation to facilitate students' focus on English application abilities and autonomous learning. Currently, the main means of assessment in CET is the summative evaluation in the form of written tests, which is not effective in assessing students' real performance, activating their enthusiasm in learning the language and guiding them to pay more attention to cultivating their communicative competence. On one hand, with such means of assessment, students still learn for examinations, which means high score is more valued than communicative competence. On the other hand, the unified exams fail to reflect students' learning performance who are different in so many aspects. Those with good bases get high scores easily, which deprives them of objectives and motivation in learning, while those with poor bases fail to achieve desirable results even with massive efforts, which thwarts enthusiasm and motivation as well. Scientific assessment system should inspire

students' emphases on both classroom teaching and autonomous learning, on both scores and communicative competence, and on both outcome and learning process. To this end, we have built up a multi-assessment system in UPC. First of all, we have decreased the proportion of scores from summative evaluations as middle-term exams and final exams while increased those of formative evaluations such as periodical tests, online autonomous learning, task completion etc, so as to achieve the balance between in-class learning and after-class learning, and between process and results as well. Meanwhile, we have decreased the proportion of scores from written tests while increased those from listening and speaking parts, which contribute to the cultivation of communicative competence and the balance between scores and ability. With the multi-assessment system, we are able to guide students to stress on autonomous learning, communicative competence and learning process, thus improving their learning performance.

## CONCLUSION

As a complete system, the CET reform in UPC begins with a full range of dynamic survey and in-depth analysis of students' learning needs, and then helps and guides them to evacuate their English learning needs so as to gain a clear understanding of their learning objectives and development directions. On the basis of a definite understanding of students' diversified and personalized learning needs, a personalized cultivation system is constructed to satisfy their individual needs by hierarchical teaching, major-oriented extension and progressive autonomous learning. We've achieved the goal of cultivating students' autonomous learning skills and language application abilities effectively, thus ensured their personalized development and optimal improvement.

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