

The Survey of Chinese College Students' Autonomous English Learning in Self-access Language Learning Center

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Abstract: With the deepening of English teaching and learning reform, developing and motivating students' autonomous learning capabilities has become one major task for college English teaching. This essay mainly studies the Chinese college students' autonomous learning state in self-access language learning center based on the survey of randomly selected university undergraduates from six universities in Wuhan where self-access language learning centers are established early in the form of questionnaires and accordingly brings forward certain suggestions for improvement.

Keywords: College English; Self-access language learning center; Autonomous learning; Learning strategy; Learning acquisition

1 Introduction

With the deepening of English teaching and learning reform, English teaching has gradually transformed from traditional teacher-centered mode to students-centered autonomous learning whose key lies in 4 factors: sound environment, abundant resources, suitable learning strategies and habits of autonomous learning. Accordingly, some higher educational institutes have already successively established language learning centers, together with the adoption of 'in-class teaching & self-access learning' mode, to provide students with multi-level and multi-path English autonomous learning environment. Naturally it has become one of the major studies in college English teaching to adopt corresponding strategies based on the state of students' autonomous learning. Therefore, the survey of the state of college students' autonomous learning in language learning center is of great significance for developing college English teaching resources, optimizing language learning environment, and boosting college students' ability of autonomous learning.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Learner autonomy

Since the 1980s, autonomous learning has received increasing amount of attention. The term of autonomy was firstly coined by Henri Holec, who defined it as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' involving five aspects of responsibilities: determining learning objectives, defining the contents and progression of learning, selecting methods and techniques of learning, monitoring the procedure of acquisition, and evaluating learning effects [1]. Dickinson (1987) then proposed the definition that 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'. Whatever environment the learner is in, whether it's in curriculum or extracurricular, the learning is free of the teacher's direct control. In one word, it's self-teaching and self-learning [2]. Little (1991) believed that learner autonomy is essentially the psychological relation between learner's learning progress and contents [3].

In recent years, the scholars in china have also launched plentiful studies and discussions. Shu Dingfang (2004) explained that learner autonomy in foreign language learning mainly includes: 1) the self-choosing optimistic attitude to treat one's learning, taking charge of one's own learning and being actively involved in it, 2) the capability learners should be cultivated to independently finish one's own learning task, 3) the environment where learners should be given adequate opportunities to exercise one's ability to take charge of one's own learning. In spite of different wording in researchers' definitions, they all focus on the following qualities of the learners: independently formulating learning objectives and plans; initiatively participating in the learning progress and implementing learning task; experimenting and adopting certain learning method and strategy; taking the initiative to monitor one's own learning progress; initiatively and effectively evaluating learning effects and timely making adjustment[4].

2.2 self-access language learning center

With the deepening of foreign language teaching and study, self-access language learning center first arised in the west in the 1980s. Not until in the 1990s did they spring up in large numbers in the

higher educational institutes in HK, Macau, mainland China, and Southeast Asia. According to Fitzgerald (1998), self-access language center generally should be equipped with computers, satellite televisions, recorders, DVDs and photocopier machines, orderly placed sorts of learning resources, tutoring system on how to use these resources, teachers and technicians to provide language learning and technique tutoring[5]. In the opinion of Gardner & Miller (1999), self-access center should be powered with two basic functions: firstly, providing autonomous language learning materials, like grammar, listening material, to satisfy the needs of independent learners, secondly, motivating learners to become more independent by encouraging them to develop individual learning strategies and to reflect their learning progress and to take charge of responsibilities[6].

A great many higher educational institutes in china have recently successively established English learning centers to provide software and hardware autonomous learning resources. Cai shaoming and He gaoda (2006) pointed out that learning center, based on the theory of second language acquisition, constructivism and humanism, backed by modern education information technology, is the language learning and acquisition environment to integrate and develop abundant learning resources, support and boost students' autonomous learning. Li linzhu (2009) viewed self-access center as the location or environment of implementing or enhancing autonomous language learning integrating computer network lab system and digitalized language lab system. In short, language center could not only reach the requirements of digitalized language lab, but also satisfy the needs of teachers' utility of network teaching system to teach, students' autonomous choosing teaching and learning software and all kinds of media resources on internet or intranet to learn, not to mention its serving as technological platform for teachers to manage, monitor and evaluate the students' autonomous learning progress.

3 Methodology

3.1 Questionnaire design

This study adopts the method of questionnaire which consists of 3 parts: 1st part is basic information including university, gender, grade and major. 2nd part is self-filling questionnaire in the form of multiple choices, on the aspects of utilization state of language learning center, software and hardware resources allocation, self-access learning motives, learning strategies application. 3rd part is the opinions and suggestions in Q & A form. All the questionnaires are conducted anonymously to acquire relatively accurate and objective data. All the questions are measured by using the Likert 5 Point Scale method to acquire the statistical result: 5 -strongly agree, 4-slightly agree, 3-just so so, 2-slightly disagree, 1-strongly disagree.

3.2 Samples

The subjects of this study are randomly selected sample university undergraduates from six universities in Wuhan where self-access language learning centers are established early, covering 13 majors, like civil engineering, electronic information engineering, applied chemistry, clinical medicine, human resources management, e-business and education, 4 grades (mainly sophomore and juniors). The total of 800 questionnaires are handed out in June 2010, 781 finished, with the recovery rate of 97.6.

4 Result Analysis

According to Likert 5 Point Scale method, we get the results of the college students' different responses ratio about the autonomous learning state in self-access language learning center. The result is as shown in table 2.

4.1 The utilization state of language learning center

On the aspects of desire of self-access learning in learning center, 16.3% respondents revealed it very strong, 59.3% strong, 8.8% unwilling, 1.0% quite unwilling, proving that most of the respondents would rather study in self-access language learning center. While the respondents don't visit the self-access language learning center frequently after class, with 14.9% seldom visiting, 26.3% sometimes, only 12.3% frequently, demonstrating that the students' frequenting the place not enough, deserving strengthening of self-control; on aspects of the familiarity of self-access learning center, 25.0% respondents said not much, 11.3 % not familiar, pointing to the fact that more guidance and training should be launched to equip the learners with autonomous learning abilities. Due to the complicated formalities of self-access learning center, 16.0% respondents considered it rather inconvenient, 17.0% slightly inconvenient. 22.5% respondents considered the cohesion between in-class teaching and self-access language learning bad, 9.0% rather bad.

Table 2 Results of The College Students' Responses Ratio

Dimension	Question	Ratio				
		strongly agree	slightly agree	just so so	Slightly disagree	strongly disagree
The utilization state of language learning center	Willing of studying in SAC	16.3	59.3	14.6	8.8	1.0
	Frequency of learning in SAC after class	12.3	18.3	28.3	26.3	14.9
	Familiarity of functions of SAC	12.6	27.4	23.8	25.0	11.3
	Convenience of learning in SAC	13.3	38.0	21.0	17.0	10.6
	Cohesion to in-class teaching	11.7	33.4	23.4	22.5	9.0
software and hardware resources allocation	Learning environment	25.4	52.9	14.3	5.9	1.5
	Allocation of software and hardware	12.9	50.3	13.7	11.7	11.4
	Abundance of learning materials	12.7	47.8	15.6	12.9	11.0
	Rationality of zoning of functions	18.6	50.2	16.9	10.6	3.7
self-access learning motives	Desire of improving English level	29.1	50.3	15.9	3.8	0.9
	Aim of learning English	13.8	44.9	19.5	15.5	6.3
	English learning interest	11.9	30.2	24.5	20.9	12.6
autonomous learning strategies application	Planning of autonomous learning	14.6	30.2	26.0	19.6	9.6
	Self-control in autonomous learning	10.4	25.1	27.3	22.2	15.1
	Will of overcoming learning difficulty	12.4	27.0	27.5	16.8	16.3
	Evaluation of learning acquisition	12.0	44.3	24.2	11.9	7.6

4.2 The allocation of software and hardware resources

The investigation reveals that 25.4% respondents considered the environment of language learning center is 'very good', 52.9% good, only 1.5% very poor. On aspects of computer software and hardware, 12.9% considered it very good, 50.3% good; on aspects of abundance of learning materials, 12.7% considered it very good, 47.8% good; on aspects of rationality of zoning of functions, 18.6% considered it very good, 50.2% good, only 3.7% very poor, all of which prove that all of the higher educational institutes have invested quite a lot and the allocation of software and hardware resources is relatively reasonable.

4.3 Autonomous learning motives

This study revealed that 29.1% respondents' desire of improving English level are quite intense, 50.3% intense, only 0.9% with no desire which proves that Chinese college students have already realized the importance of English learning in the context of globalization and wish their English level improve after great-effort study. As to the aim of English learning, 13.8% respondents think their aim are quite clear, 44.9% clear, 15.5% unclear, and 6.3% quite unclear. On the aspect of the English learning interest, 11.9% respondents reveal that their interest is quite strong, 30.2% mild, 20.9% little and 12.6 % no interest which demonstrates that more than 1/3 Chinese students lack enough interest in English, and are quite passive in learning English.

4.4 Application of autonomous learning strategies

This investigation discovered that 14.6 % respondents' planning of autonomous learning is 'very good', 30.2% 'good', 19.6% poor, and 9.6% very poor. 22.2% have relatively poor self-control ability, 15.1% very poor, 16.7% poor and 16.3 % very poor on terms of will of overcoming learning difficulty, 12.0% very good and 44.3% good, 7.6% poor and 11.9% very poor on terms of evaluation of learning effects, all of which point to the fact that when Chinese college students utilize the strategies of autonomous learning, they are affected greatly by the impetuous social climate, resulting in the poor execution of autonomous plan and the lack of necessary methods of overcoming difficulties.

5 Discussion and Suggestion

Through questionnaire, we have discovered that: 1) the establishment of self-access center helps improve the level of college students' autonomous learning ability, while because of the influence of deeply-rooted traditional education mode, quite a number of Chinese college students couldn't adapt

themselves to the autonomous learning environment and the functions of self-access learning center couldn't be fully utilized. 2) Currently higher educational institutes in china have already invested quite a lot on establishing language learning center, judging from the sound environment of language center platform, higher level of computer software and hardware, and reasonable zoning of functions, but neither the types of learning materials are diverse enough, timely updated, nor is the interactive teaching software state-of-art. 3) Even though Chinese students have an intense desire to improve their English level, they have no interest in learning English and their aim are short-sighted, only in hopes of achieving higher score in tests and acquiring better jobs. 4) When Chinese college students utilize the strategies of autonomous learning, they are affected greatly by the impetuous social climate, resulting in the poor execution of autonomous plan and the lack of necessary methods of overcoming difficulties.

Based on the above analysis, we strongly suggest that: 1) strengthening the guidance and training of freshmen, cultivating their capacity of self-access learning to bring the role of self-access language learning center into full play. 2) speeding up the update of visual-audio learning material, developing advanced interactive teaching software, and increasing the interest of language learning process. 3) expanding the learning functions of language learning centers, fully utilizing the functions of discussion zone, dialogue club, consulting room, avoiding the language learning center becoming computer rooms or internet bars. 4) teachers realizing the effective cohesion of in-class teaching and autonomous teaching. 5) holding lectures on self-access learning strategies to help college students command the methods and techniques of English autonomous learning. 6) establishing the system of motivation for college students' autonomous learning, arousing the students' enthusiasm of autonomous learning and forming sound English learning environment.

6 Conclusion

This essay mainly studies the Chinese college students' autonomous learning state in self-access language learning center based on the survey of randomly selected university undergraduates from six universities in Wuhan area on the aspects of utilization state of language learning center, software and hardware resources allocation, self-access learning motives, learning strategies application, reaching certain conclusions and accordingly bringing forward specific suggestions for improvement.

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