

Study of College Students' English Learning Autonomy and Motivation

Honghua Wei

English Department of North China Electric Power University, Baoding, Hebei Province, 071003, China.

diandiwe@126.com

Abstract

Learning autonomy is of great importance in the rapid developing epoch, motivation plays a vital role in fostering learners' autonomy. A survey is conducted in the paper to find out non-English-major college students' present situation of motivation and autonomy on English learning, so as to give directions for the further study.

Keywords

learning autonomy, motivation, personality, strategies

1. Introduction

The rapidly developing informational epoch requires that people must keep lifelong education and possess learners' autonomy (LA) which is independent of the instruction of teachers and classes. Therefore, education, including foreign language education, must try every means to stimulate the learners' motivation to learn more and foster their autonomy for the needs of lifelong education.

2. Definition of Autonomy

Holec defined autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" [1]. That is to determine the objectives, define the contents and progressions, select methods and techniques to be used, monitor the procedure of acquisition, and evaluate what has been acquired. Huttunen regarded autonomy as "the willingness and ability of the learner to take responsibility for his own learning" [2]. Dickinson described autonomy as "learner's having responsibility for all the making and implementing all of the decisions concerned with his own learning" [3]. Boud said, "Autonomy is an educational goal and an approach to educational practice" [4]. In Little's term, learner autonomy was "essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning—a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" [5]. In addition, Nunan claimed that, "learners who have reached a point where they are able to define their own goals and create their own learning opportunities have, by definition, become autonomous" [6].

To sum up, the definitions of autonomy have tended to reflect such broader educational and sociopolitical derivations, which generally tend to fall into five categories [7]:

- 1) Situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- 2) A set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- 3) An inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
- 4) The exercise of learner's responsibility for their own learning;
- 5) The right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

However, no matter what definition is given to the concept of LA, in a broad sense, it converges on the point—the learner's ability to take charge of one's own learning. LA is seen as a natural product of learning in which objectives, progress and evaluation of learning are determined by the learners themselves. Learners are to have a clear idea of what, why, and how they are trying

to learn and willing to accept the redistribution of responsibility between teachers and themselves. They take some of the initiatives that give shape and direction to the learning process, share in monitoring progress and evaluate the extent to which learning targets are achieved.

3. Motivation

Learning process is influenced by various factors, among these factors, motivation plays a vital role. Without motivation, autonomy would be an empty talk.

Motivation represents the reasons for people's actions, desires, and needs. Motivation can also be defined as one's direction to behavior, or what causes a person to repeat a behavior and vice versa.

Motivation can be divided into two different categories, namely, Intrinsic (internal) motivation and Extrinsic (external) motivation. Intrinsic motivation is the self-desire to seek out new things and new challenges, to analyze one's capacity, to observe and to gain knowledge [8]. It is driven by an interest or enjoyment in the task, and the task itself is the goal that one wants to achieve. It is often helpful to know what interests students in order to connect these interests with the subject matter.

Extrinsic motivation refers to the performance of an activity in order to attain a desired outcome and it is the opposite of intrinsic motivation [8]. It comes from influences outside of the individual. Usually extrinsic motivation is used to attain outcomes that a person wouldn't get from intrinsic motivation [8]. Common extrinsic motivations are rewards (for example money or grades) for showing the desired behavior, and the threat of punishment because of misbehavior. Competition is an extrinsic motivator because it encourages the performer to win and to beat others, not simply to enjoy the intrinsic rewards of the activity.

During practical learning process, both intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation are indispensable for students learning autonomy to get knowledge needed in the future lifetime.

4. Empirical Study of Learners' Autonomy and Motivation

In order to find out the present situation of different learners' autonomy in English study (listening, speaking, reading and writing skills are included), their motivation, and strategies adopted, this study employs a survey design to examine the relationship between these factors.

4.1 Design of the Questionnaire

From existing research, personality (introvert or extrovert) also plays an important role in language learning, in order to find more clues influencing students' language learning autonomy and motivation, personality factors is taken into consideration here.

The questionnaire is composed 38 questions, Among the 38 items of LA test, there are four aspects, including the test of aim, motivation and dynamics on LA, test of common learning strategies and meta-cognitive strategies adopted in LA, test of listening and speaking autonomous skills, test of reading and writing autonomous competence. This analysis is to show the correlation between personality and the four aspects of LA, and the correlation between the four aspects themselves.

4.2 Survey Process

A hundred non-English-major fresh students of a college were chosen randomly to be the subjects. The survey was done on November, 2015. After they got the questionnaire, all the 100 students were told, "Please do the question strictly according to your own facts, check carefully after you finish in order to make sure that no question is missed." The subjects are members of two different classes, so they do the questionnaire at different time. Every test cost about 10 minutes. Teachers invigilated carefully and strictly to assure the test going smoothly.

100 questionnaires were sent out, 100 were got back, 92 of them are valid.

4.3 Statistical Results and Analysis

SPSS is adopted to do the analysis according to the statistics received. The results are as follows:

Table 4-7 Correlations Analysis

		AMD	STRA	LIS-SPE	READ-WRI	PERSON
AMD	Pearson Correlation	1	.398(**)	.338(**)	.416(**)	-.145
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.001	.000	.167
	N	92	92	92	92	92
STRA	Pearson Correlation	.398(**)	1	.459(**)	.627(**)	-.082
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000	.438
	N	92	92	92	92	92
LIS-SPE	Pearson Correlation	.338(**)	.459(**)	1	.571(**)	.018
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.	.000	.862
	N	92	92	92	92	92
READ-WRI	Pearson Correlation	.416(**)	.627(**)	.571(**)	1	-.161
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.	.125
	N	92	92	92	92	92
PERSON	Pearson Correlation	-.145	-.082	.018	-.161	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.167	.438	.862	.125	.
	N	92	92	92	92	92

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

NOTE: PERSON=personality, AMD= aim, motivation and dynamics, STRA= common learning strategies and meta-cognitive strategies, LIS-SPE= listening and speaking, READ- WRI= Reading and writing

From the table, we can see that personality has no correlation with the four aspects of LA, while aim, motivation, dynamics on LA have correlation with common leaning strategies and meta-cognitive strategies ($P=0.000 < 0.01$), with listening and speaking autonomous skills ($P=0.001 < 0.01$), with reading and writing autonomous competence ($P=0.000 < 0.01$); common leaning strategies and meta-cognitive strategies have correlation with listening and speaking autonomous skills ($P=0.000 < 0.01$), with reading and writing autonomous competence ($P=0.000 < 0.01$).

The findings above indicate that strategies are key elements to English learning autonomy and motivation, motivation has impact on learners listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

While from the analysis of specific items in the questionnaire, we find that even though majority of students want to be autonomous, only 22.83% students adopt proper strategies when learning English, 36.96% students can choose learning materials suitable for themselves; while 60.87% students hoping to get instructions on strategies of autonomous learning.

About motivation of students' English learning, some of them learn out of intrinsic motivation—interest or enjoyment, they can and will find proper strategies to learn and get a ideal achievement; but more of them learn out of the extrinsic motivation—exam, a good job, going abroad, etc., they just try every means to reach the goal; students with different motivation are interested in

different aspect of English learning. While some students lose the desire to learn English due to various reasons.

Thus, instructions of learning strategies are necessary in teaching process. And educators should try hard to stimulate learners' motivation.

5. Conclusion

From the research, students learn English without enough autonomy and motivation. Even if they want to learn autonomously, they fail because of lack of strategy instructions, which cause part of students lose the desire to go on. So, during the practical teaching process, how to develop learners' autonomy and stimulate their motivation, further studies should be conduct.

Acknowledgements

This article is the 2015 annual North China Electric Power University in central colleges and universities basic scientific research special fund project "learning motivation and the college English curriculum and teaching research" (number: 2015 MS69), 2015 high school English teaching reform research in Hebei Province and practice item "learning motivation and the college English curriculum and teaching research" phased achievements.

References

- [1] Holec, H. *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1981, p.3.
- [2] Huttunen, I. *Towards Learner Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning in Senior Secondary School*. Oulu: Acta Universitates Ouluenss, 1986, p.233.
- [3] Dickinson, L. *Self-instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p9.
- [4] Boud, D. Moving Towards Autonomy. In D. Boud (Ed.), *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning*. London: Kogan, 1988, p.17-39.
- [5] Little, D. *Learner autonomy I: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik, 1991, p.4.
- [6] Nunan, D. Designing and Adapting Materials to Encourage Learner Autonomy. In P. Benson&P Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*. London: Longman, 1997, p. 192-203.
- [7] Benson, P. The Philosophy and Politics of Learner Autonomy. In P. Benson&P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*. London: Longman, 1997, p. 18-34.
- [8] Ryan, R. M.; Deci, E. L. (2000). *Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being*. *American Psychologist* 55 (1): 68–78. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68