

Research on Learner Autonomy in Blended Learning Mode

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Abstract

The development of digital technology in the 21st century and the customary use of smart devices make online learning a necessary part in higher education. In order to improve learning efficiency and learner autonomy, this paper explores an effective teaching procedure based on blend learning, which introduces tasks suitable to different learning stages to make the best of advantages of online and offline learning.

Keywords

Learner Autonomy; Blend Learning; Deep Learning.

1. Introduction

No students, anywhere, will have their teachers to accompany them through their life (Littlewood, 1999). Especially in such an epoch of knowledge and information, more and more is expected and required for teachers than ever before. A qualified teacher should realize the fact that their students will be with them for quite a short time, and so what they have to do is to equip them with the means and capacity to cope with actual situation when they are no longer around. That is, teachers should try to help learners “to develop the attitude that learning is a life-long process and to acquire the skills of self-directed learning” (Knowles, 1976:23, cited in Wenden, 1987:9).

The emergence of digital technology in the 21st century and the customary use of smartphones, laptops and tablets in every aspect of everyday life, has slowly introduced online learning within the core structure of Higher Education. while due to the COVID-19 pandemic, greater importance has been attached to blended learning for its advantages in improving learning efficiency and effect. The purpose of this paper is to study the way to promote learner autonomy through blended learning so as to make learning easier and more effective delivering an integrated learning experience that offers real value to learners and matches their needs.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Definition of Learner Autonomy

It was Holec who introduced learner autonomy to the field of second language pedagogy in his project report to the Council of Europe in 1981. Holec (1981:3) defined autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. 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.

After development for years, the definitions of autonomy have tended to reflect such broader educational and sociopolitical derivations, which generally tend to fall into five categories (Benson & Voller, 1997:1):

- 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 (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Dam, 1995). 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. From this perspective, despite many definitions mentioned above, LA adopted in this paper is considered as a general cover term to refer to an ability and willingness to learn both independently and interdependently as a responsible learner.

By "interdependently", it means that autonomy is not a synonym of "learning on your own" or "self-study", but rather a necessary condition of developing learners' linguistic competence through cooperation (Leng, 2005).

2.2. Blended Learning and its Characteristics

2.2.1. Definition

Blended learning, also known as hybrid learning, technology-mediated instruction, web-enhanced instruction, or mixed-mode instruction, is an approach to education that combines online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional place-based classroom methods (Wikipedia). There's a requirement of the physical presence of both teacher and student, with some elements of student control over time, place, path, or pace (Staker & Horn, 2012).

2.2.2. Characteristics of Blended Learning

(1) Being effective

Learners can be on the same page when teacher sends them reading materials, videos and pre-course questionnaires so they can come prepared.

(2) Being convenient

Learners can have access to the content anywhere, anytime, on any device, which increase the utilization of fragment of time.

(3) Increasing engagement easily

The combination of multimedia and instructional designing makes a rich learning experience. Learners can go back to the material, especially the key part, whenever they want so they can deliver great results over time.

(4) Getting insightful reports about learners

Analyze the activity of learners and see where they are excelling and where they are struggling.

In this way, teacher can optimize the content accordingly.

From the above information, we can see that blend learning can not only reflect students' dominant position, but also fully stimulate students' interest in learning, and improve teaching effectiveness on the basis of practicing the concept of people-oriented education. All those elements can possibly contribute to the development of learner autonomy. In order to prove the effectiveness of blend learning on boosting learning autonomy, we design a set of teaching and assessing system.

3. Teaching Procedure based on Blend Learning

3.1. Teaching Design

A blend learning process are designed to guide and foster learners’ autonomy. Three sectors, namely, input of materials, output of production, and further understanding of the contents, are involved in the teaching procedure. Specifically, 5P (preparation, practice, production, presentation, progress) principle are employed to design the blending learning process so as to combine the teaching elements systematically and logically. Details are as follows (fig.1):

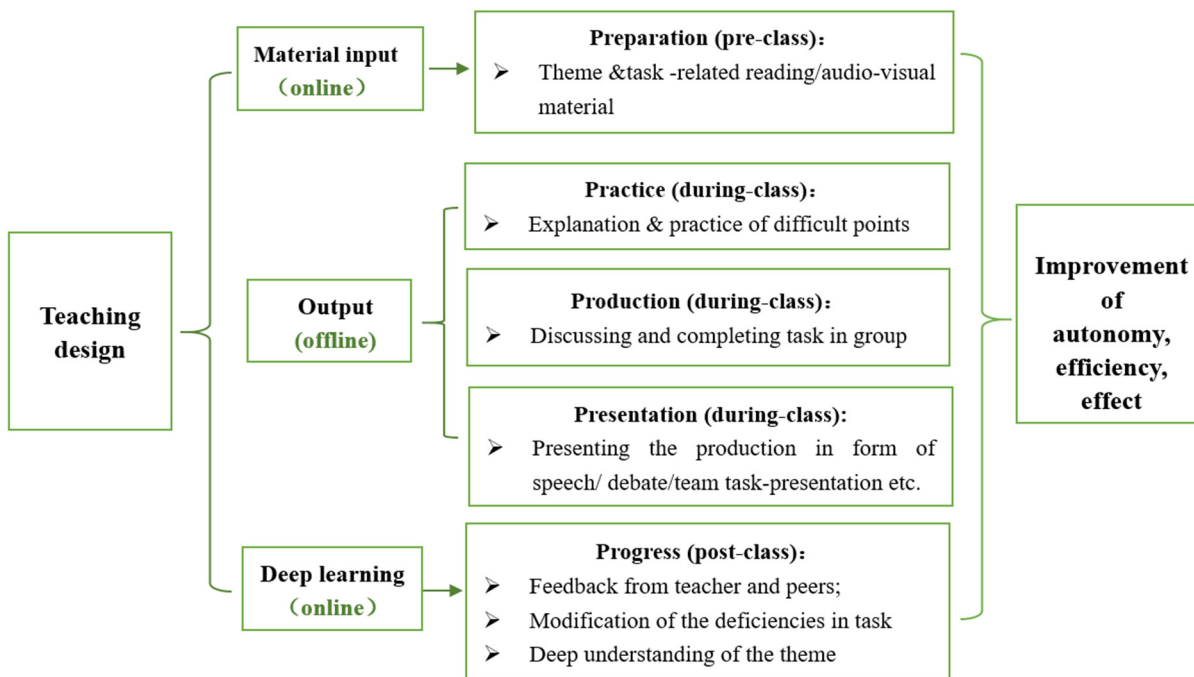


Fig 1. Blended Learning Process Design

3.2. Autonomous Learning Online

In order to motivate students to learn autonomously, deepen their understanding of the theme and expand their knowledge, this course provides online autonomous learning section before and after the class period as a necessary supplement to classroom teaching activities. See the following figure for details (fig 2):

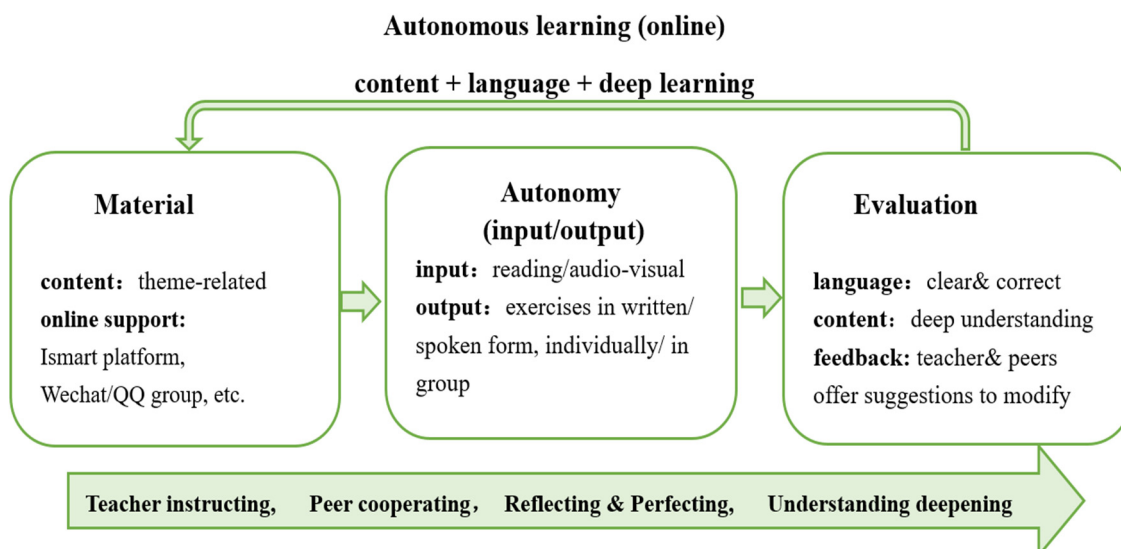


Fig 2. Design of online self-learning session before and after class

3.3. Multi-dimensional Assessment System

Multi-dimensional assessment system is employed to stimulate the learners engaging in the learning process actively, which includes diverse evaluation forms, contents, standards and even different evaluation subjects. In this way, we strive to evaluate the learning process of students from a multi-dimensional and all-round way. See table below for details (table 1):

Table 1. Multi-dimensional Assessment System Conclusion

Item	Learners' performance		Assessment			Score
			Form	Subject	Standard	
Pre-class Task	Finishing all preview materials		online	teacher	Completion of task	10
During-class task	Doing exercises& answering questions		offline	teacher	Accuracy and depth of answer	15
	Tasks (individual/group)	Engaging actively or not	offline	teacher peer	Commitment; Cooperation; Language-performance; Insight of the theme	10
		Language performance: accurate, fluent; Presentation: natural, decent				20
Theme: deep understanding of the connotation; Further work: theme-related knowledge/ action	online	peer	25			
After-class Task	Reflection and perfection of the task according to the feedback from teacher and peers; sending the modified one to the platform		online	teacher Peer	Completion; Depth	20
Total						100

After exploring methods of improving learners' autonomy in blend learning for years, through the above teaching procedure, we find that learners can make take full advantage of diverse learning materials to conduct individual or collaborative task. Meanwhile, due to the convenience of online learning section, learners of different levels can take time to make full understanding of the content, combined with specific assessment items on each learning section, which can effectively motivate learners to engage in every part of the learning process. Under the guidance of this learning process, learners will grasp the form of autonomous learning style which is beneficial to life-long learning.

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