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THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENTS’ AUTONOMOUS LEARNING ABILITY

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Cultivating students’ autonomous learning ability is the need of social development in this new era since we are confronted with a great number of unprecedented challenges, such as the fantastic development of science and technology, the frequent change of career, and the fast speed and high frequency of knowledge update. It cannot be denied that, in order to possess the competence of lifelong learning, students need to learn how to learn which refers to their autonomous learning ability. Therefore, cultivating students’ autonomous learning ability in the process of teaching English as a foreign language has become a basic educational requirement and goal, which is also the essence of teaching and learning in the education field [1]. Students with autonomous learning ability can take the initiative to set their goals, make a clear study plan, select skills and methods to be used, monitor the procedure of acquisition properly and evaluate what they have learned. They are active participants in the social process of classroom learning.

It is obvious that the ultimate purpose of language teaching and learning is to learn how to communicate with people from other cultures effectively, how to become the master of learning, as well as how to nurture an autonomous learner for lifelong learning. Meanwhile, mastering and applying effective learning

strategies is one important and dominant component in cultivating autonomous learning ability. It is generally acknowledged that cultivating students' autonomous learning ability is of vital significance. Thus, it is of great importance to analyze the key factors that affect autonomous learning ability.

It should be emphasized that achieving learner autonomy is conditioned by various internal factors (intelligence, motivation, learning strategies) as well as external factors (learning environment, teachers, educational system, etc.). Here we focus on certain factors for the reason that they exert direct influence on learning outcomes and autonomous language learners can control these elements to achieve successful language learning.

To begin with, it is necessary to mention learners' attitude as it plays an important role in the cultivation of autonomous learning ability. Learners' attitude means whether she/he is willing to take responsibility for his/her own study. Learners' active attitude is the first step to move into autonomous learning. It is affected by four main elements: teachers, the educational system, peers and the society. Among these factors, teachers have dominant influence because they introduce, advocate and promote autonomy [2]. With an enthusiastic attitude, teachers emphasize and encourage students to study with autonomy. Then students are more likely to develop an awareness of autonomous learning. Since educational institution is responsible for making the policy, institutional support becomes important when funding is required for the resources of autonomous learning. Important influence may come from their peers. If some groups of students have successfully used autonomous learning, other students are likely to have a try. Societal factors including parental pressure, culture and power hierarchies can also have important impact on autonomous learning [1].

The second important factor is learners' motivation. Motivation is defined as the factors that contribute to a person's desire to do things. As far as the relationship between motivation and autonomy is concerned, learner autonomy increases motivation, which enhances their learning effectiveness. Motivation can be

promoted by encouraging students to exercise personal control in the course of learning and to be responsible for it. Therefore, motivation is indispensable for facilitating autonomy. It is vital for teachers to inspire students' motivation because motivation determines students' attitudes towards learning and plays a decisive role in the whole learning process and their learning outcome is determined by this. Thus, motivated study is a premise for initiating autonomous learning. And a motivated learner is likely to accept autonomous learning more easily than less-motivated learners.

It is clear that learning foreign languages, especially English, is increasingly important in society, so teachers who can develop self-motivating language learners do students a great service. Z. Dörnyei divided self-motivating strategies into the following main categories:

1. Commitment control strategies which help to preserve or increase students' original goals. Teachers may remind students of the possible outcomes, positive or negative, of the language learning action.

2. Metacognitive control strategies for managing concentration and reducing procrastination. Teachers should try and teach effective study habits.

3. Satiation control strategies for avoiding boredom. Teachers can, for example, think of interesting subjects or suggest interesting activities for self-study.

4. Environmental control strategies such as maintaining a quiet, distraction free study area, or asking for help [3].

According to E. Ushioda, motivated students have well-established self-motivating strategies as part of a habitual study practice [4]. It is not apparent that these students learned their self-motivating strategies from language teachers in particular; rather, they probably applied effective study habits, acquired from teachers and parents, to a subject that they experienced success in and enjoyed. However, language teachers should remind students of the importance of applying self-motivating strategies to language learning, and should explicitly instruct students in the strategies outlined by Z. Dörnyei [5].

It is obvious that keeping students motivated to learn English is one of the biggest challenges any teacher faces. It is sometimes appropriate for teachers to take an active role in trying to improve the motivation levels of a group. Language learning environment is a crucial factor affecting motivation and autonomous learning. Most important of all is the classroom atmosphere. The traditional teacher-centered learning environment emphasizes operation and reinforcement for transferring knowledge. Under such teaching mode, there is little student autonomy in the learning process, which results in students' low motivation and passive attitude in English learning. In view of the fact that formal classroom learning is still the dominant environment for foreign language teaching, it is necessary and urgent to establish a supportive self-access language learning environment [6].

Secondly, language-using environment is a practical problem that has to be confronted and taken into consideration. Since most students are immersed in their native language and separated from the English environment, they rarely have chances to communicate with native speakers. As they cannot experience the feeling of accomplishment that comes from putting the language into use, they consider it irrelevant and show little interest in learning. Therefore, it is necessary to improve language learning environment so that students' enthusiasm and motivation can be inspired. More opportunities should be offered to them to practice using the language [1].

Let us consider some practical ideas which may help teachers improve motivation levels in their groups.

- **Setting goals.** Teachers should try to negotiate some realistic goals with the group. For instance, what do they want to be able to do in English by the end of the courses? Then teachers think of ways of achieving those goals. Achieving the goals will take effort on both parts. Students should be ready to accept their part of the task and take some responsibility for their own learning goals.
- **Progress markers.** All language learners know that there are times when they seem to be getting nowhere and

making no progress. They reach a plateau and there seems to be no way to get better. If this is the case for some students, teachers need to gather some evidence of their level by keeping a piece of their written work, recording them or keeping the results of a test. Then it is necessary to set a date in the future (for instance, end of term) and tell them they will redo the piece of work at the future date. When they have done this, teachers give them back the old piece of work and look for evidence of improvement. This usually helps students to 'see' their improvement in a more tangible way.

- Looking outside the classroom. Teachers should encourage their students to look at how English is used outside the classroom and exploit any examples they can find. The Internet is an obvious source of authentic English, but also advertising, tourist information, menus, original version films etc. This should remind students that learning English can be useful in all sorts of areas of their lives. If there are any students who have travelled to an English speaking country, teachers should use their experiences with the group. Moreover, it is possible to find some local job advertisements where English is required. Teachers could base a lesson around jobs and offer help with writing CVs. This may make students think of English as more than just another subject and more as a tool to help them achieve their future goals [7].

With the remarkable development of digital technology and the Internet, people have easy access to information. Numerous resources are available on the Internet. Surrounded by abundant English learning resources, students with learning autonomy have the awareness to select proper learning materials and sort out the needed information. Thus, students are able to pick out favorable online resources based on their specific learning purposes. For example, if students prefer British English, they can get access to original English programs such as BBC to imitate British pronunciation.

TED-Ed is an educational platform that allows creating educational lessons with the collaboration of teachers, students, animators — generally people who want to expand knowledge and good ideas. This website allows democratizing access to information, both for teachers and students. Here, people can have an active participation in the learning process of others.

Coursera offers hundreds of Massive Open Online Courses to anyone interested in gaining basic understanding of a wide array of topics and subjects. It provides online studies in different categories and learners can receive verified certificates for their online achievements. Many universities have even recognized Coursera credit and allow students to complete online courses as part of their regular degree programs at university. Meanwhile, coupled with their acquired knowledge and learning ability, students with learning autonomy should make some adjustment after comprehending the knowledge they have obtained [1].

- Using audio and visual materials. Since schools and universities are equipped with various audio and video materials, teachers should include the appropriate ones to use while planning their lessons. For instance, an overhead projector can be used in presenting research works or writing drafts for classroom correction or to read.
- Autonomy and responsibility. When teachers allow autonomy and require responsibility, they encourage motivation and self-guided learning, academic achievement and a sense of excitement in their students. Providing students with choices leads to autonomy and, in turn, motivation and learning. Students tend to be more motivated to complete a task and perform better when they choose to engage in the task themselves, rather than having the task chosen for them.
- Digital technology. There may be two ways that technology can effectively increase engagement with the kind of tasks traditionally found on worksheets: giving feedback and tracking student performance. Computers can offer feedback that reinforces the work that led to a correct

response, or feedback that helps guide the student to pathways to correct answers. Feedback for correct answers, from the teacher or the computer, should highlight the steps that led to success. Feedback for incorrect answers should promote reflection on the error. Digital technology can use past performance and the performance of other students to dynamically determine what item, task, or instruction should come next. The focus on learning can be reinforced by a focus on growth, and digital systems can display that growth immediately and graphically. That kind of progress feedback can be very motivating as all students like to see themselves getting better.

It should be emphasized that these are just a few practical ideas of how to keep motivation levels up. People are motivated to learn languages for a variety of reasons, and successful learners are able to stay motivated through the long and difficult process of language acquisition. Although the link between language teaching and long-term motivation is not clear, there seems to be links between language learning enjoyment, success, and long-term learning motivation. By planning enjoyable classes, language teachers may be able to inspire long-term learning motivation in students. Research shows that there are many techniques teachers can use to prepare motivational classes, so teachers should familiarize themselves with a variety of techniques. Not every technique will work with every class, or with every teacher [6].

Considering the peculiarities of students' autonomous learning ability, it is worth noting that self-management skills help students become more independent and successful. For example, The University of Kansas focuses on self-management plans which are used to teach students to independently complete tasks and take an active role in monitoring and reinforcing their own behaviour.

It is a matter of common knowledge that an important goal in education is to foster self-reliance and independence. In fact, self-management strategies can be implemented before any problem behaviours occur. Research studies show that self-management

strategies can be used to improve academic performance, productivity, time on-task, and to decrease problem behavior. The ability to use self-management strategies effectively is a skill that becomes very important for success. The critical elements of self-management include setting goals, monitoring behaviour, and evaluating progress. Examples of self-management include self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement. When a student engages in self-monitoring, he observes his own behaviour, records its occurrence on a data collection form, and graphs the data to evaluate progress. Self-evaluation strategies encourage students to set their own goals and compare their current performance as they work towards those goals. Both self-monitoring and self-evaluation are often used with self-reinforcement strategies. A student takes an active role in self-reinforcement strategies by determining how he will evaluate progress towards a goal and delivering a reinforcer to himself when he achieves the goal [8]. Thus, self-management strategies focus on fostering students' independence and the ability to engage in self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement. In addition, the power of self-management is its emphasis on building a feeling of control over one's own behaviour.

It should be stressed that mastering learning strategies is vital to cultivate students' autonomous ability, which is beneficial to their lifelong learning and development. When teaching language learning strategies, it is necessary to focus on two approaches which are direct and embedded. Learning strategy can be directly instructed to students. Adequate training is suggested to inform the students of the significance and benefits of learning strategies; embedded training means that the application of learning strategies is integrated into the teaching process but not directly explained to students. There are different patterns of learning strategy instructions. Let us consider the model which combines learning strategy instructions with content topics and language development activities. This model consists of five steps: preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation and expansion activities. A brief introduction of each step is as follows.

1. Preparation

In the first step of preparation, teachers find out what students really know about the content and strategies, what weak points in previous knowledge need to be reinforced, and how students have been instructed to get involved in learning activities or tasks. Elaboration, organization and optional attention are commonly instructed and applied in the preparation stage.

2. Presentation

In the presentation stage, teachers present and explain new knowledge and information to students in English with necessary clues. The key point is that teachers need to make sure that students can accurately understand the new information so that they will be able to utilize it effectively in the next step. Strategies such as self-monitoring, elaboration, and positive inference may be taught.

3. Practice

As students engage in practicing new information exposed in the presentation period, it is generally student-centered, and teachers act as facilitator and adviser to help students absorb the new information and apply strategies in effective ways. Similarly, some learning strategies are practiced in this stage: planning, elaboration, cooperation, self-monitoring, summarizing, and deduction.

4. Evaluation

In the period of evaluation, students evaluate the quality of their performance so that they can well master what they have learned and what needs to be reviewed. Evaluation can be directed by teachers. Individual and cooperative approaches are also effective.

5. Expansion activities

This step provides students with rich and various chances to comprehend and digest the new concepts and skills they have learned. They can further combine them with their acquired knowledge framework and apply them in their daily study. Students may also be given opportunities to exercise higher order thinking skills and combined learning strategies appropriate to activities.

Based on cognitive theory, this five-step model integrates language strategy instructions into linguistic development. This pattern includes both teacher-directed and student-centered activities. The distinctive feature of the pattern is the incorporation of the identification and training of learning strategies [1].

To sum up, it should be emphasized that students' autonomous learning ability can promote the overall development of students. It is necessary to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability in the process of learning English as a foreign language. It depends on the common efforts of the school authority as well as teachers and students. Moreover, motivation is one of the key factors that facilitate the rapid and successful acquisition of English. It provides the main incentive to initiate learning a foreign language and later the determination to persevere and sustain the long and often difficult learning process. Without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the best abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals. Motivation can be promoted by encouraging students to exercise personal control in the course of learning and to be responsible for it. It is vital for teachers to inspire students' motivation because motivation determines students' attitudes towards learning and plays a decisive role in the whole learning process.

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