Strategies on Cultivating Non-English Major Students' Autonomous Learning Ability Based on Constructivism Theory

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Abstract: With the implementation of the new curriculum reform and the wide application of teaching technologies in China, the teaching model of the non-English major students' English as foreign language teaching has also undergone great changes. Constructivism emphasizes student-centered, autonomous and cooperative learning, which offers a solid theoretical foundation for the autonomous learning in the non-English major students' teaching process. Therefore, based on the constructivism theory, the article attempts to explore strategies to cultivate the autonomous learning ability of non-English major students. With the application of teaching strategy of cooperative learning, situational teaching and task-driven teaching, the students can more actively participate in the classroom activities and their learning enthusiasm can be stimulated.

Keywords: Constructivism theory; non-English major students; new curriculum reform; autonomous learning; teaching strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The past few years have witnessed the rapid development of modern information and communication technologies, which also extend to every field of our society, including the English as a foreign language learning field. Great changes have taken place in the teaching methodologies as well as in the teaching resources. The teaching infrastructure in the university classrooms has been updated, such as the internet networks, computers, projectors, electronic blackboards and video conference systems, etc. The advanced technology has also stimulated the birth and development of autonomous learning.

As claimed by Benson [1], the establishment of the Centre de Reserches et d'Applications en Languages (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy, France is the first acknowledged start point of research and practice on autonomous learning. Based on the practice of CRAPEL, Holec [2] proposes that autonomous learning centers should include: (1) a basic facility with appropriate information and learning resources; (2) teachers with instructional skills; (3) an effective path provided for learners to how to use the learning system. Little [3] further develops the concept of autonomy, deepens the research into the process of internalization of knowledge and focuses on the correlation between the learner and the content of the materials. Luciana [4] and Robin [5] do some empirical researches and found that teachers' beliefs are inconsistent with teachers' teaching practice, and they provide some suggestions for teachers to transform teachers' teaching beliefs into teaching practice. Huang

and Francis [6] do the semi-structured interviews with teachers and indicate that teachers lack both of confidence in their students and of systematic training in autonomous study theory and teaching strategies, which are relevant to textbook compilation, English curriculum provision and teachers' education.

In China, with the continuous expansion of college enrollment, the number of students has surged, however, the number of teachers is relatively insufficient, and the intercommunication between teachers and students has greatly decreased. This makes the task of cultivating students' autonomous learning ability more urgent. In 2007, the China Ministry of Education issued the "Teaching English Course Requirements" [7], which clearly stated: "The new teaching model should be supported by modern educational technology, especially network technology, so that English teaching and learning cannot be limited

by time and place and develop from the perspective of individualization and autonomous learning".

However, in the traditional Chinese classrooms of non-English majors, there is a large class with more than 50 students on average. As a result, the interaction between students and teachers and the interaction between students themselves is quite limited. Therefore, teachers whose role is the center of the whole class tend to focus more on the teaching contents. As for the after-class English learning, the students are usually assigned to do exercises that are related to the textbook, which cannot ensure a high level of English proficiency. Under such a context, it is necessary to promote the research of autonomy in foreign language learning and teaching, thus improving the non-English major students' autonomous learning ability.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF CONSTRUCTIVISM THEORY

Jean Piaget [8] firstly puts forward the Constructivism, which focuses on how humans make meaning in relation to the interaction between their experiences and their ideas. From his points of view, knowledge acquisition is a dynamic process in which human's cognition should construct from the interaction with environment and human's internal and external world. Vygotsky [9] highlights the convergence of the social and practical elements in learning and considers that constructivism is an outgrowth of cognitive science. Constructivism has been increasingly involved in education, especially in language teaching, because it stresses that students are the dominant role in the classroom. All the studies have enriched and promoted the development of Constructivism, which makes practical application of the theory in the teaching process.

Nuke and Cigdem [10] examine 161 articles published between 2002 and 2013 in *Science Direct, Eric and EBSCO* and find that the Constructivist approach is a research trend in teaching and learning field and it is gaining great importance. Muna [11] notes that aspects of activities in foreign language teaching should be based on students' personal and social experience and learning should take place through interactions with other students, teachers, and the world at large. Liang Yue [12] does research on the constructivism-based autonomous learning, and offers theoretical guidance and advice to the English as foreign language teaching, including optimizing learning environment, motivating students' self-study initiatives, encouraging cooperative studies between students, providing individualized instruction according to students' learning abilities and adopting an evaluation system to promote students' comprehensive abilities. Yang Weidong and Zhao Juan [13] further explore constructivism-based English teaching and

learning modes by offering a quantitative analysis on questionnaires. Tao Jiusheng [14] uses interviews and questionnaires method to do quantitative and qualitative research on English autonomous learning in the Web environment.

STRATEGIES ON CULTIVATING AUTONOMOUS LEARNING ABILITY

The constructivist view of teaching believes that the cognitive process of students' acquisition is based on their original knowledge and experience with the help of teachers. And it emphasizes that in the teaching process, the center is the "learning" of the students, rather than the "teaching" of the teachers. In order to optimize the foreign language teaching, the author attempts to give some constructive enlightenment to the cultivation of the autonomous learning ability of non-English major students.

Teaching strategy of cooperative learning

Cooperative learning can be done in the form of a group or in the form of a class, which provides students with an equal opportunity to speak out their mind. Everyone has the opportunity to participate in classroom activities, so that teaching tasks can be carried out effectively, students' enthusiasm can be aroused and initiative can be stimulated. Teachers can organize students to conduct group study before or during the teaching class, assign teaching tasks to each study group, and discuss in groups with the guidance and help of the teachers. During the process, each student can freely express their opinions and students in the study team should choose a team leader to summarize the results of the discussion and construct a report after discussion. In this way, the students' classroom anxiety can be reduced. With English learning groups, classroom and extracurricular English teaching activities, learning plans through discussions, students can get opportunity to learn and communicate and their ability to communicate with others can be developed. In addition, a more relaxed and pleasant English learning atmosphere and students' confidence in communication can be built. Therefore, cooperative learning can stimulate students' initiative and enthusiasm, and develop students' autonomous learning ability, so that students have good teamwork spirit, strong interpersonal skills and more chance to speak English.

Situational teaching strategy

Situational teaching refers to the creation of situations that contain real events or real problems. Students conduct knowledge and meaning autonomously in the process of exploring the event and the solution to problems. The teacher is also the explorer or problem solver in the situation. Teachers provide the necessary help to the students in the process of constructing meaning together with the students. The

various events or problems in situational teaching are the "authentic tasks" that students have to complete. And teachers can make full use of the multimedia teaching infrastructure such as electronic blackboard and projector to represent the "authentic tasks". And through the exploration of these events or problems by students and teachers, the teaching content and its process become a dynamic and organic whole. With the situational teaching strategy, the teacher creates a vivid and visual environment in the teaching process, which can arouse the emotional experience of the students, activate the students' mind, mobilize the students' learning emotion, help the students to better grasp the knowledge, and promote the autonomous learning.

Task-driven teaching strategy

Based on the constructivism theory, a task-driven teaching strategy is proposed. In the pre-task stage, the teacher is responsible for leading in topics and tasks to the students, which aims to highlight the task theme, provide rich and useful language input for college English learners, and activate relevant background knowledge to fully prepare for further tasks. Teachers can use the picture display, video playback and personal experience to introduce the topic to help students understand the purpose and requirements of the task. After class, students are required to search relevant literature, video materials etc. through various channels. In the while-task stage, teachers can divide the whole class into several groups, and each student will discuss freely within the group. This stage focuses on the English expression of the students and the communication between the peers. After students' discussion, they are required to give a report on the task. The report can be both in oral English and written English. Therefore, the teacher is mainly responsible for supporting, encouraging and controlling, and provides students with the opportunity to express their thoughts in English.

CONCLUSION

With the implementation of the new curriculum reform of College English in China and the students' increasing access to get knowledge, the traditional teaching model has been challenged. Under this context, cultivating students' autonomous learning and stimulating their learning interests are of great importance. The constructivism theory emphasizes the student-centered teaching, students' active construction of knowledge and the teachers are mainly the guides and organizers of the students' learning. Constructivism theory plays a strong guiding role in teaching the non-English major students' English as foreign language, which not only promotes students' independent learning and active construction, but also helps students to deeply understand knowledge. By carrying out the teaching strategies of cooperative learning, situational teaching and task-driven teaching, it is hoped that students' autonomous learning ability can be greatly improved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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