AUTONOMOUS LEARNING STRATEGIES AND EFFICIENCY ▶ APTITUDE OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

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Abstract
Based on theories and empirical study of autonomous learning this paper analyzed the correlations between English learners' autonomous learning strategies and learning efficiency. The research showed that cognitive strategies, affective strategies, communicative strategies were closely related to the English learning efficiency and aptitude. It also revealed that the traditional English teaching mode strongly influenced the English learners' learning strategies and that cognitive strategies were more frequently used than cognitive strategies while affective and communicative strategies were employed inadequately. Therefore, the development of the English learners' awareness of learning strategies especially the awareness of cognitive strategies could help them learn English more effectively.

Keywords: autonomous learning ▶ learning strategy ▶ learning efficiency and aptitude

Research Background
In recent years the researches of English teaching approaches in China have begun to focus more on the English learners themselves. Three main areas are usually involved: English learners' physiology, English learners' psychology and English learners' cognitive strategies. Meanwhile, researchers across the global have made great contribution to both the theory and the practice of learners' autonomous learning. All these are helpful to the ongoing college English teaching reform CETR in China.

However, the traditional teaching concepts have been deeply rooted in many teachers' minds. The classroom as the principal place of teaching and learning shoulders important functions in the foreign language teaching. It is where the teachers can strengthen the already known knowledge of the students where they present new contents of their lessons and give assignments and where the students can practice what they have learnt. In the classroom teaching something new to the students is the chief task during the whole process of which the teacher usually explains what is to be learnt while the students are just listening. What can be seen in a traditional classroom is that the teacher is explaining the key points and the new structures of a text while the students are trying to memorize what the teacher has presented. Consequently, the students' ability of autonomous learning is ignored. And it is the same case with the students' creative ability in learning. Therefore, the students' autonomous learning under the teacher's guidance is the most efficient way for the students to learn English apart from what they can learn from the four hour per week English classes in school. Autonomous learning can be good for the students to learn better after they have graduated from college. The long-term goal of English teaching is

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for students to learn English independently and voluntarily not only on the campus but also after they have graduated.

Much attention has been paid to learners' autonomous learning in the foreign languages study field. The main goal of the educators is to teach the learners how to learn foreign languages autonomously, which in turn can help the learners to develop the lifelong learning ability. Once the learners have mastered this skill, it will be easy for the learners to acquire more knowledge and to use the modern technology in order to be adapted to the massive demands of increasingly developing society. Meanwhile, the ongoing CETR also requires that the English teachers to employ modern educational technologies to alter the traditional teaching approach to construct individual and active college English teaching model which can fully arouse the teachers and the students' motivation of teaching and learning and which can develop students' autonomous learning ability and comprehensive ability to use English.

In Hunan University of Economics, one of the 180 universities chosen for CETR experiment in China, an English teaching reform experiment has been carried out from September 2004 up to now on enhancing the students' practical and applicable capability, especially listening and speaking ability, as well as the cross-cultural communication ability so that the students can be lifelong learners of English so that they can learn English autonomously and use English effectively.

From the three-year CETR in Hunan University of Economics, the infrastructure construction for autonomously English learning has been bettered, the English teaching assessment and management have improved. The establishment and utilization of autonomous language learning center, ALLC, have changed the traditional learning methods, enriching the English resources and improving the practical capability of English of the college students. Nevertheless, the research of autonomous learning strategies in ALLC and learning efficiency is still at the initial stage.

II Research Theory

1 Definition and Characteristics of Autonomous Learning

Many researchers point out that autonomous learning is independent study. Once Flavel 1978 made a conclusion of autonomous learning and pointed out three main characteristics of autonomous learning:

a. Application of self-adjustment on metacognition, motive and behaviors should be emphasized;

b. Autonomous learning is a course of feedback and circulating. In other words, autonomous learner can monitor his/her learning method during whole activity. At the same time, learner is able to evaluate study result and modulate his/her learning method;

c. Autonomous learners know when and how to adopt proper learning strategies at proper time.

Additionally, Deng Kefeng 2004 claims that absolute autonomous study and non-autonomous study are rare. Most studies are situated between those two phenomena. It is wise to make off level of autonomous learning rather than dividing study into autonomous and non-autonomous. It may bring much benefit to teach the students in accordance with their aptitude.

2 Learning Strategies

This term learning strategies which was gradually established in 1956 was brought forward by Jerome S. Bruner aiming at the malpractice of learning method instruction to learners but only focusing on the teaching of knowledge. So far, there is no uniform definition for learning strategies. The following are some mainstreams:

Learning strategies form the learning rules system hidden inside learners — by Duffy 1982
Learning strategy is the course of information processing which is applied in intelligence activities of coding analyzing and collecting information — by Jones 1964

Learning strategies are some specific learning methods and techniques that are used by learners to adjust their own attention memory and thinking — by Robert. Mills Gagné 1974

There are various definitions on learning strategies. One of them is that learning strategies are
referring to the methods and techniques. It was pointed out that learning strategies could be displayed to some extent as some approaches. Techniques and operations of intentional adjusting process in order to reach the goal of learning. Shi Yaofang 1991

Another viewpoint considers learning strategies as the control on learning. Learning strategies are the process in which learning activities and approaches would be controlled subject to all the variables. Their changes and relations. Wei Shenghai 1992

In a word, learning strategy refers to the psychological adjustment of learning methods and activities according to different learning scenarios in effective learning. It contains all the activities that have an influence on learning efficiency and quality such as cognitive strategy, meta-cognitive strategy, and so on. Among these, meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies play a core role which is assured by another strategy — affective strategy.

3. Home Scholars. Researches on Learning Strategies

The empirical research on learning strategies started from the study of the relation between strategy and achievements. After that, some subjects including Mathematics and English came into the research field. The relevant researches were the motive research by Wang Zhenhong and Liu Ping 1998 and experimental study on Math learning by Fang Ping 2000.

4. English Learning Efficiency and Aptitude

It mainly refers to the effectiveness and capability of autonomous English learning as the measurement of learning outcomes. Specifically, it means the learning strategies and the competence of second language learners acquiring instruction of teachers.

III. Investigation and Research

1. Subjects

The subjects in this research are 180 non-English majors chosen randomly from different classes in grade 2005 of the university of economics. Including 82 boys and 98 girls and their average age is 20. The subjects have six-year experience of English learning in middle school. The average English level of the subjects is at Band one which is assessed by the result of the final examination of the first term. These subjects with the English level of Band one have some preliminary listening comprehension and speaking ability but be poor at reading and writing.

2. Questionnaire Design

In this study, the questionnaire was designed on the basis of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning. Oxford 1990 and the questionnaire of English Learning Strategies Cheng Xiaotang, Zheng Min 2002. In view of the existing problems, the questionnaire had been adapted to the actual teaching situation. All the questions involved had been carefully examined by teachers with many years teaching experience to ensure the feasibility of the research.

The questionnaire was divided into four parts according to the aspects of strategies which had influence on the efficiency of English learning.

There were four parts in the questionnaire: Cognitive strategy questions 1-6, meta-cognitive strategy questions 17-26, affective strategy questions 27-35, social strategy questions 36-42. There were five options ranging from completely disagree to completely agree upon which the subjects made their own decisions.

3. Instruments

In this research, questionnaire and tests were adopted as tools. The specific requirements and instructions had been clearly stated and explained to the subjects in classes. All the questionnaires were handed out among 180 subjects and 174 valid ones were collected immediately. The language level of the subjects was shown through the classroom performances and the results of the final examination.
4 Results and Interpretation

a Analysis of autonomous learning ability with SPSS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistics</th>
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<th>social</th>
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</table>

![Figure 1](image1.png)

 Autonomous Learning strategies

In Figure 1 the average value of cognition strategies was obvious higher than that of the other items Which was 4\[19 \] The average value of social intercourse strategies went next Which was 3\[82 \] On the other hand the average value of affective and meta\cognitive strategies were lower than that of the other two And their values were 3\[15 \] and 3\[01 \]

Different values in Figure 1 indicated that the traditional teaching approach influenced the students on their second language learning The teacher emphasized on the learning methods and attempted only to fulfill their tasks Consequently the teacher brought up several requirements for students to master the learning methods

- Students were required to do preparation for lessons before class
- Students were required to attend classes attentively
- Students were required to take notes and participate in language tasks in class
- Students were required to review a lesson after class
- Students were required to build relationship between what they have learnt trying to find out regular pattern and learn by analogy
- Students were required to do more readings after class in order to broaden their views

On the other hand although social intercourse strategies and affective strategies were attached importance to by the society cognitive strategies were still deep in people's mind social intercourse strategies were as notable as 3\[05 \] It indicated that the students were not familiar with the controlling and adjusting of their emotion attitude and motivation In other words the students were in lack of self confidence of learning English and it was difficult for them not to be shy and anxious

b Analysis of the Application of Autonomous Learning and English Learning Efficiency

Correlations between meta\cognitive strategies and the final scores

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</table>

![Figure 2](image2.png)

In Figure 2 the Pearson correlation of meta\cognitive strategy and the final score was 3\[81 \] which indicated that these values were significantly correlated

Correlations between social strategies affective strategies and the final scores

![Figure 3](image3.png)
Correlations

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<table>
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<th>Final scores</th>
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</table>

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.
Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

In the above table, the results showed that the Pearson correlation between the social strategy and the final scores was 0.477 and that between the affective strategy and the final scores was 0.379, which implied that these values were significantly correlated.

VII Results and Interpretation

1 Traditional Teaching Mode Has Great Influence on English Learners' Learning Strategies

From the data analysis, it was found that the learners applied cognitive strategies much more often than any other strategies in the process of learning English. The subjects of this research had a clear purpose of learning and corresponding plans. They were capable of seeking solutions to the difficulties when they came across problems and looking for better ways of improving English. This indicated that the input of learning strategies had profound effects on students. The preview—lecture—exercise—review process had been deeply rooted in the students' minds ever since the students were in the primary school. The middle school all the way up to the university. However, this learning scheme needed continuous improvements: supervision and self-assessment. It was obvious from the data that the application of meta-cognitive strategies was absent and the participants were not skilled at this superior learning management technique. Therefore, the teachers should be aware of the following aspects in giving instructions on the meta-cognitive strategies:

a Improving Meta-Cognitive Awareness of Learning Process

Improving the meta-cognitive strategy awareness including that of learners' learning purpose and methods should be the first step in the cultivation of self-management learning. Teachers are supposed to have the learners learn by doing besides clear explanation of those factors. During the practical teaching process, the foreign language teachers should always infiltrate meta-cognitive strategies and learning strategies consciously and offer more chances to the learners. By doing this, the combination of instructing knowledge and bringing up ability will offer many opportunities for the students during the continued learning activities.

b Assisting Learners to Clarify Study Target and Establish Study Plan

To set up study aim is another category of meta-cognitive strategies. It refers to study target and ability after accomplishing a certain course. Nuna 1997 At the same time, John cited in Nunn that clear study aim and motivation are closely linked together. Nuna 1997 It is wise to combine target and plan drawing together since those two factors have close relationship. Learners can have a clear understanding of their current condition with the help of teachers. Be familiar with the requirements of the school and find out distance to make out individual learning strategies in order to reach their own goals. The students are going to set up short-term goal within one semester or a year and long-term goal: reach goal after finished whole courses.

c Guiding Students to Do Self-Assessment

Self-assessment means introspecting one's own study such as circumstances for a certain language
task] Nunan 1997 [.] It will bring benefit to the students to control study proceeding by doing self evaluation] The teachers can choose a standardized paper to test the learners in order to assist them to know their own stages of learning language “English self-adapting test” software can be introduced to students as it is a good written assessment on the degree of difficulty weaknesses and future plans Therefore the initial goal will provide a better understanding for the students about themselves and preparation for the forthcoming study

2] English Learners Employ Cognitive and Affective Strategies Inadequately

Affective strategy refers to the one that learners use to control and adjust their affective attitude and motivation in the process of language learning] Active affective strategy could increase the opportunities of language application and language capability as well But if it does not handle well it will greatly affect the interests of the learners in English learning] The students would be over-worried that they cannot learn English well] that they are afraid of failing in the examination or that they are embarrassed at class for being unable to answer the questions This kind of affection filtering prevents learners from completely accepting the language input

Therefore English teachers should focus on the cultivation of effective strategies and bring them to every aspect of English learning in daily teaching They should try to minimize the effective filter and guide learners by using positive emotion In college English teaching the learners are the center and the main body The teachers are organizers of language input In the daily teaching activities the teachers could cultivate the effective strategies by following methods to promote understanding and support between the teachers and the learners in order to raise efficiency

a] Establishing Good Relationship between Teachers and Learners Creating Relaxed Atmosphere Helping Learners Overcome Anxiety in Study

i] Creating more opportunities for the teachers to communicate with the learners As a matter of fact most of the learners desire to communicate with the teachers because they have various difficulties and problems They expect to be cared about by the teachers as parents and friends

ii] Appreciating the learners’ efforts] The teachers should encourage the students by saying “good” or “well done” in class The learners will keep on going to get greater achievements for award and appreciation from the teachers and other learners

iii] Caring about the learners] narrowing the psychological distance between the learners and the teachers] Trying to build up a sincere relationship A friendly relationship between the learners and the teachers is desirable when the learners are confused and troubled They could find someone to talk about their thoughts] feelings opinions and affection] Just as Wilson once said] the college life should be a complete natural communication between the teachers and the students Only in this way can the students really realize the importance of knowledge and be good at getting along well with those who are good at thinking] which in turn helps them enjoy learning and thinking

b] Creating Genuine Learning Situation and Carrying Out Activity-based Teaching

While teaching in class it will be better to closely combine the teaching contents with the students’ practical life] creating genuine situation that the students are very familiar with] which can make the classes more active and lively and help to cultivate the students active thinking style and promote a positive affection for English learning Modern multimedia teaching methods can also be used to arouse the students’ interest in English learning through different kinds of classroom activities such as role-plays] debates and speaking contests etc

i] Making good use of the modern multimedia teaching means] designing and making PPTs to make each lecture lively and easy to be understood] and stimulating the hearing and vision ability simultaneously

ii] Arousing the interests of the learners in forms of performance activities] provide more opportunities for the learners to practice their oral expression of English and leave more space and time for the learners to show themselves] furthermore] promote their application of affective strategy to
maintain the enthusiasm in English learning.

Promoting Students’ Self-Confidence on Learning English and Helping Them Develop a Strong Will to Overcome Difficulties by Providing Them More Opportunities to Experience Success

Attention should be paid to the learners of different levels and help them to make progress in the same class. In other words, teachers should teach students in accordance with their aptitude. When the learners have difficulty in learning, the teachers could lower down the difficulty degree to reinforce confidence. For excellent learners, who are only a few among the students, the teachers could increase the degree of difficulty to ensure everyone has a success experience.

The training of English learning strategies is an important part of the college English teaching. However, the research and practice related with it is still limited. The classroom teaching has dual tasks not only in transforming knowledge but also in teaching learning techniques. Learning to do is just for a while, but knowing how to do is beneficial lifelong. Just like the old Chinese saying goes, Give a man a fish and he can eat for a day; but if you teach him how to fish, he can eat for a lifetime. It is only when the learners want to learn and are capable of learning that they can be good learners. In a conclusion, English learning strategies should be used in every English class giving the learners wonderful experience of learning.

References