

On Cultivation of Learner Autonomy in English Writing in College

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Abstract—The article gives a detailed analysis on the cultivation of learner autonomy in English writing. The article puts forward three aspects, i.e. attitude, capacity and situation, of how to cultivate learner autonomy in English writing. It contributes to stimulating learners' interests in English writing, improving their writing abilities, increasing their writing chances, and then enhancing their writing capacities on the whole.

Keywords—*learner autonomy; English writing; teacher; learner*

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing, one of the four basic skills in English learning, reflects objectively learners' capacity to exert the language. Nevertheless, in the present English teaching, the importance of writing is always being neglected, and then writing becomes a weak link in English teaching and learning. Although both teachers and learners put a large amount of time and energy in improving writing, the outcome can hardly reach their heart's content. The setback not only makes teachers frustrated, but also makes students discouraged.

At present, most of the teachers adopt the traditional teaching method, that is, the "teacher-centered" model. Although learners can acquire certain knowledge of English writing under the guide of traditional teaching approach, they haven't grasped the key of writing in fact. Since the 1980s, the cultivation of learner autonomy has given rise to the professors' concern. In the end of the 1980s, Constructivism and school of Vygotsky probed into learner autonomy from different perspectives, and made a systemic summary of learner autonomy. After the 1990s, the research on learner autonomy became broader and deeper; in particular, the studies on the essence, mechanism, the acquirement of learner autonomy have made great progress. Recently, learner autonomy has been emphasized to a growing degree in the research on subject education in China, particularly in English teaching. Since writing is a difficult point in English teaching and learning, the application of learner autonomy could achieve success certainly.

II. THE THEORY OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

A. The definition of learner autonomy

Since early 1980s, learner autonomy has become a hot issue in the field of linguistics. A great number of researchers have been doing researches on it, including the background, definition, and application to language teaching and learning. While in the field of education, it is still difficult to be defined. The foundational definition was provided by Holec in "Autonomy and foreign language learning", a report that was first published by the council of Europe in 1979. He described autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec 3). Holec also pointed out that "the learner is no longer faced with an 'independent' reality that escape him, to which he cannot but give way, but with a reality which he himself constructs and dominates" (21). Other researchers make definitions in different words.

Dickinson describes the definition of autonomy as "a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions" (11). Littlewood regards learner autonomy as "educational term which involves students' capacity to use their learning independently of teachers" (20: 71). Seeing that, learner autonomy has been defined in various ways from various perspectives.

B. Components of learner autonomy

Though there are varied definitions, it is assented that learner autonomy is characterized by several distinct features. There seem to be three key components in general. The first one is attitude. "Most theorists, however, seem to agree that the term 'attitude' refers to some aspects of an individual's response to an object or class of objects" (Yi 113). During the process of learning, learners' attitudes influence their work greatly, positively or negatively. In learner autonomy, attitude refers to learners' willingness to accept the responsibility for their own learning and to take initiatives in learning. The second component is capacity. In learner autonomy, learners should develop their abilities to choose the materials, to set up goals, to exert learning strategies, to communicate with others, and to evaluate their own and others' works. And all those abilities serve for the tasks of learner autonomy. The last one is situation. A supportive situation of learner autonomy is of great importance. For one

thing, harmonious atmosphere in learning makes learners feel ease and respected. For another, learner autonomy provides learners opportunities to take charge of their own learning. In this case, teachers play important roles. In addition, a good relationship is established among teachers and learners benefits learner autonomy a lot.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

Learner autonomy has a great deal of significance in education. A successful autonomous learning experience is:

A dynamic and ongoing process of negotiation between the learner and the teacher. Learner autonomy is, perhaps, a more efficient way to describe the manager role of the learner as described by Holec as it promotes the independence of the learner throughout the entire learning process within a course of study and beyond. (Reynard)

Firstly, facing the challenge in the new century, adapting to the fast development of scientific technology, and meeting the demands of the renewal of knowledge, one cannot only rely on what he or she has learned in school. The ability of lifelong study becomes a basic quality one must possess. However, lifelong study is not conducted in school or by teachers mostly, and it depends more on one's autonomy. At the same time, it is clear that no education can impart learners all human knowledge. Therefore, the task of education must be transformed from teaching knowledge to cultivating learners' capacity of learning.

Secondly, the cultivation of learner autonomy is the head aim of the curriculum reformation. The traditional study model emphasizes too much acceptance and mastery, leading to the passivity of learners. It cannot promote learners' progress; on the contrary, it becomes the obstruction of learners' development. While learner autonomy aims at changing the passive state and enhancing learners' subjectivity, initiative and independence. At present, with the implementation of curriculum reformation and the wide use of new textbook, learner autonomy is regarded as the new requirement in teaching. In the new textbook, a number of parts ask learners to make inquiry autonomously, to collect and analyze materials, to acquire new knowledge initiatively, and to solve problems independently, etc. All of these request learners' high level of autonomy.

Thirdly, learner autonomy is helpful for the improvement of learning efficiency, which is one of the key elements of quality education. As soon as learners realize that getting knowledge depends on themselves and that they are the managers of learning, the efficiency could be raised.

Therefore, learner autonomy is essential for learners and the cultivation of learner autonomy is absolutely necessary. Since learner autonomy contains numbers of perspectives, it is hardly to explain it in all aspects. Here, the article mainly talks about the cultivation of learner autonomy in English writing in college.

IV. THE CULTIVATION OF LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ENGLISH WRITING IN COLLEGE

A. *Cultivating learners' positive attitude towards English writing and learner autonomy*

Attitude, as has been mentioned above, is one of components of learner autonomy. It is said that the right attitude is the root of success; it enables us to stand strong and prevail. To improve learners' autonomy in English writing, right attitude plays the role of pioneer. As long as learners rectify the negative attitude towards English writing and learner autonomy, the other two components of learner autonomy can be put forward.

- Arousing learners' enthusiasm of English writing As a guide, English teacher has to assist learners to pick up their interest and enthusiasm of writing once again. Firstly, teachers should give an all-round introduction of English writing, especially the focal points and difficult points, so that learners could make psychological preparations for the frustration they fall into during their writing. Thus, the sense of being defeated could be decreased to some extent. Then they can keep on writing without heavy mental load. Secondly, teachers have to believe in learners' capability in English writing, and meanwhile, help them build up their confidence. Learners need encouragement to stimulate them to go on writing. Even being frustrated, they would persevere with the support of teachers' encouragements. Thirdly, the cultivation of learners' interest is essential. Through the multimedia software and Internet resources, the abstract theory can be changed into lifelike scenes. With beautiful background music, a vivid, colorful and dynamic teaching situation presents in front of learners. Then learners' appreciation of beauty could be urged. Moreover, intense curiosity impels learners to seek knowledge, to discover, to innovate, and spurs them to express, to show, to communicate through writing. For example, "2012" is one of the most popular films recently, and it aroused great panic among human beings. Different people hold their different points of view toward the future of the globe. Teachers can grasp the opportunity and organize learners to watch the film, to provide them with a dynamic material for writing. After that, learners are expected to express their own feelings about the unknown future in the form of writing. Their imaginations of the future are also permitted. Thus, learners' writing skills get strengthened; at the same time, the profundity of their thoughts reaches a new level.

B. *Cultivating learners' capacity to accomplish writing task autonomously*

With respect to autonomy in accomplishing writing task in this article, it refers to finish writing actively, independently, and effectively. At first, learners take part in learning on their own initiatives, rather than under the pressure of external environment. Next, learner autonomy requires learners' management of self-control and decision-making, getting rid of dependence on teachers as much as possible. At last, learner autonomy demands learners to adopt all kinds of measure to optimize their learning.

- Encouraging learner to make a working plan for writing As a saying goes, “A good plan today is better than a perfect plan tomorrow.” And another one says that, “Even a poor plan is better than no plan at all.” Needless to say too much, a plan controls the whole situation from an overall perspective. What is plan? According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary, it means “a set of things to do in order to achieve something, especially one that has been considered in detail in advance.” As for writing, it refers to an arrangement of the writing process. On a short view, learners set aside a certain time to write, including planning for the prewriting, drafting, revising and editing. Meantime, learners have to make it clear what they plan to do during the four stages, such as the selection of topics, styles and content. In a long term, they have to clarify their writing goals to achieve. Specifically, the improvements of writing skills, of their thinking, and of ability to manage learning, are all involved in the working plan. The two-level working plan, one ring linked with another, presents a frame for learners, avoiding an irrational departure from writing. Since worked out by learners themselves, the plans would be fit for their individual characteristics, and get better effects. After all, it suits the remedy to the case. English teachers should encourage learners to make plans on the basis of their own conditions, neither too high nor too low. And teachers give assistance to learners to analyze their quality of writing, and then make a working plan according to their distinct features.

- Guiding learners to build a portfolio on the platform As a purposeful collection of student work, portfolios show effect, progress, achievement, and self-reflection in one or more areas (Paulson and Paulson 3). “A portfolio includes information regarding the process of development, and a narration made on the part of students about the learning that took place. Materials in the portfolio can represent the whole learning content” (Gottlieb 5: 12). In other words, the portfolio is a kind of autobiography of the learner and a good record of learner’s growing experience. With the prevalence of platform in colleges, a good chance for the application of portfolios appears. Computers can solve the problem that paper portfolios meet, that is, the vulnerability of paper makes it hard to be collected and stored. On the contrary, portfolios on the platform are more available. Furthermore, they can directly search for the materials they want in the portfolios. Portfolio indicates a link between feedback and quality of learning. To build a portfolio, teachers have to instruct learners to give effective feedbacks. After learners’ first draft, it is always teachers’ turn to correct or revise the writing product. Whereas, Murcia once pointed out that “Revising is a complex process which requires both the teacher and students involvement”(31). Therefore, the first step to achieve effective feedbacks is self-review. Teachers ask learners themselves to check their compositions on the whole. Finding out the errors on their own, such as wrong spelling, improper use of grammar, they can correct them then. If learners write on computer, they can ask for assistance from the Microsoft Word, which can easily realize the replacement, copy, insertion or deletion. And the software is helpful for grammar and spelling correction,

supplying convenience for learners’ revision. Next step is peer feedback, a kind of group work, which can give learners a sense of freshness, enabling them to cultivate the ability to revise each other’s writing, and their ability to think independently can be enhanced to a great extent. The following step is teachers’ feedback. Teachers’ feedback can be divided into two kinds, one is written feedback, and another is conference. Here the one to be talked about is the former one. (The latter one will appear in the next section.) Teachers’ task in this period is not to correct grammar errors, the syntactical errors, and orthographical errors; they should be finished during the first two steps. What teachers should do is to complement the missed error, and help learners to develop their writing skills, mostly in the aspect of thinking. What’s more, positive comments are essential to learners, such as “Excellent!”, “You’ve done a good job!”, “You’ve made great progress, and keep on working.” Being affirmed their progresses, they can keep their enthusiasm in writing, and are willing to revise their articles. After the process of feedback, the building of portfolio can be started.

- Communicating through computer conference “Like any other classroom tool, technology for language learning must offer opportunities to practice the language in authentic contexts and user-friendly environments. Internet technologies, because they have the potential to connect students across national and linguistic boundaries, abound with such opportunities” (Dekhin et al.). In particular, the Internet can give new power to teacher-learner and learner-learner communication on writing. Through e-mail, chat room, etc., the Internet transforms writing into an instrument of entertainment and communication. Since most of learners are keen on surfing on line, teachers can take advantage of this point to increase learners’ chance to write, breaking the restraints of time and space. Learners are more willing to write autonomously. One of the presentations of computer conference is E-mail. Taking the class as a unit, teachers establish an e-mail group as the public resource of the whole class. Anyone who wants to send an e-mail to other members in the group, either the teacher or other learners, the receivers is the whole group, and the contents of their e-mails are in public. Therefore, learners can share their thoughts or experience on writing. For teachers, it is also a good chance to get a closer relationship with learners. Recently, key-pal correspondence is popular among learners from different countries. Teachers can encourage learners to make pals through e-mail, at home or abroad. At the beginning, teachers can supply consultation, such as etiquette for web communication, topics for learners’ discussion. During the contacts in written form, learners will be aware of the existence of themselves and their train of thoughts. The fresh learning experience is different from the traditional one, for what they express in e-mails is what they are thinking about, not observing the topic writing assigned by teachers. They can choose their topics and partners, and get feedbacks in time, while the traditional class possesses no such advantages. Another form of computer conference is chat room. The software for chatting on line is of great significance for English writing owing to its large capacity to hold more people in participation. Taking advantages of the chat software, teachers set up a group for learners, such

as QQ group, MSN. As long as learners enter the chat room, they can take part in others' discussion, put forward questions, ask for answers and then respond the written answers immediately. Moreover, teachers can give suggestions for learners' topic discussion. Teachers can ask learners to write on a piece of paper or send e-mails about the topics that they like to write about. Then teachers choose the top ten ones for learners' writing. Take the freshmen in college for example, one of the topics that they are interested in is "If you had the right to choose, what would you like to be, a boy or a girl?" Sending the topic into the chat room, learners would be active to write about their own views. And teachers can also give their opinions during the chatting. On one hand, teachers supervise the quantity of the participating learners and the quality of their exchanging. On the other hand, teachers' guide has further effects on evoking learners' creativity. In this way, teachers' time for controlling decreases, while learners' desire for writing increases.

V. CONCLUSION

McDevitt points out: "the end product of education is an independent learner and that cultivating a learner's independence or autonomy should be regarded as the end goal that teachers or educators try to pursue. (16: 34)" By fostering learner autonomy in English writing, learners can develop a great sense of responsibility for their writing, a more active role in classroom, and each learner is an independent individual to involve in learning. After that, learners can realize their improvement of writing as well as growth of personality, which the quality education demands.

In order to make progress in writing and comply with the modern teaching requirement of the college English, it is of great necessity to cultivate learner autonomy in writing. The article puts forward several ways to solve this problem. A series of considerations should be paid attention to. Firstly, the development of learners' English writing skill should be treated equally to other three language skills. Secondly, teachers should transform their roles into instructors and their teaching goals into quality education. Thirdly, teachers should guide learners to make it clear what learner autonomy is and what it is for. At last, teachers should develop efficient ways to cultivate learner autonomy in English writing.

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