

Teachers' Role in Students' Autonomous Learning in Culture

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Abstract: Autonomous learning is a process of active construction on knowledge which takes place in a certain situation. For foreign language learners, the acquisition of linguistic knowledge is achieved under the related cultural background. Language and culture are inseparable. Therefore, the understanding of the related culture is very important and necessary in the language learning. However, the students generally lack the awareness of cultural learning. Their abilities of autonomous learning in culture are weak. This has become a serious obstacle in students' further improvement of the input of the language. It has been an urgent issue to improve students' abilities of autonomous learning in culture. This paper mainly talks about teachers' role in students' autonomous learning in culture.

Keywords: autonomous learning, culture, teachers' role

1. Autonomous Learning

The concept of "autonomous learning" derives from debates which argues the development of life-long learning skills and the development of independent thinkers in the 1960s. Holec is an advocator and pioneer of autonomous learning in language learning. He defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning." (Holec, 1981) He takes autonomy as a conceptual tool and further develops the definition. Holec has played an important role in the field of autonomy in language learning and the definition he made has become a start in this area. It is Holec that first introduces the concept of autonomous learning into the field of foreign language teaching.

From the perspective of autonomous learning theory, the majority scholars hold the opinion that autonomous learning is supposed to contain several features, they are as follows:

- (1)subjectivity: As to the relationship between teachers and students, autonomous learning emphasizes that students are main parts of learning and teachers are mainly guides. He explains that in autonomous learning the roles of teachers are guides and helpers, they are no longer the conductors of knowledge but the organizers of teaching.
- (2)Selectiveness: Selectiveness is put to priority by scholars who point out autonomous learning is characterized by the freedom of choice. Students themselves choose the content, the way, the time and the situation they prefer to learn.
- (3)Independence: Autonomous learning is not totally independent learning, it stresses more on the independence of learning compared to other learning methods. There are individual autonomous learning and collective autonomous learning respectively.
- (4)Initiative: Initiative of students is given priority in autonomous learning. Experts believe that autonomous learning is a kind of learning based on cognitive initiation. Its presuppositions are respect, trust and exertion of learners' initiative.
- (5)Validity: The purpose of autonomous learning is optimization of learning by adopting various regulating measures.
- (6)Relativity: There is few absolutely autonomous learning or absolutely not autonomous learning. Most learning is the one between the two.
- (7)Autonomy: Students can evaluate the results of learning by themselves. Students will get feedback in time by themselves. This will help students to know how is going on with their own learning.

2. Relationship between Language and Culture

It is known to all that what makes the human beings different from animal is language. It is language that makes the society develop into a certain culture. Language and culture are closely related to each other. Language could not exist apart from culture.

The relationship between language and culture is a complicated issue to which many scholars devoted themselves. Many scholars both in western countries and in China are working on this field, though there are still controversial opinions among them, they have achieved an agreement that language and culture are closely related to each other. They agree on the fact that language is product and a carrier of culture, at the same time, it reflects culture. They interact with each other. Culture is involved in each aspect of life and the society can not develop without culture, as well as the human beings. Language is a component of the system of culture. Dai Weidong says “linguistic competence is one variety of social behavior. The relationship of language to culture is a relationship of part to whole.” He also believes that language is the major means people use to transmit convictions, values and standards of culture, it offers people a kind of approach to communicate with others and one to think, just as Sapir and Whorf wondered that language not only serves as a mechanism for interaction but also serves as a guide to social reality. Therefore, language and culture are closely related to each other. Language is more than a means of communication. It is also a part of culture, it affects people’s perception, ways of thinking and living which will in turn have influence on culture.

3. Current Research on Cultural Learning

According to Hu Wenzhong and Gao Yihong, cultural learning was first started as early as the medieval times when Roman history geography and people’s daily life were introduced in the classic literature course. But culture was not given priority in language learning.

In the 1980s, scholars began to probe into the dynamics of culture and its contribution to successful language learning. Kramsch believed that culture should be taught as an interpersonal process rather than presenting cultural facts. Teachers should help language learners come to grip with the other culture. In the nineteenth century modern language learning, the question of relating language to society or culture did not arise with urgency because language learning then was expected to prepare for the study of literature. When structuralism began to dominate the profession more than half a century ago, the main focus of language study, for a long time, been on formal language study, the learning of language was largely abstracted from its social and cultural context. It was not until World War II that the role of anthropology and sociology were recognized in language learning and the idea of the study of language combined with a study of culture became familiar with enough to most theorists. Brook emphasized the importance of culture not for the study of literature but for language learning. The objectives of language teaching and learning are believed to include the teaching and learning of socio-cultural rules for language use, not as an added cultural component, but as an integral part of the language taught. To put it simply, we learn culture because we think communicative competence necessarily entails socio-cultural competence. Accordingly, in the communicative era the contents of cultural learning are largely confined to “communicative culture”.

Over the past decades, we have witnessed a new trend in the perception of the significance of culture studies in foreign language education. Cultural studies not only serve the utilitarian purpose of communication, it also serves to contribute to learner’s whole-person education. As is mentioned above, pioneers like Byram and Kramsch all began to see the educational value of foreign language education and stress that culture should be the focus of foreign language education.

4. Teacher’s Role

As is known to all, autonomous learning does not mean completely learning by oneself, especially the autonomous learning of culture, which can not be achieved without the teacher’s participation. To a certain degree, teachers’ role is significant in students’ autonomous learning of culture. For every

learning stage, especially for students' autonomous learning, teacher plays different roles which are important for the success of students' autonomous learning of culture.

4.1 Administrator

Teachers should change their roles in class in order to develop students' autonomous learning in culture. They are not the commander of class, but those who prompt students' autonomous learning. The so-called administrator refers to teachers transfer the rights of administration to students and make them mainstay of learning. Class administration is an important guarantee to keep the class orderly and achieve normal teaching assignment. The class administration which is beneficial to students should be the one in which students have certain rights to select and the relationship between students and teachers is harmonious, the administration students adopt in class is self-administration, students can involve in class administration.

Giving students the rights and freedom of learning, teachers together with students control the teaching process. But the extent to which the freedom is released to students should be held strictly by teachers. As for students, many urge independence and autonomy. In reality, each student hope not only to have both the rights to participate in and the rights to select class activities, but also hope to share the rights to administrate the class together with the teacher. Therefore, to encourage the students' autonomous learning, teachers need to understand and satisfy students' needs. Due to this needs, teachers should give the chance of selecting the orientation of class and enable them to share the rights to set program and discipline of class. When teachers can share class administration with students and respect students, the students can turn out to be more responsible and independent. As for teachers, as an administrator, they should have a good command of knowledge and a strong sense of responsibility. They should observe and listen carefully when students are going on with class activities. Necessary direction and interference are available during the course. It is necessary for teachers to get hold of the class on the whole and stimulate students' interest in joining class activities.

Administrator is an important role the teacher plays in students' autonomous learning in culture. They can help students make improvements and progress in initiative construction of knowledge. Teachers should encourage students to apply what they have achieved of linguistic knowledge to valid communication in particular background with others. However, when students confront with problems, teachers should offer necessary help in time in order for the achievement of learning. Despite the role of administrator, teachers should not behave as proud as an administrator. The very task of them is to create a harmonious environment that is suitable for students' autonomous learning in culture and encourage students to construct knowledge by themselves and achieve autonomous learning in culture ultimately.

4.2 Organizer

Autonomous learning happens not only outside of classroom, but also in class, especially the autonomous learning of culture. Students need classroom interaction and discussion to promote their independent learning. That is to say, teachers should design some class activities such as presentation, group discussion, performance and organize students to participate in such activities. As is known to all, a good organization and clear comprehension of the purpose and context of activities are the presuppositions of a successful classroom activity. Therefore, the role of organizer is the vital factor in this process.

As an organizer of the whole class, the teacher is supposed to design class activities and inspire students to involve in. Whereas, owing to the complicated factors in class, it is definitely a challenge to make class activities successful, in some cases, certain factors are out of control. If the activity is too difficult, the students will lose their interest in taking part in. Therefore, different activities should be prepared to students of different levels and encouragement should be necessary. Gradually, students will open their mouth to express themselves. In the process of class activities, teachers are just organizer while students are the very center of learning. During class activities, teachers should first clarify the content and requirements of the activity in order that students know what to do and

how to do, and then arouse students' interest, offer necessary resources and give them encouragement continually. Of course, there may be some problems during the process which the teacher should anticipate before hand. A successful classroom activity can help students improve their autonomous learning ability and it also depends on the role of organizer which is played by teachers. But no matter how important, the teacher is just an organizer, while it is the student who is the center of the class.

4.3 Guide

Due to the old conventional teaching model in China, the purpose of learning is to pass examination and get high marks, they studied passively without effective strategies. They did not know autonomous learning at all before entering university. However, the learning model in university is of great difference from the one in middle school. Therefore, the first task of English teacher is informing them this change instead of imparting specific knowledge. In this process, teachers can also learn the needs of students and find if there are some difficulties and problems which will be useful to help them set learning goals, make plans and choose appropriate learning strategies. In class, with the help of practical teaching material, teachers can help with developing strategies and skills, increase their cultural awareness when learning English. In this way, students will began to realize the importance of culture in English autonomous learning and be more and more used to autonomous learning of culture.

As a guide, the teacher is supposed to pose questions but without giving answers. The questions will help learners to achieve the change, from the concrete cultural information they have learnt to the profound cultural perceptions. Learners are engaged in defining, clarifying, concluding, judging and doing other comprehensive jobs in the process. The difficulty in doing this is to resist the desire to offer answers to the questions posed. It is true that, in many cases, there maybe one "right answer" to each question but usually, there are many instead of one. Learners are supposed to cultivate the ability with multi-angle perspective. As a guide, the teacher can instruct either by induction or deduction. For induction, teachers can assign a cultural topic to students which they know little and ask the students to take advantage of the materials they will generate cultural explanations. Adequate information is required for the induction. However, if students can not make breakthrough, the deduction will be of help. In this way, the teacher offers a cultural explanation and then asks students to look for argument to support this explanation. This mode is more common because we are more capable of deducting than inducting.

5. Conclusions

It is known to all that language and culture are interrelated. If students want to master a foreign language, they should learn the language itself as well as its related culture. There are many scholars doing research on the autonomous learning before. Though they have had a sizeable number of achievements, few of them concerned with the respect of culture which is a significant part in language learning, especially in students' autonomous learning. This thesis points out the roles of teachers in the process of students' autonomous learning in culture. When students are in different stages of autonomous learning in culture, teachers play different roles. Therefore, teachers are supposed to alter their roles according to the different stages of students' autonomous learning in culture. As language learners, students should not only master the vocabularies, grammars and sentence structures, the mastery of target cultural knowledge is also very necessary for them and the learning of culture is an important element in language acquisition.

In conclusion, autonomous learning in culture is of great importance in foreign language learning. If students ignore the autonomous learning in culture, they will be frustrated by grammars, vocabularies and sentence structures. In autonomous learning in culture, teachers should change their role they played in traditional classroom into the administrator, organizer and guide which will facilitate students' autonomous learning in culture.

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