The Problems Faced by Students’ Autonomous Foreign Language Learning Via the Internet in Provincial Universities and the Countermeasures

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Abstract
Carrying out autonomous foreign language learning via the Internet in provincial universities in China has become a must-have. In the course of putting this practice into effect, many universities meet some unexpected problems such as the difficulty in raising the necessary money to buy equipment, the students lacking of the capability of autonomous foreign language learning via the Internet, which affects the efficiency of the practice, etc. Though the problems may interfere with the smooth carrying out for the time being, the solutions to the problems are sure to be found. What the universities should do is to lay emphasis on the problems and take active measures to deal with them.

Key words: Foreign Language; Autonomous learning; Internet; Provincial universities

INTRODUCTION
Trying to find the best foreign language teaching methodology has always been the main task for foreign language teachers and educators in the past centuries. Researchers have put forward and practiced several teaching methods, such as Audio-lingual Approach, Task-based Approach, and Communicative Approach, etc. These approaches did enrich the foreign language teaching and teachers did benefit a lot from them. However, with the rapid development of cognitive psychology and the Internet, the focus of foreign language learning has shifted from “how to teach” to “how to learn”. Students’ autonomous foreign language learning via the Internet has been widely discussed in the last two decades. A great variety of theories have been put forward to back it up. Under this trend, many provincial universities incorporated students’ autonomous foreign language learning via the Internet into the normal class teaching so as to achieve better teaching effects. In the course of carrying out the practice, some unexpected problems arose, which brought great barriers to foreign language teaching.

1. THE NECESSITY TO CARRY OUT AUTONOMOUS LEARNING VIA THE INTERNET IN PROVINCIAL UNIVERSITIES

1.1 It is Necessary to Change the Current Teacher-centered Teaching Style
Classroom is the main place where the students go about their language learning. Teachers’ behavior—verbal or nonverbal—acts as external conditions for language learning. It plays an important part in providing favorable cognitive environments for the students to engage in their learning. Previous class teaching lays particular stress on language acquisition and the effect of teachers’ input on students’ acquisition, but neglects the students’ learning attitudes and ability cultivation. Specifically speaking, teachers attach great importance to passing on
the knowledge to the students and pay little attention to involving students in the whole learning process. They
do not empower the students to set learning goals for
themselves, monitor or assess their learning process.
Seldom do they arouse the students’ interest in the
learning, nor do they often give approval, encouragement
to the students’ performance. To such kind of language
learning, the interaction between the teachers and the
students are more concerned with the teachers than the
students. The latter are always on the side of passive
receiving rather than active participating. Generally
speaking, the environment created by teachers is not very
supportive in terms of fostering the self-regulated learning
attitudes and ability.

In view of this shortcoming, a new mode of learning
has been put forward, which is autonomous learning via
the Internet. To begin with, students can evaluate their
levels of understanding, their personal interests, and their
effort and strategies used on a task. They can assess the
perceptions and attributions made by others regarding
one’s abilities, the improvement from one occasion to the
next, the amount of assistance needed to accomplish a
task, and their goals and expectations in various situations.
What the teachers need to do is to offer the students
opportunities to practice these assessments. Many kinds
of self-assessment and self-motivation are possible. On
the other hand, the learning platform of the Internet can
provide the students with freedom to achieve different
learning tasks. The students can reach their purpose of
learning language knowledge and rear their language
ability by doing what they like. Owing to the various
benefits mentioned above, China Ministry of Education
issued several official papers to encourage the carrying
out of autonomous learning via the Internet in universities,
especially provincial universities.

1.2 It is Necessary to Adapt the Current Classroom Teaching Methods of University to the Requirements of Market Economy and Information Age

With the further development of the reform and open-door
policy in Jilin province, the domestic markets have to
integrate with international markets. State-owned large and
medium-sized enterprises’ transformation management
mechanism and the entrance of foreign companies into
Jilin province greatly promote the development of
market economy. Fair competition and the survival of
the fittest are the law unable to be resisted. Competition
forces enterprises to possess professionals and technical
personnel who can take command of the special field.
Therefore, the needs of enterprises for inter-disciplinary
foreign language talents are stronger than ever. Cultivating
a large number of high-quality, internationalized inter-
disciplinary foreign language talents will not only
facilitate higher education in Jilin Province, but will also
accelerate the pace of economic reform, further expand
foreign economic and cultural exchanges, promote foreign
economic and trade growth, promote the development of
tourism, expand the international trade market and finally
help Jilin province achieve the goal of becoming stronger
in economy both at home and abroad. Elevating college
students’ foreign language autonomous learning ability
meets the needs of current society and can encourage
colleges and universities to further carry out a series of
teaching reform measures.

As is known to all, we are now in the information age.
The feature of the information age is the combination
of information and the Internet. In a sense, the process
of college and university students’ learning is intimately
associated with the Internet. There are large amounts
of knowledge for students to learn. Therefore, college
and university teaching should go beyond the traditional
classroom teaching and teachers should guide students to
carry out learning via the Internet. What teachers should
do is to provide advice for students to develop good habits
in the learning process. A teacher’s role has changed from
the core of classroom teaching to an organizer, supervisor
and assistant of the autonomous learning via the Internet.
In the process of conducting autonomous learning,
students can rear their ability to find problems and solve
problems independently. Gradually, students will meet the
needs of market economy and enterprises and will really
become special talents.

2. THE PROBLEMS FACED BY STUDENTS’ AUTONOMOUS FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING VIA THE INTERNET IN PROVINCIAL UNIVERSITIES

2.1 Lack of the Capability of Autonomous Foreign Language Learning Via the Internet and Proper Modern Teaching Facilities that Affect the Efficiency of the Practice

On the one hand, many students of provincial universities
are from countryside schools or from underdeveloped
areas. For economic reasons, the teaching facilities and
patterns there are comparatively backward. Thus, the
students from such areas are relatively poor in receiving
ability, which results in a situation where the students
must rely on the teacher to feed them knowledge.
Students’ learning is passive. They lack the motivation
to carry out their learning independently. Therefore, they
always depend on the teacher to tell them what they
should learn. In their opinion, teachers are like an emperor
and they should obey every order given by the teachers.
The whole teaching process is teacher-centered. Students
do not dare to question what the teacher says in class even
if sometimes they have doubts about certain points. When
such students enter the university, they feel at a loss when
confronted with autonomous learning via the Internet. Some of them even know nothing about how to take advantage of the Internet to learn, let alone benefit from it.

On the other hand, the smooth carrying on of autonomous learning via the Internet is restricted by the lack of proper modern teaching facilities. To build a 100-seat multimedia classroom, a university has to invest a million RMB. For a ten-thousand-student university, at least 40 multimedia classrooms are needed, which means 40 million RMB investment. Besides, maintaining such multimedia classrooms needs extra expense on them, which is a heavy burden on the university’s finance. It is known that provincial universities are mainly located in a province and are financed by the provincial finance. For economic reasons, provincial educational department usually lack funds to provide to provincial universities. As a result, almost all provincial universities are restricted by the lack of proper modern teaching facilities. Without the support of multimedia classrooms, the effects of autonomous learning via the Internet will be reduced.

2.2 The Absence of Real Language Learning Situations Interferes with Students’ Learning Dynamics

Real language learning situations can strengthen students’ cognition and interest in foreign culture and improve the effect of foreign language learning. Communicating with overseas students and teachers can create a real language learning situation, but such overseas students and teachers are few in number, which can not meet the requirements of language learning of the students. Therefore, real language learning situations can only be achieved through English songs, films, magazines, newspapers, broadcast, English corner and Internet video. Besides, a survey on the students revealed that the majorities of students are from non-urban areas and have to sustain their education in the university on bank loans. Therefore, many students can not afford computers.

In the current information age, the lack of computers means the failure of autonomous learning via the Internet. If the concerned universities do not have enough funds to equip students with enough computers and the campus Internet, then autonomous learning via the Internet can only be at the empty-talk stage. For some provincial universities that join the trial performed by the Ministry of Education, for lacking of fund, they have to charge students some money to maintain the normal teaching, which lays further burden on students from poor family and thus lower such students’ will to join in autonomous learning via the Internet. Another survey found out in some provincial universities, the part of listening comprehension is carried out completely by students themselves through the Internet. For lacking of effective supervision, students often jump over this part of learning. This causes students’ listening level to be in poor situation and forces universities to resume the traditional listening class to improve students’ listening level, which to a certain degree brings about the waste of resources.

2.3 Many Teachers Have Not Completed the Role-change From a Teacher to an Instructor and Can Not Fulfill Their Duty to Instruct the Students to Practice

On account of the previous habit of relying on the teacher to learn a language in high school, the students still anticipate to depend on the teacher to perform teaching. Consequently, without the teacher’s proper guidance, autonomous learning via the Internet will come to a halt. The effective promotion of autonomous learning can not do without the guidance, help and supervision of teachers. In the process of helping students to develop their own learning habits, improve their autonomous learning awareness, and form their own learning ability, teachers must actively participate in the learning activities, but this participation is different from the traditional teaching.

Autonomous learning via the Internet requires a teacher to act as an assistant, a supervisor instead of a number-one role. Teachers must be away from the in-front-of-the-stage teaching activities and transfer to behind the scenes, to observe and find the problems encountered in the process of students’ network autonomous learning and in a timely manner to help students solve the problem. But according to the current implementation of network autonomous learning, most of the teachers have not completed this role conversion. Many teachers still consider themselves as the main body of network autonomous learning, which makes it difficult to transform themselves from the role of knowledge teacher to the role of students’ learning guide. Teaching procedures, teaching content and teaching methods are still based on traditional teaching mode. They cannot let go of the shackles of students, still require the students to be fully answerable to their own arrangements, which causes the students to lose the independent consciousness in the process of network autonomous learning.

Although in guiding the students to carry out independent learning, some teachers use the so-called multi-media technology, they only move the original handwriting of the blackboard content through PPT courseware to the network. Other teachers’ knowledge is single and they lack the experience in the network teaching, so they can not effectively guide the students to implement autonomous learning activities and are unable to meet the requirements of personalized opening teaching task. Still other teachers completely give up the supervision and guidance of students in the network independent learning activities. This completely deviates from the original intention of the network to study independently, to cultivate the ability to think independently, to find problems and solve problems independently.
3. COUNTERMEASURES AGAINST THE PROBLEMS

3.1 Construct an Environment Matching Autonomous Learning Via the Internet

First, a learning platform based on the Internet should be established to meet the needs of mutual exchange between the teachers and the students. Through the platform, the teachers can answer some difficult questions put forward by the students. What’s more, the teachers can also perform tests or other assignments as well as act as organizers, assistants, co-operators to the students. A platform with various functions can guarantee the teachers’ instant supervising of the students. Meanwhile, the platform should be equipped with a great variety of learning materials for the students to look up and refer to. Second, an outer-class atmosphere which is good for the students should also be established.

In addition to the class teaching, universities and teachers should also create an outer-class atmosphere so as to motivate students’ interest in English learning after class and thus improve their autonomous learning ability. First, in the aspect of listening, based on campus broadcasting station, some English news and English stories can be broadcast regularly. English films can be played once in a while based on the multimedia classroom. In the aspect of oral English, speech contest and English corner are two good ways to improve their English speaking ability. A foreign language society can arouse the students’ interest in language, which is also a good choice. Universities should encourage students to get more in touch with foreigners, stimulate them to participate in social activities to act as guides and Interpreters, encourage them to carry out morning reading and all sorts of English contests that most students can avail themselves of frequently, such as drama contests, speech contests, song contests so as to develop good habits of learning English. In the aspect of reading, teachers can list different kinds of English books for students to read to solve the problem of poor vocabulary, poor reading speed, and poor communicating skills. Campus library ought to be placed emphasis on to exert its function in creating a strong learning atmosphere.

3.2 Train Students to Develop Good Foreign Language Learning Strategies

First, Universities and teachers should attach importance to the teaching and training of learning strategy. Students should strengthen their sense of autonomous learning via the Internet. Good foreign language learning strategies are the guarantee that the students can improve their learning efficiencies and develop their own ability to adapt to autonomous learning. Once the students are accustomed to the learning strategies that they have developed, they can set their sights higher for more ambitious aims. Gradually, the students can get rid of their dependence on the teachers and cultivate the good habit of doing everything all by themselves and finally become the person needed by the society. Second, in the process of teaching, the teacher-centered teaching mode should be abandoned and student-centered learning mode should be established so as to make students experience the joy and satisfaction of learning independently. Teachers should encourage students to make feasible learning plan and develop the habit of supervising their learning process alone. Third, students should develop the sense of co-operating learning. Students should realize that in modern society, many tasks can only be accomplished through co-operation. The same holds true in learning. Co-operating learning can make students develop the sense of community, which is important to their future work in society.

3.3 Improve Teachers’ Ability to Make Use of the Modern Facilities Based on the Internet

With the rapid development of the technology of computer science, obtaining knowledge through autonomous learning via the Internet has become an important way to learn a foreign language. In order to fulfill their duty to instruct the students to carry out autonomous learning via the Internet, teachers should first become experts in the relevant field. Equipping themselves with the compulsory net work knowledge and skills has become a must to teachers engaging in such teaching work. In the process of carrying out autonomous learning via the Internet, teachers should break through the roles of traditional teaching manager, the controller and knowledge teacher and play multiple important new roles. First, teachers are learners and researchers in the process of the cultivation of students’ autonomous learning ability. Teachers should collect students’ feedback and advice from peers to continuously improve their level of professional theory and professional skills, so as to be able to perform linear guidance to students. Second, teachers should act as the resource base, consultant and analyst in the process of the cultivation of students’ autonomous learning ability. Teachers are an important source of information to students and students are eager to get more help and support from the teachers. In the information society, the rapid renewal of knowledge requires teachers to “charge themselves”, to enrich themselves so as to help students broaden their knowledge, develop their language ability and social communication ability. Third, Teachers are the evaluators of students’ learning ability training process. Teachers should check the completion of students’ learning tasks by means of dictation, questions, random checks and testing regularly and help students find problems. Teachers ought to encourage students to make progress and help them analyze their problems in a variety of forms, such as interviews, seminars, etc. Finally, teachers must cultivate the idea of information education; improve their knowledge and skills necessary to the education of information technology. At the same time, teachers should change their teaching ideas; strengthen their own
quality and ability to adapt to the new teaching mode of autonomous learning. Local colleges and universities should pay attention to the training of teachers, improve teachers’ qualifications and strengthen the construction of teachers’ professional ethics, pay attention to teaching theory, educational psychology, learning strategy research so as to make teachers adapt to autonomous learning via the Internet in a short period of time. Only after the qualified teachers can really implement the reform of the teaching mode, can they really help students to study independently.

CONCLUSION

Traditional teaching models and traditional teaching methods play an active role in provincial universities in the past. Nowadays pressures from all directions call for higher requirements for foreign language teaching. Under such background, autonomous foreign language learning via the Internet becomes the trend. The most important and prominent advantage of this model is that students are treated as individuals. Their individualization is fully considered. What’s more, this model favors comprehensible input both in and out of the classroom. Since authentic teaching materials are required, communicative competence is also emphasized. This model doesn’t limit teaching methods applied in the class to a single one. Rather, it encourages different teaching methods. However, there is a conflict between higher requirements of autonomous foreign language learning via the Internet and traditional teaching methods. This results in a lot of problems. Regardless of the special enthusiasm over this teaching model, there exist some limitations in it. For example, it depends too much on a platform based on the Internet. If the platform is not as reliable and valid as expected, the “backwash” effect will add some more trouble to the existing problems. Since provincial universities are limited in financial resources, they should adopt a feasible attitude towards carrying out autonomous foreign language learning via the Internet. To universities that have put this practice into effect, necessary countermeasures should be taken to address to the problems so as to make sure the normal teaching effects.

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