Promoting Learner Autonomy in IT English Learning through the Use of Three-dimensional Textbook

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Abstract. The advent of mobile learning platform and E-book is believed to provide an autonomous learning space for language learning. Three-dimensional IT English textbook which includes audiovisual resources, an E-book and an online teaching website makes it possible to learn IT English anytime and anywhere. The aim of this paper is to discuss the significance of learner autonomy and its feasibility in IT English education. The use of three-dimensional textbook can facilitate the application of autonomous learning mode in IT English learning, which will greatly improve the effect of English teaching.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, advanced educational technology has brought about dramatic changes in educational concepts. Previously, students depended on classroom attendance and books to gain knowledge. The field of language education has witnessed the rapid shift from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness so as to prepare learners to be ready for the rapidly changing world. Learner autonomy represents an important element of student-centered instruction. The promotion of learner autonomy in language education in recent years is not only able to facilitate English language learning but also prepare learners for social life in the future.

Learner autonomy has become one of the most important research themes in the field of ELT in China. The rapid development of modern information technology has made the acquisition, update and accumulation of students’ knowledge more diversified. The advent of recent mobile technologies brings new possibilities in terms of learner autonomy by providing not only a potential means of learning anytime and anywhere, but also access to a variety of rich, multimodal content. Make IT Easy: An Advanced English Course for Information Technology Majors published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press is a three-dimensional textbook which includes student book, teacher’s manual, e-book, and online learning platform. The three-dimensional textbook supplemented by an e-book and an online learning platform is full of multimedia resources. With the support of e-book and online learning platform, English learning is not limited to time and place. Language learners are able to make use of such mobile devices as smartphones and tablet computers to learn autonomously anytime and anywhere.

Learner Autonomy in Language Learning

Learner autonomy is a cross-cultural concept. Different researchers have different understanding and definition of it. The original and widely cited concept of autonomy in language education was proposed by Holec, who defined autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” [1]. The definition entails that autonomous learners themselves are fully responsible for all learning decisions, such as identifying objectives and contents, selecting materials, monitoring and evaluating their progress. Learners’ responsibility becomes the first step to autonomy[2]. Autonomous learners are responsible for their own learning and are actively involved in the learning process by setting personal goals, planning and executing tasks, and reviewing their progress[3]. Learner autonomy does not mean students always learn independently, without the involvement of teachers or peers. In general, learner autonomy often involves students learning.
Benson argues that autonomy is a natural attribute of learners. He believes that learners naturally tend to have autonomy but the exercise of autonomy is inhibited by educational institution. Modifying Holec’s definition, he formulates autonomy as “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” [4].

Learner autonomy is a teaching concept with a focus on learner-centeredness. Learners participate in various kinds of study activities and monitor their progress. They communicate, collaborate and share learning materials. They are able to finish learning tasks with the guidance and support of teachers. In the process, teacher’s role changes from a traditional knowledge provider into a facilitator. They provide the learners with enough space to work independently and to interact and cooperate with others, either within or beyond the language classroom.

**Autonomous Learning Mode for IT English Course**

**Features of Three-dimensional Textbook**

Make IT Easy: An Advanced English Course for Information Technology Majors published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press is a three-dimensional textbook which includes student book, teacher’s manual, e-book, and online teaching website. Autonomous learning based on three-dimensional textbooks is possible in the society where information technology is an indispensable part of foreign language education. It brings new possibilities in terms of learner autonomy by providing access to a variety of online multimodal learning materials, tracking and monitoring students’ progress.

The student book is mainly used for classroom teaching and the teacher’s manual for teachers’ reference. They contain text, pictures or diagrams. The e-book is student book publication made available in digital form, consisting of texts, images, exercises, audios and videos. Different from the student book is that the e-book has much more supplementary reading and listening sections in digital form. The online teaching website has the following functions, such as audio and video playback, text reading, online test, announcement, teacher-student interaction, etc. For teachers, they are able to track students’ study pace and offer feedback. For students, they are able to have access to the teaching website for autonomous learning with mobile devices such as tablet PC and cellphone and learn English at their pace, time, and place. They are also encouraged to further explore other related materials online. The appearance of mobile technologies creates more flexible ways for students to manage their learning, allowing learners’ mobility in learning. The three-dimensional textbook embodies the transformation of learning media, and combines various media forms to present teaching content in multiple manners. It also embodies a new teaching method that can effectively promote the shift from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness.

**Teaching Practice of Autonomous Learning Mode**

In the researcher’s college, the above-mentioned IT English book is intended for second-year vocational students specializing in software technology. The course is intended to cultivate students’ English communication skills in the IT industry. The teaching content of the textbook directly comes from IT enterprises, making the book more true to life. It is able to familiarize them with different working scenarios in IT companies. The cultivation of this practical English ability requires students to be active in learning, involve in self-paced learning process, and participate in in-class and after-class activities. This course sets time for autonomous learning. The classroom teaching hours to autonomous learning hours ratio is 1:2, with classroom teaching hours reaching up to 60 hours.

We will take a unit entitled Project Management for example to present the teaching practice of autonomous learning mode for IT English course. Before class, teachers set tasks for students on the online learning platform, and ask students to think about how to prepare for a project meeting. Students are required to read pre-class articles in the e-book. There are a large number of reading materials and audiovisual resources related to this topic in the e-book. Students are able to complete pre-class exercises of the corresponding units, understand subject-related knowledge, and prepare
for class discussion. They can learn autonomously so as to understand the cultural background, business scenarios and basic language expressions of the unit.

Classroom activities are divided into warm-up activities, in-class reading, listening and speaking sections. In the process of completing the task, the students work in small groups. During class, teachers use PPT courseware to present pictures of a poor project meeting so as to arouse students’ curiosity in the topic. Afterwards, students can analyze the problems of the project meeting through group collaboration. Representative of each group will be selected to articulate their own opinions. Afterwards, a video which shows the steps of conducting a project meeting is presented. In-class reading section is intended to help students quickly understand the structure of the article and its theme. Team members collaborate to look for information and interact with each other. Teachers play a supportive and facilitative role in autonomous learning by encouraging students to take active part in decision-making, problem-solving, and offering them guidance. In the listening and speaking section, students are required to answer relevant questions according to a video conference and summarize relevant expressions. Afterwards, the teacher expands the knowledge. Moreover, students are asked to participate in such classroom activities as role play and presentation, making oral practice with both verbal and nonverbal language. With no passive reliance on teacher's explanations, students seek solutions through well-designed tasks and cooperative learning, which greatly promotes learner autonomy.

After class, students can use smart phones, tablet computers to watch videos, browse reading materials, complete after-school exercises through online teaching website and e-book. Teachers will be able to monitor and track students’ autonomous learning, which plays a supervisory role for students. The online teaching website and e-book are essential components of the three-dimensional textbook, which enhances information dissemination and offers learners with room to study on their own either within or beyond the language classroom. It is easier to consolidate students’ knowledge and broaden their horizon.

Task-based approach and collaborative teaching strategies are mainly used in the teaching process. Benson maintains that autonomy is supported by the social constructivism of active learning. Learner autonomy does not mean that learners work in isolation. Rather, they socially construct knowledge by actively engaging in the process of learning. Through social interactions, learners develop a capacity to analyze, reflect upon and synthesize information to create new perspectives[5]. In the learning process, students’ learning can be guided and assisted by teachers, and they can choose time and place for autonomous learning. Teachers arrange tasks in which students complete tasks through independent learning and discussion. After the task is completed, the teacher offers corresponding comments and guidance.

Curriculum Evaluation System

Rational evaluation system is vital for monitoring learner autonomy effectively. It plays an essential role in offering useful feedback and enhancing English learning effect. After education reform, an evaluation system that embodies formative evaluation and summative evaluation has been set up. Students’ final score is mainly consisted of three components:

(1) In-class assessment score. It accounts for 30% of the final score. Teachers assign in-class activities according to teaching requirements. Students are required to be actively engaged in group-based cooperative learning for decision-making and problem-solving. And students are graded according to their performance in class. (2) Autonomous learning score. It represents 30% of the final score. The online teaching website makes it possible for teachers to effectively monitor students’ autonomous learning process, grade their assignments and offer feedback. It offers such functions as audio and video playback, text reading, online test, learning analysis and evaluation, teacher-student interaction, etc. Teachers can check the progress of the online learning at any time, and play a supervisory role in their learning process. (3) Stage test and final test score. It represents 40% of the final score. Stage tests will be conducted every term, which will serve as the driving force for autonomous learning. Summative evaluation of each student is formed through final exam to test students’ comprehensive language abilities.
Conclusion

In traditional learning mode, students have access to limited information and are generally passive receivers whose language learning heavily relies on in-class teaching. The ultimate goal of education should be the development of a high degree of learner autonomy, the capacity to take control of their own learning. A Chinese proverb goes like this: “Give him a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Students’ learning should not be confined only to the assimilation of knowledge, and knowledge should be sought beyond textbooks, classroom and campus. Most importantly, students’ autonomous learning abilities should be cultivated and they will be sure to benefit from it for a lifetime. Advanced educational technology makes it possible to conduct educational reform intended to cultivate autonomous learning ability of vocational school students. The use of three-dimensional textbook can facilitate the application of autonomous learning mode in IT English learning, which will greatly improve the effect of English teaching and make lifelong learning successful. This teaching mode will definitely become the mainstream of English teaching in the future and a research theme that deserves further in-depth exploration.

References


