

A Study on Learner Autonomy Among Ethnic Preparatory Students

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Abstract. The purpose of the paper is to probe into autonomous learning awareness and behavior amongst ethnic preparatory undergraduates and postgraduates, as well as the factors that may exert influence on learner autonomy. A questionnaire survey is conducted in experimental classes and 822 valid papers are recovered. The statistics collected are processed by SPSS for Windows 13.0. The results show that the longer the education experience is, the higher the level of autonomous learning awareness and behavior is. Compared with urban and county students, rural students and pastoral students show higher level of learner autonomy. Autonomous learning ability of ethnic preparatory students is in positive correlation with their academic achievement.

Introduction

Heloc (1981) defined learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning, and to have or to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, which include setting objectives of learning, determining the content and progression and evaluating the product of learning”

Little Wood (1999) defined learner autonomy as the capability of applying acquired knowledge without depending on the teacher.

Peng Dingjin (2002) proposed a five-step reflective autonomous learning procedure: Step 1, Having a sense of responsibility for learning; Step 2, Having clear learning aims; Step 3, Making learning schedules; Step 4, Evaluating learning progress; Step 5, Adjusting learning strategies.

Skehan (1989) holds that the ability to do autonomous learning has a direct effect on academic performance and is in direct proportion to learning ability. Learner autonomy may vary with such variables as age, cognitive power, motivation, environment and cultural background as well.

Until now, there have been quite many studies on learner autonomy in China. However, studies that target at ethnic preparatory students’ autonomous learning are few, if not at all.

Experimental Classes composed of ethnic preparatory undergraduates and postgraduates have been set up in Ethnic Education School of Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, for the purpose of practicing autonomous learning under the aid of autonomous learning multi-media platform.

After more than two years of experiment and practice, a questionnaire survey was conducted to probe into autonomous learning awareness and autonomous learning behavior of ethnic preparatory students, as well as the factors that exert some influence on learner autonomy in the hope that the findings may provide some constructive reference to counterpart educators, teachers or researchers.

Research

The purpose

- (1) Getting a general knowledge of autonomous learning awareness and autonomous learning behavior of ethnic preparatory students.

(2) Finding out whether such factors as learning experience, family background, academic performance, gender and major of study, bear correlation with autonomous learning ability.

The Subjects

The subjects are ethnic preparatory undergraduates and post-graduates, who can be classified into four groups: Group A (*first-year Xinjiang ethnic preparatory undergraduates*), Group B (*second-year Xinjiang ethnic preparatory undergraduates*), Group C (*ethnic preparatory undergraduates from different parts of China*) and Group D (*ethnic preparatory post-graduates from different parts of China*). Group A and Group B must finish two-year preparatory learning before going to their target universities, and their mother tongues are their ethnic native languages other than mandarin. The latter two groups are students who must spend one year in preparatory education before going on furthering their studies in their target universities, and they speak mandarin as their mother tongue.

Instruments

There are two parts in the Questionnaire. Part One is a survey on autonomous learning awareness; Part Two is a survey on autonomous learning behavior.

There are ten 5-point Likert questions for each part, and the internal consistency of this scale is high: Cronbach alpha reliability for the two parts are 0.8412 and 0.782 respectively. All the data collected from the Questionnaire Survey are processed by SPSS for Windows 13.0. Altogether, there are 822 valid questionnaire papers.

The Collected Statistics and Analysis

A Survey on the Levels of Autonomous Learning Awareness and Autonomous Learning Behavior Based on Schooling Backgrounds

Table 1. Means of Autonomous Learning Awareness (N=822).

	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	All
Mean	4.3302	4.6772	3.9273	4.2204	4.1825
Std.	.89146	.60266	.96163	.82008	.90109
N	106	127	344	254	822

Table 2. Means of Autonomous Learning Behavior (N=822).

	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	All
Mean	3.7170	4.5197	3.5407	3.9143	3.8260
Std.	1.06686	.75436	1.00644	.88057	.99947
N	106	127	344	254	822

Table 3. Test Statistics (a,b).

	Autonomous Learning Awareness	Autonomous Learning Behavior
Chi-Square	79.678	101.930
df	3	3
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000

a: Kruskal Wallis Test b: Grouping Variable: schooling backgrounds

Statistics Analysis

1) With Kruskal-Wallis Test as a non-parametric test for several independent samples, Sig Asymp. is less than 0.05, which shows that the group difference is significant.

2) Group B shows higher levels of autonomous learning awareness and autonomous learning behavior than Group A.

3) Group D shows higher levels of autonomous learning awareness and autonomous learning behavior than Group C.

4) Group A and Group B show a higher level of autonomous learning awareness and autonomous learning behavior than Group C and Group D.

Result

1) A comparative study on preparatory students from similar backgrounds between Group A and Group B, Group C and Group D indicates that the longer the education experience is, the higher the level of autonomous learning awareness and behavior is. The reason behind this is that greater emphasis has been put on developing the autonomous learning ability in the past decade, which is also one of the important goals of curriculum reform in Chinese higher institutions. In many universities and colleges, multi-media facilities that may facilitate autonomous learning have been provided, which is instrumental to molding students into more self-disciplined and self-controlled autonomous learners.

2) A majority of ethnic preparatory undergraduates from Xinjiang had never been exposed to autonomous learning mode in a multi-media context before they started receiving preparatory education. This may explain why they have displayed greater interest in and greater passion for the computer-aided autonomous learning mode.

3) Ethnic preparatory postgraduates (Group D) exhibit higher level of autonomous learning awareness and behavior than their undergraduate counterparts (Group C), which is the effect of their previous four-year higher education that has got rid of rote learning typical of secondary education in Mainland China.

A Survey on the Levels of Autonomous Learning Awareness and Autonomous Learning Behavior Based on Family Backgrounds

Subjects can be classified into the following four groups in terms of their family backgrounds: Group E (*urban students*), Group F (*county students*), Group G (*rural students*), and Group H (*pastoral students*)

Table 4. Means of Autonomous Learning Awareness ($N=822$).

	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Std.	.92195	.89674	.88744	.58959
N	318	213	270	21

Table 5. Means of Autonomous Learning Behavior ($N=822$).

	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Mean	3.7358	3.7512	3.9519	4.3333
Std.	1.01380	.94622	1.00994	.91287
N	318	213	270	21

Table 6. Test Statistics (a,b).

	Autonomous Learning Awareness	Autonomous Learning Behavior
Chi-Square	11.906	15.787
df	3	3
Asymp. Sig.	.008	.001

a Kruskal Wallis Test b Grouping Variable: family background

Statistics Analysis

1) With Kruskal-Wallis Test as a non-parametric test for several independent samples, Sig Asymp. is less than 0.05, which shows that the group difference is significant.

2) Group G and Group H show higher levels of autonomous learning awareness and autonomous learning behavior than Group E and Group F

Result

- 1) Family backgrounds exert a subtle and latent effect on learning autonomy.
- 2) Group G and Group H are students from relatively poor families, a large percentage of whom do not own their personal computers or other electronic learning products. They try to make the best use of the provided multi-media facilities to improve learning efficiency and effectiveness.
- 3) Compared with urban and county students, rural students and pastoral students are more appreciative of preparatory educational opportunities, and more motivated to change their fates through education. That may account for their higher degree of involvement in autonomous learning experience.

A Survey on the Levels of Autonomous Learning Awareness and Autonomous Learning Behavior Based on Academic Achievements

At the beginning of every new term, students are placed in different English classes based on their scores in the English Placement Tests. Group I are students from low-score classes and Group J are students from high-score classes.

Table 7. Means of Autonomous Learning Awareness (N=212).

	Group I	Group J
Mean	3.8407	4.2424
Std.	1.10653	.83411
N	113	99

Table 8. Means of Autonomous Learning Behavior (N=212).

	Group I	Group J
Mean	3.5664	4.1111
Std.	1.01661	.90225
N	113	99

Table 9. Test Statistics(a).

	Autonomous Learning Awareness	Autonomous Learning Behavior
Mann-Whitney U	4508.500	4328.000
Wilcoxon W	10949.500	10769.000
Z	-2.577	-2.980
Asymp Sig. (2-tailed)	.010	.003

a Grouping Variable: score

Statistics Analysis

- 1) With Mann-Whitney Test as a non-parametric test for two independent samples, Sig Asymp. is less than 0.05, which shows that the difference of different score groups was significant, with statistical significance.
- 2) Group J shows higher levels of autonomous learning awareness and autonomous learning behavior than Group J.

Result

1) Successful learners can consciously manage their own learning methods, learning objectives and learning process by means of self design, self adjustment, self testing, self evaluation, self transformation, and self-improvement.

2) Students' autonomous learning ability and academic achievement are mutual reciprocal causation, which means they mutually reinforce each other.

Statistics analyses show that factors like gender and major of study bear no significant correlation with autonomous learning awareness and autonomous learning behavior as far as ethnic preparatory students are concerned.

Reflection

Autonomous learning means independent analysis, exploration and practice aiming to achieve learning goals. Since learning experience, family background and academic achievement bear significant correlation with autonomous learning awareness and autonomous learning behavior, educators are supposed to pay close attention to individual differences, create diverse learning environments and guide students to do autonomous learning by resorting to different methods.

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