

An Experimental Project on Student's Autonomous Learning

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学生の自律的学習に向けての実験的試み（英文）

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An Experimental Project on Student's Autonomous Learning

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Abstract

This paper describes a one-term experiment conducted in the first author's English class for post-graduate students from Feb. 2004 to June 2004. The project was intended to encourage student autonomy, and to train students on how to acquire various skills in language learning and communication. The project provided students with enough room to exert their autonomy and they attained its desired goals. The beneficial effects can be seen in three ways: The center of the class shifts from the teacher to the students; students can learn more effectively if they are given an autonomous learning environment; and students can acquire all round abilities if they adopt a positive attitude towards learning.

I. Introduction

Student autonomy refers to the "ability to take care of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981). It can also mean independent learning or self-reliant learning (Nunan, 1989). Dickinson considers autonomy to be "both an attitude towards learning and a capacity for independent learning" (Dickinson, 1995). Obviously, the idea of autonomous learning is not new, nor is it confined to language learning. More and more educators have argued convincingly that schooling cannot prepare students with all the contingencies in a constantly changing world. Instead of spoon-feeding students with a static body of knowledge, teachers should raise the students' consciousness as the center of learning and train them how to learn to make them responsible for their own learning. To a large extent, the success of teaching depends on students' active involvement. Therefore, language teachers must maximize opportunities for students to take responsibilities for their own learning. To encourage student autonomy, the first author designed a one-term work project for 49 post-graduate students who are learning for their Masters degree, as a supplementary to their textbook learning. Here is a brief description.

II. The Project

1. Project Description

Goal: To encourage student autonomy in learning

Input: Readings on the topic chosen

Activities: Reading, discussion, preparation and presentation

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Teacher's role: Director, organizer, counselor and creator of opportunities

Students' role: Active participants and learners

Setting: Outside the classroom (reading and preparing); in-class (presentation and discussion)

2. Project Procedure

Assigning the task	At the beginning of the term: The teacher offered 15 topics related to texts or social issues that students were interested in. Forty-nine students formed 10 groups, 4-5 members in each, and chose 2-3 topics for their own group.
Preparing	Outside class: Students collected, sifted through materials; worked out an outline; designed ways to present the topic to the class.
Presenting	At the beginning of each unit in class: Each group gave a 10-minute presentation of the topic while the others listened and asked questions. For each unit 3 groups were arranged to give a presentation on the same topic
Wrapping-up	Right after the presentations: First, the group did self-assessment; then the classmates evaluated their work; last, the teacher gave comments and a score for the whole group

3. Examples of Students' Performance

Topics	Ways of Presentation
Music	Lecture: Five students introduced 5 styles of music: Rock'n'Roll, Motown sound, folk music, disco, jazz and rap music.
Culture and Civilization	Short Play: Four family stories in China, Japan, France and Britain which showed their cultures differently.
English Language Studies	Short Play: Expressed that listening, speaking, reading and writing are all important.
Health	Report: Five students introduced the 5 best ways to sharpen ones memory.
Population	Forum: How to turn a population burden into an asset
Economy	A simulated press conference: How important will IT industry influence the economy in China?
Fashion	Short Play: Emily Goodwin at a fashion show
Business	Short Play: An agreement is reached
Internet	Debate: Different opinions on the Internet
Education	Report: Theoretical teaching and practical education
News	Satirical short play: Embellish a narration
People	Story: The monster, which is about Richard Wagner, a great dramatist, thinker, and stupendous musical genius.
Science	Short Play: What is your paper on?

Politics	Speech on a topic: We need peace
Ethnics	Debate: Different ideas about the idea that the cloning of humans will forever be seen as unethical

4. Students' comments on the project and their own performance

"We are free and equal in class, and the class becomes dynamic."

"The teacher treats us like adults."

"It is helpful to improve our creative and imaginative ability."

"I began to learn how cooperation is important."

"We become brave and more confident."

"It is good because we know how to work with others."

"I've learned a lot about social problems."

"We have to take the responsibility for our own learning."

"I now understand that learning means much more than just reading the textbooks."

"I should improve my self-learning ability."

"The most difficult part of my job is how to give my lecture and involve the whole class at the same time... Teaching isn't as easy as I thought."

III. Student Autonomy in the Project

Throughout the project, the students were entirely autonomous: They decided on their work partners, materials, ways of presentation, audience involvement, etc.

1. Group Work

While working on the project, the group members cooperated, influenced, and stimulated each other. There was more interaction among members because they assumed different roles in their performance and shared responsibilities. There was also a team spirit since they all worked towards the same goal.

2. Collecting Information

Students used multimedia software and the Internet for the required materials. They tried every means possible to get the knowledge by themselves instead of waiting for it. In addition, they analyzed the information and selected what material best fitted their presentations.

3. Presentation

Each group of students decided their own ways of presentation, which best expressed their ideas to the class and got the whole class involved. They presented the information they selected through short plays, debate, lectures, stories, speech, simulated press conference, etc. They employed PowerPoint multimedia software for audiovisual aids. Quite a few students got to know how to lead the audience along with questions and cues. They learned how to conduct basic interaction in a presentation.

4. Evaluating and Feedback

First, the group members evaluated their own work by comparing their actual performance with what they prepared and expected. Then, their classmates told them directly their strengths and weaknesses. At last, the teacher summarized the key points of the group's work. The prompt feedback not only makes the group see their own problems, but also enables the other groups to become aware of the problems so that they can avoid them and do even better.

IV. What the Project Has Achieved

The project attained its original goal--encouraging students' autonomous learning, and succeeded in the following three aspects.

1. Teacher retreated and students centered the class

The teacher used to be the central figure in language teaching class. He served as the knowledge transmitter, offering what he thought as important and worth learning to the students. The students passively took notes, and passively took in knowledge. However, in this project, after the teacher assigned the task, he retreated into the background. He gave advice and helped when called for and comments at the end. So here, the teacher is not an instructor, a lecturer, or a knowledge transmitter, but rather, a director, an organizer, and even more important, a creator of an environment in which students learn and get to know how to learn. The students take responsibility for their own learning. Enjoying full autonomy and deciding on their own agendas, students become more involved and willing to work.

What has to be noted here is that absolute autonomy is impossible and unrealistic, because the control the teacher exerts (assigning the task, offering the topics, explaining the objectives) defines the parameters within which students work. Without this control, students could feel psychologically deserted.

2. Students received effective learning

1) Purposeful learning activity

There is an increasing awareness among teachers that students are motivated to learn when they take an active part in the learning process, and the key to successful learning is consciousness raising. When English is used as a vehicle for doing something, it can be acquired effectively; when students are directly involved in accomplishing the task through English, they will have special interest in the outcome of what they are using English to do. In the experimental project, the students were all engaged in purposeful activities. From the first step input through intake to output, students have a clear purpose in mind: to explain the topic to the class. This is a task "which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (Nunan, 1989).

2) Bridging an information gap

The presentations proceeded naturally in class because the students liked to share the information each group had collected after working hard on it. Their in-class presentation task can actually fill in an information gap so that all the class benefits from each group's work. The others don't just listen; they ask questions to clarify some points and give comments at the end of each performance. If one presentation is particularly successful,

it serves to inspire and encourage the listeners into the further study on the given topic or related topics.

3) Upgrading the textbooks

Many teachers and students complain their textbooks are boring and uninteresting. However, in this project, while preserving the themes of the texts, students upgraded the contents. They collected as many materials as they could manage on the given topic. This is a worthwhile supplementary exercise to textbooks. The study of one text is viewed as a starting point, from which students radiate their learning activities. What's more, while practicing reading, speaking and writing, students learn how to express themselves and how to explain profound ideas in detail. This accomplishment is a motivation strong enough for them to continue.

3. Students developed all round abilities

The project aims to offer students an opportunity to work by themselves. Students are the real center of teaching and learning activities. Therefore, they should be entitled to make decisions in learning and be encouraged to exercise their autonomy. In their independent working, they learned how to acquire new knowledge, get information, manage their presentation, work with others, apply the language skills to problem solving, and make communication more effective. These skills are all necessary for post-graduate students. In the project, the students really developed their abilities and enlarged their knowledge, which are necessary to carry out self-directed learning tasks independently.

V. Conclusion

Students enjoyed the project enormously and benefited a lot from it. This supports the theoretical notions underpinning the project. In this project, the textbook served as a starting point from which students' learning activities expanded; the teacher served as a thoughtful designer and director; and the students were skillful, responsible and active learners and participants.

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