



Net-Based Learner Autonomy, Its Problems and Possible Solutions-A Case Study in WAHU, China

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Abstract

The paper presents a study investigating the net-based learner autonomy of the first-year non-English major students studying in West Anhui University (WAHU). Through questionnaires and interviews, the study shows the problems in learner autonomy and presents a new perspective for the development of an auto-learning environment. The study reveals that students had difficulty adapting to net-based learning mode. Some proposals that the college, teachers and students could unite to tackle the problems in learning have been put forth as the solutions to the problems.

Keywords: Net-based learning, Learning autonomy, College English

1. Introduction

College English Teaching Curriculum Requirements (For Trial Implementation) was issued by the Higher Education Bureau of the Ministry of Education of China in January 2004. It confirms the net-based, multimedia-aided teaching and learning mode and requires that all universities and institutions widely apply advanced information technology and promote computer and net-based English teaching and learning in order to provide the students with a superior language learning environment. Further, it clearly points out that all higher learning institutions should make full use of multimedia and network technology, adopt new teaching patterns to improve the monotonous, teacher-centered class teaching mode, and that the new mode should be based on modern information technology - especially the network technology to make English teaching and learning free from the limitations of time and space - and develop towards autonomous learning. This shows that a net-based English teaching and learning mode elongates the time and extends the space in the process and thus creates a more fertile environment for autonomous learning, which in turn lays the foundation for students to cultivate their language skills.

2. Net-based college English learning

In the 1990s, Multimedia Approach to Foreign Language Learning (MAFLL) was adopted and tremendously promoted language learning. As an integral part of it, net-based language learning became popular for its vividness, animation, and conveniences. Learners become more active and enjoy much more freedom limitless learning atmosphere. Multitude software is designed to develop autonomous learning in China. Meanwhile, many websites have been set up for autonomous English learning. Linguistics achievements are made in schools, colleges and universities by applying the net-based language-learning mode, especially in relation to college English study. Learners can study either from the campus intranet or the Internet. In turn, this promotes learner autonomy in language study.

After the Reform of College English Teaching and Learning by MOE (Ministry of Education of China), net-based college English learning has become the primary focus of College English Teaching and Learning syllabus. As such autonomous learning is becoming more and more important in the students' English study, guiding and leading their study and learning activities and strategies. Since autonomous learning is emphasized today, the net-based autonomy has become a critical issue in college English study.

Through the data-collecting and case study, the paper tries to find out the respondents' readiness and tendency for

learner autonomy in EFL learning by discussing students' actual performance in the perception of problems they encounter in net-based autonomous learning.

3. Methodology

3.1 The subjects

Participants in this study are 104 first-year non-English major students in West Anhui University. Their ages range from 18 to 21, comprising 78 male students and 26 females. They are majoring in two departments: Mechanics and Electronic Information and Technology. Their average English score in the college entrance examination was 105.5 out of a total of 150.

3.2 Instrument

The data for this study was collected through a questionnaire and the personal interviews. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In Part A, students were asked to provide background information about their name, age, gender, specialties and their score on the English entrance examination. Part B focused on net-based English learning. This part contained items about self-study each week on a single learning activity and three open questions that required respondents to offer whatever information they had about their strategies and problems in self-study. The three open questions were also the ones used in the interviews. The factors that affected net-based learning -- as well as the pros and cons on net-based language study-- were also questioned in this part.

4. Results and analysis

This study is intended to find out the non-English major students' general behavioral patterns for net-based English learning. The results reveal the following findings and these findings might have implications for college English teaching in China.

Tables 1 to 9 present the results gained. Subjects' responses concerned with these 9 aspects will be reported one by one.

4.1 Learners' attitude towards net learning

Table 1 is about the degrees and frequency of students' performance on net learning. As is shown in Table 1, 43% of the students rarely learnt English on the net and 35% sometimes did, while only 2% always did. 46% asserted that the assignments on net learning were just fairly proper or sometimes proper. 45% of them were sometimes able to finish their tasks and only 2% could always do that. On self-evaluation and assessment, 36% sometimes did it and 32% rarely did. 34% students claimed that they never interacted with the teacher when learning on the net, plus 28% who rarely did. 40% said they sometimes had difficulty when learning. Students tending to exchange with peers took 31% of the total and 42% seemed to remain independent. Students' computer skills were affecting their learning and it took a percentage of 34%. As for teachers' instruction, most of the students claimed that it was not indispensable, with a high of 88%, which may result in their unrealistic goal setting and random learning.

As Shu claims, the second component of autonomous learning is attitude: learners should be active towards their study, i.e. be responsible for their study and devoted to their learning. From the analysis of Table 1, students' attitude needs changing in order to foster learner autonomy.

4.2 Place and time of students' net learning

Table 2 concerns the place where students did net learning. 94% learned through the campus intranet and only 6% on the Internet.

Table 3 concerns time spent each week on net-based English learning. It reveals that most of the students only spent a little time engaged in net learning just 2-6 hours per week.

From tables 2 and 3, it is clear that students' net learning was not so good. Their learning activities were mostly limited to the campus intranet, which was not suitable for the purpose of cultivating their autonomy. In other words, learners are advised to learn more from the internet where more sources for learning are available.

4.3 Students' reaction to the new learning mode

Table 4, Table 5 concern Students' satisfaction with net-based autonomous learning mode and students' preference net-based autonomous learning. Table 4 shows that 55% of the respondents were fairly satisfied with the new mode. Table 5 indicates that 56% of the subjects fairly liked it with only 3% who liked it very much.

Table 6 is about whether net-based autonomous learning should be the primary means of English learning respectively. Table 6 tells us the how the students regard the role of net-based autonomous learning. A very high percentage of them agreed it should have an active role. 46% of them fairly agreed, 31% agreed and 7% strongly agreed.

The three tables affectively conclude that students had not adapted to the new mode to a great extent. They did not show their full recognition for the mode at present. That is to say, there will probably be some time before learners to make use of the conveniences provided by the new mode.

4.4 Benefits gained from the new learning mode

Table 7 indicates benefits that can be gained from net-based autonomous learning in English

The main benefits gained from net-based learning are shown in Table 7 and most of the subjects considered it to be a good learning mode. But it is just from this perspective that they regard it so.

Net-based college English study has been established as the dominant learning mode since the Reform. This facilitates students' capacity for language application as well as their autonomy. In addition to the advantages listed in Table 7, there are more strong points to be considered. Compared with a more traditional learning mode, net-based learning style and autonomy boast a number of advantages:

(1) Students' individualized autonomous learning gets realized. In this context, learners can actively choose what they wish to learn, how, when and where to learn and they can finish learning tasks with the help of net technology according to their situation and interest.

(2) Students' learning aim and direction become clear. In the new mode, learners' tasks would be the only focus of language study. Students can consult their teachers or other students when they encounter any difficulty in the process of learning. And students can get teachers' effective guidance from teachers.

(3) Students can develop all the language skills completely and evenly. Net-based college English learning attaches more importance to listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, especially the skills of listening and speaking. This enhances students' ability to use English widely and effectively.

4.5 Problems in the new learning process

Table 8 and Table 9 concern individual problems and difficulties in net-based autonomous learning and net problems respectively. The table 8 shows the common individual problems and difficulties in the learning process. 78% complained about the computer set and facilities and 61% said they possessed a lack of vocabulary to fully benefit from net learning. In Table 9, common problems with net-based English learning were collected. 81% of the respondents said the environment was unsuitable for net-based English learning and 75% admitted that they were in great need of self-control and regulation when learning on the net.

From the study it is clear that students' readiness for net-based autonomous learning was somewhat unsatisfactory. As mentioned above, there are many advantages to be found in net-based college English study. However, in the learning process, there often arise some problems that cannot be ignored due to the influence of subjective and objective factors. Through the interviews and the questionnaire it could be claimed that such problems stemmed from two major types of cause.

(1) Subjective causes. Teachers and students hold different opinions about the Reform. Their proficiency in operating the computer and using the net varies very much. Thus, net-based college English learning and autonomy gets influenced and perhaps impeded. Thereafter, both teachers and students should change their perception, affirm the future trend and direction of net-based college English study and put the computer and net aided learning and teaching technology into practice. Furthermore, both teachers and students should master computers and the net in order to fully engage in net-based courses and the college English study system. Only then can the autonomy be guaranteed.

(2) Objective roots. This refers to the computer hardware, the LAN (Local Area Network) connection and multimedia courseware, etc. The new learning mode poses a rigid requirement on both computer and network. There are often connection failures or other such problems. To better manage these technologies, cooperation between English teachers and technicians--and another one between the English Department and some sectors concerned with the college--should be established for net-based college English study. Thus, learner autonomy will be fostered and promoted smoothly.

According to Shu, the third component is environment: learners should be provided with abundant chances to practice. He also emphasizes that without external environment such as teachers, teaching facilities and learning material, the first two items can never be realized, especially in the primary phases of fostering autonomous learning. That is to say, students' autonomous learning attitude and capacity cannot be cultured.

With regard to the problems encountered in self-study, one of the most serious was related to vocabulary. The respondents of the open net-based learner autonomy questionnaire and the interviews reported that they had difficulties in both remembering new words and using the words they had newly memorized and that their vocabulary is not enough to engage in net-based English learning. In addition, a high percentage of questionnaire respondents disagreed that peer students could help them with the study of English; further they rarely interacted with teachers. A possible explanation may be that students did not have confidence in the other students and teachers. The other one was their computer skills and knowledge of network technology. Fortunately, these two main hindrances may be overcome through their further study.

The net-based autonomous college English learning mode has improved students' English study as shown in the tables.

But there were problems during the process. Students had benefited a lot from the new mode. However, by comparing the benefits shown in Table 7 and the above advantages and disadvantages, it can be concluded that learners had not truly realized autonomous learning during net study and that the advantages of net-based learning cannot be seen here. It can also be concluded that students need time to change their beliefs and adjust to the new mode.

5. Problem solving

5.1 Problems on net-based college English learning

The net-based English autonomous learning mode has been applied in college English teaching and learning and it has shown its advantages and generated benefits for students. However, we did hear complaints about the “cold” interaction with computers and the apathy of the learning process without a live teacher. Students want to react to a real human being, not a machine. Meanwhile, many students showed their incompatibility to the new learning approach because of their own learning styles. As the questionnaire in Table 8 shows, 78% of the respondents were not satisfied with the temporary computer facilities at the university’s language learning center and 61% said they had problems with vocabulary. Many students who come from distant areas have no experience of using computer and informational networks. That is why they may feel uncomfortable and embarrassed when stimulated to join this activity with 41% of them were impeded by poor computer operation skills and proficiency, and 40% complained about the poor LAN connection with another 40% not knowing what to learn. Besides, 81% of the subjects reported that there was a poor environment for such learning and 75% claimed that they had poor self-control and regulation when learning. 40% said they were affected by the poor management system. and administration in the center and 30% claimed that they had too little time to study on the net. The fee for using computer and network may also be quite high for them with 15% worried about the fees of net learning.

There are also negative health implications: Constant using of computer (during the network access) may result in students eyes malfunctions such as short sight, optic neuritis or even glaucoma. In addition, the increased level of radiation may result in chronic fatigability, nervous breakdowns and even cause dependency making a person addicted to the virtual world and unable to cope with real problems and events.

5.2 Suggested solutions

China is a big developing country so it's impossible to provide all high schools with the necessary technical equipment but after entering the university students obtain a possibility to enlarge their experience and operate new devices and mechanisms which is extremely important considering the wide usage of computers nowadays. Then, as to the problems in the Language Learning Center, we can update the computer facilities, improve the LAN connections and better the management system so that students can more easily learn without objective hindrances.

Being a non-profitable organization, the educational establishment has no aim to collect students' money groundlessly. On the contrary there can be a system of discounts and bonus network cards for talented students (as a prize) or for students from poor families (as a way of state care and support).

Ways of Overcoming Negative Health Implications:

Modern informational technologies are being improved very fast and main scientific efforts are directed to neutralizing the negative influence of certain computer parts such as radiation from screen. Thus following certain rules and instructions students may significantly reduce the danger of health damage without any loss of knowledge. First, the time of contact with the computer should be precisely restricted and this limitation should never be exceeded. Second, the bigger distance between the user and a screen is, the less effect of negative radiation will be noticed. Big screens or digital projectors allow arranging many activities with materials from the network but they give less harm to the audience than in case when each student uses a separate computer with a small screen. Third, special glasses and optional protective layer for screen should be inevitable attributes for people who use computer more frequently than others: coordinators (teachers), detached students who skipped exam and use their second chance or talented students who are deeply interested in subject and require more activities and tasks.

Fourthly, all students and teachers have regular health check in case of any slightest weakness or illness so they can always get a qualified medical service and advice. They must not neglect such effective means of saving health as eyes massage and special exercises, which are so widespread in recent years. Last but not least, teachers do not need to be all-time supervisors but be advisors with flexible time. If students studied mostly under teachers’ supervision, their learning would never be autonomous but passive and forced. Teachers could offer advice and guidance on students’ learning activities and help students change beliefs to adapt to the new mode.

6. Conclusion

Net-based independent study among the first-year non-English majors in West Anhui University is not so satisfactory. There is plenty of work to be done. In order to build up enough web-based tutoring and learning material, foreign language teachers will have to undertake a major share of the work as such measures have to be taken to make students

sufficiently motivated.

Moreover, an information management system should be incorporated so that the burden of the users, primarily teachers and students, can be minimized; and material stored in the server can be easily and conveniently retrieved.

The Net-based college English study mode is an entirely new phenomenon in the field of teaching perception, teaching ideas and teaching methods. It was shown during the pilot teaching phase in some other universities beside WAHU that the potential of the students was tapped. As long as the teaching and learning activities are well arranged and organized, students can not only finish their learning tasks, but also foster a capacity for autonomous learning and benefit from future study. It can be claimed in brief that the new college English study mode has already shown its advantages as a practical and useful tool in college English study.

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Appendix

Table 1. Degrees and frequency of students' performance on net learning

| ITEM | NEVER | RARELY | SOMETIMES | OFTEN | ALWAYS |
|---|-------|--------|-----------|-------|--------|
| Learning English on net | 2 % | 43 % | 35 % | 18 % | 2 % |
| Assignment received | 4 % | 21 % | 46 % | 24 % | 5 % |
| Finishing assignment on time | 5 % | 20 % | 42 % | 31 % | 2 % |
| Self-assessing and evaluating | 13 % | 32 % | 36 % | 13 % | 6 % |
| Interacting with teacher | 34 % | 28 % | 26 % | 11 % | 1 % |
| Exchange with peers | 11 % | 14 % | 40 % | 22 % | 10 % |
| Having difficulty when learning | 19 % | 23 % | 31 % | 22 % | 5 % |
| Computer skills affecting learning pace | 25 % | 22 % | 34 % | 8% | 11 % |
| Needing teacher's instruction | 29 % | 26 % | 33 % | 9 % | 3 % |

Table 2. Where to learn

| Campus intranet | Internet |
|-----------------|----------|
| 94 % | 6 % |

Table 3. Time spent each week on net-based English learning

| 0-2hs/w | 2- 4hs/w | 4-6hs/w | 6+ hs/w |
|---------|----------|---------|---------|
| 47 % | 31 % | 20 % | 2 % |

Table 4. Students' satisfaction with net-based autonomous learning mode

| Satisfied very much | Satisfied | Fairly satisfied | Dissatisfied | Strongly Dissatisfied |
|---------------------|-----------|------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 2 % | 25 % | 55 % | 9 % | 9 % |

Table 5. Students' preference on net-based autonomous learning,

| Like it very much | Like it | Fairly like it | Dislike it | Strongly dislike it |
|-------------------|---------|----------------|------------|---------------------|
| 3 % | 23 % | 56 % | 10 % | 8 % |

Table 6. Whether net-based autonomous learning should be the primary means of English learning

| Strongly agree | Agree | Fairly agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|----------------|-------|--------------|----------|-------------------|
| 7 % | 31 % | 46 % | 6 % | 10 % |

Table 7. Benefits that can be gained from net-based autonomous learning in English

| | |
|--|------|
| Time saving | 40 % |
| More ease English learning environment | 58 % |
| Enlarging knowledge scope | 80 % |
| More easiness and freedom when expressing opinions | 61 % |
| Material searching becoming easy | 7 % |

Table 8. Individual problems and difficulties in net-based autonomous learning

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Poor computer proficiency | 41% |
| Lack of English vocabulary | 61% |
| Poor computer sets | 78% |
| Poor connection of LAN | 32% |
| Not knowing what to learn | 40% |
| Others | 18% |

Table 9. Problems with net-based autonomous learning

| | |
|--|------|
| Poor self-control and regulation | 75 % |
| Limitedness and pressure of learning time | 30 % |
| No auto-learning ambience | 81 % |
| High fees | 15 % |
| Poor management in the computer and network center | 40% |