

Oral English Autonomous Learning Ability of English Majors Under the Background of the Internet and Its Improvement

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Abstract: The Internet is an important means of communication for contemporary college students, especially those majoring in English, to acquire knowledge about information and improve their oral proficiency. However, research on the relevant oral English autonomous learning ability of English majors shows that the overall learning situation is not satisfying. Based on the development of the concept of autonomous learning, this article explores the current situation and existing problems in oral English autonomous learning of English majors under the context of the Internet, and proposes corresponding autonomous learning strategies for improving their oral English skill.

Keywords: Oral English; Autonomous learning ability; Internet; English majors

Online publication: October 19, 2023

1. Introduction

For a long time, foreign language education in China has focused on imparting knowledge and relatively neglecting skills cultivation. The foreign language skill cultivation is limited to basic language skills training, which not only limits the space for further development of foreign language majors, but also weakens their ability to adapt to social changes and lifelong development^[1]. In recent years, the country has increasingly emphasized the cultivation of students' abilities. The National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020) released in 2010 regarded the skills cultivation as one of the main themes of China's education reform and development: emphasizing special skills, optimizing knowledge structure, enriching social practice, strengthening skills cultivation, striving to improve students' learning, practical, and innovative skills, and promoting their active adaptation to society to create a better future. The "National Standards for the Quality of Foreign Language and Literature Teaching" (hereinafter referred to as the "National Standards") issued by the Ministry of Education in 2018 is the first time that specific requirements have been put forward for students majoring in foreign languages to meet the needs of the country, standing at the height of building a strong country through higher education. The ability to apply foreign languages,

appreciate literature, cross culture, think critically, as well as a certain level of research, innovation, information technology application, autonomous learning, and practical skills, will undoubtedly greatly promote the improvement of the quality of foreign language talent cultivation in China. Autonomous learning ability is one of the important abilities that foreign language majors should possess according to the “National Standard.” On the one hand, in the face of inexhaustible knowledge and information sources in the information age, students need to make independent judgments and choices. On the other hand, the popularization of the Internet and the rapid development of information technology have accelerated the speed of knowledge updating. Only by possessing the ability to learn independently can students continue to learn independently and efficiently after completing school education, in order to continuously update and expand their knowledge, and meet the needs of society and self-development.

The latest “Teaching Syllabus for English Subjects in Higher Education” (hereinafter referred to as the “Teaching Syllabus”) issued by the Ministry of Education clearly states that the ultimate goal of English teaching in universities is to help students to develop strong comprehensive English skills, especially listening and speaking skills, so that these college students can communicate fluently in English in their future learning, work, and social activities. At the same time, practical and feasible measures should be taken to enhance their autonomous learning ability^[2]. Therefore, in the current situation, English teaching in universities should make students the absolute subject and enable them to independently learn English knowledge. This is a direction of current English teaching reform in universities. Autonomous learning aims to enable students to learn enthusiastically and actively in a conscious manner, rather than learning under pressure from various external factors.

Tyler-Smith^[3] pointed out that network learning has the advantages of having a large amount of information that is not limited by time and space, and being able to learn collaboratively. Multiple networks can be flexibly applied, thus having great advantages in improving learning efficiency. Learning strategies have the most direct impact on the efficiency of autonomous learning. In the context of the “Internet,” various online learning materials, innovative and unique teaching methods, and learning methods have driven the continuous development of autonomous learning. For contemporary English major college students, it is crucial to make better use of online resources for autonomous and personalized improvement of their English oral proficiency.

This article elaborates on the current situation and existing problems of oral English autonomous learning among English majors. Secondly, it analyzes the reasons for the current situation of oral English autonomous learning. Lastly, it proposes corresponding strategies to improve their oral English autonomous learning ability in the context of the Internet, thus improving their oral English proficiency.

This study uses online and offline interviews with college students in Xiangtan Institute of Technology. Online interviews are mainly conducted through WeChat, QQ, and other network platforms. Offline interviews are mainly face-to-face interviews, with interviewees agreed on a good time and place for the interview.

2. Development of the concept of autonomous learning

Holec officially introduced the concept of autonomous learning into the field of language teaching in the 1980s, first proposing “learner autonomy” and defining it as “the ability to take responsibility for one’s own learning”^[4], specifically including determining learning objectives and content, selecting learning methods, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation of learning results.

Early autonomous learning mainly refers to autonomous learning in self-directed learning centers, which trains and cultivates learning autonomy for adults who do not have the time and opportunity to participate

in school classroom learning ^[5]. The concept of autonomous learning is mostly related to the concept of “independent learning.”

Emphasizing the social characteristics of autonomous learning is another manifestation of the deepening development of the concept of autonomous learning. Autonomous learning not only relies on individuals, but also on groups. Only by collaborating with others can learners better acquire autonomous learning abilities ^[6].

Littlewood defined autonomous learning as “the ability of learners to use what they have learned without relying on teachers” ^[7]. The real subject of learning is the students themselves. In order to really stimulate students’ interest in learning and improve students’ learning ability, the key point is starting from the students themselves. The teaching from teachers is only an auxiliary function. Dickinson believed that autonomous learning is an attitude and ability to learn. Among them, attitude is a responsibility for one’s own learning decisions, while ability is a reflection of them ^[8]. Zimmerman proposes that the specific characteristics of autonomous learning include setting goals, managing specific time, engaging in meaningful practice, using cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and having a sense of self-efficacy. Autonomous learning is achieved through students’ own learning goals, self-monitoring, self-overcoming difficulties, and other means ^[9]. Its greatest feature is learner-oriented, strong curiosity, clear learning goals, and the ability to choose suitable learning methods. Autonomous learning can temper students’ will. Learning is not achieved overnight, it requires indomitable will and perseverance, because difficulties and setbacks will be continuously encountered in the process of learning. The ability of autonomous learning precisely has the tenacity to overcome difficulties. A process of autonomous learning is also a process of training students’ will.

The academic community is gradually realizing that autonomous learning is not simply equivalent to independent learning, and mutual cooperation and support are important factors in cultivating autonomous learning abilities. In recent years, with the rapid development of the Internet, the connotation of autonomous learning ability has been continuously expanded and given new dimensions, namely network or information literacy skill, which includes the ability to obtain network information, the ability to identify and analyze network information, the ability to critically interpret network information, the ability to produce network information, the ability to communicate and cooperate in the network, and the ability to self-manage.

3. Importance of autonomous learning

Autonomous learning instills a sense of ownership and responsibility for one’s education. Unlike traditional classroom settings where instructors dictate the pace and content, autonomous learners are self-driven and motivated by their personal objectives. This ownership leads to a deeper engagement with the material, as individuals pursue knowledge or skills they are genuinely passionate about.

Furthermore, autonomous learning nurtures critical thinking and problem-solving skills. When individuals are responsible for setting their learning goals and finding resources to achieve them, they are compelled to think critically, analyze information, and make informed decisions. This not only enhances their cognitive abilities but also equips them with practical problem-solving skills that are invaluable in real-world scenarios.

Moreover, autonomous learning fosters adaptability and resilience. In a rapidly changing world, the ability to adapt to new circumstances and acquire new knowledge or skills is crucial. Autonomous learners are better equipped to navigate uncertainty and stay relevant in their professions by seeking the latest information and learning opportunities. They are more likely to view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than obstacles.

Additionally, autonomous learning promotes self-confidence and self-efficacy. Successfully setting and

achieving learning goals on one's own can boost an individual's confidence in their abilities. This newfound self-assuredness can extend beyond the realm of education, positively impacting other aspects of their life, such as career advancement and personal relationships.

Furthermore, autonomous learning is a cornerstone of lifelong learning. In an era where the half-life of knowledge is constantly shrinking due to rapid advancements in technology, individuals who embrace autonomous learning are better prepared to adapt to new information and technologies throughout their lives. They view learning as an ongoing process rather than a finite endeavor tied to formal education.

Moreover, autonomous learning encourages resourcefulness. Autonomous learners become adept at identifying and utilizing a wide range of resources, including books, online courses, mentors, and peer networks. This resourcefulness not only enriches their learning experiences but also prepares them to be proactive problem solvers in their professional lives.

Autonomous learning is a powerful force that shapes personal and professional development in the modern world. It empowers individuals to take control of their education, think critically, adapt to change, build confidence, and foster a lifelong love of learning. As our world continues to evolve, the role of autonomous learning becomes increasingly essential in equipping individuals with the skills and mindset needed to succeed and thrive in any endeavor they pursue. Embracing autonomous learning is not just a choice, it is a necessity in the journey of personal and professional growth.

4. Current situation of oral English autonomous learning among English majors

Oral English autonomous learning among English majors generally faces several problems, as follows.

(1) Weak intrinsic motivation in oral English learning

In the process of autonomous learning, students will have two motivations, namely internal motivation and external motivation. For autonomous learners, internal motivation is mostly at work. When they are driven internally, they can develop goal plans based on their own needs and take corresponding responsibility for the results. Through the interview about students' attitudes and motivations towards autonomous learning, although the majority of students have a positive attitude, it can still be seen that they are driven by external factors. Although this external motivation can motivate learning to a certain extent, it also increases students' sense of dependence, which will cause their oral learning to be increasingly passive, inefficient, slow to effect, time-consuming, labor-intensive, and only driven by internal motivation. Only by truly integrating into it can one become the master of the oral learning process.

(2) Relatively single learning method and strategy

The interview shows that although learners are able to use some good self-directed learning methods and strategies, they are relatively single, and the actual learning strategies and methods they master are only a little experience accumulated in their daily learning. Without a systematic understanding of them, it is difficult to apply and choose different learning strategies and methods according to different tasks. It shows that more students improve their oral proficiency by watching English movies, English short videos, etc. It shows a lack of understanding of other methods and strategies, and a tendency towards more passive methods and strategies.

(3) Problems with self-reflection and evaluation in oral English autonomous learning

The interview shows that most students are aware of their learning problems but do not reflect or correct them. They are unable to correct weak links, and many of them do not perform adequate self-

evaluation and self-reflection on the problems in their learning. The lack of self-evaluation can lead to problems that are difficult to solve in a timely manner, thus deviating from the normal learning trajectory, and hindering the process of autonomous learning and the understanding and mastery of knowledge.

(4) Poor ability to self-supervise and control during oral English autonomous learning

Due to the fact that learning on the Internet requires more willpower to self-supervise and control compared to traditional self-directed learning methods, in addition to the diverse learning resources that cause people having nowhere to start, there are also various other types of information that interfere with self-directed learning. Therefore, students with poor control ability are easily affected with a lack of self-discipline, and students with self-discipline ability are prone to lack of concentration, resulting in low efficiency. The poor learning effect leads to the failure of autonomous oral learning.

The reasons for the current situation being less optimistic may include the following:

- (1) In China, English is not the mother tongue, so students often face the problem of lacking actual English context. There is no opportunity to interact with native English speakers or live in an English-speaking environment, which limits the opportunity for autonomous learning.
- (2) Some students may lack effective self-directed learning skills, such as developing learning plans, self-evaluation, and feedback, and finding suitable learning resources. This makes it difficult for them to independently improve their oral skills.
- (3) English majors may face a large amount of coursework and exam pressure, which may make it difficult for them to allocate enough time for oral autonomous learning.

5. Suggestions on improving oral English autonomous learning ability under the background of Internet

Wu believes that autonomous learning in the online environment refers to the process of learners taking responsibility for their online learning with a sense of autonomy, fully utilizing their subjective initiative, utilizing learning resources supported by the online environment, and obtaining information and learning ^[10]. In recent years, artificial intelligence and information technology have developed rapidly. In the context of information technology, students can use network resources to obtain more knowledge and information.

5.1. Stimulating students' internal motivation

Brown believes that internal motivation plays a greater role in learners' autonomous learning process ^[11]. Interest is the internal motivation of most college students' English learning. Bruner's cognitive discovery theory points out that cultivating students' internal driving force for learning is the key to education, and it cannot rely solely on external stimuli and rewards, especially highlighting the important role of curiosity and interest in cognitive needs. Once students are interested in English and experience the fun of learning English, they will never get tired of learning the language and will have a positive attitude towards learning the language rather than succumb to external pressure, hence they are more willing to take the initiative to learn the language. A large number of resources are available for browsing, which is very convenient. Rich and colorful video images and various learning resources can be easily obtained on the Internet. Compared to traditional textbooks and textbooks with single images and sentence structures, online resources can further enhance students' interest in English, in order to promote their active search for topics of interest and generate a strong internal drive to promote the smooth development of English autonomous learning. At the same time, various English

speech competitions on the Internet, excellent dubbing works, and other authentic pronunciations are beneficial resources to arouse students' curiosity and interest in English pronunciation and intonation.

5.2. Clarifying the goals of oral English autonomous learning and developing an appropriate learning plan

When learners use the Internet to set learning goals for themselves, they need to rely on their own actual situation. Based on one's own abilities and the principle of the zone of proximal development, high-level and low-level goals are combined to develop appropriate goals. For example, there are many spoken language software on the Internet that provide oral proficiency tests when users register for the first time. This will help students to have a preliminary understanding of their current level, establish oral language learning goals that are suitable for their own situation, improve learning efficiency, and enhance learning effectiveness.

At the same time, the plan formulated should be specific and detailed. Some students are ambitious when making plans, resulting in too much learning volume for themselves every day, for example, they plan to spend more than fifteen hours per week improving pronunciation. Such plans are difficult to persist, and can also cause fatigue and boredom, consequently reducing learning motivation and interest. In short, by formulating a detailed and feasible plan based on one's own learning situation, and strictly following the plan, continuous progress and development can be achieved in the process of autonomous learning.

5.3. Providing immediate learning evaluation through the Internet apps

There is not much time for oral English practice in class. A teacher is usually responsible for the oral assignment of more than 100 people, which is time-consuming and laborious. Sometimes students have submitted the assignment for a long time before they are evaluated by the teacher. In addition, the oral proficiency of English teachers is uneven, and the evaluation of students' oral assignment is not accurate and scientific. Apps on the Internet use an intelligent speech recognition system to intelligently compare the pronunciation of students with the pronunciation of the system. After the students submit the recording, the system will respond quickly, giving feedback from the aspects of pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and integrity, and then identify the pronunciation of each word through different colors and intelligently correct errors. Teachers can learn more about the completion of the task from the system report, including completion, average score, average recording time, score distribution, performance ranking, individual student performance, etc., so that teachers can discover students' problems in time and adjust the teaching plan.

6. Conclusion

Under the driving force of the Internet, oral English learning can better promote students to become the main body of autonomous learning, exert their initiative, accurately grasp the theoretical knowledge of oral English autonomous learning, and actively engage in English oral conversations and other forms of diversified training in the English context of network operation, which can effectively achieve oral English autonomous learning and enhance college students' English oral practice ability. The cultivation and training of oral English autonomous learning is very important. It is a long and arduous journey for English majors to improve their oral English, which requires efforts from many aspects. By relying on the Internet, it has formed a platform that allows students to learn whenever and wherever, which breaks through the restrictions of time, space, and region in the process of oral English learning, and makes up for the deficiency of traditional oral English classroom.

Emphasizing learner autonomy does not necessarily mean a weakening of the teacher's role and a reduction

of responsibility. On the contrary, teachers play a crucial role in promoting students' autonomous language learning, helping them to achieve self-realization, and providing regular assistance. Therefore, strengthening the construction and development of the foreign language teacher team is a prerequisite and guarantee for cultivating students' English autonomous learning ability^[12].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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