

Practical Exploration of Cultivating Autonomous Learning Ability with the Upsurge of Foreign Language MOOCs

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Abstract: At present, MOOCs are rapidly emerging throughout the country which bring great challenges as well as opportunities to foreign language teaching. Foreign language learners can learn language better through MOOCs. However, the teaching effect of MOOCs is directly determined by learners' autonomous learning ability. Therefore, this article discusses the relevant theories of autonomous learning, analyzes foreign language learners' autonomous learning on the MOOCs platform, and proposes methods to promote the autonomous learning ability of foreign language learners.

Keywords: Foreign language MOOCs boom; Self-learning ability training; Auxiliary mechanisms and tools

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1. Introduction

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are online courses that combine the advantages of distance education and open education resources. They help to promote the equalization of global education opportunities and meet the needs of lifelong learning. They are known as the new trend of education reform.^[1] "Massive" refers to the huge number of learning users. Compared with the traditional form of education, the number of learning users in MOOCs can reach tens of thousands. "Open" means that MOOCs' education resources are free and is open to the general public. Learners can freely choose the content of their learning in MOOCs and arrange their own learning plans. Hence, providing learners with a high degree of autonomy. "Online" means MOOCs are conducted through the internet which is a method of online learning. "Courses" refer to the diversity of MOOCs in which MOOCs have a wide range of knowledge fields that can meet the learning needs of most learners. The vigorous development of MOOCs has a huge impact on the world's higher education. In this wave of educational innovation, how should the teaching of foreign language face this change? At present, China's foreign language teaching is predominantly "teacher-centered" and most of the students do not have the consciousness of autonomous learning in addition to their generally weak ability in autonomous learning. According to relevant research, the teaching effect of MOOCs is positively correlated with learners' autonomous learning ability. In view of that, this article discusses how to improve the self-learning ability of foreign language learners with the upsurge of MOOCs.

2. Foreign language MOOCs and autonomous learning

2.1. Theory of autonomous learning

Autonomous learning of foreign languages is a hot research topic in the field of foreign language teaching. In the 1980s, the concept of autonomous learning was introduced into the field of language teaching. “Learner autonomy” refers to the ability to be responsible for one’s own learning which specifically includes determining learning goals and content, selecting learning methods, self-monitoring and self-evaluation with learning results, etc. In 1998, Zimmerman proposed the cyclic phase model of autonomous learning which divided autonomous learning into three stages. The first is the pre-thinking stage which includes task analysis and self-efficacy evaluation. Second, the behavior or will control stage which includes self-regulation and self-control. The third is the self-reflection stage which includes self-judgment and self-reaction.^[2] Going back and forth, the cycle continuously optimizes the process and behavior of autonomous learning. In 2004, the famous Chinese scholar, Shu Dingfang discussed three elements of autonomous foreign language learning based on the situation of foreign language learning in China. The first element is attitude where the learner is willing to actively engage in learning. The second is ability in which the learner has independent learning ability and strategies. Thirdly, the environment. Learners should be given opportunities to exercise their learning ability in which external environment cultivates learners’ autonomous learning attitude and ability.^[3]

In summary, autonomous learning is a process of comprehensive construction of learners’ own learning process, behavior, strategy, monitoring, and environment. The learners’ autonomous learning ability is improved in this process. In other words, autonomous learning denotes that the learners use their subjective initiative and make full use of the learning environment to gain autonomous learning opportunities while applying relevant skills and knowledge to build their own learning process.^[4]

2.2. Autonomous learning status of learners with the upsurge of foreign language MOOCs

In recent years, the country has paid much more attention to the cultivation of students’ comprehensive abilities. One of the most important abilities is to learn independently. As early as 2010, the “Outline of the National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)” places capacity training as one of the strategic themes in China’s education reform and development.^[3] Understanding the learners’ autonomous learning in MOOCs enables experts and teachers to take effective measures in helping learners improve their autonomous learning ability. According to data from the MOOCs platforms, the application rate of learners in MOOCs is high but the graduation rate is low. After analyzing, the following reasons are drawn and discussed below.

2.2.1. Lack of self-learning awareness and strategies

The cultivation of learners’ autonomous learning awareness is the prerequisite for the development of autonomous learning ability.^[3] Compared with the traditional English teaching classroom, foreign language MOOCs platforms have higher requirements for learners’ autonomous learning ability due to the openness, decentralization, and flexibility of its resources.^[5] Schools should cultivate students’ sense of autonomous learning from multiple angles and directions. Teachers can teach their students to learn independently using the MOOCs platforms so that they will not lose their way in the vast world of knowledge. Secondly, schools should speed up the construction of high-quality MOOCs as well as provide their students with high-quality learning contents and services to enhance their intrinsic motivation for learning.

2.2.2. Lack of information literacy

With the rapid development of the internet and information technologies, digital literacies have become one of the most important skills for contemporary students. This skill requires students to be able to proficiently use the network information technology, obtain the needed information in the era of

information explosion, identify and analyze information in consideration of its difficulty in distinguishing true information from false ones, possess critical thinking and rational awareness, as well as able to effectively social network. Although the country has been vigorously promoting the cultivation of information literacy among students in recent years, for most students, this key information literacy education is missing. Therefore, with the increase in MOOCs, students seem to be a little rushed and uneasy.

2.2.3. Lack of social literacy

Social literacy refers to the ability of students to collaborate with others.^[6] In the learning environment of MOOCs, students need to maintain social contact with teachers and classmates. This process requires students to have certain social skills. Students should learn to use various social, psychological, and behavioral resources while depending on their own cooperation with others to transform unfavorable environment factors into favorable ones, thereby improving the effectiveness of their own self-learning.^[4] In the traditional English teaching environment, students have fewer opportunities to exercise their social literacy abilities. Therefore, they lack awareness in the cooperation with others.

Generally, in the learning process of foreign language MOOCs, learners have weak learning awareness, insufficient interactive communication, lack effective language output, unbalance autonomous learning ability, and insufficient autonomous learning motivation (see **Figure 1.**) Hence, there is still room for improvement in regard to learners' autonomous learning ability.

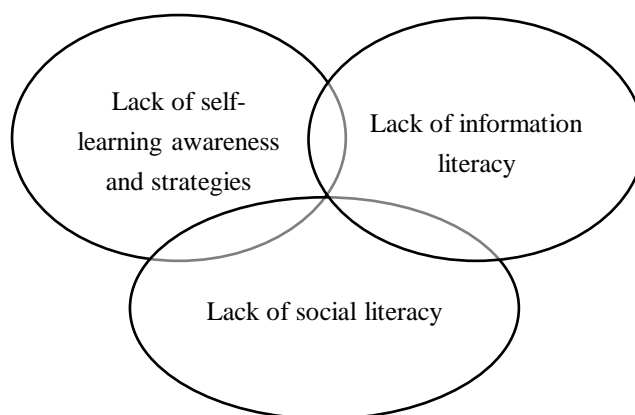


Figure 1. Status of learners' autonomous learning with the upsurge of foreign language MOOCs

3. Ways to promote learners' autonomous learning with the upsurge of foreign language MOOCs

3.1. Combination of traditional English teaching classroom and MOOCs

MOOCs present as a new teaching method. Teachers should have the courage to combine the traditional English-language teaching with MOOCs in keeping pace with trends to promote the continuous improvement of the English-language teaching. The traditional foreign language teaching is divided into two stages which are knowledge transfer and knowledge internalization. Teachers would fulfill knowledge teaching in classrooms while students would strengthen their knowledge and internalize them through homework after classes. If the traditional English classroom is combined with MOOCs, the form of teaching will be converted. Students would learn new knowledge by watching MOOCs instructional videos before classes and during classes, there would be complete internalization of knowledge with the help from teachers and collaboration among classmates. After classes, the internet allows interactions between teachers and students as well as among students themselves. Teachers can use the internet technology to review their students' work and record their learning trajectory while students can also evaluate their

homework and share learning experiences. In short, the combination of the traditional foreign language teaching and MOOCs is an upcoming trend for the development of foreign language teaching in the future.

3.2. Teachers providing assistance for self-directed learning

The open resources in MOOCs are the main source of knowledge. MOOCs gradually shift the focus of education from teacher-centered to student-centered. In the traditional foreign language teaching, the teachers dominate the classrooms and determine the learning contents. They are the disseminators and indoctrinators of knowledge whereas in foreign language MOOCs learning, the role of teachers has changed to be assistants.^[7] The teachers help students in learning to collect and organize learning materials, exercising independent learning strategies, organizing learning exchange activities, creating an atmosphere of common learning, and so on. With the assistance of teachers, students would continue to enhance their self-learning ability and gradually master this ability.

3.3. Creating an interactive learning environment and using a diversity of auxiliary learning tools

Online autonomous learning emphasizes collaboration, socialization, individualization, and focuses on the interaction between learners and the environment.^[6] The ultimate goal of language learning is to use the learned language to communicate. Foreign language learning is inseparable from interaction and communication between people, let alone the communication in the society. Through interactive reinforcement, students obtain real language input and feedback and ultimately improve their own language skills. Therefore, MOOCs should also focus on strengthening students' interaction and collaboration. Students' autonomous learning ability can be promoted by creating an interactive learning environment. In addition, using diversified auxiliary learning tools can also effectively help students improve the efficiency of autonomous learning on MOOCs platforms. For example, through course learning reminders, reminder tasks are regularly set to prevent students from forgetting their learning tasks and help them manage their time. Another example is visualizing learning tasks and recording students' learning processes including tasks completion, homework corrections, time of online learnings, wrong question collections, frequencies of online interaction, etc. Third, through a peer review area, students are able to correct their homework and interact with each other online. Fourth, with self-evaluation and learning behavior comparison tools, students would be able to self-evaluate by comparing with the learning behaviors of others. This would help students regulate their learning behaviors and cognitive strategies.

In summary, the development of learners' autonomous learning ability with the boom of foreign language MOOCs requires not only the learners' own efforts but also the external environment and the teachers' auxiliary support to jointly promote the effective development of autonomous learning practice (Figure 2.)

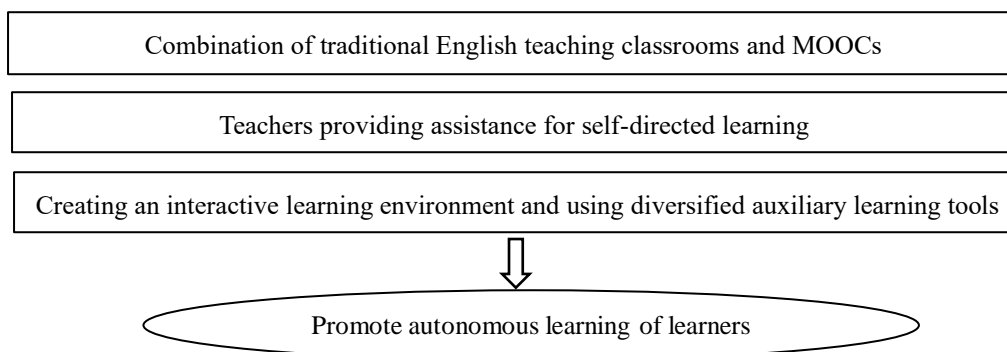


Figure 2. Ways to promote learners' autonomous learning with the upsurge of foreign language MOOCs

4. Conclusions

Online learning represented by MOOCs is a new education model which would surely become a major trend in the development and reform of foreign language education in the future. “How to effectively combine the traditional foreign language teaching with the emerging foreign language teaching internet methods in order to effectively promote the improvement of foreign language learners’ autonomous learning ability?” This is a question that requires continuous exploration.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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