Status Quo of Studies on ADL Motivating in Chinese Colleges

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Abstract: With the teaching of language being more and more communication–oriented, traditional teaching methods are facing big challenges and are being replaced by the "learner-centred" ones. This means that learners will assume greater responsibility for their own learning. That is to say, learner autonomy has to be enhanced to meet the needs of the new teaching mode, especially the mode under distance education. Up to date, some studies have explored learners' characteristics in Distance Learning (DL) and found that certain characteristics lead to a better distance learner. The most important one is motivation. The paper, by making a study on motivation theories of English study and foreign language teaching as well as discussing and analysing a series of problems such as the connotation of the distributed learning, the learning theory base, component essential factors and the differences from the traditional distance education, presents some ways and strategies to stir up the motivation study of autonomous learners in distance education in ADL system.

Education is a lifelong process, one purpose of which is to equip learners to cope in a changing world. As Wenden and Rubin (1987, p.8) claim, 'one of the leading educational goals of the research on learner strategies is an autonomous language learner,' one who is equipped with the appropriate skills and strategies to learn a language in a self-directed way. This is what is termed as autonomous learning. Generally speaking, autonomous learning can take place at any learning environment, controlled or uncontrolled, while the learning mode under the environment of the distance education may be the best choice for autonomous learners.

Distance Learning (DL) is more than 150 years old and has been a practical option for many students and institutions, but the advances in Information and Communication Technology has accelerated interest in DL to an unprecedented degree. DL is becoming a mainstream instructional delivery system for post-secondary courses and degree programs

(Selingo, 1998). Many higher education institutions are adopting distance and online learning as the next logical step in educational delivery systems. Distance learning in China has also a relatively long history, i.e. over 50 years, if correspondence learning is taken into account. The rapid advancement of modern information and technology practically changed the way people read, write and use the computer. Distance education, which teaches students through transportation media, greets this development, and becomes an important way to cultivate applied intellectuals in China. Distance education provides more opportunities to access to higher education for those who failed in the High School Entrance Examination in China. Online learning, in contrast, is the latest emerging phenomenon.

Up to date, some studies have investigated learners' characteristics in DL and found that certain characteristics lead to a better distance learner. Buchanan (1999) asserted that Web-based environment requires certain qualities and learning styles: learners need to be mature, self-directed, self-disciplined, computer-literate and, particularly, have the ability to collaborate and communicate with others. In the studies investigating factors influencing students' achievement, Oxford et al. (1993) found that motivation was the best predictor of student achievement in learning the Japanese language through the medium of satellite television. Shih & Gamon (1999) examined the relationships of student learning styles, motivation, learning strategies, and achievement in Web-based courses. When looking at students' view of distance education compared to traditional instruction, Klesius et al., (1997) concluded that distance education is more likely to be perceived positively when students need the course content, enjoy little or no travel to the instruction site, and are intrinsically motivated. In some other studies, students' ability to structure one's own learning (Hardy & Boaz, 1997), goal-centeredness (Laube, 1992), intrinsic motivation (being motivated by the curiosity and demand of knowledge rather than by external reinforcement)(Dill & Mezach, 1991; Coussement, 1995), and previous experience with technology (Richards & Ridley, 1997) were found to be significant determiners of persistence and achievement in DL. All these studies have touched the word "motivation", and stressed the main function of motivation in DL. Undoubtedly, the learners' motivation has a close relationship with the autonomous distance learning. But all these studies are mainly based on investigations conducted in foreign countries that are generally more developed than our country.

The present study focuses on the influence of learners' motivation on the autonomous learning in distance education in China, and then puts forward a few suggestions as to how to initiate and sustain autonomous learning motivation.

Autonomous learning in distance education

Rapid advances in Information Technology and easy access to the Internet and the web are reshaping education and training by providing distance education, a new way to learn, to the world. Researchers have reported that distance education is different from on-campus education in the form that learners can study at home by themselves, at anytime, anywhere, without any on-campus environment. This kind of learning is also called autonomous learning.

Autonomous learning is based on the principle that learners should take maximum responsibility for, and control of, their own learning styles and stages outside the constraints of the traditional classroom. In 1981, Holec (1981:3) had defined autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. It refers to a learner's capacity to take charge of both the strategy and content of learning, and is obviously predicated on an assumption that the educational environment will provide the freedom for him or her to do so. Dikinson (1993) identified five features associated with the autonomous learner: a) they can identify what has been taught; b) they are able to formulate their own learning objectives; c) they select and implement appropriate strategies; d) they can monitor these for themselves and e) they know when to give up on strategies that are not working for them. After all, it is the learner who has, eventually, to be able to use the language. In concrete terms, learner autonomy as a capacity refers to the domain-specific knowledge and skills necessary 1) to make choices concerning what, why and how to learn, 2) to implement the plan and 3) to evaluate the outcome of learning.

Broadly speaking, learner autonomy can take place at any learning environment, but the environment in distance education may be the chief learning mode for autonomous learners. While in a distance environment, learners have to be independent, self-motivated, and personally responsible for their personal development for the simple reason that most of the time, there is no teacher present to take over any of those functions. If the distance learner

does not solve her/his own problems, no one else is going to do it for them. Only distance learners can organize their time, only they can keep to their work schedules, and only they can prepare for their examinations. They must become, as far as possible, autonomous-that is self-governing. Autonomous distance learners are no longer thought of as coming to a class like an empty vessel waiting to be filled. Autonomous distance learners are expected to take an active part in the learning process, and have opinions to assert and choices to make at all stages of the learning process. They may, of course, seek some help and advice-that is normal. Autonomous distance learners are expected to take personal responsibilities for much of their own development, and see the teacher as a guide, an adviser, a friend giving encouragement, rather than an authority figure exacting discipline and handling out judgments.

Advanced Distributed Learning in China

Soon after the invention and popularization of computers, educators and psychologists realized the value and potential of computers in teaching. Afterwards, the appearance of the Internet offered more convenient access to interaction and communication of information and knowledge. The net became a universal platform for transmitting information, and learning material based on net could be transmitted by any medium. Under such circumstances technology on the basis of the net also quickly became the mainstream of learning technology. All these exerted great influence on the already existing CBI (Computer-Based Instruction) and ITS (Intelligent Tutoring Systems).

Telecommunication tools coupled with artificial intelligence and virtual reality are transforming traditional distance education into a new instructional paradigm called distributed learning. Distributed learning emerged from research on the science of distributed cognition. Advanced Distributed Learning (ADL) is the product of the ADL Initiative, established in 1997 to standardize and modernize training and education management and delivery. The Department of Defense (DoD) Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (OUSD P&R) proposed, developed and oversees the ADL Initiative for the purpose of modernizing education by utilizing learning and information technology as well as promoting the government, institutes and business circles to cooperate and develop

standards of e-learning. The vision of the ADL Initiative is to provide access to the highest-quality learning and performance aiding that can be tailored to individual needs and delivered cost-effectively, at the right time and in the right place (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia). In view of this, Advanced Distributed Learning System, also called Advanced Distance Learning System, is aimed to build a new distributed learning environment to get broader materials through the Internet, including courses and tools, over the world. Application and popularization of ADL is aimed at promoting the acquirablility, duplicapability, updatability and interchangeability of learning materials. ADL does not lay down rules by itself but reorganizes existing standards and norms and develops testing software to examine and verify whether the products provided by producers at all levels conform to SCORM (Sharable Course Object Reference Model). The Sharable Courseware Object Reference Model (SCORM) is a set of specifications that, when applied to course content, produces small, reusable learning objects. A result of the Department of Defense's Advanced Distributed Learning (ADL) initiative, SCORM-compliant courseware elements can be easily merged with other compliant elements to produce a highly modular repository of training materials. In a word, the institute of ADL proposes for the perspective of resource a "Shareable Content Object Reference Model"(known as SCORM), aiming at solving the problems of the sharability of the learning content, interoperability, coordination in a larger scope, and intelligent guide of the distributed learning.

With its more than 15 years of development and improvement, ADL is widely used in many fields, home and abroad. Educators and scholars in China research the strategies and goals of the ADL system and its run-time environment, SCORM, to improve the web-based education in China by using the idea of ADL for reference and constructing interoperable distance learning system and have achieved remarkable success so far. SCORM defines a Content Aggregation Model for net learning and a Run-time Environment for learners. To put it simper, it is a model designed to meet the high-level requirements for the learning materials on net and refers to a series of relevant technological standards. SCORM is composed of Content Model, Meta-data and Content Packaging. Many organizations have made great contributions to the development of SCORM, such as ARIADNE, AICC, IEEE LTSC, IMS, etc.

ADL provides open, flexible and convenient English learning references and training/ learning materials as well as compatible English-learning systems for Chinese foreign language learners. Hence, it's a much more standardized and universal learning system.

When learners using ADL system conduct autonomous learning, they should have indulgence to such a diverse learning mode and system; they must acknowledge a true and decisive standard that exists in the compatible learning system.

As a trend of future learning, ADL has been aimed at sharing resources, supporting mutual operation between systems and guaranteeing service quality of distance education right from the beginning of its development. Since schools at all levels adopt and apply ADL in their programs in large scale, learners visit video and sound files; browse web pages and other teaching materials; log on net to study or communicate with co-learners and teachers according to their schedule. As a consequence, the times for learners and teachers to communicate with each other face to face necessary to increase teaching quality are decreased considerably.

Motivation - Main factor in ADL influencing autonomous distance learning
The current situation of autonomous distance learning in China

In a state of separation between teaching and learning in space and time, learners employing modern educational technology maintain bi-directional relationships with study supportive systems in modern distance education systems, and carry out learning activities through a kind of autonomous mode. The learning mode of modern distance education puts learners in the centre of the learning process, emphasizing the learners' controlling power on the learning process, the learners being the controller of the receiving and restructuring of the teaching materials and the active constructor of the intended knowledge.

The essence of distance learning is that by harnessing the benefits of technological development, it became possible to separate the teacher from the learner and the learner from the learning group but for the educational process to continue and be successful. The autonomous learning can be one of the major characteristics of distance learners' approaches to learning. But in China, studies show that autonomous learning in distance education is not

as effective as it indicates. First, the autonomous ability of Chinese distance learners is weak. Some experts said that older learners could devote more whole-heartedly to the systematic study in distance education. But most of our distance learners are high school graduates, and the trust and psychological reliance on their teachers, which they have cultivated through years of traditional education, cannot be changed at one time. What's more, students don't know how to conduct autonomous learning more effectively. Second, without any assistant on the part of the teachers, the motivation of students is not strong enough for them to persist. Although distance education has many advantages theoretically, most of our distance schools adopted the old ways of teaching due to the practical limitations of technology and financial reasons. With the appearance and rapid development of ADL, more and more universities, institutes and research centers introduce and put into use this learning approach and system.

As distance language education emphasizes autonomous learning, the distance language learners will certainly meet some new challenges in their process of learning. While it may be true that learners who are able to follow a path of self-instruction successfully may have acquired a high degree of learner autonomy, it is also true that self-instruction for the autonomy often fails to provide successful results. Without correct understanding of this, an obstacle to the fullest realization of learners' potential will naturally and surely arise and learners' attempts at their learning will certainly be frustrated.

Distance education has its own characteristics, and this puts a high requirement on the autonomous learners' learning ability. Statistics show that, whether DL can be successful or not depends largely on the learners' knowledge background and levels of motivation. If learners' knowledge background is favorable and their motivation is high enough, the chances of success for DL will be higher, and vice versa. Since the knowledge background on the part of the learners is hard to change, motivation becomes the key factor for successful DL. In order to achieve this, motivation must be promoted during the learning process.

Definition of motivation

Motivation may be defined as the conscious or subconscious psychological trait, which causes a certain human behaviour leading people to achieve their goal. It is some kind of internal drive that encourages someone to pursue a course of action. It seems to be the case

that if we perceive a goal (that is something we wish to achieve) and if that goal is sufficiently attractive, we will be strongly motivated to do whatever is necessary to reach that goal. Motivation is goal-directed, but there may be many kinds of goals and sub-goals. Typically, motivation has been related to five different aspects of the goal of learning. Learners approach each of these aspects in different ways.

The first is volitional undertaking: actually starting to learn something. People begin with remarkably different views of things and learning process, and although these are discussed more often under the heading of attitudes, they are closely related to motivation.

The second is perseverance, or continuing with the task. Learning something is a time-consuming activity, and the arguments, benefits or other motivating factors which started the process are often not the same as those required to continue for the months and years which learning normally requires.

The third is tolerance of frustration. A strongly motivated person is likely to persevere through the ordinary and some extra-ordinary frustrations in learning better than one with low motivation. Such frustrations may arise from access to resources, exposure to the language, time pressure, or the pace of other learners.

The fourth is risk preference. Highly motivated people may be more willing to risk cognitive and social stability than others. (Cognitive risk-taking refers to information overload, forgetting, incomprehension, loss of face, nerves both performing in front of peers, fears of communication failures.)

Lastly, motivation may have a role to play in anxiety management. Highly motivated people may be able to cope with anxiety about the learning experience better than others.

Chomsky points out the importance of activating learners' motivation: 'The truth of the matter is that about 99 percent of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material'. Therefore, it is quite important to arouse students' motivation.

Ways of motivating autonomous distance learners in ADL

In second language learning, as in every other field of human learning, motivation is the crucial force which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all; how much energy

they devote to it; and how long they persevere. As teaching and learning is in a state of separation in ADL, how effectively to arouse the learners' study motivation and constantly to sustain the motivation has become an urgent important subject that needs to be solved at the present time. Concerning the real conditions in China, the following suggestions are put forward to motivate autonomous distance learners in ADL.

First, propose suitable demands; set up developing objectives; and make up concrete individual study plans. Learners should make up their own practical study plan according to objective conditions such as professional background, knowledge basis, learning motivation and capacity, age, profession as well as work, family conditions etc. The study plan should be both fitting the current situation and be challenging according to appropriate demands. Sticking to developing principle, it can be made out with the help of the teachers combining self-analysis from the learners themselves. If the task is beyond the learners' capacities, they will escape the task. Instead, if the learners feel they can accomplish it, they will get involved in it actively and enthusiastically.

Second, form a good learning habit and stick to the principle of autonomous learning in ADL. Learners can choose and decide the goal for a period of time, even material and content that other media do not contain. Under the circumstances of alternative space and autonomy, the study goal is based on the learners' own needs and self-confidence. In this way, the responsibility and perseverance will be enhanced. Even under the condition that the teaching demands and objectives are decided, more self-choosing and deciding situations and opportunities must be created as much as possible. Even the smallest amount of autonomy will bring unexpected safety and pleasure to learners.

Third, Individual objectives must be "absolute", combining the long-term and immediate objectives as much as possible. Learners can decide the knowledge and skills they must master in a period at a certain learning stage in ADL according to their own conditions and teaching demands. It can be supervised through self-evaluation or consulting with the teachers. The standard for evaluation should be "absolute", that is, to be evaluated by personal progress rather than by teaching demands. Guided to set up long-term objectives, through experiencing future life blueprint and comprehending the social meaning of knowledge capacity and individual value, learners can be motivated to dream and be

enthusiastic about the future, and set up their life desire. Meanwhile, learners must be made to feel that everything they do now bears close connection with their future. Their every effort brings them much closer to their long-term goal. Learners must be made to sense their progress in the learning progress, to experience the co-changes of efforts and achievements. Only in this way, can strong motivation be sustained and self-confidence be regularized and increased.

Fourth, make full use of modern technology, to cultivate learners' interest. From the psychological point of view, human beings have hierarchical communication needs. If multi-leveled and multi-functional interaction can be provided, it will definitely be an attraction. So, the interactions on the net should not be confined to homework or nutty question solving. In interactive study on the net we also need to create an atmosphere of "class" or "study field". Through interaction on the net with the help of tools such as chatting rooms, forums, on-line group discussions, e-mails, etc., learners can conduct autonomous learning for their own purposes without exposing their real names. Gradually, learners' interest can be aroused, consequently their motivation can be enhanced.

Finally, effective technological supports and services are needed. As is congruent with the earlier studies (Buchanan, 1999), computing skills display notable influence to DL because the learning activities rely on learners' using computer technologies to access information resources, complete assignments, and communicate with institutions, tutors, and peers. Effective technological support and services also need to be included in the DL system designs.

It also necessarily requires well-trained and confident teachers who can handle this constant process of negotiation and learners who are willing to take on what they may conceive of as the teachers' responsibility.

The secret of success in a distance system such as ADL is to guarantee that the educational process is carried out successfully, when the teacher and learner are at a distance. In contrast, in non-distance learning systems, that is in conventional universities, this process is automatically set up, as universities and schools and colleges are the privileged places which society creates for the educational process.

Conclusion

With the advent of distance education, combining with the learner autonomy, students can learn languages according to their own plan, needs and styles. In other words, they are responsible for their own learning. It is an encouraging trend, but some questions still exist in the learning process. Distance education has its own characteristics, which is manifested in the separation between the teaching and learning in time, and in the learners' autonomy and awareness as well. This requires the strong autonomous learning ability on the part of the distance learners in ADL learning process. The investigation results show that most of our distance learners do not form autonomous learning habits; consequently their autonomous learning ability is quite weak. This directly influences the improvement of distance learning quality, which is the matter of the first importance that we must pay attention to. The main and key factor that influences autonomous distance learning is motivation. In order to improve the autonomous learning ability, the initiation and sustaining of learning motivation should be implemented during the learning process. Only in this way can we take advantage of modern technology for our English learners to exert their potential to the fullest and learn more effectively.

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