

A Study of Developing Senior High School students' Autonomous English Learning Ability upon the Metacognitive Strategies under the New NCEE

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Abstract

The new national college entrance examination emphasizes that the goal of English teaching is to cultivate students' core competency, and an important part of this is to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability. Under the background of the new curriculum reform and the new college entrance examination, English teaching in senior high school, compared with junior high school English, has deepened language difficulty, increased learning tasks, and higher requirements for thinking ability, which leads to freshmen in senior high school not being easily adapted to the subject and not knowing how to learn English effectively. In this study, we learned the current situation of students' use of metacognitive learning strategies and autonomous learning ability through a questionnaire. In order to help and guide students to learn English better and adapt to high school English learning as soon as possible, English teachers should stimulate students' metacognitive experience, strengthen the metacognitive monitoring of the learning process, and cultivate students' autonomous learning ability of English, so as to promote the continuous improvement of the quality of English learning.

Keywords

New national college entrance examination; metacognitive learning strategies; autonomous English learning ability.

1. Introduction

English still occupies an important position in the new high school entrance examination, which is roughly consistent with the trend of China's development toward internationalization. According to the requirements of the new college entrance examination and the new curriculum standards, high school English teaching should be student-centered and pay more attention to students' autonomous learning ability. Therefore, English teachers should abandon the traditional test-oriented teaching thinking and effectively cultivate and improve students' learning ability in the teaching, so that students can internalize the spirit of lifelong learning.

The English Language Curriculum Standards for General High Schools (2020) state that the effective use of learning strategies is not only helpful in improving students' learning efficiency, but also in developing their autonomous learning ability. To develop students' autonomous learning ability, the use of learning strategies is the key. High school students are under great pressure to learn, so in addition to enriching the form of teaching, teachers should also help students find effective learning strategies, so as to reduce their learning pressure. Metacognitive strategies have long been regarded as a powerful tool to promote the process of foreign language learning and enhance the efficiency of foreign language learning. Metacognitive strategies involve thinking, monitoring, adjusting the learning process and guiding the language learning tasks, which can help students reduce blindness, impulsiveness

and irrationality in learning activities. Therefore, metacognitive strategies are crucial to the cultivation of students' autonomous learning ability.

2. Existing Problems of English Teaching under the New College Entrance Examination Reform

2.1. The problem of cohesion in English teaching

English is a crucial course, which starts from the third grade of elementary school and continues to the university, and it can be said that English is not only carried out throughout the compulsory education stage, but also in high school as well as in the university. However, many students find it difficult to cope with high school English learning after entering high school, which is mainly due to the inappropriate teaching methods in schools. Because of the poor transition between junior high school and senior high school English courses, and pay too much attention to students' vocabulary and test scores, without realizing that the main purpose of English teaching is to stimulate students' interest in English learning, resulting in a lack of students' autonomous learning ability, and did not develop good learning habits and effective methods of English learning, in the face of the senior high school learning tasks, they still follow the past English learning methods to solve the high school English learning problems. Although it can not be said that high school English does not contain middle school knowledge, but the difficulty and knowledge capacity have changed, and the new college entrance examination puts forward higher requirements for students, if students do not change the learning method and thinking is bound to be difficult to keep up with the progress of teaching in high school.

2.2. The problem of valuing scores over ability cultivation

To cultivate students' English application ability, we need to lead them to practice listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, to find out their own problems in the practice and to improve them. However, due to the shortcomings of exam-oriented education and the requirements of the new college entrance examination, many teachers are only teaching for the purpose of the college entrance examination. Many teachers take the teaching of the college entrance examination as the self-standard and the examination results as the standard of measurement, focus on the explanation of the examination content, divide the emphasis of the examination, require students to memorize a lot of words, learn grammar, strengthen reading and writing practice, etc., especially reading and writing teaching is extremely important, and they think that only by putting enough efforts on reading and writing can they achieve good results in the college entrance examination. However, the lack of practice and attention to listening and speaking has led to many students' learning bias, and even when they reach high school, they still lack the ability to fluently and skillfully express their ideas in English, and are defined as "mute English".

2.3. The problem of lacking of relevance of teaching methods

Many high school English teachers attach great importance to the enrollment rate, which also leads to the phenomenon of "polarization". In the teaching, they fail to take into account the differences in English ability and basic level of students in the class. In order to catch up with the progress or give preference to students with good grades, many teachers explain the key points of the new college entrance examination, adopt the irrigation teaching method, and impart a large amount of knowledge to students without taking it into account Middle and downstream students' listening progress, and rarely interact with students in class, resulting in poor performance of students difficult to keep up with the teacher's teaching ideas, lack of strong interest in learning. As a result, students become more and more reluctant to take the initiative to speak English, unwilling to spend time on learning English, and lose their confidence in learning English.

3. Autonomous Learning and Metacognitive Strategies

3.1. Autonomous learning

Since the 1980s, autonomous learning has become a hot issue in the field of educational psychology, which has a wide and profound impact on the field of language and learning. Henri Holec (1981) believes that autonomy is “the ability to be responsible for one’s own learning”, while autonomous learning is “the ability to manage one’s own learning”, which mainly includes the following aspects: setting one’s own learning goals, using language materials reasonably and effectively, carefully allocating learning time, and actively developing learning strategies. Opinions vary on the concept of autonomous learning, and many famous scholars in China also have their own different opinions, but in summary, junior and senior high school students’ English autonomous learning ability should have the following characteristics:

- (1) Clear learning goals and directions, and understand their own learning needs;
- (2) Make a reasonable study plan and strictly implement it;
- (3) Effectively select and use appropriate learning methods, especially metacognitive strategies under the guidance of teachers and the cooperation of classmates;
- (4) Be able to independently and positively evaluate the English learning process.

3.2. Metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategy refers to the practice, detection, management and evaluation of students’ learning behavior, learning strategy and learning effect in the process of learning. Metacognitive strategies are a series of purposeful actions taken by students to solve problems in the learning process (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Xu & Zhang, 2023), is an important symbol of students’ self-education and autonomous learning ability. It has a strong helping effect on students’ learning ability. In 1976, the concept of metacognition was first introduced by American psychologist Flavell. He believes that metacognition refers to the knowledge formed by individuals in the cognitive process and the cognitive process in which learners actively manage the learned knowledge, monitor the learning behavior, adjust the learning strategy and coordinate the learning behavior to achieve the expected learning effect. Metacognitive strategy is an important part of learning strategy. It is a method and measure that learners use metacognitive knowledge to regulate language learning through planning, monitoring and evaluation of language learning (O’Malley & Chamot, 2001). From a traditional perspective, metacognitive strategies are generally divided into three categories, namely, planning, self-monitoring, and self-assessment (Qin & Zhang, 2017).

3.3. The relationship between autonomous learning and metacognitive strategies

Autonomous learning and metacognitive strategies are both different and related. First of all, there are essential differences between the two: autonomous learning is the process of learners’ comprehensive self-regulation of learning, while metacognitive strategy is the strategy of learners’ information processing and self-regulation. Secondly, they are mutually reinforcing. On the one hand, the use of metacognitive strategies can improve learners’ learning cognition, make students actively participate in learning activities, improve the efficiency of preparation and review, and finally promote learners’ independent learning. On the other hand, the more metacognitive experiences learners have in learning, the higher their cognitive level of metacognitive strategies will be, and the more mature the use of metacognitive strategies will be. Guiding learners to use metacognitive strategies in independent learning is an effective way to improve their English learning performance. In teaching, metacognitive strategies should be combined with teaching objectives. Only the combination of the two can reflect the substantive

role of metacognitive strategies. Therefore, in order to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability, metacognitive strategies should be integrated into English teaching.

4. Current Situation of Metacognitive Learning Strategies and Autonomous Learning Ability of Senior High School Students

In order to understand the status quo of metacognitive learning strategy awareness and autonomous learning ability of senior high school students, the author conducted a questionnaire survey on 55 students in a class of Senior one in Zigong Shuguang Middle School. The Questionnaire on Metacognitive Learning Strategies for High School Students (Appendix 1) adopts the expressions of questions 17-26 on metacognitive strategies in the Questionnaire on English Learning Strategies by Cheng Xiaotang and Zheng Min (2002) to measure metacognitive learning strategies for high school students under the requirements of the new curriculum standards. The Questionnaire on Independent English Learning Ability of High school students in this study (Appendix 2) comes from the Questionnaire on Independent English Learning Ability of Xu Jinfen (2014).

According to the data collected from the Questionnaire on Metacognitive Learning Strategies for High School Students, the average score of the lowest score in the survey on metacognitive strategies is 2.05, lower than 2.5, indicating that most students are unable to actively explore learning methods suitable for themselves. The average score of question 3, "I pay attention to my progress and shortcomings in English learning" is 2.93, indicating that most students can basically pay attention to their progress and shortcomings in English learning. Among the 10 questions, 8 had a minimum value of 1, and 2 had a minimum value of 2, with an average score of 3.04, indicating that most students used metacognitive strategies in English learning in general.

Questions 1-5 in the Questionnaire of High School students' English Autonomous Learning Ability are about students' beliefs in setting and planning English learning goals. The average score is above 2, and 3 of them are higher than 2.5, indicating that students have basic beliefs in setting and planning English learning goals. Questions 6-13 are about the survey of students' belief in the use of English learning methods. Among the eight questions, the average score of six questions is lower than or close to 2.5, indicating that teachers' guidance on students' use of English learning methods is far from enough, students' understanding of the use of learning methods is insufficient, and students will not accurately use learning methods in English learning. Students' use of learning methods also needs more effective guidance. Among these ten questions, the scores of questions 19 and 22 are below 2.5, while the scores of questions 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21 and 23 are above 2.5, indicating that students have knowledge and understanding of monitoring and evaluation of their own learning process in English learning, and basically have the consciousness of regulating the learning process.

5. Approaches to Improve High School Students' Autonomous English Learning Ability Based on Metacognitive Strategies

The reform of the new college entrance examination mentioned above has put forward new requirements for both English teachers and learners, and it has become an important task to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability. The application of metacognitive teaching method in English classroom is a high-level learning and execution technique, which has a direct relationship with the learning effect. In the process of English teaching, the goal is to cultivate students' practical application ability of language, improve their comprehensive quality and autonomous learning ability. Moreover, through questionnaire survey, it is found that students have a basic understanding of metacognitive strategies and a certain degree of

self-learning awareness. Teachers should help students make full use of metacognitive strategies to cultivate and improve their autonomous learning ability.

5.1. Cultivate students' metacognitive thinking and strategic awareness in English teaching

To integrate English teaching with cognitive strategies, the first step is to cultivate students' metacognitive thinking and consciousness, so that students can make a correct evaluation of themselves in the learning process. This includes a correct understanding of your abilities, differences, hobbies, interests and learning strengths and weaknesses. It is also necessary to recognize the content of English learning and the nature, length and difficulty of learning materials, as well as the content of learning tasks and learning methods. Because these understandings will affect the progress and results of English learning activities in the future. Students also need to know about learning strategies, what kind of content they have and what content they will adopt in the future learning process. Because different learning cognitive strategies have their own advantages and disadvantages, the applied cognitive strategies must be analyzed by themselves to find out their own learning methods and make adjustments, which is basis of metacognitive learning.

In English language learning, teachers should particularly focus on guiding students to develop their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Improvement in these skills relies on vocabulary accumulation, so it is essential to guide students in vocabulary learning. Vocabulary acquisition should be approached through various methods. For example, categorizing vocabulary for memorization allows students to grasp the main content more accurately when practicing topics related to listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and also helps them learn the usage of relevant vocabulary, thereby enhancing their interest in vocabulary accumulation. Additionally, students should be taught to expand their vocabulary by using prefixes and suffixes. During listening practice activities, students should be encouraged to create a quiet environment for themselves and guided to use focused and selective attention to improve their listening skills.

5.2. Make a detail plan for English learning

The key factor in students mastering a foreign language is their motivation to learn. Language acquisition is a long-term process requiring continual accumulation and practice. Many students may lose motivation due to the monotonous nature of the learning process and may even abandon language study.

Thus, motivation plays a crucial role in language learning. It can be divided into extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation includes external factors such as parental pressure, school regulations, potential punishment for poor performance, the pressure of further education, and job prospects abroad. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is the interest and pleasure derived from the language learning process itself. It provides a more stable and enduring drive for language mastery. While extrinsic motivation can provide impetus, for most students, it serves merely as a tool. In contrast, intrinsic motivation, which stems from genuine interest and curiosity about the language and culture, fosters independent learning and sustained motivation. This is crucial for long-term success in language learning. Metacognitive strategies also support this by enabling students to monitor their performance, plan their studies, and adjust their learning methods and attitudes when progress stalls. Additionally, teachers should encourage students to set both long-term and short-term goals, develop detailed learning plans and steps, and adhere strictly to these goals to ensure systematic and effective learning.

5.3. Strengthen the ability of supervision and control in English teaching

The critical factor determining students' success or failure in learning is their self-regulation and control abilities. Metacognitive monitoring skills align closely with students' self-regulation abilities. A successful language learner is typically someone with strong autonomous learning capabilities, adept at self-management, self-evaluation, and control, which allows for effective independent study. However, most people are not naturally independent learners, so it is necessary for teachers to help develop metacognitive monitoring skills. Teachers should track students' progress, identify issues and difficulties encountered during learning, and provide guidance. Students should be encouraged to use metacognitive monitoring to evaluate their own learning outcomes, quality, and progress, and to reflect on their cognitive activities to identify weaknesses. This reflection helps in making targeted improvements and continuously addressing learning challenges.

For example, when teaching an English reading class, a series of targeted activities can be designed to train students' reading strategies. Using the textbook, strategic teaching activities can include whole-text reading, repetition, comprehension of long and short sentences, inference, and vocabulary reinforcement. Teachers should clarify learning methods and techniques and encourage students to take notes. After the lesson, assigning reading tasks based on metacognitive strategies and having students perform self-evaluation and monitoring is essential(Jiang & Wu, 2021).

5.4. Assessing learning outcomes through writing reflective journals or creating student portfolios

Assessment strategies, as a crucial component of metacognitive strategies, play an essential role in developing students' reflection and self-assessment abilities, which are vital for enhancing their autonomous learning skills. Through self-assessment, students can determine whether they have achieved their pre-established learning goals and evaluate the effectiveness of their strategies, allowing them to promptly adjust their learning plans and methods. Teachers can create portfolios for students to evaluate their performance at various stages, helping students understand their learning characteristics and deficiencies, propose solutions, and facilitating further guidance from the teacher. Encouraging students to engage in regular reflection and accurately assess their successes and failures is a key aspect of metacognitive strategy training and, more broadly, of middle school English instruction. Due to the influence of traditional teaching models, students often rely on single English exam results to gauge their learning outcomes, without fully recognizing the effectiveness of their learning strategies. Teachers should guide students to continuously evaluate the use of metacognitive strategies, checking their progress towards their goals through formative and summative assessments based on regular English test results or learning outcomes. This helps students understand the gap between their current English level and their desired level, adjust their learning strategies, and track their progress to gain greater motivation for learning.

6. Conclusion

Metacognitive strategies play a crucial role in enhancing learners' autonomous learning abilities. In the context of English learning, the application of metacognitive strategies not only helps learners to appropriately and consciously select learning materials, improving learning outcomes, but also facilitates the setting of learning goals, monitoring of the learning process, and evaluation of learning results. This helps students develop good autonomous learning habits, improve their English proficiency, and build confidence in learning English. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the training of metacognitive strategies in English teaching to strengthen students' ability to use these strategies. Metacognitive strategies training not only

provides teachers with new teaching concepts but also fosters students' initiative in learning English. Experimental methods involving training and self-reflection effectively cultivate autonomous learning abilities, benefiting not only current learning but also students' lifelong development. This research aims to integrate metacognitive strategy training into regular high school English classroom teaching, enhance guidance on students' metacognitive strategies, and encourage students to self-assess their learning, thereby promoting the development of their autonomous learning ability.

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