

Original Article

An Investigative Study of Senior High School Students' Autonomous Learning Strategies in English Reading

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Abstract - *Autonomous learning is a significant theme in today's educational research, and the new curriculum standard also puts forward higher requirements for autonomous learning ability. In view of this, this paper adopts the interview method and questionnaire survey to investigate the senior high school students' autonomous learning strategies in English reading. It is found that students' motivation and interest in learning, learning ability and self-confidence, learning environment and resources, learning attitude and habits, and teachers' role constitute the factors that influence the application of autonomous learning strategies in English reading. In view of the above factors, teachers should constantly stimulate students' learning motivation and interest, provide students with learning strategy guidance, create a good learning environment for students, cultivate students' good learning habits and change their roles in the teaching process. The study will not only help high school students' autonomous learning and English reading learning but also shed light on high school teachers' cultivation of students' autonomous learning strategies and reading strategies.*

Keywords - *Autonomous learning strategies, English reading, Senior high school students.*

1. Introduction

In 2020, China's Ministry of Education formulated the *English Curriculum Standards for General High Schools (2017 Edition Revised in 2020)*, further clarifying education's positioning. It puts "to improve students' comprehensive quality and develop core literacy so that students will have the ability to develop independently and to communicate and cooperate" as the cultivation goal. In addition, high school students have a higher level of cognitive development, a stronger sense of self-awareness, and a more complete personality than elementary and middle school students (Pang, 2003). They are more mature both psychologically and physically. Thus, it is a good opportunity to cultivate further and develop autonomous learning to lay a solid foundation for future study and lifelong learning. In the teaching process, it is an important issue that teachers cannot ignore to teach students how to learn and develop their autonomous learning ability.

In this context, this study attempts to investigate the autonomous learning strategies in English reading of high school students in secondary school B of L city, then explore the factors affecting the application of autonomous learning strategies in English reading, and put forward practical measures to improve the autonomous learning ability of high school students. To help students understand autonomous learning so that they can take the initiative in autonomous learning and apply autonomous learning strategies in English reading.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Autonomous Learning

Autonomous Learning originated in the West in the 1960s and is still an important theme in today's educational research. Different scholars have put forward different opinions on the definition of autonomous learning. Holec first defined autonomous learning as the ability of language learners to decide the purpose of learning independently and set learning objectives, self-select learning materials, tasks and methods, and independently fulfill assessment criteria (Holec, 1981). While Little sees autonomous learning as a matter of the learner's psychological relationship to the learning process and the learning content, an ability to think independently and critically, make decisions, and act independently (Little, 1991). According to Zimmerman, a student's learning is autonomous when he or she actively participates in metacognition, motivation, learning time, and behavioral performance of learning (Zimmerman, 1990).

It can be seen that foreign researchers do not exactly have a unified view of the definition of autonomous learning. In China, He Lianzhen believes autonomous learning is "the ability of learners to independently determine their own learning objectives, learning goals, and learning content and methods, and to determine their own set of assessment systems (He, 2003)." Pang Weiguo, on the other hand, advocates defining autonomous learning from both the horizontal and vertical perspectives of learning. The horizontal definition of learning refers to synthesizing the



essential attributes of autonomous learning from all aspects of learning. The vertical definition of autonomous learning refers to interpreting the essence of autonomous learning from the whole process of learning activities (Pang, 2003). Cheng Xiaotang believes that autonomous learning is a mode, that is to say, the learners in the overall educational objectives of the macro-control, under the guidance of teachers, develop and complete the specific learning objectives of the learning mode according to their own conditions and needs (Cheng, 1999). These show that domestic researchers have positively affirmed autonomous learning when defining it. Therefore, the author believes that autonomous learning is the process in which students are free to carry out learning activities and fully play their own role in the learning activities relative to English teaching.

2.2. Research at Home and Abroad

In 1981, Henri Holec was the first to introduce the concept of “learner autonomy”, a philosophical category of education, into the field of foreign language teaching and learning. Littlewood sees autonomous learning as “the desire and ability of learners to make choices independently (Littlewood, 1996).” Benson defines autonomous learning as “the ability to take control of one’s own learning” and categorizes autonomy of learning into four levels: personal, social, psychological and political (Benson, 2001).

Since the 1990s, the study of autonomous learning has become a hot topic in China’s foreign language teaching. Based on introducing the historical background and developmental status of independent learning, Zheng Min discusses the feasibility and far-reaching significance of autonomous learning under the current conditions in China. Hua Weifen analyzes the factors that promote “learners’ autonomy” and explains the respective roles and interrelationships of the learner, the teacher, and the learning environment in the process of developing the learner’s autonomy and their interrelationships.

Xu Jinfen, taking into account the characteristics of English teaching in China, suggests that autonomous learning should not only focus on the students but also on the whole process and aspects of teaching (Xu, 2004). Through the literature review and analysis, it is found that scholars have made great achievements in the study of autonomous learning. However, most of them focus on theoretical research, and the research on autonomous learning is mostly gathered from the perspective of colleges and universities; thus, focusing the research on high school reading teaching has certain research value.

3. Research Methods

In this study, two analytical methods are used: qualitative and quantitative methods, including questionnaire survey method and interview method.

3.1. Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate the application of senior high school students’ autonomous learning strategies in English reading, and then to explore the factors affecting high school students’ application of autonomous learning strategies in English reading, and propose practical measures to improve their autonomous learning ability. There are three specific research questions:

- What is the current situation of the application of autonomous learning strategies in English reading among high school students?
- What are the influencing factors of high school students’ application of autonomous learning strategies in English reading?
- What are the possible measures to improve high school students’ autonomous learning ability in English reading?

3.2. The Subjects of the Study

The subjects of this investigation included both students and teachers. The students are 221 high school students in the first grade of B High School in L City, including 134 boys and 107 girls. They have similar cultural backgrounds and already possess a certain degree of autonomous learning. The teachers are three English teachers in the first year of high school B in L city, all of whom have rich teaching experience.

3.3. Research Process

The questionnaires are distributed with 221 copies and 210 valid. The author used SPSS 20.0 to analyze the data. The interviews were implemented with the participation of three English teachers and ten students, and the author also recorded and analyzed the interviews.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Current Situation of the Application of the Senior High School Students’ Autonomous Learning Strategies in English Reading

By analyzing the students’ questionnaire data and the results of interviews, the author summarizes some current status of the application of the senior high school students’ autonomous learning strategies in English reading as follows:

4.1.1. A Clear Motivation for English Reading

More and more high school students have clear motives for English reading. The data show that about 71% of the students want to improve their English grades to ensure their chances of further education. 10% of the students want to improve their English proficiency, and through reading English materials, they want to gain an in-depth understanding of international affairs, increase their insights, or be able to achieve excellent results in international exchanges and competitions to broaden their international horizons and learn about multiculturalism. About 8% of the

students showed a strong interest in English reading materials and enjoyed reading various English books, articles and literature. This interest motivated them to take the initiative in learning and prompted them to explore new reading content. The rest of the students have their own motives: some to improve their comprehensive quality, some to pursue personal growth, some to better communicate with foreign friends, etc. Generally speaking, high school students have clear motives for English reading, which are related to personal academic, career development, hobbies, comprehensive quality and other aspects. As teachers, they should fully understand and give support to stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning and help them make better achievements and progress in English reading learning.

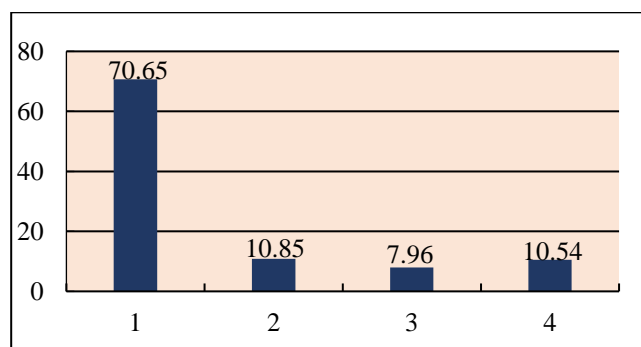


Fig. 1 Percentage of the motivation

4.1.2. An Ability to Apply Learning Strategies

In the survey, the author found that although some students lacked subjective initiative and subjective consciousness, most of them could still apply some learning strategies to help themselves in reading. As high school students, many of them are more self-disciplined. They would make English reading study plans and specify daily or weekly reading time and tasks to keep their learning continuous and organized. As another example, most students will make some notes or markings to record important information, such as key vocabulary and topic sentences, and they will also guess the meanings of vocabulary words through contextualization. Another example is that the current trend of Internet learning is gradually rising, and many students will actively utilize online resources, such as online dictionaries, reading websites, English learning apps and so on, to obtain more abundant reading materials and learning materials.

4.1.3. Lack of Subjective Initiative and a Sense of Subjectivity

Constrained by teachers' teaching ideas and teaching methods, some students lack planning and management of their own learning. It mainly manifests in the following aspects: firstly, some students tend to rely too much on teachers' guidance and arrangement in reading and learning. They may just passively fulfill the reading tasks assigned by the teacher and lack the motivation to explore and learn actively. Secondly, some students lack the ability to choose reading materials suitable for themselves independently. They

may only read what the teachers provide or the textbooks' teaching materials and neglect to search widely for reading resources. Thirdly, some students do not have clear reading goals or planning. They lack a long-term reading plan and are only satisfied with accomplishing the tasks, lacking an overall understanding and planning of English reading. Fourthly, due to the lack of a sense of subjectivity, students often lack the sense of self-reflection and improvement of their reading learning.

Many students are accustomed to the tasks arranged by the teacher, lack a strong sense of independent learning, and lack reflection and evaluation of their own learning process, so they do not know how they should improve their reading ability (Zhang, 2021). Finally, students who lack initiative may not actively seek learning support and help from others. They may have the mentality that "we can solve it by ourselves" and are unwilling to ask teachers or classmates for advice and communication. Therefore, teachers should help students establish positive learning attitudes and a sense of subjectivity and stimulate their initiative and subjectivity in English reading.

4.1.4. Too Much Dependence on Teachers

Under the background of exam-oriented education, students are used to the traditional teaching mode of "teachers teach students to listen and do exercises" and hope that the teachers can pass on knowledge to them. They may not realize the importance of reading through other means, such as online resources, independent reading, etc. Moreover, when some students encounter reading problems or new words, they tend to get used to asking the teacher for help immediately instead of taking the initiative to try to understand through context. All these directly or indirectly lead to their lack of initiative and motivation in learning English reading.

4.1.5. Teachers' Insufficient Knowledge of Autonomous Learning Strategies

In the interviews with teachers, it is found that only a few teachers would consciously train their students to carry out autonomous learning in the process of teaching, some teachers have insufficient cognition of autonomous learning strategies, and some teachers dare not let go of the implementation of it. This leads to the fact that students also do not know much about it and have low motivation for English reading. In addition, under the influence of traditional education concepts, schools and families may emphasize more on test scores and neglect the cultivation of students' autonomous learning abilities.

4.2. Factors Influencing High School Students' Application of Autonomous Learning Strategies in English Reading

Through interviewing teachers, the author found that students' motivation and interest in learning, learning ability and self-confidence, learning environment and resources,

learning attitudes and habits, and teachers' roles constitute an important part of the factors influencing high school students' application of autonomous learning strategies in English reading.

First, learning motivation and interest. Motivation and interest are the key factors affecting the application of autonomous learning strategies, which will directly influence students' willingness to try autonomous learning strategies. Students who lack interest in English reading or have low motivation may not actively apply learning strategies.

Second, learning ability and self-confidence. Learning ability and self-confidence will also affect students' willingness to use learning strategies actively. Students with strong learning ability and sufficient self-confidence are more likely to try various learning strategies and believe they can progress. On the contrary, students who find it difficult to learn or have low self-confidence are afraid to try other learning strategies and may rely more on their teachers and traditional teaching modes.

Further, learning environment and resources. The adequacy or otherwise of the learning environment and resources greatly impacts students' application of autonomous learning strategies. Most teachers mentioned that students are more likely to actively participate in autonomous learning if they are in a learning environment where peers exchange learning experiences and strategies and share learning resources with each other. Moreover, suppose schools and families provide good learning resources, such as libraries, English learning websites, learning software, etc. In that case, students are more likely to obtain information and try different learning strategies independently.

In addition, learning attitudes and habits. Learning attitudes and habits play a decisive role in the application of students' autonomous learning strategies. Students who are active and good at thinking are likelier to try different learning strategies and insist on applying effective methods to improve their reading level.

Finally, teachers' role. Students need to be guided and directed by teachers appropriately in the application of autonomous learning strategies. Teachers' roles are crucial in this process; they should stimulate students' interest in learning, provide training in learning strategies, and correct and guide students when they make mistakes.

It seems that factors such as learning motivation and interest, learning ability and self-confidence, learning environment and resources, learning attitudes and habits and teachers' roles together affect the application of autonomous learning strategies in English reading by high school students. Educators and parents should pay attention to these factors, actively create an environment and atmosphere conducive to

students' autonomous learning, cultivate students' active learning ability, and help students achieve better learning results in English reading.

4.3. Measures to Improve High School Students' Application of Autonomous Learning Ability in English Reading

Aiming at the above factors and combining teaching practice and reflection, the author proposes the following measures to promote high school students' application of autonomous learning strategies:

4.3.1. Stimulating Students' Interest and Motivation in Learning

Motivation can be divided into internal and external motivation. Stimulating students' motivation has become the first task of teaching. Survey results show that internal motivation is more likely to drive students to learn, so teachers should stimulate students' internal motivation. Teachers can provide diversified English reading content to stimulate students' interest in learning so that they are willing to take the initiative to read and discover the joy of learning and form a benign and lasting learning motivation, laying the foundation for the formation of autonomous learning ability.

4.3.2. Providing Guidance on Learning Strategies

Teachers should provide students with regular guidance and training on learning strategies in the daily learning process so that students can understand different learning methods and help them apply these strategies in reading. Teachers can also communicate with students in class or out of class and find countermeasures for students' difficulties in English learning or reading to help them improve their reading skills.

4.3.3. Creating a Good Learning Environment

Autonomous learning does not mean independent learning or learning by oneself; communication and interaction can better promote learning. The questionnaire results show that students are less likely to take the initiative to seek help from teachers or classmates when they encounter difficulties. Teachers should encourage students to form study groups to exchange learning experiences and strategies, solve learning problems together, and motivate and support each other. In addition, in the classroom, teachers should try to create a democratic, harmonious and relaxed learning atmosphere, which is more conducive to promoting students' active participation in learning activities.

4.3.4. Cultivating Good Learning Habits

The essence of autonomous learning is that learners are responsible for their own learning behavior. It is not only the core task of implementing the new curriculum education but also an important task for teachers to make every student learn independently and have an innovative spirit and practical ability (Wu, 2019). Students should change their mindset from

“Force me to learn” to “I want to learn”, plan their own learning and take responsibility for their own learning. Teachers should guide students to develop good learning habits, such as reading regularly, recording study notes, and reflecting on learning effects, so autonomous learning becomes a habit.

4.3.5. Changing Teachers' Roles

Teachers play a significant role in cultivating students' autonomous learning ability and should be transformed from the transmitter and instiller of knowledge to the designer, organizer and manager of teaching activities as well as the guide, helper and facilitator of students' learning. Students' independent learning, independent thinking and independent problem-solving must be reflected in the whole process of classroom teaching (Yang, 2022). Under the new educational background, English teachers should timely change their teaching concepts, fully account for students' learning conditions and actual needs, and formulate a set of practical English teaching plans. Through innovative classroom teaching methods, students' subjectivity, enthusiasm and autonomy can be fully brought into play in class to achieve the goal of English teaching (Chen, 2023). The new curriculum standard requires breaking the traditional teacher-centered

teaching mode to carry out student-centered teaching activities, respecting students and giving play to the main role of students. At the same time, teachers should also strive to change their roles, improve their own comprehensive quality, and also always improve students' enthusiasm and initiative in learning, and help students develop good learning habits.

5. Conclusion

In this study, questionnaires and interviews are adopted to analyze the current situation of high school students' application of autonomous learning strategies in English reading and to summarize the influencing factors and the solution measures. The results show that factors such as learning motivation and interest, learning ability and self-confidence, learning environment and resources, learning attitudes and habits, and teachers' roles jointly influence the application of autonomous learning strategies in English reading. Based on this, teachers should constantly stimulate students' motivation and interest in learning, provide students with guidance on learning strategies, create a good learning environment for students, cultivate students' good learning habits, and change their roles in order to cultivate better students' autonomous learning ability and awareness of learning in the process of teaching.

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