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Autonomous ESL Learning: “Read & Reflect In English”

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Abstract

Autonomous learning triggers students' self-devotion and self-regulation. This study articulates an autonomous ESL learning provided by the Fu-Jen Catholic University library in Taiwan. The project “Read & Reflect in English” (for ESL learning) was led by student mentors, who drew up syllabi and activities for a group of 10-15 students each semester since 2012. Students from different subject domains sign up as members each semester. In addition to allocating space for group meetings and learning, the library also provides multimedia learning resources for reading and viewing. Group members are instructed to reflect on issues related to the reading materials. As a result of the weekly “Read & Reflect in English” meetings, members made progress in English learning.

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1. Introduction

“We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting from experience.” – John Dewey

1.1. Autonomous learning in “Read & Reflect in English”

Active learning is often addressed in learning in various subject domains. Many educators assert that all learning is inherently active and that students are therefore actively involved while listening to class presentations. However, holistic learning occurs only when students are engaged not only in reading, writing, discussing, and reflecting on

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what they learn, but also in actively participating in higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Weimer, 2013). More than active learning, autonomous learning derives from individuals' interests, and motivates self-exploration into knowledge and skills (Clegg, 2004). Improvements in the experiential knowledge base are also the result of the self-monitored learning approach. Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning by utilizing a self-learning and reflection process. This deepens individuals' thoughts and ideas, and leads to a reflective process in knowledge construction and skill development (Clegg, 2004; Holec, 1981). Within this context, it is proposed that strategies promoting active learning should be defined as activities in which students are doing things and thinking about what they are doing (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). The "Read and Reflect in English" project incorporates various modes of learning, including computer-based learning, content-based learning, and reflection practice. Electronic learning materials from the Fu Jen Catholic University library, including films, videos, electronic books, journals, and newspapers are utilized. Learning contents during consulting hours are tailor made for individual needs. Along with the learning process, an exciting exploratory environment is provided. Students are motivated to enjoy language learning. Weekly exercises help students develop confidence in the use of English. Students' thinking and reflection processes are documented in the ePortfolio system which has been designed for assessing one's own progress. The reflective learning strategy – DIEP (describing, interpreting, evaluating and planning) (RMIT University, 2010) is also applied as part of the reflective practices. This study analyses and discusses how students learn during the "Read & Reflect in English" process.

1.2. Importance of a reflective process

A growing body of research across a range of disciplines in higher education is pointing to the benefits of journal writing as a mechanism to encourage students to be more critical and reflective about their learning. Journals serve as a vehicle for reflection before, during, and after a learning experience. They provide a venue for students to develop personally and professionally (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010). Reflective learning provides a learning experience for students to record and reflect deeply on their thoughts and feelings on issues and events that are an essential part of their learning (Le & Le, 2007). The reflective process in "Read and Reflect in English" involves the following features addressed by Roger (2001): "(1) Individuals are actively engaged in a given task, (2) Reflection is triggered by interesting, strange or perplexing situations or experiences, (3) Individuals re-examine their assumptions, presuppositions, and world views, and (4) Individuals develop a new understanding as the result of reflection". As argued by Boud et al. (1985), reflection during learning refers to intellectual and affective activities in which learners explore their experiences in order to develop new understandings and appreciations.

2. Implementation

As a part of the continuing "Teaching Excellence Project" at Fu Jen Catholic University (Taiwan), the "Read & Reflect in English" (for ESL learning) project was launched in fall semester of 2012. Students from different subject domains signed up as a member of the learning group and were led by student mentors, who were selected by project directors. A learning space equipped with audio-visual interactive media was provided by the university library (Figure 1). In addition to space for group meetings and learning, the library also provided multimedia learning resources for reading and watching. "Read & Reflect in English" was scheduled for 10 weeks. For the members' assignment, reflective journals were assigned. Members were encouraged to reflect on issues related to the provided materials. A required mid-term presentation was also used to assess each individual's learning (Figure 2). Each week, there were 2 hours of lectures and 2 hours of consultation. During the lecture hours, 2-3 reflective activities were carried out. Students started with communication exercises, then moved on to movie clip watching or article reading, followed by group discussion and class sharing and finally journal writing. During the consulting hour, students were free to ask about anything related to language learning, from homework assignments and TOEFL preparation to thesis writing. Students needed to sign up for each tutorial consultation.

"Read and Reflect in English" was a non-credit autonomous learning project. Based on DIEP strategy, students were guided to describe, interpret, evaluate and plan during their reflective process. At the end of each class period, they described and interpreted what they accomplished from their speaking, listening, and reading activities in class. They were encouraged to provide their reflections, including: specific ideas about the materials covered in the class,

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