Chapter 9

Using a Virtual Learning Environment to Promote Autonomous Language Learning for Chinese Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines a semester-long Moodle-based programme of monitored quizzes designed to encourage first-year Chinese students at an English medium university in China to engage in English language self-study and autonomous learning. Usage statistics and questionnaire data were collected and analysed in order to investigate overall quiz participation rates, usage patterns across the semester, and the extent to which the programme affected students’ attitudes towards self-study. The results indicated that participation rates in the quizzes were high, although activity on the programme pages did decline as the semester progressed. Students also reported via the questionnaire that the programme had helped them learn how to organise their own self-study. However, statistics from Moodle revealed that many participants were not taking the quizzes on a regular, weekly basis, as had been intended, suggesting that the programme may have only been partially successful in fostering autonomous study skills.

INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy is generally endorsed in language acquisition literature as a desirable concept that is conducive to successful study (Littlewood, 1999). Holec (1981) and Little (1995) both define learner autonomy as the situation where students take control of their own learning, and Little suggests that this is something that can be taught. In a CALL context, Schwienhorst (2003) asserts that such autonomy is achieved through the facilitation of reflection and self-evaluation, while Reinders (2007) highlights the importance of monitoring...
what learners are doing. Independent learning of this nature can have long-term benefits (Littlewood, 1996) and is viewed as important in many English language universities. Indeed, difficulties in acclimatizing to this style of study may contribute in part to the reported problems that students experience when transitioning from high school to tertiary level education (Bailey, Hughes, & Karp, 2002; Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004). Certainly, for Chinese students entering English-medium ‘western’ university courses, the challenge of learning to study autonomously is likely to be considerable, especially given the distinctly un-autonomous long hours and heavy homework loads that appear to be typical of Chinese high schools (Kuhn, 2011; XinHua, 2007; Zhang & Zhu, 2007).

Computer Assisted Language Learning literature has highlighted Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) as one tool that can be used to facilitate learner autonomy (Dolle & Enjelvin, 2003), although some researchers also note that there is considerable variation in the way that students respond to them (Maltby & Mackie, 2009). Accordingly, this chapter reports on how a programme of quizzes in a Moodle-based VLE at an English medium university in China was used to promote autonomous language learning among first year Chinese students. The background section of the chapter details some descriptions of Chinese students’ typical patterns of learning, as well as exploring the relationship between VLEs and autonomous learning, and providing a brief justification for this study. Information is then provided about the programme of quizzes, as well as the university environment in which the study was conducted. Following this, the research methodology and results are presented, and suggestions are put forward for future research. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the extent to which the programme was successful in increasing students’ level of autonomy.

**BACKGROUND**

**Chinese Learners and Autonomy**

Given that the vast majority of students at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), where this research was conducted, are Chinese, it was important to consider typical Chinese patterns of learning when designing our programme of quizzes. Some literature suggests that Chinese learners are generally passive and conforming (Lee, 1998; Vansteenkiste, et al., 2005), and Chang (2001; in Swan & Smith, 2001) identifies some key characteristics of traditional Chinese learners, claiming they are:

- Used to memorization learning (rote learning).
- Taught not to voice opinions or enter into discussion.
- Suspicious of games that are not obviously learning.

Together, these three characteristics could easily form a barrier to autonomous, student-centred approaches to language learning. As a partial explanation for the passive nature of Chinese students, Vansteenkiste et al. (2005) note that while students in western institutions are often encouraged to develop their own style of learning, such traits are usually not actively encouraged by teachers or parents in Eastern cultures. Indeed, Ho and Crookall (1995) conclude that is “easy to see why Chinese students would not find autonomy very comfortable, emotionally or indeed intellectually” (p. 237). However, even though Chinese students are commonly perceived as passive learners, Chang (2001; in Swan & Smith, 2001) points out that they are generally observed to work hard and often have to be dissuaded from learning.

The participants in the research described here were all first year students in their first semester at university; therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that their experiences at high school would
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