

Original Paper

Current Status and Cultivation Strategies for English Self-Directed Learning Abilities Among Non-English Majors

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Abstract

This study focuses on the English self-directed learning abilities of non-English majors. Through methods such as questionnaires and interviews, it analyzes the current situation and identifies issues including utilitarian learning motivation, inadequate learning methods, and insufficient resource utilization. To address these issues, cultivation strategies are proposed in areas such as stimulating student interest, guiding learning methods, and optimizing resource utilization. These aim to enhance the autonomous English learning abilities of non-English majors, laying a foundation for their English studies and future development.

Keywords

non-English major university students, autonomous English learning abilities, current status, cultivation strategies

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly accelerating globalization, English, as the primary language of international communication, has become increasingly vital. For Chinese undergraduate students majoring in non-English disciplines, mastering English not only broadens their international perspective but also opens up more development opportunities and career advancement prospects. However, the current state of English learning among these students is concerning. Despite investing significant time and effort, their practical English proficiency remains inadequate, resulting in a phenomenon of "high scores but low competence." As a key factor in enhancing the effectiveness and quality of English learning, self-directed learning ability is crucial for non-English majors. Therefore, conducting in-depth research on the current state of self-directed learning abilities among non-English majors and proposing effective cultivation strategies holds significant practical importance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition and Characteristics of Self-Directed Learning Abilities

Academic circles currently lack a unified definition of self-directed learning abilities. On one hand, examining the process of self-directed learning reveals that “from a macro perspective, self-directed learning encompasses three indispensable processes: self-monitoring, self-regulation, and self-reinforcement, constituting a metacognitive learning approach that transcends mere cognition. From a micro perspective, it involves setting learning objectives, determining content and pace, selecting methods, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes.” On the other hand, content-focused definitions describe it as “the ability to independently think, judge, and decide on learning content by integrating factors like competence, attitude, and strategies, thereby adopting appropriate actions”. This study defines autonomous learning ability as: a manifestation of learners’ proactive learning capacity, referring to students’ ability to independently set learning objectives, formulate study plans, select appropriate learning strategies, and engage in self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reflection during the learning process based on their own tasks and requirements.

2.2 Research Status on English Autonomous Learning Ability Among Non-English Majors

Existing research has explored the English autonomous learning ability of non-English majors from multiple perspectives. Zhu Yun’s survey indicates that non-English majors possess a certain level of English self-directed learning ability, yet numerous issues persist, such as a lack of awareness in managing self-directed learning time, predominantly instrumental learning motivation, limited diversity in self-directed learning methods, and insufficient application of learning strategies. Li Bing’s study on the backwash effect of self-directed learning tests at Southwest University suggests that such tests exert some influence on cultivating self-directed learning abilities among university English learners, though the specific effects warrant further investigation. These studies provide theoretical foundations and research directions for this paper. However, existing research may not be sufficiently comprehensive or in-depth, necessitating more detailed analysis grounded in practical contexts.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Questionnaire Survey Method

A meticulously designed questionnaire covering multiple dimensions—including student demographics, attitudes toward English learning, learning motivation, learning strategies, and self-directed learning abilities—was administered to a large-scale sample of non-English major undergraduates across multiple universities. A stratified sampling method was employed to ensure sample representativeness, encompassing students from different regions and tiers of universities. Statistical methods were applied to analyze the questionnaire data, including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and difference tests, to reveal the current status and characteristics of non-English majors’ English self-directed learning abilities, as well as the relationships among various factors.

3.2 Interview Method

Representative students were selected for face-to-face interviews, including participants from different majors, grade levels, and English proficiency levels. The semi-structured interview format ensured coverage of predefined key questions while allowing flexible adaptation of questioning direction and content based on student responses, encouraging full expression of their perspectives and experiences. Simultaneously, interviews were conducted with selected English instructors to understand challenges encountered in teaching from the educators' perspective, as well as their views and suggestions regarding the cultivation of students' autonomous learning abilities. Interview content was meticulously recorded and transcribed, with thematic analysis employed to extract key themes and insights from the data.

3.3 Case Study Method

This approach focuses on individual students' English learning experiences, delving into the process and outcomes of cultivating self-directed learning abilities. By selecting representative cases, it examines students' specific behaviors, challenges encountered, and solutions adopted during independent English learning, providing concrete empirical support for the research.

4. Current Status of English Self-Directed Learning Abilities Among Non-English Majors

4.1 Learning Motivation and Attitudes

Learning motivation is impure. The motivation for learning English among non-English majors is largely improper. Over half of the students are motivated by "school curriculum requirements," followed by "workplace demands for CET-4/CET-6 certificates" and "personal preference for English." A few students have unclear learning motivations. This indicates that beyond academic requirements, students' motivations lean toward instrumental goals—seeking social recognition and tangible economic benefits through language proficiency. Few align with Gardner's second language learning motivation component of "desire for knowledge." Such utilitarian motives diminish students' initiative and enthusiasm, hindering sustained learning momentum.

Low Learning Enthusiasm: In actual teaching practice, it was observed that most non-English majors exhibit only moderate to mild interest in English learning. Students with strong enthusiasm are not the majority, nor are those completely disinterested. The absence of proper learning motivation also manifests as insufficient enthusiasm in students' learning. If they consistently adopt a perfunctory attitude toward class, being physically present but mentally absent, they will never genuinely engage with the teacher's explanations and interactions.

4.2 Self-Directed Learning Behavior and Capacity

Lack of Planning: Students exhibit insufficient planning in their English studies, lacking control over learning objectives, content, methods, and materials. Survey data indicates that while 62% of students actively engage in self-directed English learning for over two hours daily, 91% never study independently outside class, revealing poor self-management of study time. Only 35.6% and 36.4% of

students can independently determine their English learning goals and content after class, respectively. While 42.4% formulate study plans, only 57% of those who create plans actually follow through. Implementation remains inadequate, reflecting a passive and somewhat haphazard approach.

Inappropriate methods: Students lack the awareness and ability to proactively regulate their learning pace, and their capacity to effectively utilize various auxiliary devices and learning materials is low. The vast majority of students do not utilize the internet to support their English learning. A significant portion merely watches English films or listens to English songs. Only a few students diligently study using learning CDs via the internet, watch English videos or speeches, or download relevant English materials to their portable audio devices. Even fewer persist in listening to English news via radio. Students' supplementary materials are predominantly dictionaries, past exam papers, or practice tests for CET-4 and CET-6, along with nearly universal teacher's manuals. When encountering textbook difficulties, students routinely rely on reference books for solutions, seldom reflecting on the root causes of their problems to reinforce related knowledge points.

4.3 Utilization of Learning Resources

Students exhibit deficiencies in leveraging learning resources. School-provided English education resources are limited: the English learning environment lacks richness, with insufficient campus signage and designated communication spaces like English corners; English learning materials are inadequate, featuring limited English books and journals in libraries, alongside constraints in accessing online learning resources. Concurrently, students themselves demonstrate weak awareness of resource utilization, lacking knowledge on how to effectively harness existing resources to enhance their autonomous English learning capabilities.

5. Factors Affecting the English Self-Directed Learning Ability of Non-English Majors

5.1 Individual Factors

Learning Foundation: Non-English majors exhibit significant disparities in their English proficiency. Some students failed to establish a solid foundation during secondary education, resulting in limited vocabulary, weak grasp of grammar, and inadequate listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. This creates substantial challenges for their university-level English studies and hampers the development of their self-directed learning abilities. For instance, in listening practice, students with weak foundations may struggle to distinguish basic pronunciation and intonation, let alone comprehend complex audio materials.

Learning Interest: Students' interest in English learning directly impacts their self-directed learning abilities. Those genuinely interested in English are more proactive in their studies, actively exploring learning methods suited to them and overcoming challenges encountered. Conversely, students lacking interest often adopt a passive attitude toward English learning, lacking motivation and enthusiasm, making it difficult to develop self-directed learning habits.

Learning Habits Sound learning habits are crucial for enhancing self-directed learning. However, many

non-English majors lack such habits. They rarely review diligently after class, often adopting a perfunctory attitude toward assignments. Pre-class preparation is even less common, with most students developing a habit of passivity and dependency, lacking initiative and settling for mediocrity. In class, they struggle to concentrate, show little proactive engagement, and demonstrate poor abilities in actively receiving and comprehending information.

5.2 Teaching Factors

Traditional English instruction relies heavily on teacher-centered lectures, resulting in low student engagement. Classrooms often lack interactivity and appeal, making it difficult to spark students' interest and motivation. Most students report that their English learning has consistently centered on test-taking strategies. This approach stems from the primary goal of improving scores in middle and high school. Consequently, students' practical English skills, particularly listening and speaking abilities, remain severely underdeveloped. Many describe their learning as "mute English," struggling to speak. This teaching method hinders the cultivation of independent learning skills, conditioning students to passively absorb knowledge while lacking the capacity for active thinking and exploration. Teacher Guidance Teachers play a crucial guiding role in students' independent learning. However, some educators may lack awareness or methods for cultivating students' self-directed learning abilities, failing to provide sufficient guidance and support. For instance, teachers might merely impart knowledge in class without teaching students how to create study plans, select learning methods, monitor progress, or evaluate outcomes. This leaves students unable to resolve issues promptly during independent learning.

5.3 Environmental Factors

Family Environment: The home environment also influences students' English learning. Some families may not prioritize English education, failing to create a conducive English-learning atmosphere or provide sufficient support and encouragement. For instance, a lack of English communication at home limits students' exposure to hearing and speaking the language, hindering improvements in speaking and listening skills. Additionally, family financial circumstances may restrict access to English learning resources, such as purchasing study materials or enrolling in language training programs.

Social and Cultural Environment The social and cultural environment shapes attitudes and values toward English learning, which in turn affects students' self-directed learning abilities. If society undervalues English learning or holds cultural beliefs that discourage it, students' motivation and initiative may suffer. For instance, some students might be influenced by the notion that "English is useless," believing it offers little benefit for future development, thereby lacking motivation to study.

6. Strategies for Cultivating Self-Directed English Learning Abilities Among Non-English Majors

6.1 Stimulating Student Interest and Motivation

Create a supportive learning atmosphere. Teachers can organize activities like English corners, speech contests, and drama performances to provide more opportunities for English communication and foster

an immersive learning environment. For instance, regularly hosting English corner sessions with native speakers or advanced students allows students to improve oral expression through practical interaction while making learning more engaging.

Establish Equal Teacher-Student Relationships Teachers should respect students' individuality and perspectives, fostering equal and harmonious relationships. In class, encourage active participation in discussions and presentations, offering timely affirmation and encouragement for student contributions. This makes students feel cared for and supported, boosting their confidence and sense of accomplishment in learning English. For instance, when students present unique insights during class, teachers should praise and acknowledge them to stimulate learning interest and enthusiasm.

6.2 Guiding Students to Develop Effective Learning Habits and Methods

When creating study plans, teachers should guide students to develop reasonable schedules based on their individual circumstances, clearly defining learning objectives and progress milestones. For example, assist students in establishing weekly and monthly study plans that include learning content, time allocation, and study methods, while monitoring their adherence to these plans. Simultaneously, teach students how to adjust their study plans based on actual progress during the learning process, enhancing flexibility and adaptability.

Teach effective learning strategies. Educators should impart practical English learning techniques, such as vocabulary memorization methods, listening comprehension strategies, reading skills, and writing approaches. For instance, in vocabulary acquisition, introduce association-based memorization or root-and-suffix techniques; for listening comprehension, teach students to identify key words and predict content. Additionally, guide students to select appropriate strategies based on specific learning tasks and contexts to enhance efficiency.

6.3 Optimizing Learning Resource Utilization

Strengthen school resource development by enhancing English teaching resources, enriching learning materials, and improving learning facilities. For instance, increase the number of English books and journals in libraries, introduce more English learning software and online courses, and establish multimedia classrooms and language labs to provide better learning conditions. Simultaneously, foster a conducive English learning environment through measures like installing English signage on campus and organizing English cultural activities.

Guide students to utilize resources effectively. Teachers should instruct students on how to efficiently leverage existing learning resources. For instance, teach students how to search for English learning materials online and use English learning software for self-directed study. Simultaneously, encourage students to actively participate in various English learning activities, such as English lectures and training programs, to broaden their learning avenues.

6.4 Enhancing Teachers' Instructional Capabilities and Guidance Skills

Transform teaching philosophies: Educators should shift from traditional teaching approaches to adopt a student-centered philosophy, emphasizing the cultivation of students' independent learning abilities.

In the classroom, reduce teacher-centered lectures while increasing student participation and interaction, guiding students to actively think and explore. For instance, employ task-based learning or project-based learning methods, enabling students to enhance their independent learning skills and comprehensive language proficiency through task completion and project work.

Strengthen teaching training. Institutions should enhance professional development for English instructors to elevate their instructional proficiency and guidance capabilities. This includes organizing regular workshops and training courses to expose teachers to cutting-edge pedagogical theories and methodologies, particularly those focused on cultivating student autonomy. Additionally, encourage faculty to engage in teaching research to explore effective English instruction models tailored for non-English majors.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated and analyzed the current state of English self-directed learning abilities among non-English majors, revealing numerous issues in areas such as learning motivation and attitudes, self-directed learning behaviors and competencies, and utilization of learning resources. Factors influencing students' English self-directed learning abilities primarily include individual factors, teaching factors, and environmental factors. To address these issues and influencing factors, this study proposes cultivation strategies such as stimulating students' learning interest and motivation, guiding students to develop good learning habits and methods, optimizing the utilization of learning resources, and enhancing teachers' teaching abilities and guidance levels. These strategies aim to improve the English self-directed learning abilities of non-English majors, help them better cope with the challenges of English learning, and lay a solid foundation for their future career development and lifelong learning. Future research may further explore the implementation effectiveness of different cultivation strategies and how to tailor cultivation approaches to individual student differences.

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