

Lifelong Learning: A Study of College English Autonomous Learning

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This paper examines two modes of teaching: the traditional teaching mode and the teaching mode based on the notion of lifelong learning which places greater emphasis on the cultivation of students' ability to learn autonomously outside the classroom. In order to compare the effectiveness of these two teaching modes, two hundred freshmen from a foreign language college were taken as subjects and divided into an equal number of control classes and experimental classes. The results showed that the overall performance of the experimental class which was taught by the new teaching mode significantly improved. The results of the questionnaire survey showed that students in the experimental class spent more time on autonomous learning after class, and the content and method were more in-depth; moreover, most of the students in the experimental class thought that autonomous learning could effectively improve their English language skills.

Keywords: lifelong learning, English, teaching mode, autonomous learning

1. INTRODUCTION

A sound knowledge of the English language is bound to be useful for life for anyone exposed to it in any number of fields including business and education. In the wave of globalization, most people have come in contact with the English language in one form or another, as it has become the universal language. This is particularly the case for college students in the new era, who are most likely to need English language skills for their future workplace and careers. However, when students learn English by means of the traditional English teaching mode, unless they are majoring in English or English-related subjects, most of them will not continue to learn English after their final assessment. Moreover, most will not maintain the level of skill they have acquired, let alone continue to improve (Ponzio & Matthusen, 2018). "Never too old to learn" is no longer just a proverb intended to encourage people to take

on new learning challenges: in today's rapidly developing society, this has become a necessary mindset. If people cannot embrace lifelong learning, they will not be able to keep pace with the social and technological demands of today's world, and will find it difficult to achieve their goals (Fang, 2018). Dubovicki et al. (2015), through an online questionnaire survey, explored whether the expectations of lifelong learners changed due to generational differences in the didactics course and found that all the respondents thought that the didactics course was very important. Mojtaba et al. (2017) analyzed the lifelong learning strategies of nursing students with international experience and found that the application of lifelong learning strategies could improve the quality of nursing education as well as the quality of patient care given by nurses. Duckworth et al. (2015) analyzed the role of mentors in teacher education in the early stage of lifelong learning and examined ways to open up key space to promote the flow of mentors, interns, learners and community empowerment. They found that the proposed mode and training method could be used in all stages of education as it encouraged

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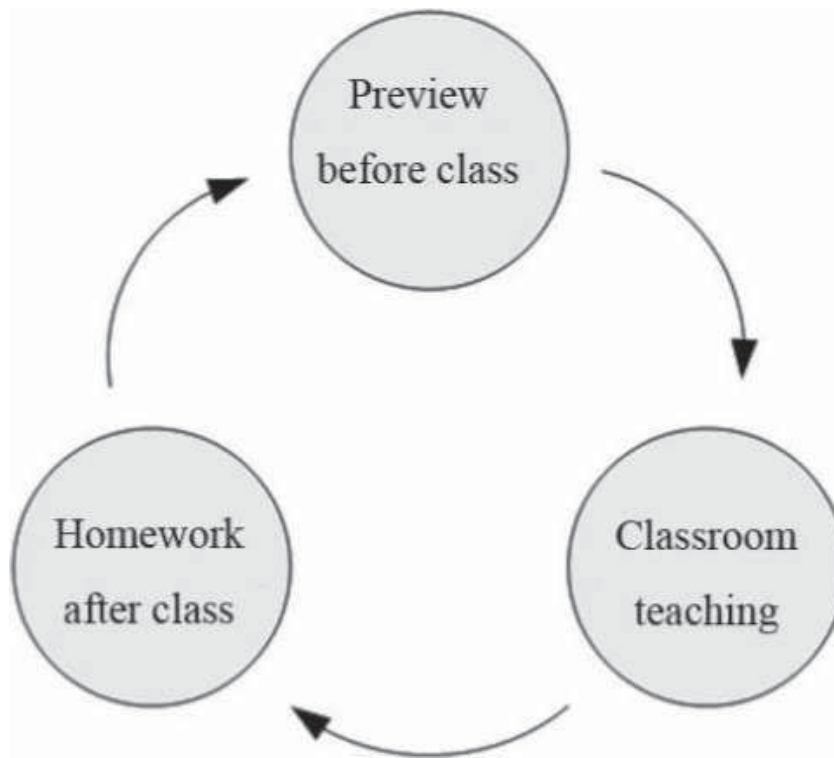


Figure 1 The traditional teaching mode.

critical reflection, exposed students to different cultures, and developed inclusiveness.

This paper briefly introduces the traditional teaching mode and teaching mode based on the lifelong learning theory which focuses on the cultivation of autonomous learning ability outside the classroom. In order to compare the effectiveness of these two modes of teaching, an equal number of control classes and experimental classes were conducted comprising a total of two hundred freshmen enrolled in a foreign language college.

2. TRADITIONAL ENGLISH TEACHING MODE

English is a conventional subject; the traditional teaching mode used for teaching this language is shown in Figure 1. The teaching process basically consists of three steps: pre-class preview, classroom teaching and homework (Zhao, 2019). In the pre-class preview, teachers define the teaching and learning objectives of the curriculum, and require students to have a preliminary understanding of the course according to the scope of the curriculum. Subsequently, in the classroom, teachers explain the assignments set in the previous class, especially the parts which could present some difficulty, and then carry out corresponding teaching according to the set teaching plan (Cui, 2017). At the conclusion of the class, teachers set appropriate homework to ensure that students review and consolidate the previously imparted information, and explain the scope and content of the next class. These teaching steps are repeated, without variation, in every class. This is the traditional teaching mode (Kovanović et al., 2015).

3. ENGLISH TEACHING MODEL FOCUSING ON AUTONOMOUS LEARNING UNDER THE CONCEPT OF LIFELONG LEARNING

In recent years, rapid socio-technological development has seen a tremendous increase in the rate at which information is updated. The knowledge which is acquired at school alone cannot effectively prepare individuals to adapt to these changes and developments. English is one of knowledges. In this new era, young people must be able to use the English language proficiently. However, if English is not the students' mother tongue, unless students are majoring in English or English-related subjects, their English language skills will deteriorate dramatically once they have accomplished their final assessment task. Not only is this a waste of the time and effort invested in the short English course: it means that the students will be unable to use the English they acquired in their future social, business or workplace interactions (Dadvand & Behzadpoor, 2020). Therefore, when teaching English to students, teachers should not only impart basic knowledge, but should apply a mode of teaching that will encourage students to embrace the concept of lifelong learning and strengthen their ability to learn autonomously.

Lifelong learning (Lauer, 2015) is defined as the learning process that members of society engage in throughout their lives to ensure that they can adapt to social and technological changes; put simply, it can be summed up as 'learning forever'. The notion of lifelong learning developed as a result of the rapid development of the economy after World War II, the increase in the amount of spare time that people had, the improvement of people's living standards, and the

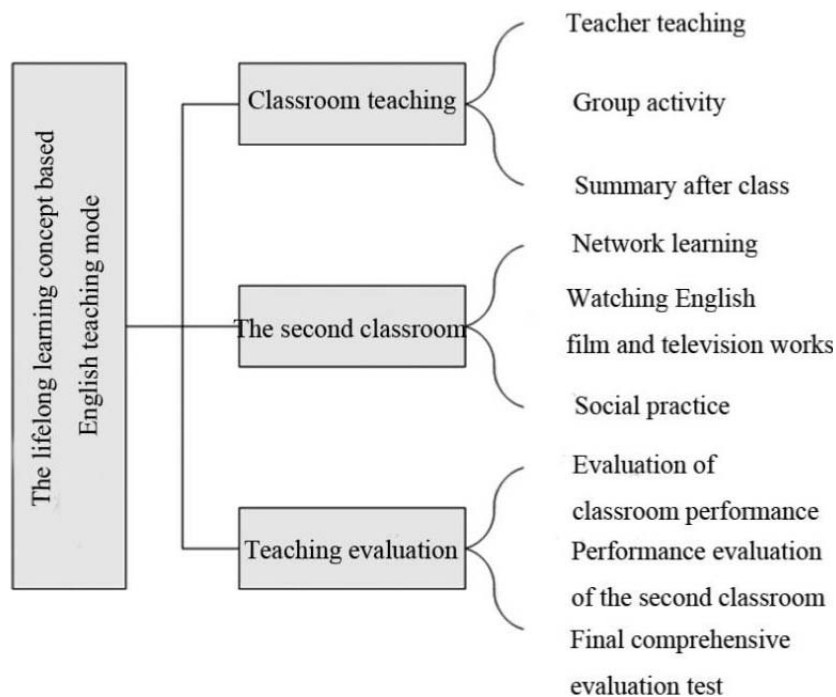


Figure 2 The lifelong learning theory-based English teaching mode.

emergence of various new technologies and new occupations that made it necessary for people to acquire new knowledge. Increasingly, the traditional teaching mode is unable to meet the needs of talents brought about by the new social changes. Knowledge infusion only deters students from engaging in autonomous learning, and ensures that they remain out of touch with societal and workplace demands. Hence, schools and universities must adopt and implement a teaching mode that encourages autonomous learning.

As shown in Figure 2, similar to the traditional teaching mode, classroom teaching is the first part of the new teaching mode. It is also the closest link between teachers and students, and therefore the most direct means of transferring the spirit of autonomous learning. In the classroom, teachers teach according to the curriculum, but they no longer pay too much attention to the unilateral explanation of written text. Instead, they apply their own teaching and learning experiences to guide students to think independently (Lauer, 2015). Teachers avoid feeding information directly to students. Rather, they design group activities that require students to collaborate with each other and search for materials and information themselves. Finally, the teacher evaluates and summarizes the results of group activities and assigns corresponding tasks.

In the second classroom link, teachers further weaken their own leading role and become learning facilitators who guide the students toward autonomous learning by assisting them to make use of tools available to them outside the classroom, such as social networks, English movies and TV shows, and opportunities to practise their English skills in social settings. These are just some of the activities that students can engage in beyond the classroom, all of which strengthen their capacity for autonomous learning. Teachers play only an auxiliary role in these extracurricular activities, and the learning and application of English requires students to explore their own means of improving their skills.

The teaching evaluation link in the new teaching mode ensures the overall effectiveness of this new teaching mode where the focus is on the autonomous learning of students, not on the input of teachers. For students, highly efficient, independent learning needs strong self-control, and self-control needs long-term training, so as to develop the spirit of autonomous learning. In this process, teachers play a supervisory role that includes, mainly, initial classroom performance evaluation, a second classroom performance evaluation and the final comprehensive evaluation test (Jōgi et al., 2015).

4. CASE ANALYSIS

4.1 Subject of Teaching Experiment

In this study, 200 freshmen from a foreign language college were chosen as the subjects, with equal gender representation. Students who were enrolled in English language classes were divided into 10 classes, 20 students per class, again with equal numbers of males and females. Each class was assigned one teacher. All teachers had more than 10 years of experience in English teaching, and all were familiar with the traditional teaching mode, as well as having a thorough understanding of the concept of lifelong learning.

4.2 Teaching Method

First of all, five classes were randomly selected from 10 classes as the experimental classes, who would be taught using the new English teaching mode. The remaining five classes were taken as the control class, to whom the traditional teaching mode would be applied.

The traditional English teaching mode involved the following: ① students read the textbook with teacher guidance; teachers explained any difficulties and knowledge points in the text according to their own understanding; teachers organized classroom tests; ② for homework, teachers set one or more sections of text to be studied for English pronunciation, as well as reading materials and other related tasks. Back in the classroom, teachers discussed and explained problems that students had encountered when completing their homework tasks.

The new English teaching mode is as follows: ① prior to the lesson, teachers examine the learning materials and design a teaching plan accordingly; ② teachers set the scene and introduce the theme to the students (Himelhoch et al., 2015); ③ students discuss the theme freely, with their teacher guiding them by asking questions; ④ students analyze and respond to the teacher's questions; ⑤ teachers exchange suggestions with students and extend the topic; ⑥ teachers recommend corresponding English films and TV shows according to the performance of students outside the classroom.

One particular course is given as an example of the way the new teaching mode can be applied. The theme of this course was "communication and body language". The teacher set the background as: "I go to the airport to meet foreign students, but during the process of communication, body language mistakes are made due to cultural differences". The students then discuss the "mistakes" made due to "body language". The teacher used many images to establish the setting and then asked students to consider and respond to three questions. In groups, students discussed these questions freely and one person from each group was nominated to present the group's answers to the class. The questions were as follows:

- (1) Why are international students coming to China?
- (2) Who meets these international students at the airport?
- (3) What arrangements are made for them by the school?

After the groups' presentations, the teacher listed the key words and sentence patterns for the topic and then asked the students to discuss in groups any "mistakes" that they had made during cultural exchanges. The teacher observed the discussion process and contributed appropriate information as required. The teacher also recommended that the students use the Internet for online learning or watch appropriate English movies and TV shows in their own time.

4.3 Test of Teaching Effect

In this study, two pre-tests were given to students to determine and compare the effectiveness of the traditional teaching mode and the teaching mode based on the concept of lifelong learning (Mackness et al., 2016). The first test involved listening and speaking: an audio text was played, and the students answered related questions. The total score was 50 points. The second test was a reading test which required written responses. This test consisted of multiple-choice questions, blank-filling questions and reading comprehension questions. The total score was 50 points.

In order to test the effectiveness of the two teaching modes, first of all, the ten classes participating in the experiment were tested using the same tests prior to the commencement of classes. After two months of teaching, the classes were again tested for listening and speaking and reading to compare the scores before and after teaching. Then a questionnaire survey (Bing, 2017) was conducted to investigate students' autonomous learning ability under the two teaching modes. Questionnaire responses were anonymous. The questions were:

- ① How long does it take to learn English independently after class? A. more than 2 hours; B. more than 1 hour but not more than 2 hours; C. not more than 1 hour.
- ② How do you learn English independently after class? A. English expansion; B. doing homework; C. word recitation; D. preview and review.
- ③ How do you learn English independently after class? A. listening to English songs; B. reading English newspapers; C. online learning; D. watching movies.
- ④ Is autonomous learning of English beneficial to the improvement of English level? A. great help; B. some help; C. little help; D. no help at all.

4.4 Teaching Results

The effect of the two teaching modes was tested intuitively by the listening and reading test. The test results are shown in Figure 3. Before teaching, the highest, lowest and average scores of the control class were 65.3, 21.1 and 62.5 respectively, and those of the experimental class were 66.3, 22.3 and 63.1 respectively. After teaching, the highest, lowest and average scores of the control classes were 66.8, 22.4 and 64.2 respectively, and those of the experimental classes were 89.6, 58.3 and 73.6 respectively. As shown in Figure 3, the English scores of all the ten classes were almost the same before teaching. The scores of the control classes increased slightly after teaching, which showed that the traditional education mode was effective to some extent. However, the scores of the experimental classes improved significantly, both in the score interval and average score; the comparison with the control group showed that the experimental classes had higher scores; in particular, there was a very significant increase in the previous lowest score.

As shown in Table 1, the survey results of question ① showed that most of the students in the control class spend only a small amount of time on autonomous learning, while the majority of the students in the experimental class spend more than two hours. Question ② concerned the type of autonomous learning that students engaged in after class. Most of the students in the control class focused only on completing homework tasks, while the experimental class focused on expanding their knowledge of English, and on preview and review. Question ③ was intended to investigate the ways that students engaged in autonomous learning after class. Most of the students in the control classes chose more relaxed songs, and only those films and TV shows that had

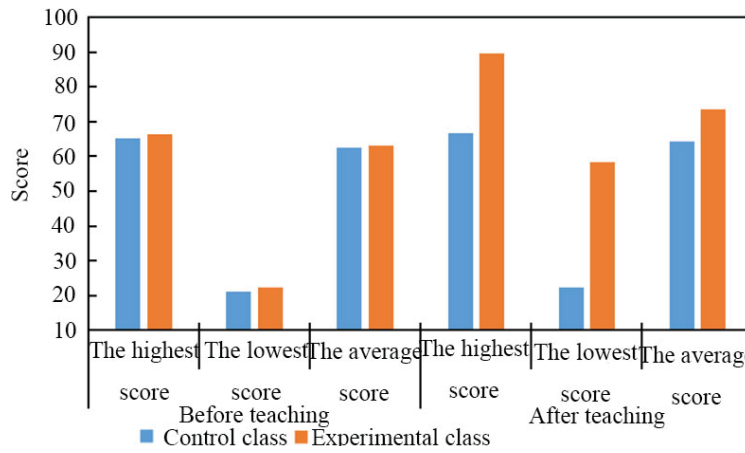


Figure 3 Test results before and after teaching with two teaching modes.

Table 1 The survey results for two kinds of classes.

Class	Control class				Experimental class			
	①	②	③	④	①	②	③	④
A	4%	5%	42%	12%	80%	66%	10%	67%
B	28%	55%	2%	12%	15%	6%	44%	20%
C	68%	30%	1%	66%	5%	6%	36%	10%
D	0%	10%	55%	10%	0%	22%	10%	3%

Chinese subtitles. On the other hand, most of the students in the experimental classes chose to read English newspapers and engage I online learning. Question ④ sought to determine students’ attitudes toward autonomous learning after class. Most of the students in the control classes thought that autonomous learning after class did little to improve their test scores, while most of the students in the experimental classes thought that autonomous learning beyond the classroom could effectively improve their English skills.

5. CONCLUSION

The teaching mode proposed in this study focuses on the cultivation of autonomous learning ability outside the classroom. Two hundred first-year students enrolled in a foreign language college were taken as subjects and divided into control classes and experimental classes for comparison. The results are as follows: (1) the overall performance of the experimental class after being taught with the new teaching mode significantly improved; (2) the experimental class spent more time engaged in autonomous learning after class, and the way and content were more in-depth. Moreover, students in the experimental classes agreed that autonomous learning was a more effective means of improving their English language competencies.

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