Effects of Online Teaching on Student Autonomous Learning with U-MOOCs: A Case Study of Business English and Communication

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This study examines the effects of online teaching on student autonomous learning by using U-MOOCs during the period of COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were bachelor’s degree students in English Department taking “Business English and Communication” course. Approaches to learning practice were measured by designing a multi-link teaching model, including the periods before, during, and after the online class. The study result reveals that the implementation of the proposed model for this course can not only fully mobilize students’ learning enthusiasm, but also provide practical help for students’ autonomous learning, which proves to be an effective teaching model.

Keywords: autonomous learning, U-MOOCs, Business English and Communication

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In view of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, the traditional face to face teaching becomes impossible in colleges and universities in China. Faced with this situation, China’s Ministry of Education required that online teaching during the epidemic prevention and control period should be guaranteed to fully ensure the normal teaching order and strive to “stop class, but not stop teaching nor stop learning”.

Online teaching is a new teaching mode that enables remote, simultaneous, real-time, interactive teaching and learning with the assistance of new media technologies such as the Internet and professional teaching platforms. Breaking the limitation of time and space, online teaching can not only help promote the teaching progress in the special period, but also enable the supply and allocation of high-quality teaching resources to meet the needs of students in different degrees as much as possible.

Although various network platforms and tools provide the opportunity to teach and learn in an open system, there are still some concerns about online teaching. For instance, teachers are accustomed to the traditional “face to face” teaching, in which they can interact with students according to real-time learning conditions. However, the shift from traditional classroom teaching to an online virtual environment, to some
extent, makes it difficult for teachers to get instant feedbacks from students. Instead of face to face
communication in classroom, they can only talk in front of the screen. Without the eye contact and spontaneous
communication between teachers and students, the feeling of isolation is intensified, and the distance felt by
students is also increased (Brickman, 2003; Peterson, 2001).

1.2 Autonomous Learning

The term “autonomous learning” was first proposed in distance education in 1971 (Moore, 1972). In the
early 1980s, it was introduced into language teaching which specifically refers to the ability to be responsible
for one’s own learning. In other words, autonomous learning means the ability to make decisions on all aspects
of the learning process, including learning objectives, learning content, pace and method, and the evaluation of
the learning process and effects (Holec, 1981).

Based on Holec (1981), Nunan (1997) proposed a model of learners’ autonomous learning consisting of
five progressive levels or stages, namely, “awareness”, “involvement”, “intervention”, “creation” and
“transcendence”. Later, self-evaluation, reflection and monitoring are suggested to be integrated in the process
of foreign language autonomous learning. Zimmerman (2002) considered autonomous learning as a process
that mental skills are transformed into academic skills, instead of a kind of mental intelligence or academic
performance skills itself.

1.3 U-MOOCs and Business English and Communication

The main platform we employ is U-MOOCs of Wuhan University of Technology, which is composed of
four main functional modules: curriculum management, teaching resources, teaching activities, and curriculum
construction. “Curriculum management” includes teachers’ management on the basic information of the course,
such as course introduction, teaching objective, assessment and rubrics. “Teaching resources” embraces
abundant teaching and learning materials which can be achieved through online editing, such as input text,
picture resources and teaching videos. These resources combined with “teaching activities” form a teaching
unit to guide students to actively participate in learning. Students’ feedback on teaching effects can also be
obtained through “Q &A discussion”. “Curriculum construction” flexibly organizes “teaching resources” and
“teaching activities” according to different teaching objectives.

The course Business English and Communication aims to improve students’ ability to communicate
effectively in international business activities through the study of business communication knowledge and
foreign trade correspondence. Through comprehensive training of business and foreign trade skills, in
accordance with the introduction to Western culture, business etiquette, and international business negotiations,
students can broaden their horizons and strengthen the integration and penetration of English in their business
practices.

2. Multi-link Teaching Model

2.1 Before Online Class

Although online teaching is an inevitable trend in the era of the Internet, the large-scale online teaching
during this special period is a challenge for both teachers and students, which requires full preparation and
adaptation.
With regard to the design of a successful teaching model, we considered, first of all, the teaching content should be more refined than traditional class, while guaranteeing the teaching quality at the same time. Second, various forms of interaction are needed to maintain students’ learning enthusiasm. Third, timely feedback on students’ assignments is required. Taking all these into account, we decided to choose U-MOOCs and QQ group as the main teaching and learning platforms. U-MOOCs enables us to upload learning tasks, courseware, PowerPoint, online tests, assignments, etc. QQ group is used to arrange learning tasks, upload notices, answer students’ questions and make video calls in groups to facilitate students who do not have computers to study online.

In order to adapt to online teaching as soon as possible, we set up QQ group two weeks in advance to keep in touch with the students when needed. A week before the class began, we issued a notice to students on QQ group and platform, explaining this kind of teaching model, clarifying teaching objectives and assessment requirements, and providing the usage of U-MOOCs. In addition, we updated teaching plan and contents based on the current events and academic trends at home and abroad, and published the latest information on the platform for students to preview. We also conducted a test run of technologies online with the students before the class started to ensure that every student could log on to the platform successfully.

2.2 In online class

2.2.1 Preview period

Online teaching requires the cooperation between teachers and students. Many scholars believe that teachers should guide students to evaluate themselves, set goals, master and apply learning strategies, and cultivate students’ learning motivation through the development of metacognition (Cheng, 2011).

Thus, two days before each class, we would publish a notice on QQ group, specifying learning objectives, contents, activity arrangement, target requirements, etc. At the same time, we would upload preview materials such as the handouts and PPT on U-MOOCs as well (Video already on the platform). During this period, with the help of the teaching assistant, students are able to watch teaching videos and preview materials of this unit on the platform. Moreover, students are encouraged to ask questions encountered during the self-study period through QQ group. Then, the questions are collected and sorted out in groups by the TA for the teacher to answer in class. Obviously, this preview period is still under the guidance of the teacher; but together with the TA’s assistance and students’ participation, it can generate significantly positive effects on students’ autonomous learning. (Chen, Guo, & Hu, 2015)

2.2.2 Teaching period

After making sure that everyone enters the live class, we send agenda to QQ group to inform students about the specific steps of this class, so that the teaching process could be more efficient. In the warm-up phase, we use the previously collected materials about the COVID-19 to test students’ vocabulary and arouse their enthusiasm and curiosity. This provides an effective way to examine students’ understanding and mastery of what they have observed and learned on a daily basis.

“Involvement”, as one of the five stages proposed by Nunan (1997) in autonomous learning, plays a vital role in this period as well, for the student-centered teaching model is still the purpose of online teaching. In each class, besides explaining the key and difficult points of the unit, we guide and inspire students to think
creatively to achieve good interaction. During the class time, we set aside time to listen to students’ oral presentation according to the assignments given in the previous time and make constructive comments. Different from traditional face-to-face teaching, students show unprecedented initiative and enthusiasm in the process.

Given that the knowledge acquired by students through autonomous learning before class is not systematic, at the end of each class, we make brief summary to effectively help students systematize and organize what they have learned to deepen their understanding. In this process, we not only answer students’ questions, but also raise further questions for students to brainstorm. Extra materials are provided during this time when necessary, so that students can engage in intense online discussion by asking more profound questions that spark a new round of discussion.

2.3 After Online Class

After online class period is presumably a rather dull period for both teachers and students. But thanks to U-MOOCS, which facilitates online teaching during the pandemic period, our multi-link teaching model goes smoothly. For students, assignments are released according to the effect of teaching and learning, and they are asked to submit the finished work on the platform before the deadline. Assignments are mainly submitted to the “course assignments” module, where we can write comments and select excellent ones for students’ reference after careful reviewing. Furthermore, U-MOOCS enables us to provide supplementary learning material to students. For example, we would upload materials from MIT undergraduate manage course from the Open Courseware to the “teaching resources” module to encourage students to implement autonomous learning during their spare time, thus forming their own learning habits and characteristics (Benson, 1997).

“Q&A discussion” module on the U-MOOCS platform is a good place for students to interact with each other. In addition to posting their own opinions, other students’ opinions are also useful for generating critical thinking. This module thus attracts students’ participation, draws on their collective wisdom, and is beneficial to “brainstorming.” Inspired by the discussion in this module, students can realize their advantages and drawbacks by comparing with others’ voices. Undoubtedly, teachers’ comments on the results of students’ discussion can also help enhance interaction and learning effectiveness. Thus, we also make full use of the “frequently asked questions” module to supplement the knowledge to satisfy those who have an aspiration for more challenging material on the one hand, and to consolidate the teaching content on the other.

As teaching involves both teaching and learning, teachers’ approaches to teaching should also be reviewed. Although online teaching lacks face-to-face communication, abundant online data makes it easy to evaluate the teaching effectiveness and students’ satisfaction. In addition to checking on students’ involvement in online class by reviewing their ideas via QQ screen, which shows their autonomous learning and deep thinking, we also conducted a questionnaire on online teaching and learning in U-MOOCS. The purpose of this is to have some feedbacks of this new multi-link teaching model and review how much it can satisfy the students’ needs. To our satisfaction, the results show that more than 85% of the students can adapt to the online teaching model and make full use of online resources from U-MOOCS for autonomous learning. Nearly 90% of the students agree that this teaching mode creates an open learning environment and gives them more opportunities to be more engaged and practicing their critical thinking.
3. Reflection

Autonomous learning, as a student-centered model under the guidance of teachers, is essentially an ability. (Benson, 2005; Little, 2010)

For students, effective learning is inseparable from their ability of self-management. In particular, autonomous learning is a test for students with poor self-monitoring ability under the background of online teaching. Students should be aware that learning is their own business, thus they need to strive to be responsible for themselves and improve their autonomous learning ability. In addition, from the perspective of the trend of future education, students’ autonomy and openness of learning are becoming more and more important, which requires them to master autonomous learning ability, make clear their own learning needs, and take initiative to set learning goals, so as to rationally allocate their learning time and follow their own pace. Only through continuous training of self-management and autonomous learning, can better learning effect be achieved.

For teachers, they should correctly deal with the relationship between the principal role of students and the guiding role of teachers, and help students clarify their learning tasks and put forward flexible requirements. They must express clearly, accurately and specifically when guiding students to learn autonomously (Zhang & Wu, 2020). In this way, students can have a clear understanding of learning objectives and specific requirements. Through communication with students on the online platforms, teachers should guide students to arrange their time reasonably, choose suitable methods and strategies to learn, and evaluate their learning effects correctly when they study online, so that they can find deficiencies during the process and improve their ability of autonomous learning.

Conclusion

The effect of online teaching model on students’ autonomous learning under the guidance of teachers proves fruitful in this special period of COVID-19 pandemic. Online teaching is not only an emergency measure to minimize the impact of the pandemic on normal education, but also an active attempt to use information technology to transform teaching models and cultivate students’ autonomous learning ability. The application of U-MOOCs of Wuhan University of Technology and the unique multi-link teaching model is conducive for stimulating students’ self-disciplined awareness and enhancing their autonomous learning.

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