

IMPROVING CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' AUTONOMY  
IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Wei Zhang (Vanessa)

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Abstract

IMPROVING CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' AUTONOMY  
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Wei Zhang

Under the Supervision of Yuanyuan Hu, Ph.D.

This paper aims to explore some solutions to improving Chinese college students' autonomy in English language learning. On the basis of a review of the literature on the definitions and importance of learner autonomy and the strategies for developing learner autonomy in an EFL context, the paper examines the necessity and benefits of learner autonomy from learners' and teachers' perspectives and discusses various approaches to foster learner autonomy. The paper concludes with solutions and suggestions for improving Chinese college students' autonomy in English language learning.

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## **Chapter I Introduction**

Learner autonomy has become a new “buzz-word” in the field of applied linguistics (Little, 2009). Learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one’s own learning (Holec, 1983). Learner autonomy comes into play as learners begin to shoulder responsibility for their own learning (Icy, 1998). Learning is not just a simple transmission of subject-matter knowledge; it is a directional process. Harmer (2003) argues that learners’ autonomy will influence their learning much more than what teachers believe.

College English language teaching in China is still lingering in the traditional grammar-translation stage. Many college English teachers are used to being the authority in the classroom and reluctant to give up the teacher-dominated approach. They still educate students using the traditional teacher-centered and material-centered language teaching methods and give typical lectures using officially designated textbooks. Teacher talk occupies most of their class time; students are just sitting there and taking notes with few opportunities to communicate in English with their teachers.

Because of China’s Ministry of Education’s decision to change educational policies to include a stronger focus on English language teaching, college English teachers in China began to make some changes in their classrooms. Helping learners to become more autonomous in their language learning has become a notable topic since English language teaching enters a new age in China. It is now widely accepted that helping learners to be autonomous in their learning is one of the most important goals of education and will benefit learners in their life-long learning process.

Given that learner autonomy plays an increasingly important role in English language teaching in China, this paper aims to demonstrate why autonomy is important in English

language learning and explore how college English teachers can help improve Chinese college students' autonomy in English language learning.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The paper explores the following two questions: Why is it important to improve Chinese college students' autonomy in English language learning? How could Chinese college students' autonomy in English language learning be improved?

### **Definitions of Terms**

Learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is an ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1983).

College English. English for non-English majors in China.

College English teachers. Teachers who teach college English to non-English majors in China.

College students. College English learners who are non-English majors in China.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Research in China has indicated that a large proportion of Chinese college students, non-English majors in particular, lack autonomy in their English learning. They tend to over-rely on their English teachers. The purpose of this paper is to examine why it is important to improve Chinese college students' autonomy in English language and how college English teachers in China can improve students' autonomy in English language learning.

### **Significance of the Study**

This paper is to show the importance of improving learner autonomy for Chinese college students in English learning and explore solutions to improving Chinese non-English majors' autonomy in learning English. The paper may provide college English teachers in China with some ideas for improving their students' learner autonomy.

## **Methodology**

A brief review of the literature on the definitions of learner autonomy was conducted. A second review of the literature on the importance of improving learner autonomy in an EFL context was carried out. Additional research was conducted on the strategies for developing learner autonomy in an EFL context. The paper concludes with solutions and suggestions for improving Chinese college students' autonomy in English language learning.

## **Chapter II Review of Related Literature**

This chapter reviews the literature on the definitions of learner autonomy and the importance of learner autonomy in an EFL context. This chapter also reviews the strategies for developing learner autonomy in an EFL context.

### **Definitions of Learner Autonomy**

Researching the definitions of learner autonomy is an important first step to understanding learner autonomy. Although different researchers have defined learner autonomy in different ways and from different points of view, and even the same researcher gave different definitions during different periods of time, the definitions of learner autonomy do have something in common and sometimes overlap each other.

Smith (2008), an expert on learner autonomy, suggests that learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning and to take responsibility for all decisions concerning all aspects of learning. One of the more widely accepted definitions of learner autonomy is put forward by Benson (2007), who defines it as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (p. 21). Icy (1998) characterizes learner autonomy as "readiness to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 282).

Hammer (2003) defines autonomous language learners as those who "initiate the planning and implementation of their own learning program" (p. 288). Icy defines an autonomous learner as "an active participant in the social processes of classroom learning" (p. 322). Nevertheless, Sert (2006) points out that "it may well be that the fully autonomous learners is an ideal rather than a reality" (p. 180). Sert argues that degrees of learner autonomy and learner's potential for achieving different degrees rely on factors such as their personality, goals, cultural context and so on. Language skills can be attained if learners develop autonomous

language-learning awareness so that they can make use of all opportunities to learn both in and outside the classroom.

Littlewood (2000) describes an interesting model of language learning, in which the learner is regarded as a communicator, a researcher, and an intentional learner. Littlewood (2007) also sums up that one can define “an autonomous person as one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices that govern his or her actions” (p. 36). Ability and willingness are two essential components to the capacity. In the process of becoming autonomous, learners should learn to make appropriate choices in regards to the knowledge and skills they choose to pursue and develop. The ability to learn independently must be present if one wants to be a life-long learner. Willingness depends on having both the self-initiation and confidence to take personal responsibility for the choices learners have made. Learners’ ability and willingness should not be defined by the cultural mindset on education; instead, a learner’s natural desire will shape what choices he or she will make (Littlewood, 2000).

Railton and Watson (2005) argue that “the autonomous learner is a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent in his own learning process” (p. 182). Furthermore, they also state that learning is seen as the result of learners’ own self-initiated interaction with the world. From such a perspective, learning is not just a matter of memorization, but it is also a process that involves retention of knowledge, which is accomplished through self-activated learning. An autonomous learner takes an active role in his or her learning process, generating ideas, and seeking for learning opportunities.

Mynard and Sorflaten (2003) note that the essence of learner autonomy lies in accepting responsibility for one’s own learning. It entails establishing a personal agenda for learning, taking initiative to shape the learning process, and developing a capacity to evaluate the extent

and success of one's learning.

### **Importance of Learner Autonomy in an EFL Context**

Cook (2002) states that the purpose of English language teaching is cultivate "a learner's independence or autonomy which should be regarded as the end goal that teachers or educators try to pursue" (p. 201). Learner autonomy cannot be realized unless both teachers and students strive for it.

**Learners' Perspective.** In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning environment, autonomy is needed for the following reasons:

First, learners will become more efficient in their language learning in the classroom if they can develop learner autonomy. It means that learners will not follow their teacher blindly. Instead, they will actively familiarize themselves with the objectives and contents of a lesson prior to attending it. Furthermore, autonomous students will benefit more from interaction with their teacher (Dickinson, 1997). In addition, the strong motivation to "study for myself" can also enable them to explore more opportunities to learn, which are not created by the teacher deliberately. Littlewood (2000) suggests that a learner use feedback from other learners to evaluate his or her success.

Second, learners will benefit from taking initiative to learn outside the classroom because practices in the classroom are limited. Nunan (2001) points out that "students could not completely master the linguistic knowledge and skills immediately that the teacher has presented in the classroom" (p. 134). That means they need to engage themselves in an autonomous learning process. On the contrary, limiting their work to what is taught in a course and its textbook is of little benefit to learning a second or foreign language when success so much depends on an individual's pursuit of opportunities for language use outside the classroom.

Third, learners will improve their quality of learning if they use learner autonomy to adapt various practices to their own learning styles. As far as teachers are concerned, each has his or her own relatively stable teaching style, but teachers are increasingly faced with students who have different language aptitudes, cognitive styles, learning styles, and affective features. It is particularly difficult for teachers to satisfy the needs of each student. Therefore, Nehir (2006) argues that learners should learn to manage their own study, analyze their own learning characteristics, and choose appropriate learning strategies to improve their learning.

**Teachers' Perspective.** In English language learning, teachers can create necessary learning environments, but learning can only happen if learners are willing to contribute.

Little (2009) notes that learner autonomy is very likely to be more efficient and effective if learners are reflectively engaged with their learning under teacher's guidance. He emphasizes learner's independence from teachers, which would help shift the learning responsibilities from teachers to learners.

According to Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device (LAD) hypothesis (1965), students actually learn languages by themselves through the guidance of their "inside" teacher rather than a classroom teacher. Under the principle of learner autonomy, teachers' roles should be redefined as helpers who assist with choice of materials and advise what to do as well as observers, course designers, and researchers.

Learner autonomy is based on learner's independence and active attitude towards learning. The learner has the responsibility to make decisions and take charge of his or her learning. However, it never means that a teacher's functions can be overlooked. Jones (2003) points out that "learner autonomy refers to the situation in which a learner is working alone without the direct control of the teacher" (p. 35). What he said cannot be simply understood as

students learning on their own. On the contrary, in autonomous learning, learners take their own responsibility for goal-setting, materials selection, and learning activities, rather than rely on a teacher in every aspect. As Smith (2008) notes that “it is a misinterpretation that teachers’ roles are no longer the part in the autonomous learning process” (p. 396). The fact is that without teacher supervision, the whole learning process may result in low efficiency and even fall into disorder.

**Cooperation between Teachers and Students on Autonomy.** It is suggested that learning should be a partnership between teachers and students. On the one hand, learner autonomy is the ability and capacity possessed by learners; on the other hand, it is the responsibility of teachers to help learners learn and use English language autonomously. Therefore, improving learner autonomy may depend on mutual cooperation in the learning process. Usuki (2002) notes that an autonomous learner is able to cooperate well with his or her teacher and other classmates as well as engage in self-directed and independent learning. It implies that learners ought to understand what they are expected to accomplish and what kinds of resources are in their command. They should be willing to put their efforts into learning. In addition, Dogancay-Aktuna (2005) suggests that “learners should be equipped with learning strategies so that they are able to take full advantage of the resources and learning materials” (p. 99). Marcosa and Tillemab (2006) also point out that “learners are likely to know how their efficient behaviors will enhance their capacity in autonomous language learning” (p. 112). Thus helping learners adapt to autonomous learning is a crucial part of a teacher’s responsibilities.

### **Strategies for Developing Learner Autonomy in an EFL Context.**

Various approaches have been researched and adopted to foster learner autonomy among learners.

**Definitions of Learning Strategy.** Researchers have defined learning strategy from different perspectives. Oxford (2007) defines learning strategies as specific actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations. His definition more focuses on learning outcomes. Gardner and Miller (1994) state that learning strategy is a specific mental procedure for gathering, processing, associating, categorizing, rehearsing, and retrieving information of patterned skills. Cohen (1998) defines learning strategy as learners' choice, which is consciously selected by learners in the learning process. The commonality among these different definitions of learner strategy is that they all give priority to learning efficiency.

**Self-Report Strategies.** Wenden (1998) claims that it is good that a teacher has intention to find out how students accomplish their assignments and help them become aware of the strategies they adopted. When a teacher assigns a task, he or she is supposed to require the students to report their thinking process when performing this task. Self-report is what has been named as retrospective self-report since learners are asked to think back or retrospect on their learning (Wharton, 2002). It could be argued that self-reports can be a means of raising learner awareness of strategies and the need for constant evaluation of techniques, goals, and outcomes. As Wenden (1998) observes, without awareness, learners will remain trapped in their old patterns of beliefs and behaviors, and their learning autonomy will never be achieved.

Dam (1995) concludes that diary keeping, one of self-report strategies, proved to be beneficial to improving learner autonomy for their language learning. Harmer (2000) notes that merits of keeping a diary are multiple not only for learners but also for teachers. On the one hand, diary keeping may help learners discover things about themselves and their learning difficulties or anxieties, and think critically about their weaknesses and strengths; on the other

hand, it may help teachers cater better to learners' needs and expectations and make some necessary adjustments as to what works and what does not work in their classrooms.

**Encouraging Students to Take Charge of Their Own Learning.** Cotterall (2000) and Little (2007) argue that learner autonomy should be seen as an essential and incontrovertible goal of all learning, since no student will have teachers' accompany throughout his or her life. Generally speaking, in formal educational settings, learners do not automatically accept responsibility for their learning. Teachers thus should help students become psychologically independent from teachers by making the roles of teachers and students explicit at the very beginning of the learning process. Teachers should enable learners to realize the importance of their own role in language learning. The core task of psychological preparations is to raise awareness and change attitudes of learners. Cook (2001) points out that "learners gradually replace the belief that they are 'consumers' of language courses with the belief that they can be 'producers' of their own learning program and that this is their right" (p. 201).

**Altering Teachers' Role.** Although we have repeatedly emphasized learner autonomy, it does not mean that the role of a teacher can be overlooked. It is especially important for an EFL teacher to realize the importance of learner autonomy and encourage it among students. Wenden (1998) suggests that it is up to teachers to encourage students to take charge of their learning by guiding them in their choice of work either at home or in the classroom and providing advice on individual study plans. In this sense, Cotterall (2000) states that teachers are distant watchers of learners. They not only observe learners' study, but also record each learner's progress and do research on the changes in each learner's learning behavior.

**Teaching Students How to Learn.** Wen (2001) notes that successful or intelligent learners learn how to learn. In this sense, learning how to learn and getting necessary strategy

training is more important than being simply “taught” something. Teachers must focus their attention on how to help students learn independently.

It is time to offer students some advice, help them realize their problems, and teach them how to learn in easier but more efficient ways. The priority should be given to helping students learn to manage their studies, and teachers should help learners take charge of their own learning. To manage their studies does not simply mean student attending classes, listening to teachers attentively, completing after-class assignments, and previewing and reviewing lessons. To manage their studies “mainly entails setting some personal goals, utilizing learning strategies, evaluating one’s progress and regulating oneself” (Smith, 2008, p. 396). So learners should be introduced to the skills of managing their studies, and planning and evaluating strategies. After the introduction to the strategies or skills, students should be given opportunities to practice them through language tasks. If students really master the strategies or skills, they may become more efficient in their future learning and have greater self-direction in their work.

The analysis of learner autonomy from both learners’ and teachers’ perspectives reveals that learner autonomy under teacher supervision is one of the most crucial aspects of teaching English as a second language. This autonomy approach increases students’ desire to learn English language beyond a classroom setting. To achieve learner autonomy in an EFL context, the strategies that so far have been identified in this paper need to be adapted to meeting the needs of specific groups of students. Overall, improving learner autonomy in English language learning needs both teachers’ and students’ efforts.

### **Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations**

The above chapters have analyzed current problems in English language teaching in China and the importance of improving learner autonomy in an EFL context. As college English is a compulsory course in Chinese colleges, how to improve Chinese college students' autonomy in English language learning is a matter of great importance.

#### **Solutions for Improving Chinese College Students' Autonomy in English Learning**

This section will put forward some solutions to improving Chinese college students' autonomy in English language learning.

**Teaching Chinese Students' Learning Strategies.** Learning strategy is important for all college majors, but it is particularly important for non-English majors participating in an English course because they need to develop autonomy in order to benefit from the course that is not directly related to their majors. These strategies consist of cognitive strategies and meta-cognitive strategies in general. Through the cultivation of cognitive strategies, students can concentrate on learning tasks, guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from context, and using inductive and deductive reasoning to deal with specific learning activities, which include how to identify, retain, retrieve, and use necessary language materials. Through the cultivation of meta-cognitive strategies, students can set goals, make plans, select learning modes, monitor their learning process, and evaluate themselves.

**Encouraging Cooperative Learning.** Cooperative learning is a powerful approach to learner autonomy. It aims to establish an environment in which students are able to ask questions and discuss ideas freely with their teacher and peers (Wang, 2003). Wang also notes that cooperative learning consists of five elements: positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability and personal responsibility, interpersonal and small group skills, and

group processing. Even a non-English major can benefit from these five elements. For example, someone who is a science major could learn how to work in a group, communicate with others, and accept ownership and problems by participating in English group activities. With this cooperative learning approach, students in one class can be divided into several small groups to achieve their learning goals by helping each other under the guidance of their teacher.

Group work is a typical approach to cooperative learning. It helps encourage cooperation and independence, and strengthen students' autonomy. For example, Chinese college students can take turns being the teacher, which will help other students learn and take responsibility for their own learning. Group work gives each group member equal responsibilities and opportunities if students are grouped properly. It is difficult to "hide" in a small group. The students should be ready in engaging themselves in group work and is likely to find it enjoyable if it is carefully planned and well designed. In group work, students also can share successful strategies with their peers.

Cooperative learning is an effective way for Chinese students to become more autonomous or independent. Learner autonomy can be fostered and improved in EFL classrooms through cooperative learning.

**Transferring Roles.** To most Chinese college students, especially non-English majors, changing the way they learn from being passive to active requires a considerable shift in classroom. It may be the most demanding challenge not only for students but also for teachers.

It is better to take steps to help passive learners become active learners. The first step, which aims to motivate students, may be an easy one. For example, students need to analyze their own strengths, weaknesses, and needs independently. Second, teachers can encourage independent learning inside and outside the classroom. For example, teachers can give some

assignments that require students to search for related information at a library or online, compare and contrast the information as well as draw their own conclusions independently. In the third step, teachers can use activities to involve students in making decisions about the teaching process. For example, teachers may ask students which sections need to be explained and what parts they would like to study on their own. By transferring roles from being passive to active, Chinese college students will gradually take responsibility for their language learning.

### **Constraints and Suggestions**

Despite the importance of learner autonomy, there are some constraints to improving learner autonomy in Chinese college English classrooms. It takes a long time to develop learner autonomy because it is difficult to break away from old habits even if one already knows the benefits of becoming an autonomous learner. In China, College English Test Band 4 and College English Test Band 6 are still the two major tests to evaluate non-English majors' English proficiency. Because most of college teachers are in favor of using mechanical and intensive training that focuses on preparing students for the national college English examinations, it can easily discourage college students from taking initiative to learn English. Careful strategy training and careful preparation on the teacher's part is thus necessary to develop student autonomy in learning.

In summary, autonomous learners have more opportunities to communicate with their teachers as well as develop their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. There is a famous Chinese saying, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." Since learner autonomy is significant in language learning and an essential quality of a good language learner, the cultivation and improvement of learner autonomy has been put into a vital position in Chinese colleges. However, as mentioned above, in reality, it

is difficult for both students and teachers to change their traditional roles efficiently. Therefore, in order to improve learner autonomy, efforts must be made by individual learners as well as their teachers, and both teachers and students should play their new roles and cooperate effectively. This paper aims to be helpful to college English teachers in China who are planning on cultivating and improving students' autonomy in English language learning.

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