

**A Case Study of
the Correlations Between Teacher Autonomy
and Learner Autonomy in
Foreign Language Teaching**

外语教学中的教师自主与学生自主

——一项基于案例分析的研究

安琦 著



经济科学出版社
Economic Science Press

**A Case Study of
the Correlations Between Teacher Autonomy
and Learner Autonomy in
Foreign Language Teaching**

外语教学中的教师自主与学生自主

——一项基于案例分析的研究



经济科学出版社
Economic Science Press

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| List of Abbreviations | 1 |
| Chapter One General Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1 Introduction | 1 |
| 1.2 Research background | 3 |
| 1.3 Significance of the study | 13 |
| 1.4 The structure of the book | 18 |
| Chapter Two Literature Review | 19 |
| 2.1 Introduction | 19 |
| 2.2 Definitions | 19 |
| 2.3 The relationships between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy | 33 |
| 2.4 The relationships between learner autonomy and language proficiency | 39 |
| 2.5 Summary | 42 |
| Chapter Three Theoretical Framework of Learner Autonomy | 44 |
| 3.1 Cognitive learning theories | 44 |
| 3.2 Humanistic psychology | 50 |
| 3.3 Constructivist theories of learning | 53 |
| 3.4 Summary | 57 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Four Research Design | 59 |
| 4.1 Introduction | 59 |
| 4.2 Research question and hypotheses | 60 |
| 4.3 Research determinants and variables | 71 |
| 4.4 Data collection procedures | 88 |
| 4.5 Summary | 97 |
| Chapter Five Results and Analyses | 99 |
| 5.1 Introduction | 99 |
| 5.2 Results of teacher autonomy | 100 |
| 5.3 Results of learner autonomy | 123 |
| 5.4 Results of the relationships between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy | 144 |
| 5.5 Results of the relationships between learner autonomy and language proficiency | 187 |
| Chapter Six Conclusion | 205 |
| 6.1 Introduction | 205 |
| 6.2 Major findings of the study | 205 |
| 6.3 Implications | 208 |
| 6.4 Limitations | 216 |
| 6.5 Suggestions for further research | 218 |
| Appendix I | 220 |
| Appendix II | 222 |
| Appendix III | 224 |
| Bibliography | 229 |

Chapter One

General Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Although the idea of autonomy in language learning originated in the late 1960s, the philosophy of autonomy can be traced back to Confucius: “I read, and I forgot. I saw, and I believed. I did, and I understood.” A similar idea is found in Galileo’s words: “You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself.”

In 1981, Holec’s *Autonomy in Foreign Language learning* was published, signifying the very beginning of research on autonomy. Since then, learner autonomy has gained momentum and become the focus of relevant research in the past two decades. Generally, autonomy can be interpreted as the capability of taking charge of one’s own study. Researchers both in China and abroad have come to realize that the focus in language teaching should shift from what we should teach to the study of the conditions that facilitate language teaching and to creating these suitable conditions. In other words, it is learners rather than teachers who should be responsible for their learning. During the process of learning and teaching, it is the teachers’ responsibility to create the environment most conducive to learning. The idea of autonomy has been warmly wel-

comed, as can be seen in opinions of researchers: Autonomy is a human right (Benson, 2000); autonomous learning is more effective than other approaches to learning (Naiman, N., Fröhlich, H., Stern, H. & Todesco, A., 1978); learners need to take charge of their own learning in order to make the most of available resources, especially outside the classroom (Waite, 1994). Under the influence of cognitive theories of learning, humanistic psychology and constructivist theories, a great deal of contemporary research has been conducted on learner autonomy at an international level from different aspects, such as study of the concept of learner autonomy (Benson, 2001; Little, 1999; Sinclair, 2000), study of the factors that influence the development of learner autonomy (Dickinson, 1995; Littlewood, 1999), study of the ways to develop learner autonomy (Gardner & Miller, 2002; Wenden, 1995).

However, as more and more researchers investigate learner autonomy, they come to realize that teachers, during the process of the development of learner autonomy, play a very important role, and to some extent, can even determine whether learner autonomy can be realized, as seen in Wenden (1991: 11) "few teachers will disagree with the importance of helping language learners become more autonomous as learners". The roles that teachers play in the development of learner autonomy also draw researchers' attention in China. Teachers of English (and other foreign languages) in China have examined questions such as 1) How can language teachers aid their learners in becoming autonomous? 2) How do learning strategies contribute to learner autonomy? 3) How can the development of learner autonomy be incorporated into the teaching and learning of foreign languages?

Against this background, using both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the present research attempts to explore one research question with two hypotheses. The research question is: Does teacher autonomy

have positive effects on learner autonomy? The two hypotheses are: 1) Teacher autonomy does have positive effects on learner autonomy to some extent; 2) Learners with autonomous learning ability can make faster progress in language proficiency than those without learner autonomy.

1.2 Research background

Studies on learner autonomy came along with Holec's (1981) project report *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* to the Council of Europe. Since then, the concept of autonomy has gradually become a hot issue that Little described it as a "buzzword" of the 1990s in the field of applied linguistics (Little, 1991). As far as pedagogy is concerned, there has been a shift from focus on the teacher to focus on the learner, from focus on how to improve teaching to a concern for how individual learners experience the learning process in the field of second/foreign language education (Gremmo, 1995). The last twenty-five years have seen an ever increasing amount of attention to learner autonomy in the second/foreign language learning literature, marking the importance of learner autonomy in EFL settings.

1.2.1 Research abroad

The large number of books, journals and studies devoted to the research of learner autonomy demonstrates that autonomous learning has become the mainstream of language pedagogy concerns in western countries.

Many researchers (Benson, 1997, 2001; Dickinson, 1987, 1995; Holec, 1981; Kenny, 1993; Lamb, 2000; Little, 1991, 1996; Tort-Moloney, 1997) have worked on definitions of learner autonomy

and teacher autonomy, and the relationships between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, all of which will be discussed in chapter two. Apart from theoretical studies of learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, many researchers have investigated the development of learner autonomy. A lot of western researchers who advocate autonomous language learning integrate principles of learner autonomy into their teaching practice in Asia in places like Thailand, Japan and China Hong Kong, confirming learner autonomy as a world-wide practice.

Littlejohn (1983) created an experiment in which subjects were given some extent of freedom to control the content inside a teacher-directed classroom where learners reviewed the content, reported the difficulties, presented their findings, provided exercises and carried out activities by themselves with only necessary assistance by teachers. Littlejohn found that learners with developed senses of responsibility for their learning showed increased motivation and improved examination results. In another article, Littlejohn (1985) argues that "a truly learner-centered approach should instead be concerned with allowing learners a greater role in the management of their learning, by providing opportunities for learner choice in the method and scope of study". (Littlejohn, 1985: 253)

Fowler (1997) researched how to develop students' autonomy outside the classroom. Some strongly motivated students who have difficulty making progress in the classroom have improved their capability of using English outside the classroom. To further evaluate effects, strategies like portfolio of written work, self-study tapes and independent learning plans were employed by the study. Fowler finally concludes that learners' involvement in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies contributes to the development of their self-confidence and self-management skills.

Yap (1998) designed a case study: Out-of-class use of English by secondary school students in a Hong Kong Anglo-Chinese school. Two of the aims of the study were to describe the students' out-of-class learning and its influence on the development of their English language proficiency. Based on a self-report questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, it was concluded that all students created opportunities to use English out of the classroom. Further, the students tended to value these activities, which offered them a lot of fun and a pleasurable sense of achievement. Yap's study provided insights into the nature of out-of-class learning. This empirical research aims either to discover how to give learners control over content and skills or to evaluate their autonomy and independence in and out of the classroom.

Other research related to developing learner autonomy is concerned with issues such as learning strategies, skills in self-directed learning, self-confidence and motivation. Wenden (1995) illustrates how to train learners with cognitive and metacognitive strategies for self-directed learning. Wenden advocates a task knowledge-based approach, describes the functional relationship between task knowledge and the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, summarizes the implication of this relationship for the development of autonomy, and finally concludes that learning strategies and the knowledge essential to exercising autonomous learning are equally important in learner training. This principle is also reflected in Wenden's (1995) claim that autonomous learners need to be self-directed, mentally active and aware.

1. 2. 2 Research in China

Studies of learner autonomy have gained momentum since Chinese educational reform movements concerned with a learner-centered approach were launched in 1998 (Ying Huilan, 2009). Since then, Chi-

na has made considerable efforts to improve the quality of college English language teaching. Implemented in 2000, the principles of the new Curriculum Requirements for English majors, where fostering learner autonomy has been clearly stated as an objective of FL teaching, represent a significant shift in terms of teaching methodology, course materials, and theories of language teaching and learning. Since then, focus on teaching skills, devoted to find more efficient and more effective ways of teaching languages has been replaced by focus on learning. Until now, journal articles comprise the bulk of published works on learner autonomy in China. These journals include: Foreign Language Teaching and Research, The World of Foreign Languages, Modern Foreign Languages, The Journal of Foreign Languages, Foreign Languages Research, Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Teaching, Computer-assisted foreign language education in China, Foreign languages in China, Foreign language education, Foreign language learning theory and practice, Materials On Education in Foreign Countries, Linguistics in Foreign Countries, Foreign Languages Teaching in Shandong, The Journal of P. L. A. Foreign Languages College, The Journal of Sichuan Foreign Languages College, The Journal of Xi'an Foreign Languages College. Until the time of the present research, more than eighty articles were obtained from these journals in terms of the objects of study, the methods of study and the content of study.

1. 2. 2. 1 Study of the feasibility of learner autonomy

Are Chinese learners weaker than Western European students in their ability to develop autonomous learning? Is it feasible and necessary for learner autonomy to be practiced in the Chinese context of English language learning? In an effort to answer these questions, quite a number of researchers (An Qi, 2009a, 2009b; Chen Dongcun, 2006; Chen Jianlin, 2010; Chen Xiaoxiang & Zhang Xiyang, 2003; Dai Jun-

rong, 2004; Gao Jili & Li Xiuping, 2005; Hui Yaling, 2003; Li Hong, 1998; Li Ming, 2001; Qi Hongbo, 2004a, 2004b; Wang Duqin, 2002; Wei Yuyan, 2002; Xu Jinfen, 2004; Zhang Lixin & Li Xiaoxiang, 2004; Zheng Min, 2000; Zhou Zhizhong, 2004) have probed into them. Based on their studies and findings, some conclusions can be drawn:

1) Developing learner autonomy among Chinese college students is necessary in that it is not only the requirement of modern education objectives and modern language teaching theories, but also that of the current situation of college English teaching in China.

2) It is feasible to promote learner autonomy in the process of teaching English majors in China. Chen Xiaoxiang and Zhang Xiyang (2003) distributed questionnaires among teachers and students of the English major. The results showed that most students have had some ability to practice autonomous learning and the awareness of self-improvement, and that most teachers have also come to know the importance and necessity of fostering learner autonomy among English majors.

3) On the surface, the idea of learner autonomy may not seem adaptable to Chinese culture due to the Chinese principle of collectivism. Individualism seeks individual freedom and development, but the Chinese tend to believe more in authority than in themselves, resulting in lack of experience in thinking and problem-solving independently. However, the theory of learner autonomy could well find its way into Chinese culture. Li Hong (1998) and Qi Hongbo (2004a) reply that oriental collectivism provides the right environment for learners to work interdependently.

4) By creating a contrastive study of autonomous learning ability of Chinese students (in a British university) and Western European students, Zhang Lixin and Li Xiaoxiang (2004) conclude that Chinese

students, by and large, have the learning autonomy ability equal to that of Western European students, with a certain aspect of the ability being somewhat different. And Qi Hongbo (2004b), based on his survey results, concludes that Chinese college students are not weaker than Western College students in terms of the awareness of autonomous learning.

1. 2. 2. 2 Study of the methods and practice of promoting learner autonomy

Two aspects are involved in this study. Firstly, researchers study theory, as in these articles: Fan Ye, 1999; He Lianzhen, 2003; Li Ming, 2001; Ouyang Jianping & Zhang Jianjia, 2009; Wei Yuyan, 2002; etc. Secondly, they explore ways to develop learners' autonomy by setting up learner autonomy centers, as in the following articles: Hua Weifen, 2001b; Hua Weifen, 2003; Sun Hong, 2004; Zhuang Ling, 2006; etc. Following these studies come three ways to develop learners' autonomy:

1) by improving autonomous learning environment: reforming traditional evaluation systems to provide learners with more open atmospheres of learning; reforming the patterns of traditional teaching with shifts from the focus on "teaching" to the focus on "learning" (i. e. from giving learners fish to teaching them how to fish), from "textbook plus blackboard" to "multi-media teaching"; setting up learner autonomy centers;

2) by promoting awareness of learners' autonomous learning: encouraging creative ideas among learners so as to gradually build learners' confidence; respecting individual differences among learners to arouse their internal learning motivation; encouraging learners to keep diaries in order to analyze and evaluate their own learning process; requiring learners to draw up "learners contracts" to help them set learning objectives; working out learning plans and specifying learning contents;

3) by practising “learner training”, comprised of four aspects: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive knowledge, and learning strategies.

Apart from the theoretical investigation of how to foster learner autonomy, scholars have made some rewarding attempts to integrate principles of learner autonomy into practice in the process of teaching. In the process of college English teaching, Peng Jinding (2002) has adopted such unorthodox measures as asking students to exchange and correct assignments, letting teachers and students jointly compile teaching materials, and having students work out learning plans, in hopes of fostering students' learning autonomy. On the basis of one school year of empirical study, Wang Duqin (2002) finds that teaching specific learning strategies is effective in enriching students' metacognitive knowledge and promoting learner autonomy. Zhang Yanjun (2004) has benefited learners' autonomous learning ability by “training metacognitive strategies” in class and “drawing up the agreement for learners” after class. Liu Honggang (2008) has studied Chinese non-English major undergraduates in an effort to investigate the relationship between ELT motivations and autonomy in English learning, finding that ELT motivations are closely correlated with learners' autonomous learning ability. Gao Peng and Zhang Xuezhong (2005) conduct a one-school-year teaching experiment, studying “Classroom Teaching Activities Typical of Learning Autonomy and the Development of Learners' Learning Autonomy” and “Classroom Teaching Patterns Typical of Learning Autonomy and the Results of College English Test-Band-4”. The results show that classroom teaching activities typical of autonomous learning can not only tap the potential of learners' autonomous learning ability, but also improve learning efficiency and test scores.

The results of the survey and experiment show that learners have en-

hanced their awareness of autonomous learning and that their learning progressed. From the perspective of practice, He Xiaodong (2004) uses after-class English reading to illustrate the operative process of a self-chosen language learning item in terms of the three phases of planning: executing, self-monitoring and evaluating, and he analyzes likely difficulties in his paper. By empirical study, Zhang Dianyu (2005) concludes that English learning strategies have remarkable effects on learner autonomy. He expects that students can improve autonomous learning effectiveness by adopting learning strategies in order to discover concrete learning strategies and task-based activities suitable for the learners themselves.

Studies have also been done on network-based learner autonomy. Chen Qingsong and Xu Luomai (2006) study autonomous learning in the context of networks and proposed a reform plan for college English teaching through practice of autonomous learning and conclude that network-based autonomous learning is superior to traditional classroom teaching with regard to helping students to acquire language skills and to improving teaching efficiency. Similarly, Wang Zhiru (2006) delves into preliminary conditions of network English learning from the perspectives of the ability of autonomous learning, the skills of networks and computers, and the belief in network learning.

These results shed light on network English teaching. Lin Lilan (2006) shows that learning strategies training should be introduced into English teaching in order to improve the patterns of network learning autonomy. Liu Yanxiu and Kong Xian (2008) study learners' performance in the "CALL + Class Instruction", and draw a conclusion that CALL and Class Instruction should complement each other, but fulfill their different tasks respectively, and that learners autonomous aptitude and willingness in cooperative learning should be fostered during instruction in

order to help them to move from teacher dependent learning to autonomous learning. By carrying out a six-month practice of after-class learning autonomy, Wang Yan (2007) studies the relationship between learner performance in the development of learner autonomy and sense of self-perceived achievement. Wang suggests that teachers should foster learners' autonomous learning ability and highlight the sense of achievement of autonomous learning by affecting performance.

1. 2. 2. 3 Study of teachers' roles in learner autonomy

What role (s) does a teacher play in the context of learner autonomy? Hua Weifen (2001a) and Tan Hong (2001) have discussed this question at length. Hua Weifen (2001a) divides teachers' roles into three types, Tan Hong (2001) into eleven. They agree that teachers should first be "coaches" or "advisors" by promoting learners' awareness of learner autonomy, by pointing out their learning objectives and by selecting their learning materials. Then, teachers should be "promoters" or "trainers" by giving students various kinds of assistance. Finally teachers should be "puzzle solvers" or "information sources" to students in solving problems and providing relevant information. Wang Yan (2007) probes into learners' expectations of their teachers' roles in learner autonomy and concludes that teachers should continue their efforts to improve themselves, develop learning materials suitable to the development of learner autonomy, and encourage learners to sustain their hard work.

1. 2. 2. 4 Study of teacher autonomy

Contrasted with the tremendous interest in the study of learner autonomy, the study of teacher autonomy has not gained momentum so far. Very few articles about teacher autonomy are found in top foreign language journals. Huang Jing & Benson, P. (2007) complete a study of teacher autonomy in second language education. In this study, the au-

thors first emphasize three important phases in the development of teacher autonomy: teachers' role, teachers' professional development, and teachers' professional freedom.

1. 2. 2. 5 Study of other aspects relevant to learner autonomy

Having probed into the relation of learners' learning autonomy to identity and self, Pang Jixian, Ye Ning, and Zhang Yingli (2004) point out that learners and teachers must, in the course of teaching, attach importance to their respective identity and self, exerting some effect on learners' autonomous learning. Fan Jieping (2004) discusses the ideas and the characteristics of autonomous learning of foreign languages as well as creative talents in the research-oriented universities. Yang Ying and Jiang Jingyi (2001), from the angle of language perception, have formulated a way of promoting learner autonomy. Li Jing (2005) has expounded the construction and development of the materials for learner autonomy. Li Ping (2005) has analyzed the relation of the computer and classroom-based multi-media teaching patterns to the development of learner autonomy, proposing that the cultivation of metacognitive ability should contribute to the formation of students' individualized learning methods and to the enhancement of learner autonomy. Li Jing (2006) introduces several instruments for evaluation of learner autonomy prevailing in the current world as well as the material for evaluation of learner autonomy. Zhu Yumei (2007) expounds the definition, degree, and characteristics of learner autonomy as well as the application of learner autonomy in class and after class and the relationship between learner autonomy and culture. Zhu has also reviewed the research and the development of learner autonomy in China. Shao Huijuan (2008), from the perspective of language philosophy, has probed into the modes of foreign language teaching dedicated to the fostering of autonomous learning ability, including their own basic theories, methodologies, forms of dis-

course, ways of teaching practice, and exemplary models.

In summary, autonomy research in China and abroad over ten years shares the following features:

1. Domestic studies tend to focus on theoretical analysis and most of studies focus on introduction of studies abroad.
2. Research abroad more strongly emphasizes empirical studies; it is understandable that domestic studies lag behind considering the fact that autonomy was originated abroad and has been studied for years before it entered China.
3. There is a lack of study on the relationships between autonomous learning and teaching; (i. e. Teacher autonomy and the effectiveness of autonomous learning are inadequately valued.)

1.3 Significance of the study

Successful learning is in the objective of autonomous learning (Wenden, 1991). Independent learners are much more likely to succeed in their studies than those who are heavily dependent on teachers. Benson (2001: 19) argues that “the successful learner is increasingly seen as a person who is able to construct knowledge directly from experience of the world, rather than one who responds well to instruction.” Therefore, if learners are to achieve maximum success and cope with the ever-changing world, they need assistance in gaining skills which will help them to be more independent learners.

Dewey (1916) stated that, in a democratic society, the primary purpose of education should be to prepare students to take part in social and political life. Dewey believed that it is individuals' moral responsibility to devote themselves to the betterment and reform of the societies in