

Autonomy in Learning English as a Foreign Language: A Case Study of Chinese College Students

Ran Jiao

Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan

Email: ranjiao55@outlook.com

KEYWORDS

Autonomous learning,
English as foreign language,
Learning strategy, Adult
learner

ABSTRACT

This study is an endeavour to investigate how Chinese students learn a foreign language out-of-class. A secondary aim is to learn about the different approaches that students use when they study by themselves. To study the participants' attitudes toward autonomy in learning, the semi-structured interview was conducted using a list of ten questions which the participants were asked to answer. Since learning autonomy depends upon the interrelation of the teacher and the learner, this study explored the subject from the learners' perspective and examined the different strategies that students use out-of-class. Despite recent research on learning autonomy, there is a lack of research addressing the field of adult Chinese students learning foreign languages out-of-class. Hence, this research examined various dimensions of how Chinese learners start autonomous learning by learning self-management and cognitive processes. Furthermore, this study discussed language learning strategies which had been proven useful in autonomous learning and what made these strategies essential tools for autonomous language learning.

ARTICLE INFO

Article type: Original article

Article history:

Received: 22 October 2024

Revised: 29 December 2024

Accepted: 08 March, 2025

Published online: 10 March
2025

Introduction

Learning autonomy has long been acknowledged as one of the most important factors in the process of foreign language acquisition. It is often defined as “the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one’s own learning” (Benson, 2001, p. 58). As the theory is defined in the literature, the autonomy is a goal that learners should strive to achieve when starting to learn a foreign language.

Henri Holec (1981) first introduced the concept of autonomous learning in his book *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. One of the earliest definitions of autonomy was created by Holec in 1981 in the Council of Europe. He described autonomy as:

- an ability to determine the learning objectives;
- an ability to select the best learning strategies;
- an ability to evaluate what has been learned;
- an ability to monitor the learning process;

How to Cite: Jiao, R. (2025). Autonomy in Learning English as a Foreign Language: A Case Study of Chinese College Students. *International Journal of Practical and Pedagogical Issues in English Education*, 3(1), 56-74.
DOI: 10.22034/IJPIE.2025.484979.1058



© The Author(s).

He concluded that a qualified autonomous learner must have these abilities in order to have the capacity to make their own decisions at each stage of the learning process. Although this definition covers most aspects of learner autonomy, there are still some problems to be addressed. He investigated different strategies and concepts in the field of language learning, chiefly those related to individualized learning. Holec (1981) points out that if a learner wants to be successful in learning a language, he or she must know how to train themselves to carry out self-directed learning with or without support from teachers or peers.

As another attempt, Little (1991) argues that autonomy is not only a procedure of how languages are learned, it is a capacity for learners to develop a psychological relationship with the process of learning. Holec's (1981) and Little's (1991) definitions cover two dimensions of autonomy, but there is still one more dimension that needs to be understood.

Later, autonomy mainly refers to the capacity of the learner to take charge of their learning, and the term autonomous learning is defined as a situation of study without teacher guidance out-of-class. In order to train learners to be proactive in their course of study, teachers need to give up control and free learners to follow their own direction. It is perhaps one of the greatest challenges that both teachers and learners have to face when they start to learn out-of-class autonomously.

In China, studies on autonomous learning began in the 1990s. By 2014, Yin and other researchers had engaged in many heated discussions on this field of study (Yin, 2014). In China there are some differences with scholars in other countries, such as a greater emphasis on the applications of technology-based learning (Gao, Liao, & Li, 2013). Since China has an extensive market in online education, Chinese researchers such as Xu and Zhang (2004) have focused on the study of language learning autonomy from the perspective of learners in the classroom. However, there were a limited number of researchers conducting research with learners out-of-class.

Consequently, this paper aims to undertake research of how learners use self-study strategies after finishing a lesson in the class. In this research paper, firstly, the different terms relevant to learner autonomy are to be defined. The focus then shifts to the subject of autonomy from the perspective of learners and the question of how do learners motivate themselves to learn a foreign language. A discussion is provided illustrating common strategies that learners use when they start to learn a foreign language. A detailed conclusion has been drawn at the end of discussion.

Literature Review

In recent decades, the concept of autonomy has become part of the mainstream of language education research. This is due to the achievements of numerous projects, and especially research projects, conducted by scholars who are interested in the field of self-directed learning. However, the concept of autonomy is more complex than is reflected in many researchers' views. In other words, autonomy needs to be understood as the way learners learn both how to make their own decision and how to apply that knowledge to a wider context.

Historical Background of Autonomy

The concept of learning autonomy was first introduced to the field of language education through the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, in 1971. In this project, autonomy was introduced by Yves Chalon, later regarded as the father of autonomy in language learning. The

aim of this project was to provide adults with essential approaches for lifelong learning and self-directed learning. After Chalon died in 1972, this project passed to Holec, who continued the autonomy research and reported the findings to the council. His report "*Learner training: Meeting needs in self-directed learning*" (1980) to the council contained a detailed description of the idea of autonomy in language learning, where it was explained that the goal of self-directed learning was the development an adult individual's ability to act more independently with regard to their language education. This finding was a significant influence on later definitions of learning autonomy.

Riely and Zoppis (1985) argued that autonomy was a synonym for self-directed learning. They also firmly believed that autonomy was a product of natural human development as it was associated with the human objective of learning progression, a process which could be fully determined by the learners themselves. Among these earlier definitions, learning autonomy was defined as the capacity to take charge of one's own learning. It signified learning to take responsibility for one's learning process.

In 1980, Dickinson and Carver drew insights on learner training from language research of learning autonomy. Since learner-cantered modes of learning had come to play a central role in language education, teachers were no longer content to merely teach knowledge to learners. Instead they were looking for ways to teach learners how to learn on their own. Learners also seemed to understand that self-direction was the key to success in learning a language. In Holec's view (1980), the basic methodology of learner training in autonomy was "discovery," meaning learners should develop their own abilities to discover knowledge with or without guidance from a teacher.

The methodology of learner training became popular in the 1980s and 1990s. Altman and James (1980), and Brooks and Grundy (1988) illustrated the important association of autonomy with individualization. They believed that individualization and autonomy should work in concert with one another. It was suggested in 1971 by *Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues (CRPEL)* that learners should be treated differently when they are learning something new. Thus, in the interests of individualization, learners should determine their needs and act upon them. Contained within the scope of individualization was another form of learning, in which learners were expected to follow their own pace of study with little assistance from teachers. Fundamentally, Barnes (1976) claimed that teachers' final goal in teaching a foreign language is to provide learners with the tools to learn a language by themselves. An individual learner cannot thrive by following a fully-autonomous approach, nor can a teacher develop a successful teaching methodology without participation from learners.

Riely and Zoppis (1985) suggested that the idea of autonomy should be used to describe the ability of the learner to work alone and make their own decisions without influence from their teachers. In 1987, Dickinson defined autonomy as "the situation in which the learners are totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of these decisions" (p.11). Later, he used the term "full-autonomy" to define the meaning of learner autonomy. Later, Riley (1986) argued that individualization was linked with psychology and was generally recognized as a tool that teachers could use to encourage learners to think about their own learning strategies. Therefore, this early understanding of individualized autonomy implied

that if a learner wanted to learn faster on their own they must largely be isolated from teachers and other counsellors.

Moreover, Wenden (1991) emphasized the connection between learner training and learning autonomy in his work *Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy*. He explained the idea that learner ability training could lead to greater autonomy. This idea later led to further research on the role of individualization in the field of learner autonomy development.

In 1992, Dickinson identified learner training as an important part of classroom learning, and concluded that successful learner training could lead learners to achieve their language acquisition goals more easily than those who had not received learner training. The term “independence” is now used as a synonym for autonomy by some researchers, with the consequence that new critics have emerged in this field of study (Benson, 2011). Another term, “interdependence” has also been raised to describe an opposing approach to “independence” wherein learners acquire new knowledge together with teachers and peers to achieve their learning goals. Kohonen (1992:19) argued that “personal decisions are necessarily made with respect to social and moral norms, traditions and expectations. Autonomy thus includes the notion of interdependence.” In this view, teachers and learners must work collaboratively. Learning autonomy does not mean to learn without a teacher’s guidance. If we study a language, we will need basic guidance from a teacher.

Benson (1996) argues that control over learning is necessary in the process of self-directed autonomous learning. He states that mastering control of the learning process cannot be achieved only by following individual preferences, but that rather it is a question of self-management as well as of how to arrive at a solution in the cognitive process. Meanwhile, Littlewood (1996) argues that teachers and learners working collaboratively can develop learners’ capacity for autonomy. He also argues that well-developed learner autonomy depends on the learner’s capacity to participate in social interactions. Such statements provide a clear framework for the study of autonomy, when the individual wants to study out-of-class, they must work interdependently with teachers in order to achieve autonomy.

Furthermore, Cameron (2001) points out one problem of learner autonomy. He considers learner autonomy to be a “good thing” for learners that needs to be encouraged in the classroom, but how about out-of-class? In his view, the concept of autonomy should not only serve as a guide for teachers to help learners develop their own learning ability, but also needs to be taught as a form of learning strategy. This means teachers and schools should prepare learners to take charge of self-directed learning in order to prepare them for future employment after they graduate. From 2003 to 2008, Benson (2007, 2008) ; Nunan (2003) and Barcelos (2003) broaden the meaning of autonomy with the idea of long-term autonomy in the development of learner autonomy. Long-term autonomy refers to a social understanding of autonomy, especially with regard to lifelong learning, distance learning and technology-based out-of-class learning.

Later, Little (2007) argues that the idea of learner autonomy in the context of language education is shifting away from purposeful learning and long-term learning toward the learning-to-learn skills. He argues that learner autonomy is now understood as a capacity that allowing learners to identify which of the learning strategies provided by teachers in the classroom works best for them.

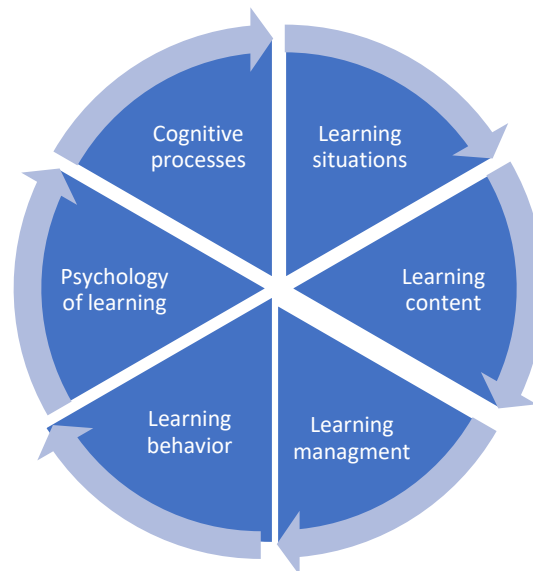
Attempts to Define Learner Autonomy

As mentioned in the previous section, the concept of autonomy in language learning has been defined by different researchers with a variety of approaches to the theory of language education. It is now most commonly defined as the capacity to take charge of one's own learning. In order to better understand the term "learner autonomy" we must understand what it means to "take charge" in the context of language learning.

It should be emphasized that the description of autonomy covers at least three important dimensions for which a learner may be responsible: learning management, cognitive processes and learning content (Figure 1). These dimensions are fully interdependent. It also implies that autonomy should involve decisions concerning the learning content.

Figure 1

Defining autonomy: The Capacity to Take Charge of Learning



Littlewood (1999) introduced two concepts in autonomy, one is "proactive" and the other is "reactive". He defined proactive autonomy as a direction that learners set up to achieve their own goals, while reactive autonomy does not require learners to create a clear direction to reach the goal, rather they organize their learning resources autonomously once a direction has been set.

In 2003, Smith expanded the concept of pedagogies for autonomy, using the term of "weak" and "strong" versions of pedagogy for autonomy. A "weak" version tends to define autonomy as a skill that learners need to acquire, in preparation for future study. A "strong" version of pedagogy for autonomy assumes that learners are already autonomous and already have a capacity to learn. As both versions are becoming mainstream in language education, learners in the classroom are more capable of making reasonable personal decisions about their learning than their teachers. Teachers in the classroom play the role of a guide, leading learners to develop their autonomy skills from a lower level to a higher level. The discussion of "weak" and "strong" versions of autonomy has been taken up by other scholars in more recent years. Researchers

Allwright and Hanks (2009) use “packaging methods” to describe their approaches related to two versions. They describe these versions as a shift in teaching methods from theoretical teaching to communicative language teaching. They also emphasize that teachers should not merely follow the textbooks but develop their own ways to teach in the classroom in order to better help learners to acquire knowledge.

If we understand the meaning of autonomy, we should also be able to develop methods to measure learner autonomy. There are a few reasons why we would want to measure autonomy. First of all, in some literature, researchers use the term “degree” to describe the level of autonomy, as in the case of Nunan (1997) who observed autonomy as a “matter of degree.” In his point of view, learners can be divided into groups of more autonomous learners and less autonomous learners. More autonomous learners can be classified as highly self-motivated learners who need little or no control from teachers. When we judge learners as being more autonomous or less autonomous, we tend to measure them with certain behaviors. For example, an important indicative behavior of a more autonomous learner might be the ability to create a learning objective and study plan.

The second reason we should seek to measure autonomy is that it could shed light on the relationship between motivation and learner autonomy and therefore indicate the learning strategies that contribute most to learner autonomy. In any case, if we want to conduct research related to motivation and autonomy, we must find a meaningful measurement approach. Little (1991) points out that there are numerous approaches we can take to define autonomy in terms of behavior. For example, we can consider the age of learners, their past studying experience, how they progressed in their study, what objectives they wished to achieve, etc. In other words, we must consider various non-observable metrics when we measure autonomy.

Perhaps the most important reason to measure autonomy is to discover the autonomous learners’ learning outcomes. When a learner raises a question in class and looks to the teacher for the solution, we cannot determine from this whether the learner is taking charge of his own study. Teachers cannot observe the autonomous learning process, in or out-of-class. The only indicators visible to teachers are the outcomes from assessments. Thus, if we wish to understand how to measure autonomy, we must consider some psychological issues related to autonomy, such as learners’ behaviors and thoughts.

There is a related problem concerning the research of autonomous behavior. Breen and Mann (1997, p. 141) use the metaphor of the “mask of autonomous behavior” to describe a group of learners who will outwardly show behaviors consistent with a good level of autonomy, but have not actually attained the capacity to be true autonomous learners. This contradiction may occur because of a disconnect between autonomous behavior and autonomy as a capacity. As mentioned in the previous section, autonomy can be treated as a capacity that learners need to develop when they start self-directed learning. However, a capacity for autonomy can be derailed by unproductive behaviors that may eventually sabotage the individual’s learning process. Both autonomous behavior and capacity for autonomy must somehow be captured in order to better measure autonomy.

In recent decades, there has been a growing concern towards regarding autonomous learning as a cutting-edge methodology in the realm of language acquisition (Kashef, Alavinia, & Khabazian, 2023). Several researchers, such as Rowsell and Libben (1994), and Simmons &

Wheeler (1995), use discourse analysis to create a measurement model to assess autonomous behavior and decision-making procedure in studying. Moreover, Alrabai (2017) examined the autonomous learning activities carried out by Master level students at Tribhuvan University in Nepal by applying questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, suggesting that learners exhibit significant engagement in autonomous activities. Moreover, teachers have encouraged learners to cultivate autonomy, constituting a favourable attitude towards autonomous learning by both educators and students. More recently, Dam and Little (2018) proposed that learners who exhibit autonomy tend to display higher levels of engagement, motivation and responsibility towards their learning to achieve better learning outcomes. In the same vein, Papamitsiou and Economides (2019) examined the learners' perspectives and behaviors in the context of autonomous language learning, which revealed favourable dispositions regarding the teaching goals and personal objectives, along with a willingness to engage in autonomous English language learning. Unfortunately, none of these studies seem to have produced a functional model to reliably measure data related to autonomous learning. However, they do point to the possibility of designing an instrument of measurement for an individual research project.

The research questions that the study aims to answer are:

RQ 1: *How do Chinese learners learn a foreign language autonomously out-of-class?*

RQ 2: *How do Chinese learners monitor (control) their language learning process out-of-class?*

Method

Aim

The purpose of this study is to examine how adult learners motivate themselves to learn a language out-of-class and how they monitor the process of language learning. In the following sections, it will present the research process in detail, and then move on to the findings and discuss whether or to what extent they matched the previous predictions.

Research Design: A Case Study

As Kagan (1992) states, qualitative data are categorized as a group of data which focus on the subjects' beliefs, previous knowledge or learning behaviour. Awla (2024) also used the qualitative method to analyse the perceptions of Iraqi EFL learners regarding autonomous learning in higher education, he argues that qualitative research is appropriate for exploring individual's personal experiences, attitudes, and perceptions. The purpose of this research is to investigate how learners learn autonomously out-of-class. In the process, learning environments, experiences, learning strategies and learning processes are explored. Thus, this research falls into the category of qualitative studies.

This study applies case study as the research method in conducting research. As Yin (2003) explains, a case study can be a story about individuals, groups, programs, and even institutions. He also mentions that "how" questions in research are best answered in case studies. A case study also provides a good opportunity to explore the specific area of language education. Hence, a case study might be the most appropriate approach for this study to use.

It is important, however, to acknowledge the limitations of case studies in general and of the present research in particular. One limitation of case studies is that their findings are determined by case selection and may not necessarily be representative. Stake (1995) states that case studies tend to address a particular phenomenon rather than a generalized phenomenon. It is also necessary to point out that since the purpose of this research is to explore strategies for out-of-class autonomous learning, the participants are purposefully selected for their experience as autonomous learners.

Settings and participants

This research was conducted in different universities and the participants were university students with experience studying autonomously out-of-class.

There were five participants involved in this research, each of whom speaks at least one foreign language (See Table 1 for participant profiles). According to the personal information sheets, Yang, Tao, Zhao and Wang were students from different Chinese universities, with different educational focuses such as Sports Coaching, MBA, and Computer Science. Participant Pan majored in literature. All participants had studied English as a compulsory subject for more than 10 years. Following sections will present the data that have been collected and will analyse the data using the thematic analysis method in order to answer the research question.

Table 1

Participants' Profiles

Name	Age	Educational Backgrounds	Major(s)	Mother tongue (L1)	L2
Yang	21	Undergraduate student	Sports Coaching	Chinese	English
Pan	22	Undergraduate student	English Literature	Chinese	English
Zhao	23	Undergraduate student	Management Business Administration (MBA)	Chinese	English
Tao	24	Undergraduate student	Computer Science	Chinese	English
Wang	22	Undergraduate student	Computer Science	Chinese	English

Data gathering instrument

The instrument employed in the research was a semi-structured interview, which has proven its effectiveness as a means of research in the cases of Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), Richards (2003), and Nunan (1992). They emphasize that if a researcher wishes to interact in the research process and to interpret responses from the participants, the semi-structured interview might be the best option. In this type of interview, researchers do not have to prepare a list of pre-determined questions, rather they have to prepare guidance questions, allowing the researcher to be flexible in the process of the interview. Nunan (1991) indicates that interviews should focus on the topics the researcher wishes to explore rather than relying on questions. Drever (1995) also states that using numerous open and closed question forms can easily control the pace of the interview and follow up on questions that arise during the interview. Compared with other interview forms, a semi-structured interview can delve deeply into topics, which makes it a good tool for seeking the data required to answer the specific questions of the research.

In terms of interview topics, using a semi-structured interview as an instrument in this research allows the researcher to maintain control over the whole process of the interview, while the participants are able to follow the questions and provide me with clear answers. Consequently, by using the turn-taking interview method, valuable data should be yielded for later analysis.

The semi-structured interview included a background introduction section to collect basic data on participants' educational backgrounds, English levels, years of out-of-class study in English and other languages and the participants' views on five aspects of learning:

- a) Participants' opinions on learning in-class and out-of-class;
- b) Participants' reasons for studying the language out-of-class;
- c) Participants' purpose for learning a second or a third language;
- d) Participants' opinions on autonomous learning;
- e) Participants' opinions on learning process.

Procedure of data collection

Five adult participants were invited to take part in this research, an introduction to the interview method, the objective of the research, and the interview questions were provided to the participants in the form of an introductory video. This step was not necessary, but it would make participants perform better and provide more relevant and informative answers if they were advised of the importance and structure of the interview and the objectives of the study. The interview was conducted via Skype and WeChat, the average time spent on each participant was around 45 minutes.

Data process and analysis

Processing data

Analysis of the data was carried out in different steps. The first step was to convert the recorded audio data into written data. The aim of the transcription was to ensure the accuracy of the data (Richards, 2003).

After transcribing the recordings, the second part of data processing was to translate the written interview responses from Mandarin to English. Although it was not necessary to translate the whole text into English if the study used a thematic code to analyse the data and present the most frequently-used words in a table, it was necessary to translate the whole text before such an

analysis could be performed. The other reason for translating the whole text is that unlike English, each Chinese word has more than two synonyms. Therefore, if the researcher translated the whole text into English, the researcher could find the synonyms and note them as a single term in English. Besides, there were some other advantages in analysing the translated data. For example, it would help the researcher to reread and reconsider the answers the participants produced in the interview; second, it would help the researcher to find more accurate theme to summarize the data; third, it would help me to capture how things are said during the interview; last, it would help me to find the most frequent words they were using in the interview. As Tsui (2003) suggested, translation is a process of preserving an utterance “syntactically and semantically”. This is an exemplar (see Table 2) in the process of data analysis.

Table 1

A sample of Data Processing

Question 1: How would you define learning autonomy?	Commons & common opinions	Theme
I think learner autonomy <u>means a student can start learning by themselves without a teacher guidance.</u>	Without teachers’ guidance	Without teacher’ guidance
I have never considered this question. If I have to answer this question in this interview, <u>I think learner autonomy means a learning behavior and it means learn a language without a teacher.</u>	A learning behavior Without teacher’s guidance	

Data Analysis: Thematic Coding

Denscombe (2010) suggests a few principles for qualitative data analysis, stating that in order to analyse qualitative data, we need to input the raw data into a succinct structure. This means organizing the oral and written data into tables or flow charts. One of the best reasons for using qualitative data analysis is that it provides the opportunity for researchers to compare and identify the important data from a numerical table. The second concern the researcher should take into consideration is to make a clear presentation of the research objectives and the final summary.

In order to find the common arguments provided by participants in their interviews, this study used thematic analysis to decode the data.

Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative analysis used to analyse themes, classifications and patterns associated with the data. It helps the researcher understand the whole meaning of the statements offered by the participants during the interview (Boyatzis, 1998). Themes should

capture the important concepts in the data in order to prepare the data for further interpretation, which ultimately leads to the answers to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The following section provides an example of the encoded data from the three interview questions.

Findings

This section discusses the findings yielded by the interviews of our five participants. The results were achieved through thematic analysis of the data collection. The findings of this study will be examined theme-by-theme: 1) motivations; 2) learning strategies; 3) learning process; 4) challenges among autonomous learning.

Motivations

(R=Researcher, Y= Yang, W=Wang, T=Tao, Z=Zhao, P= Pan)

R: Which foreign language do you study? Do you want to study a foreign language autonomously out-of-class? And why?

Y: Oh, well, I am studying sports in a sports university in Beijing, I am not a big fan in language learning, but, I have to pass the CET-4 (Chinese University English Test - Level 4) English exam by the end of the second semester in order to receive my degree. There are no such CET-4 English classes available in the school curriculum, so, you know, I have to study by myself out-of-class.

R: So, your motivation to study out-of-class was to pass the exam.

Y: Yes!

It is clearly that Yang had no particular aptitude for learning foreign languages, but in order to receive her degree, it was necessary that she made an effort to study English. Thus, in her opinion, pass the exam was one of the important factors that she had to take into consideration when she developed a skill to study out-of-class.

W: I am studying English as a foreign language. Because I like to watch Hollywood films whenever I have spare time. I can say that film is part of my life.

Interest, in Wang's case, was a strong influencer in her decision to undertake autonomous learning. This interest was transformed into a motivation for her to continue studying English with enthusiasm.

P: I have to get enough credit to graduate. Besides, I like English culture and literature, I enjoy reading English novels in my spare time.

Pan told me that if she wants to graduate, she must earn enough credits. In addition, she also mentioned that she likes English culture and cuisine. Thus, for her, culture and language were interrelated.

T: I liked to read Marvel comics and I studied English as a foreign language for more than ten years. I liked to study out-of-class and I preferred to study by my own. I think self-directed learning can help me to master this language in a short period of time.

In Tao's case, he liked reading American comics. He demonstrated that interest can promote a learner to learn autonomously out-of-class. He also showed that he was highly self-motivated in autonomous learning.

Z: I study English as a foreign language. I like to study this language out-of-class. Because, there is an exchange program in my university and I want to be part of this exchange program. However, there is a requirement for this program that I have to get band 6.5 in IELTS¹. In order to grab a place in this exchange program, I have to work hard out-of-class.

It is obvious that Zhao had a particular aptitude for learning English as a foreign language. She knew exactly what she wants. In her opinion, if you find the right motivation, you will push yourself to do whatever it takes to attain your goal. She also mentioned that she was no longer interested in working as a customer service manager. If she wanted to work for an investment bank, she must speak fluent English.

To sum up, it appears that the motivation for these participants to learn a second or a foreign language out-of-class may vary, but all of them have a specific reason to conduct autonomous learning.

Learning strategies

Online learning

R: What are your strategies when you study out-of-class?

Y: Oh, well, I prefer to find some online recourses or e-learning materials.

R: Good, why?

Y: You know, I am not good at self-management and I easily get distracted by other things, for example video games, television shows and so on. So, I think if I buy an online course, it will force me to learn it every day and it probably can help me to achieve the goal I want to achieve out-of-class. Umm, and, I think the online tutor can help me to find a best learning strategy.

R: Why do you think online tutors can help you to develop the learning strategy?

Y: Because the school teacher can't do that, you know, there are around 100 students in a class, teachers don't have enough time to take care of you (every student).

In the interview, Yang mentioned the term "online learning" and "online recourses" seven times. She found that the best way for her to engage in self-directed learning was with support from online tutoring. For her, she viewed the learning strategy as a procedure that have been provided by the online recourses. In her opinion, if there was a teacher who can help her to develop the learning skills, she might be able to find her own strategies.

W: I use online recourses and an online language course, because the cost of online learning is not expansive.

R: What kind of online recourses do you use in language learning?

¹ IELTS stands for the International English Language Testing System, it is an English language proficiency test, it is developed and run by the British Council.

W: I like to watch some movies and television shows. I think watch TV is really helpful for me to study. But, I need a teacher to guide me through the beginner level. You know, the structure between English and Chinese are different. After I finished the beginner level, I started to study this language with online sources.

Wang mentioned that since the structure of English is quite different from Chinese languages, Wang found that she needed a teacher to guide her through the beginner level. She stated that a teacher was important for her when she first started learning the language. Besides, she considered that distance learning is more convenient and affordable. Thus, Wang's learning strategy divided into two parts: learning with teachers throughout beginners' level; learning with online recourses and self-designed study plan after beginners' level.

Teacher Guidance

R: What are your strategies when you study out-of-class?

P: I don't have a learning strategy. I just followed teachers and attended the language classes and did the homework.

R: What did the teacher teach in the class?

P: Well, there were two teachers in the class, one was an English woman, another was a Canadian man. The female teacher shared her experience in the UK and taught interesting English culture in the class. The male teacher simply followed the textbook and read through all the articles. I didn't like him. I wanted to hear more interesting stories and English culture in the class.

Pan participation was a special case in this research. This is not only because her major was in English literature, or the fact that she spoke fluent English, but also because her case stood out among the participants. Unlike the other participants in this study, she admitted that when it came to autonomous learning, she did not have a clear learning strategy. I asked her reasons for studying English, and her response was vague. She took a couple of minutes to consider how to respond to the question. Her final response was that she liked the English culture. She was interested in this language, but she did not have a capacity to study by her own. As I mentioned previously, teachers in the classroom play the central role of a guide, leading learners to develop their autonomy skills, thus, I consider that her teacher was important for her to develop the learning strategies. She also emphasized that she wanted to have a good teacher who can provide more guidance to inspire her to study.

Study Plans

T: I like to study by myself. I consider myself as a successful autonomous learner, I don't need anyone to push me to study, I have a clear study plan and I have bought many different textbooks, two dictionaries and two grammar books. I started learning this language by listening to some videos and music online. Umm, of course, I read some language learning blogs online as well. You probably know that, there are people like to share their learning experiences online and upload some learning materials. I consulted some blogs and I started to learn this language by learning vocabularies. After I memorized 2000 words, I started to read some simple articles and fictions.

In the interview, Tao had a positive aptitude in learning a language autonomously out-of-class. He bought several textbooks, two dictionaries and two grammar books. Tao reported that

when he started to learn the language, he had a clear motivation and learning strategies. He had a capacity to manage his study and he was good at self-directed learning.

Z: You know that I am doing MBA as a part-time student, so, I am very busy. Umm, ... so, I have to plan a manageable task: finding and reading two English articles per week and study 50 new English words every day. I like to write everything in my appointment book and I would accomplish the task no matter how much effort it should take.

Zhao had a clear objective for learning out-of-class. Although she was very busy, she always found time to study. For her, learning a language required a high level of autonomy.

It seems that different participants have different strategies to learn a foreign language out-of-class. As Pressley with McCormick (1995) state that learning strategies are consciously controlled by learners. In the data, it also appears that a learning strategy implies conscious control towards a language learning goal. Let us consider different participants in this research, they all have different language learning goals, some of them study a language for a degree, some of them study a language for their own needs. Due to different learning goals, participants have to use different strategies to accomplish their goals. However, the most common strategy they use is distance learning. They think that it is affordable and convenient. For participant Pan and Yang, they think teachers play a central role in case of learning strategies, because they consider that teachers can guide learners to find their own strategies.

Learning process

R: Do you have a clear progression plan when you study out-of-class?

Y: Yes, I have a clear progression plan. But, I only have a long-term study plan.

R: What do you mean by long-term study plan?

Y: Well, you know, I have to pass CET-4 English exam before the end of the second semester. I decide to study English 15 hours per week and practice two practical tests per week. I did a calculation earlier. Umm, if I can follow this study progression plan, I can finish at least 100 practical tests and I will probably pass the exam.

R: Can you really following this plan?

Y: Umm, wo, wo, I have to, you know, I have to follow this plan, ok, let's move on to the next question.

Yang was clear about the goal that she wanted to achieve and she was clear about the study progression. She believed that “pass the exam” was a goal she wanted to achieve. Theoretically, this well-designed plan worked very well if she could follow it every day. However, when we came to the question of “can you really following this plan”, her answer was vague. It seems that she did not have confidence to answer this question.

R: Do you have a clear progression plan when you study out-of-class?

W: Of course, I have a clear study progression plan. I spent 3 months in learning vocabularies, 4 months in learning grammar, 5 months in practicing listening and reading.

R: So, you used one year to study this language. How were the study outcomes?

W: I can't tell, recently I started to read English fictions and watch news.

Wang had an annual study progression plan. She stated that she followed this plan for a year and the study result of this plan was astonishing. She was able to read English fiction after one year hard working.

T: I just focus on the listening and reading parts. I like to watch movies and dramas. I would copy the transcripts of the movie I watched and dictated dialogues that I heard from the drama. I told myself that I have to memorize at least 1000 words and dictated 500 dialogues in a month. Anyway, I have a clear study schedule and I like to study by following this study schedule. I think these activities out-of-class influence me to study autonomously.

In Tao's case, he had a clear study schedule and mentioned both study schedule and learning strategy as important components which can greatly influence him to study a foreign language autonomously.

Z: I used mobile app to help me to create a progression plan. There is a kind of mile stone app that will help me to create a daily progression plan as well as a seasonal study plan. I am following this plan for more than six months, and I have never suspended.

Zhao used a mobile device to support her in the process of autonomous learning out-of-class. She emphasized that she had never suspended the study. She always followed the study plan and never stopped learning progression.

Challenges

Ran: What challenges, if any, do you experience when you are studying out-of-class?

Y: As I mentioned before, I studied an online course out-of-class. But, it was not easy for me to follow the online lessons. First of all, each lesson lasted for more than one hour, thus, it was hard for me to follow the main context. Secondly, I didn't like the teaching style that they were using in the lessons. They never communicated with the students and they just simply repeated the sentences. Perhaps, it was not the main reason, umm, well, I probably cannot concentrate on each topic. I was easily distracted by other things.

Yang pointed out that there were many online recourses, but she found that learning autonomy was not an easy skill for her to gain. Although she had booked an online course, she still needed to develop some essential study skills in the process of distance learning. She knew that she was easily distracted by her classmates or other out-of-class activities.

W: There was nobody can provide feedback to me. I didn't know the correct answer, for example the grammar and the sentence structure.

Z: I have faced many problems, but I think the biggest challenges was that I can't receive immediate error corrections, because there were no teachers.

I put Wang and Zhao together, because both of them mentioned error correction and feedback from teachers. They considered that one of the disadvantages of autonomous learning out-of-class was lacking of error corrections and immediate feedbacks from the instructors.

P: Oh, I think, probably, the biggest challenge for me was that I didn't have enough interest to accomplish the study out-of-class.

T: I think lack of interest may be the biggest challenge for me. There was a period of time I didn't want to study out-of-class, I was tired and I didn't want to study Japanese anymore.

Both Pan and Tao considered that “interest” was centered around the individual’s aptitude of language learning out-of-class. Lack of interest was probably one of the biggest challenges for learners to learn a language autonomously. Zarfsaz and Hosseini (2023) indicated that competence needs have a strong link with motivation and interest. Keller (1983) also presented a self-directed motivation framework to illustrate the importance of interest in learning a foreign language. He discussed that individual’s curiosity, individual’s expectance, and the result of the learning activity can help language learner to increase their motivation to learn a language autonomously.

Conclusion

This study explored the historical development of autonomy and attempted to define the meaning of the autonomous learning. Through analysis process, it explored some potential learning strategies that learners use out-of-class and have examined why Chinese learners learn a foreign language out-of-class. It also presented the potential strategies in relation to the monitoring learning process by learner themselves. Although interest and motivation are important factors in relation to self-directed autonomous learning, a situation monitoring and environment are indispensable.

In addition, this study found that there are certain factors in autonomous learning that are worthy of further exploration, such as age, occupation, area of study, interests and materials choosing. For example, in Zhao’s case, her experience working in a bank may have prepared her to be more aggressive when it comes to meeting goals and the learning process in general. Although she did not really enjoy the process of learning, she still pushed herself to do it. In the case of Wang, her interest in movie made her highly self-motivated to learn English. She did not initially aspire to reach a high level of English, but even so, she ended up making extraordinary achievements. The analysis indicated that a significant proportion of participants exhibited favourable attitudes towards autonomous learning. This is in line with previous research conducted by Hussein and Al Bajalani (2019) and Papamitsiou and Economides (2019) in highlighting the beneficial effects of self-directed learning to possess greater autonomy on language proficiency and learning.

Finally, the researcher acknowledges that doing this research has been beneficial for the personal development towards becoming a qualified academic researcher, though the researcher realizes that there remain areas that need to explore in future study.

This highlights the essence of autonomous learning out-of-class from different dimensions to provide focused assistance to learners, on self-directed learning strategies, as well as to engage in autonomous English language learning. There are still many questions to be answered. For example:

- a) What kind of materials can motivate learners to study autonomously out-of-class?
- b) Do learners need a clear learning objective in order to study on their own?

What problems do learners encounter when they face sudden developments such as a change in instructor?

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

References

- Alrabai, F. (2017). From teacher dependency to learner independence: a study of Saudi learners' readiness for autonomous learning of English as a Foreign Language. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, 14(1), 70-97.
- Altma, H. B. & James, C.V. (eds) (1980) *Foreign Language Teaching: Meeting Individual Needs*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Allwright, D. and Hanks, J. (2009) *The Developing Language Learner: An Introduction to Exploratory Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Awla, I. S. (2024). Investigating Iraqi EFL Learners' Perceptions of Autonomous Learning in Higher Education. *International Journal of Practical and Pedagogical Issues in English Education*, 2(2), 35-45. doi: 10.22034/ijpie.2024.462230.1023
- Barcelos, A. M. F. (2003) 'Researching beliefs about SLA: A critical review'. In P. Kalaja & A. M. F. Barcelos (Eds.), *Beliefs About SLA: New Research Approaches* (pp. 7-34). Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Barnes, D. (1976) *From Communication to Curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Benson, P. (1996) 'Concepts of autonomy in language learning'. In R. Pemberton, et al. (eds) *Taking Control: Autonomy in Language Learning* (pp. 27-34). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Benson, P. (2001) *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. London: Longman, p. 61
- Benson, P. (2007) Autonomy in language teaching and learning. State of the Art Article. *Language Teaching*, 40(1).
- Benson, P. (2008) 'Teachers' and learners' perspective on autonomy'. In T.E. Lamb and H. Reinders (eds) *Learners and Teachers Autonomy: Concepts, Realities and Responses*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 15-32.
- Benson, P. (2011) *Teaching and Researching Autonomy*. 2nd ed. Routledge.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998) *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3/2, pp. 77-101.
- Breen, M. P. & Mann, S. (1997). Shooting arrows at the sun: Perspectives on a pedagogy for autonomy. In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 132-149). London: Longman, (p. 141).
- Brooks, A. & Grundy, P. (eds) (1988) *Individualization and Autonomy in Language Learning*. ELT Documents, 131. London: modern English Publications/British Council.
- Cameron, L. (2001) *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2000) 'Interview'. In: Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. *Research Methods in Education* (5th edn.). London: Routledge Falmer, pp. 267-292.
- Dam, L., & Little, D. (2018). The autonomous language learner: Taking charge of learning and teaching. *Multilingual Matters*
- Denscombe, M. (2010) *The Good Research Guide for Small-Scale Social Research Project*. (4th ed). Maidenhead, England: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press.
- Dickinson, L. and Carver, D. (1980) 'Learning how to lean: Steps towards self-direction in foreign language learning'. *ELT Journal* 35(1): 1-7.
- Dickinson, L. (1987) *Self-Instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge University press, p.11.
- Dickinson, L. (1992) *Learner autonomy 2: Learner training for language learning*, Dublin: Authentik.
- Drever, E. (1995) *Using semi-structured interviews in small-scale research*. Edinburgh, The Scottish Council for Research in Education.
- Gao, X., Liao, Y., & Li, Y. (2013). 'Empirical studies on foreign language learning and teaching in China (2008–2011): A review of selected research'. *Language Teaching*, 47(01), 56-79. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0261444813000414>
- Holec, H. (1980) 'Learner training: Meeting needs in self-directed learning'. In H.B. Altman and C.V. James (eds) *Foreign Language Learning: Meeting Individual Needs*. Oxford: Pergamon, pp. 30-45.
- Holec, H. (1981) *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon. (First published 1979, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.)
- Kagan, D. M. (1992) 'Professional growth among pre-service and beginning teachers'. *Review of educational research*, 62, 129-169.
- Kashef, S. H., Alavinia, P., & Khabazian, F. (2023). A Case Study of Iranian EFL Learners' Intensive Speaking Practice to Express Regrets in English Language. *International Journal of Practical and Pedagogical Issues in English Education*, 1(4), 1-15.
- Kohonen, V. (1992). Experiential language learning: Second language learning as cooperative learner education. In D. Nunan (Ed.), *Collaborative language learning and teaching* (pp. 14-39), Cambridge University Press.
- Little, D. (1991) *Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Little, D. (2007) 'Introduction: Re-constructing learner and teacher autonomy in language education'. In A. Barfield and S. Brown (eds) *Reconstructing Autonomy in Language Education: Inquiry and Innovation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Littlewood, W. (1996) 'Autonomy: an anatomy and a framework'. *System*, 24(4), 427-435.
- Littlewood, W. (1999) 'Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts'. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(1), 71-94.
- Nunan, D. (1991) *Language Teaching Methodology: A Textbook for Teacher*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall

- Nunan, D. (eds) (1992) *Collaborative Language Learning and Teaching*. Cambridge University Press
- Nunan, D. (1997) Designing and adapting materials to encourage learner autonomy. In P. Benson & P. Voller (eds) *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning* (pp. 192-203). London: Longman.
- Nunan, D. (2003) 'The impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in the Asia-Pacific region'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(4): 589-613
- Papamitsiou, Z., & Economides, A. A. (2019, February 18). Exploring autonomous learning capacity from a self-regulated learning perspective using learning analytics. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 50(6), 3138-3155.
- Richards, K. (2003) *Qualitative Inquiry in TESOL*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Riely, P. and Zoppis, C. (1985) 'The sound and video library'. In P. Riley (ed.) *Discourse and Learning*. London: Longman, pp. 286-98
- Riley, P. (1986) 'Who's who in self-access'. *TESOL France News*, 6(2), 23-35.
- Rowell, L.V. & Libben, G. (1994) 'The sound of one-hand clapping: How to succeed in independent language learning'. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 50(4): 668-88.
- Simmons, D. & Wheeler, S. (1995) *The Process Syllabus in Action*. Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research
- Stake, R.E. (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, (p. 8).
- Smith, R. C. (2003). 'Pedagogy for autonomy as (becoming-) appropriate methodology'. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (eds) *Learner Autonomy Across Cultures: Language Education Perspectives* (pp.129-146). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Tsui, B.M. (2003) *Understanding Expertise in Teaching: Case Studies in ESL Teaching*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, (p. 74)
- Wenden, A. (1991) *Learner strategies for learner autonomy*. London: Prentice Hall International.
- Xu, J., & Zhan, X. (2004) 'Guoneiwai "xuexizhe zizhu" yanjiu shuping. [Learner autonomy of home and abroad: A literature review]. *Foreign Language World*, (4), 2-9.
- Yin, R. K. (2003) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications
- Yin, H. (2014). 'Zhongguo waiyu zizhu xuexi yanjiu huigu yu zhanwang (1979-2012) [Reviews and previews on studies of autonomous foreign language learning in China (1979-2012)]'. *Foreign Language Education*, 35(1), 66-67, 103. <https://doi.org/10.16362/j.cnki.cn61-1023/h.2014.01.023>
- Zarfsaz, E., & Hosseini, F. (2023). Innate needs and motivation: self-determination theory in EFL context. *International Journal of Practical and Pedagogical Issues in English Education*, 1(1), 1-19. doi: 10.22034/ijpie.2023.170624

Ran Jiao is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School of International Relations at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan. He has published numerous research papers in his areas of study, including higher education and international students' motivations.