



## Learner Autonomy and the Chinese Context

Haiyan Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao 266061, China

E-mail: haiyanwang417@163.com

### Abstract

There is a move away from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning or autonomy. Learner autonomy has become the new rational concept in educational field since 1980s and it is more challenging and of greater significance to cultivate learners' ability to self-direct their learning and live independently and successfully later in society. However, autonomy in language teaching is sometimes presented as western concept unsuited to contexts such as those in China, which has different educational traditions.

This paper mainly researches two questions: What's learner autonomy indeed? And why is such concept presented that learner autonomy is unsuited to the Chinese context?

**Keywords:** Learner autonomy, The Chinese context, Teacher-centered English teaching

### 1. Introduction

Learner autonomy has become the new rational concept in educational field since 1980s and it is more challenging and of greater significance to cultivate learners' ability to self-direct their learning and live independently and successfully later in society. However, autonomy in language teaching is sometimes presented as western concept unsuited to contexts such as those in China, which has different educational traditions.

This paper mainly researches two questions: What's learner autonomy indeed? And why is such concept presented that learner autonomy is unsuited to the Chinese context?

### 2. Learner autonomy

There is a move away from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning or autonomy. In this part, the general characteristics of learner autonomy will be analyzed. Besides, because learner autonomy is not a product, this part also makes it clear that autonomous learning is achieved when certain conditions are obtained.

#### 2.1 *The Definition of Learner Autonomy*

In recent years, terms like autonomy, self-directed learning have earned more and more prominent place in the literature on learner-centeredness. Each term indicates that effective language learners have the capacity to take responsibility for their own learning, independent of the teacher.

For a definition of autonomy, Holec (1981:3, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997:1) might be quoted, who describes it as "the ability to take charge of one's learning". On a general note, the term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways (see Benson & Voller, 1997:2):

- (1) for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- (2) for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- (3) for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
- (4) for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
- (5) for the right of the learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

It is noteworthy that autonomy can be thought of in terms of a departure from education as a social process, as well as the roles of the participants in the learning process. There are innumerable definitions of autonomy and synonyms for it, such as "independence" (Sheerin, 1991), "language awareness" (Lier, 1996; James & Garret, 1991), "self-direction" (Candy, 1991), "andragogy" (Knowles, 1980; 1983) etc., which testifies to the importance attached to it by scholars. Definition of autonomy have of course varied, but according to Littlewood (1999), they have usually included these central features:

- (1) Students should take responsibility for their own learning. This is both because all learning can in any case only be carried out by the students themselves and also because they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of their formal education.

(2) “Taking responsibility” involves learners in taking ownership (partial or total) of many processes which have traditionally belonged to the teacher, such as deciding on learning objectives, selecting learning methods and evaluating process.

It is argued that concepts of autonomy and individual responsibility, as they are used in social as well as educational context, come laden with western values and are not applicable to other contexts, such as those in Eastern Asian where conformity are highly valued. For theorists in this field, however, there don't exist serious obstacles here. They generally concede that autonomy is not an “all-or-nothing” concept (e.g. Holec, 1984; Oxford, 1990; Nunan, 1995) and that it may come by degrees (e.g. Dickinson, 1987). “The degree of autonomy will be largely determined by the context in which the learning takes place” (Nunan, 1995:134). A learner could even, for example, be autonomous in one skill and semi-autonomous in another. Holec goes as far as to say that assuming responsibility for one's learning can be done with other learners or with outside help. Learners are able to formulate their own learning objectives, not in competition with the teacher, but more often in collaboration with the teacher.

From the discussion above, it is clear that “autonomy” is not any one specific thing--it is a capacity and a matter of explicit or conscious ability to direct oneself in leaning. Like any other abilities, it will grow with practice and becoming rusty with inactivity.

### 2.2 *The Desirability of Learner Autonomy*

For university English majors, according to their experiences of being taught, they remember the teacher with most pleasure and respect, was the one who listened to them, who encouraged them, who respected their own views and decisions. Curiously this teacher who helped them most was the one who actually did “least teaching” of the subject matter and was, seemingly, technique-free, being basically “himself” in class. Their memories of his lessons are of what they did, rather than what he did, of their learning rather than his teaching.

Those experiences mentioned above are true not only for English majors but also for other language learners. Two assumptions are raised here: the first is that people learn more by doing things themselves rather than by being told about them; the second is that learners are intelligent, fully-functioning humans, not simply receptacles for passed-on knowledge. Learning is not simply a one-dimensional intellectual activity, but involves the whole person.

As Heron (1993) believes that there are many arguments for autonomy in learning. Firstly, he argues that learning by its very nature is autonomous, that is, nobody can make you learn and indeed no one can memorize facts, understand ideas or practice skills for you. Heron maintains that interest and commitment are self-generated and any attempts to impose or negate them interfere with learning. Secondly, he believes that compliance with a program completely directed by others leads to conforming behavior in order to survive “the system”. Thirdly, Heron cites the doctrine of natural rights formulated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and now described as “human rights” as being the right of children, workers, research subjects and also students in higher education to participate in decisions that relates to them. Fourthly, Heron believes that learning should involve the whole person.

### 2.3 *The Theoretical Basis of Learner Autonomy*

Learner autonomy is in relation to dominant philosophical approaches to learning. The assumption is that what is dubbed as learner autonomy and the extent to which it is a permissible and viable educational goal are all too often based on particular conceptions of the constitution of knowledge itself (Benson, 1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997:20). With a view to examining how philosophies of learning connect with learner autonomy, three dominant approaches to knowledge and learning will be briefly discussed.

Positivism, which reigned in the twentieth century, is premised upon the assumption that knowledge reflects objective reality. Therefore, there is the maintenance and enhancement of the “traditional classroom” where teachers are the promulgator of knowledge and holder of power, and learners are seen as “containers to be filled with the knowledge held by teachers” (ibid.). On the other hand, positivism also supports the notion that knowledge is attained through the “hypothesis-testing” model and that it is more effectively acquired when “it is discovered rather than taught” (ibid.).

Constructivism encourages movement away from the “transmission model of learning” to the “experiential model”(Nunan, 2001). In contrast to positivism, constructivism holds the view that, rather than internalizing objective knowledge, individuals reorganize and reconstruct their experience. In Candy's terms (Candy, 1991:270), constructivism “leads directly to the proposition that knowledge cannot be taught but only learned (that is, constructed)”, because knowledge is something “built up by the learner” (Candy, 1991:290). In other words, language learning does not involve internalizing sets of rules, structures and forms; each learner brings his own experience and world knowledge and relate them to the target language or task at hand. As a result, constructivist approaches encourage and promote self-directed learning as a necessary condition for learner autonomy.

Finally, the critical theory, which is an approach within humanities and language studies, shares with constructivism the view that knowledge is constructed. Moreover, it argues that knowledge does not reflect reality, but comprises

“competing ideological versions of that reality expressing the interests of different social groups”(Benson & Voller, 1997:22). Within this approach, learning concerns issues of power and ideology and is seen as a process of interaction with social context. Then, learner autonomy assumes a more social character within the critical theory. As learners become aware of the social context in which their learning is embedded and the constraints their learning implies, they gradually become independent.

### 3. Cultural influences and individual differences

Now extensive literature which helps us in “understanding culture’s influence on behavior” (using the words of the title of Brislin 1993) can be found. In them, cultural influences are expressed through far-reaching generalizations. Below are just a small proportion of those in one textbook (Samovar and Porter 1995):

- (1) “German dress, eat, address others, and conduct themselves in a very formal manner.” (P.105)
- (2) “The Japanese value collectivism over individualism and collaboration over competition.” (P.89)
- (3) “Since harmony is a guiding principle for the Chinese, they will not tolerate toward displays of anger.” (P.108).

What is the impression of those statements, which suggest all Germans, all Japanese, all Chinese (and so on) behave, think or feel in the ways described? As all-inclusive generalizations, the statements are clearly not true and we cannot accept them. Nor can people simply ignore, however, the experiences that have led groups of other people to perceive Germans, Japanese and Chinese in that way. Indeed the members of cultures often make generalizations of this kind about themselves. A Chinese student often writes, “We Chinese are very shy and nervous of speaking to strangers”.

From birth onwards, the members of a culture are bombarded by their group’s public and cultural representations concerning values, traditions, ways of behaving, and so on. As a result, it is not surprising if, when they enter formal education, their values and perceptions of learning have been influenced to a considerable extent by the values and perceptions that they have commonly experienced within their sociocultural group. This does not mean, however, that they have been passively moulded or that all individuals will conform to the common pattern.

Now, three sources of influences which are often claimed to have an important effect on attitudes and behavior in China will be analyzed in detail.

### 4. Chinese learning culture

English is learned as a foreign language in China. Chinese culture is admittedly quite different from western ones, ranging from customs to ideology. It is featured by a distinctive belief; perceptions or values that influence the way people learn a foreign language.

Many researchers believe that the three following Chinese traditional beliefs, perceptions or values have an important effect on students’ approaches to foreign language learning in China.

#### 4.1 *The Collectivist Orientation of Chinese Society*

“In the literature on intercultural difference, it is common to differentiate cultures according to whether they are oriented more towards one end or the other of a continuum from ‘individualism’ to ‘collectivism’”(Littlewood, 1999:79). An individualist orientation encourages individuals to believe in their own unique identity; they are more likely to claim the right to express themselves, make personal choices and strive for self-actualization. A collectivist orientation encourages individuals to see themselves as an inseparable part of the in-group; they expect and are expected to accord first priority to the views, needs and goals of the group rather than “stand out” as an individual. Individualism is often described as oriented towards the “I”, collectivism towards the “we”. In a large of comparative studies of beliefs and values, people in East Asian countries, such as in China, have emerged as showing a much stronger collectivist orientation than people in western countries.

Because of the importance attached to collectivism, Chinese students have a strong tendency to form strong cohesive groups than work towards common goals. They therefore value cooperative learning in which they help and support each other. This corresponds to the observations of many teachers who have noted the effectiveness with which their students work in team-based project work and form study groups outside class in preparing for assignment. It seems that they see “group” as their shelter, instead of “standing out” as an individual. This prevents students from participating in classroom activities actively.

#### 4.2 *Attitudes to Power and Authority*

“A second dimension along which many researchers have claimed to find systematic variation is often called the “power distance’ dimension” (Littlewood, 1999:80). People who are low on this dimension feel that it would be good to reduce the differences in power and authority between members of society. People who are high on this dimension accept these differences. “Accept” does not necessarily mean identifying with such differences as desirable; it may simply mean bowing to them as unavoidable facts of life. This difference is crucial in considering the classroom roles that students may wish, or feel able, to adopt in relation to the teacher. It has been found China rates high in power

distance. Chinese students have a clear sense of differences in power and authority between themselves and the teacher.

As what discussed in Part Two, in such a setting as our China, teacher is afforded high status and remains at some distance from students. The direct outcome of that phenomenon is that learners are dependent on teachers. Chinese students perceive the teacher as the authority figure whose superior knowledge and control over classroom learning events should not be questioned. Chinese students are often criticized as passivity and reticence in classrooms and this can be explained by this cultural reason.

#### *4.3 Uncertainty Avoidance*

According to many writers, a third pervasive influence on many aspects of Chinese students' foreign language learning is the tradition which derives from Confucius. Confucianism strongly holds the view that any uncertainty in knowledge should be avoided. This point is well illustrated in the following quotation from Confucianism (Wen Qiufang, 1997:37).

“Only when you are sure that you have a good understanding of something, can you say that you understand it; otherwise, you should honestly say that you do not understand it. That is what a wise man does.”

Under the influence of Confucian tradition, Chinese students cannot bear something that is ambiguous. In other words, they would not like to accept such requirement as there's no right or wrong answer. But bearing something that is ambiguous is an effective characteristic for learning a second language. And as a result, they refuse to express themselves freely, just expressing their own opinions.

### **5. Causes for teacher-centered english teaching**

The following reasons account for the present teacher-centered situation (i.e. for lacking the ability of learner autonomy in English learning) in Chinese colleges and universities.

#### *5.1 Cultural Background*

The educational system in which teachers work will be influenced by cultural notions of authority. The goal of Chinese college foreign language teaching is developing students' overall abilities, with particular emphasis on students' reading ability. This goal is properly set on the basis of our country's present situation. Consequently, most university language tests for English majors, like TEM 4 and TEM 8, take the form of reading comprehension and writing. Listening and speaking tests account for only a small proportion. The teachers, therefore, have to lay more emphasis on grammar and word studying. Cultural notions of authority will affect the potential roles of teachers and learners.

#### *5.2 Teachers' Elements*

Using a framework suggested by Harmer (1991), it is possible to identify the teacher in a number of roles: as controller in eliciting nationality words; as assessor of accuracy as students try to pronounce the words; as corrector of pronunciation; as organizer in giving instructions for the pair work, initiating it, monitoring it, and organizing feedback; as prompter while students are working together; and as resource if students need help with words and structures during the pair work. However, as well as being partly dependent on personality or particular method, the precise interpretation of these roles would also be to some extent socially and culturally dependent. In such a setting where the teacher is afforded high status as our China, is an authority figure, and remains at some distance from students, prompter might well refer to prompting the individual student with a display question to respond in a typical classroom sequence of initiation-response-feedback, for example:

Teacher What's Peter's job, Marianne?

Student He's a... [Pause]

Teacher Yes, he's a car...

Student mechanic... he's a car mechanic.

Teacher Yes, good.

Undoubtedly, the teacher remains at the front of the class, in control and responsible for learner activity.

#### *5.3 Learners' Elements*

Undoubtedly, no matter what kind of method is adopted, its effect is ultimately embodied and realized in the subject. In the field of language teaching, the subject is the learner. Therefore, subject analysis takes up an important position. The following part studies learners in detail from four aspects.

##### *5.3.1 Age and Intellectual Factors*

Studies show that the age of the learner remarkably affects his language learning. Children are more effective in acquiring the language system than adults while adults have stronger ability to understand grammatical rules and memorize vocabulary. This is mainly because children tend to imitate and obtain concrete language input. However, adults have developed stronger logical thinking and tend to probe into the interior rules and disciplines of a subject. In

addition, an adult learner approaches a foreign language on the basis of his native language and it's very natural for him to connect the two languages in his learning process. Disorderly and unsystematic imitation and repetition may discourage an adult learner and cannot satisfy his curiosity about exploring disciplines. Moreover, adult learners tend on the whole to be more disciplined and cooperative. This may be partly because people learn as they get older to be patient and put up with temporary frustrations in the hope of long-term rewards, to cooperate with others for joint profit, and various other benefits of self-restraint and disciplined cooperation. Another reason is that most adults are learning voluntarily, have chosen the course themselves, often have a clear purpose in learning and are therefore likely to feel more committed and motivated. Therefore, the language teacher has to tailor his teaching methods to the special characters of the learners so as to achieve a better result.

The age of Chinese college students basically ranges from 18 to 22. Their learning potential is greater than that of young children, and although they have lots of characteristics similar to those of adult learners, it is more difficult to motivate and manage them.

### 5.3.2 Cognitive Styles

The cognitive styles chiefly refer to the different ways employed by people in information accepting, organizing and searching. Scholars distinguish two kinds of cognitive styles as 1) field dependence and 2) field independence. Characters of the former include: 1. depending on the outside frame of reference to deal with information; 2. tending to understand a thing as a whole; 3. lacking the ability to make one's own view; 4. being socially sensible and prone to communication with others. Characters of the latter include: 1. depending on oneself as the frame of reference; 2. tending to analyze; 3. being independence; 4. having weaker ability in socializing and communication.

Studies indicate that learners of field dependent cognitive style are more likely to succeed in a natural learning environment while in class study, learners of field independent cognitive style have more advantages. As Chinese college students have already familiar with the class environment, they are more field independent, depending on themselves to analyze the language itself.

### 5.3.3 Motivation

Motivation has been identified as the learner's orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second language (Crookes and Schmidt 1991). Motivation is divided into two basic types: integrative and instrumental.

#### 5.3.3.1 Integrative motivation

It is thought that students who are most successful when learning a target language are those who like the people that speak the language, admire the culture and have a desire to become familiar with or even integrate into the society in which the language is used. This form of motivation is known as integrative motivation. When someone becomes a resident in a new community that uses the target language in social interaction, integrative motivation is a key component in assisting the learner to develop some level of proficiency in the language. It becomes a necessity, in order to operate socially in the community and become one of its members. In an EFL setting such as China it is important to consider the actual meaning of the term "integrative." As Benson (1991) suggests, a more appropriate approach to the concept of integrative motivation in the EFL concept would be the idea that it represents the desire of the individual to become bilingual, while at the same time becoming bicultural. This occurs through the addition of another language and culture to the learner's own cultural identity. As China is basically a monocultural society, opportunities to use the target language in daily verbal exchange are relatively restricted. There is also limited potential for integrating into the target language community.

#### 5.3.3.2 Instrumental Motivation

In contrast to integrative motivation is the form or motivation referred to as instrumental motivation. This is generally characterized by the desire to obtain something practical or concrete from the study of a second language (Hudson, 2000). With instrumental motivation the purpose of language acquisition is more utilitarian, such as meeting the requirements for school or university graduation, applying for a job, requesting higher pay based on language ability, reading technical material, doing some translation work or achieving higher social status. Instrumental motivation is often characteristic of second language acquisition, where little or no social integration of the learner into a community using the target language takes place, or in some instances is even desired.

While both integrative and instrumental motivation are essential elements of success, most linguists agree that it is integrative motivation which has been found to sustain long-term success when learning a second language. But it has been found that generally students select instrumental reasons more frequently than integrative reasons for the study of language. Brown (2000) makes the point that both integrative motivation and instrumental motivation are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Learners rarely select one form of motivation when learning a second language, but rather a combination of both orientations. Motivation is an important factor in L2 achievement. For this reason, it is important to identify both the type and combination of motivation that assists in the successful acquisition of a second language. At the same time it is necessary to view motivation as one of a number of variables and situational factors

which are unique to each language learner.

In China, university students' motivation is basically an instrumental one, with various exams as the main reason or source of motivation for their English study. That is to say, most Chinese college students learn English to pass exams like achievement tests, academic tests at school or some national English proficiency tests such as TEM4 and TEM8, and then, to get a better and higher-paid job. Although there are students who hope to study overseas and eventually enter the English community, they have to first pass language tests concerned such as TOEFL, GRE, or IELTS. Some characteristics of motivated learners described by the authors of a study of successful language learning (Naiman et al., 1978) are:

- (1) Positive task orientation. The learner is willing to tackle tasks and challenges, and has confidence in his or her success.
- (2) Ego-involvement. The learner finds it important to succeed in learning in order to maintain and promote his or her own self-image.
- (3) Need for achievement. The learner has a need to achieve, to overcome difficulties and succeed in what he or she sets out to do.
- (4) High aspiration. The learner is ambitious, goes for demanding challenges, high proficiency and top grades.
- (5) Goal orientation. The learner is very aware of the goals of learning, or of special learning activities, and directs his or her efforts towards achieving them.
- (6) Perseverance. The learner consistently invests a high level of effort in learning, and is not discouraged by setbacks or apparent lack of progress.
- (7) Tolerance of ambiguity. The learner is not disturbed or frustrated by situations involving a temporary lack of understanding or confusion; he or she can live with these patiently, in the confidence that understanding will come later.

#### 5.3.4 Personalities

Scholars of psychology identify two kinds of personalities: extrovert and introvert. They are found to have influence on language learning. Perhaps an outgoing, sociable person learns a foreign language better than a reserve, shy person, but the connection is not usually so straightforward. Learners of different personalities tend to apply different learning strategies in their learning process. Extrovert learners are talkative and responsive, which provides them with more opportunities of using the target language. However, they do not care much about language form. Introvert learners, on the other hand, apply their calmness in the systematic analysis of the limited language input and are more aware of the form. Therefore, we may say that there is a link between extroversion and oral fluency while introvert is more related to accuracy. Then, different language teaching methods should be adopted when teaching different learners. The introverts might be expected to prefer academic teaching that emphasizes individual learning and language knowledge; the extroverts audio-lingual or communicative teaching that emphasizes group participation and social know-how (Cook, 2000).

As for Chinese learners generally, they are more introvert, often quiet, shy and reticent in language classrooms. They dislike public touch and overt displays of opinions and name "listening to teacher" as their frequent activity in English classes. They are afraid to make mistakes in public and therefore, when a question is raised before them, no one in the class is willing to take the initiative. Chinese students are reluctant to talk, even when they know the answers very well because the very activity of talk involves risk. It may be the introvert personality of Chinese students that results in the teacher's choice of a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method which in turn, only makes the students more introvert. Another personality of Chinese students is that Chinese students tend to be cooperative and have more faith in teamwork. For example, when they are asked to discuss the answers in groups, the students are more willing to speak. They know that the humiliation and embarrassment that result from the incorrect answers could be shared by all the members in the group.

#### 5.4 Language Environment

Speaking of causes that lead to the current teacher-centered phenomenon, we should not forget Chinese unsatisfying language environment. Normally, Chinese students are not used to communicating with each other in English outside class. In an English lesson, though, some of the students participate in the so-called communicative activities only with the attitude of doing their tasks. Moreover, among the communicative activities, applied in an English lesson in Chinese colleges or universities, the activity that is used most often is group discussion. And in order to save time, the teacher will hastily wind up the discussion with a solo summary or conclusion well before the subject is discussed fully and the students have come to anything.

### 6. Conclusion

From the discussion above, learner autonomy and why there are suspects that the concept of "learner autonomy" doesn't fit foreign language learning and teaching in China are very clear. Whether or not learner autonomy is suited to the

Chinese context needs continuous research.

### References

- Benson, P. & Voller, P. (Eds.). (1997). *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. London: Longman.
- Candy, (1991). *Self-direction for lifelong learning*. California: Jossey-Bass.
- Harmer, J. (1991). *The practice of English language teaching*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.. Harlow: Longman.
- Heron, J. (1993). *Group facilitation: Theories and models for practice*. London: Koganpage Ltd.
- Holec, H. (1980). Learner training: Meeting needs in self-directed learning. In Howard B Altman & C Vaughan James (Eds.) *Foreign language teaching: Meeting individual needs*. Oxford: Pergamon Press LTD.
- Lier, van L. (1996). *Interaction in the language curriculum, awareness, autonomy and authenticity*. USA: Longman.
- Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian Contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, 20 (1).
- Nunan, D. (1995). Closing the gap between learning and instruction. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20(1), 133-58.
- Samovar, L. A. & R. E. Porter. (1995). *Communication between cultures* , 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.