Learner Autonomy and its Cultural Appropriacy in Chinese context

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Abstract
In recent years, with the prevalence of people-oriented and life-long learning educational belief around the world, more and more teachers have realized the significance of cultivating students’ independent learning ability, and the study of the Cultural Appropriacy of learner autonomy in EFL in the Chinese cultural context has become the core of discussion. The present paper is an attempt to investigate the feasibility of autonomous Learning of English in the Chinese context based on the study of the concept of “learner autonomy” and its cultural Appropriacy in China.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Cultural appropriateness, Autonomous learning of English.

Introduction
With the introduction and the deepening study of the education theories of Western countries, Learner Autonomy has been a hot issue, and even a new trend in foreign language education in the past decades, especially in relation to human-oriented educational belief and life-long learning skills. It has transformed the old practices in the language classroom and as a result, the learner has been placed in the center of attention in language education. Today, increasing Chinese EFL teachers have realized the importance of fostering learner autonomy and turn their attention to this field.

Definition of Learner Autonomy
The term learner autonomy, was first coined in 1981 by Henri Holec, the “father” of learner autonomy. Holes defined Autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec, 1981). Holec’s initial definition has been considered as a starting point of the subsequent work in this area. Later, Little (1991) defined it as “an ability to think independently and critically, to make a decision and carry out an independent action.” According to Wenden (1998), learner autonomy also involves the ability of risk taking and the ability to tolerate the ambiguity of language. Apart from being defined as an ability, other definitions have been given to the term, depending on the writer, the context, and the level of debate educators have come to. It has been viewed as a human right, as a responsibility of learners or as a situation in which learners study entirely on their own. However diversified the definition of this term is, according to Littlewood (1999), they have usually included the following 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.

**Cultural Appropriacy of Learner Autonomy**

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. Ho & Crookall (1995) claims that autonomy appears to contradict with Chinese educational culture which is teacher-dominated and authority-oriented. They point out that “[Chinese] cultural traits [...] may be an obstacles to the promotion of autonomy.” In line with Crookall, Littewood (1999), tentatively concludes that collectivism can be a hindrance for Chinese learners to take responsibility for their language learning.

In contrast, some researchers challenge this argument. For example, Jones’s (1995) study on English language students in Cambodia indicates that students are ready to work independently despite their strong orientation towards acceptance of power, authority, collectivism and interdependence. Benson (1996) discusses the Individual, political, social and psychological dimensions of autonomy. Autonomy stresses individual learning styles and preferences. In this form of autonomy individual choices take precedence over collaborative learning. In contrast, social autonomy recognizes that learning takes place through interaction and collaboration, as well as through individual reflection and experimentation. A psychological view of autonomy focuses on the importance of the psychological or internal capacities of the learner, such as cognitive and learning styles, motivation, attitudes, aptitude and there is a focus on the learners’ responsibility for their own successes and failures in learning. In contrast, a political view of autonomy has, as its prime goal, a political end, and the learning process is shaped by this. Benson (1997) moves on to distinguish three broad ways of talking about learner autonomy, in education:

1) a ‘technical’ perspective, emphasizing skills or strategies for unsupervised learning: specific kinds of activity or process such as the ‘metacognitive’, cognitive, social and other strategies identified by Oxford, 1990;
2) a ‘psychological’ perspective emphasizing broader attitudes and cognitive abilities which enable the learner to take responsibility for his/her own learning;
3) a ‘political’ perspective, emphasizing empowerment or emancipation of learners by giving them control over the content and processes of their learning. Benson’s definition of autonomy has opened a view to identifying the different emphasis placed on learner autonomy by different cultures. Sinclair (1997) points out that Western view of autonomy has become one which focuses on the individual and psychological dimensions of autonomy, whereas the type of autonomy which focuses on social aspects of autonomy is more commonly found in cultures with collectivist or Confucian-based values. He further broadens the concept of "autonomy" as follows:

1) “Autonomy involves a learner’s capacity and willingness to take responsibility for making decisions about their own learning;
2) The capacity and willingness to take such responsibility are not necessarily innate;
3) There are degrees of autonomy;
4) These degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable;
5) Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process, i.e., conscious reflection and decision making;
6) There is a role for the teacher in supporting the requisite capacity building and development of positive attitudes for learner autonomy;
7) Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom;
8) Autonomy has both individual and social dimensions;
9) The promotion of learner autonomy has both psychological and political dimensions;
10) Different cultures interpret autonomy in different ways;
11) Different teaching and learning contexts require different approaches to the promotion of learner autonomy”.

Apparently, the concept of autonomy in this sense is no longer based on western values. In other words it has become “universally appropriate, rather than based solely on Western, liberal values” (Sinclair, 1997). In 1998, Li Hong made an empirical investigation of the social and cultural influence on promoting autonomy and concluded that autonomy can be adapted to different cultural contexts and the concept of autonomy is compatible with certain Chinese cultural traits. In her opinion, Chinese learners are no longer totally dependent on the teacher or dissatisfied with the pedagogical way of cramming the learners in language classroom. On the contrary, Chinese learners have a strong inclination to take responsibility for their learning project and are willing to become autonomous learners. Littlewood (1999), based on the discussion on collectivism and autonomy, concludes that in Asian countries, learner autonomy is feasible in teaching practice. He makes further discussion on the cultural appropriateness and claims that Chinese learners accept the concept of autonomy. Littlewood maintains that learners in Asian countries have a low level of proactive autonomy; meanwhile, they have a high level of reactive autonomy in independent learning as well as interdependent learning. Later Zheng (2005), after a detailed contrast analysis, points out that during the recent decades, the connotation of learner autonomy has been bestowed new meanings. She suggests that the generalization of autonomy has been widespread in to many different fields; and its connotation has been becoming a point that can be suitable for different fields. Based on this idea, she thinks that leaner autonomy has been gradually accepted in Chinese context.

On the basis of the above researches about the “cultural appropriacy” of learner autonomy, we conclude that learner autonomy is a universal concept that is also suitable to Chinese context.
**Humanism---the Theoretical support of Learner Autonomy**

Humanism Theory puts emphasis on the respect for the special “human” quality of human existence. Humanism focuses on the positive aspects of the people, their inner-directed, conscious motivation and self-directed goals, which stresses understanding, personal assumption of responsibility and self-realization (Stevik, 1999). Carl Rogers, a world-famous humanistic psychologist, emphasizes intrinsic or natural learning, and advocates an education improving learners’ healthy development and "self-actualization" of their "inner life". Rogers' "learner-centered" humanistic educational concept is a direct application of his "patient centered" humanistic Psychotherapy theory. It has contributed significantly in recent years to the to the redefinition of the educational process, and meanwhile, has inspired many teachers to consider the importance of the empowerment of students in classrooms (Brown, 2001).

**Foster Learner Autonomy in Chinese Context**

Today, cultivating a learner’s autonomy has been universally regarded as the ultimate goal of education that teachers try to pursue. In the new College English Curriculum Requirements, learner autonomy is listed as one of the objectives of college English teaching. However, under the deep influence of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese EFL teaching has long been featured by teachers’ dominance and control as well as learners’ passive acceptance of teachers’ authority without question or challenge. Many students are still used to being spoon-fed by their teachers who cram them with facts and contents. Therefore, now it is high time for Chinese EFL teachers to change the traditional view that learner autonomy is not appropriate in Chinese culture and to help students develop the abilities to learn autonomously. We should also take advantage of favorable cultural factors to develop China's EFL learners' autonomy. Chinese Collectivism may impede individual self-study to some extent, but it's helpful to carry out cooperative study, which is a powerful approach for learner autonomy. Its aim is to establish a community of learners in which students are able to generate questions and discuss ideas freely with the teacher and each other. According to Johnson (1991), cooperative learning incorporates five elements: positive interdependence; face-to-face promotive interaction; individual accountability and personal responsibility; interpersonal and small group skills and group processing. In this approach, students often engage in teaching roles to help other students learn and to take responsibility for their own learning. After participating in a cooperative class, students can complete similar tasks better by themselves because their critical and independent thinking abilities have been enhanced. By applying cooperative learning in our EFL classroom, learner autonomy can be achieved. Moreover, Taking advantage of self-access resources is of great significance to help foster learner autonomy. Self-access is probably the most widely used and recognized way of encouraging learners to move from teacher dependence to autonomy. The goal of learner autonomy can be achieved when self-access resources are integrated with the language programs offered by the teacher and learners together. The application of self-access resources can give students opportunities and environments of autonomous learning. Without reducing teacher’s classes drastically, students can be scheduled to attend individual work sessions with computers. And with the help of the designed tasks and assistance from teachers, students can work individually and monitor themselves. Answers to questions or corrections to exercises are available and students can check their own work easily. It
will improve students’ ability of self-correction, self-initiation and self-repair, making learners become autonomous.

**Conclusion**

Though some researchers hold negative views toward the application of learner autonomy in EFL teaching in China, studies have prob that learner autonomy is feasible in China and some Chinese cultural traits provide facilitating conditions for its promotion. Chinese EFL teachers should endeavor to explore more effective ways to foster learner autonomy in Chinese context.

**References**