

## How to Foster Learner Autonomy in English Teaching and Learning

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**Abstract:** Learner autonomy is a desirable goal in English teaching and learning. How to foster learner autonomy is of significance and of importance on pedagogy. The paper discusses the present problems in China, and then proposes four ways to promote learner autonomy.

**Key words:** learner autonomy    English teaching and learning    learning strategies  
cooperative learning

### I. Introduction

In recent years, learner autonomy is becoming increasingly important in China because of continuing expansion of college enrollment. The Higher Education Department has thought of enhancing learner autonomy as a vital evidence for the success of the reform of college English pedagogical patterns. Learner autonomy is now generally recognized as a legitimate need and goal in education. As McDevitt (1997) states: "The end product of education is an independent learner", cultivating a learner's independence or autonomy should be regarded as the end goal that teachers and educators pursue.

Learner autonomy refers to autonomous self-regulation in which the learner takes charge of his own learning, determining the objectives, defining the contexts and progresses, selecting methods and technique to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly and evaluating what has been acquired (Holec, 1981). It also means an ability to think independently and critically, to make a decision and carry out an independent action (Little, 1991).

Learner autonomy in English teaching and learning is a desirable goal. It aims at providing learners with the ability to take on more responsibility for their own learning. Fostering learner autonomy is of significance on pedagogy because no students, anywhere, will have their teachers to accompany them throughout their life. Students should make decisions by themselves about what and how they should learn. Once learners become autonomous, they have acquired a life-long learning skill and a habit of independent thinking, which will benefit them long after leaving university. Therefore, fostering learner autonomy in English teaching and learning is urgent and necessary.

### II. The Present Problems in Chinese English Teaching

Although great changes in English teaching have taken place in recent twenty years in China and these changes and development make teachers and students change their traditional ideas and have new recognition, the relationship between teachers and students is still unbalanced. It is featured by teachers' dominance and control in classroom and learners' passive acceptance of whatever teachers say and do for them. Facing the pressure of College English Test Band Four, teachers often consider how to better teach students than how to teach them to learn,

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focusing on teaching forms of the target language, rather than teaching students how to learn the language. Students tend to consider their teachers as the main source of learning. They think it is the teachers' job to tell them what they have to do and what they have to learn. They view knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than be discovered by the learner. When expected to move from this traditional role, students frequently show anxiety. They are typically described as passive learners, accepting teachers' authority without question or challenge.

Even though teachers give students opportunities to learn English independently, students are not willing to do so because they are used to being spoon-fed by their teachers who cram them with facts and contents just for examination. For many students, they are used to the teacher-centered teaching pattern. They have little or no acceptance of responsibility for their own learning. As a result, most of the non-English majors become dependent on teachers and have little incentive to undertake learning inside and outside the classroom. They seem to be unprepared for the learning skills that are necessary to succeed in English learning. Therefore, it is necessary and crucial to help students develop the abilities to learn autonomously.

### **III. Ways to Foster Learner Autonomy in English Teaching and Learning**

#### **3.1 Changing the beliefs of teachers and students**

All behavior is governed by beliefs. It follows that autonomous language-learning behavior may be supported by a particular set of beliefs. The beliefs teachers and students hold may either contribute to or impede the development of students' potential for autonomy. Since the Chinese EFL learning and teaching have long been influenced by the traditional methods, the majority of teachers and learners are accustomed to those methods. This makes the implementation of learner autonomy difficult.

Therefore, teachers should realize their roles in developing learner autonomy first. As Todor (1993) claims, teachers need to prepare learners for their new role by developing learners' self-awareness as language learners and their awareness of learning goals and options and of language itself. Teachers play many roles in fostering autonomy such as facilitators, consultants, guiders, supporters, co-learners and inspectors in learning processes.

Also students need to change their traditional roles and become more aware of their central roles in learning. They should take on these new roles: planner, organizer, manager and evaluator of their own learning. These beliefs will profoundly influence their approach to language learning and enhance the quality of thinking and task engagement, thus making them become autonomous learners gradually.

#### **3.2 Teaching learning strategies**

Fostering learner autonomy involves the cultivation of learning strategies because when students come to university, they bring with them learning experiences and habits formed in high schools. They don't know how to learn at the university. In order to learn autonomously, teachers should give students adequate training to prepare them for more independent learning. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) believe that learning strategies have learning facilitation as a goal and are intentional on the part of the learner. The goal of strategies use is to "affect the learner's motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes or integrates new knowledge"(Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). A series of learning strategies are the key to learner autonomy, aiming at maximizing learner autonomy.

Learning strategies refer to special actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations (Oxford, 1990). They consist of two parts in general: cognitive strategies and meta-cognitive strategies. Through cultivating cognitive strategies,

students can understand and master all kinds of learning skills such as listening skills, reading skills and so on. Through cultivating meta-cognitive strategies, students can make plans, select learning modes, monitor learning process and evaluate themselves. These strategies will greatly promote and improve learner autonomy undoubtedly. Wang Duqin (2002) has proved that developing learning strategies is effective for learner autonomy.

### 3.3 Using cooperative learning

Cooperative learning 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.

Cooperative learning can provide an environment in which students can be engaged in more interesting activities than just listening, taking notes and translating word for word of a written text. 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 lesson, students can complete similar tasks better by themselves because their critical and independent thinking abilities have been enhanced.

So cooperative learning has also been the natural way for learners to become more autonomous or independent. Littlewood (1999) advances the idea that autonomy in language is inseparable from the development and internalization of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions. By applying cooperative learning in our EFL classroom, learner autonomy can be achieved.

### 3.4 Taking advantage of computer resources

The use of computers and multimedia system or even multimedia center where high-tech equipment are available for EFL teaching and learning represents the backbone of an English program whose main goal is to teach and encourage students to become autonomous learners. The application of them 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 much assistance from teachers, students can work individually and monitor themselves. Answers to questions or corrections to exercises can be made available and students can check their own production easily. It will improve students' ability of self-correction, self-initiation and self-repair, making learners become autonomous.

## IV. Conclusion

In sum, as a life long mode of learning, learner autonomy plays an important role. We will continue to explore more effective ways to foster it.

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(Edited by Hua Zhou, Jjianshan Chen and Jasmine)