

Foreign Language Learning Beyond the Classroom: College Students' Learner Autonomy in the Digital Times

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Abstract. In the digital times, learner autonomy or autonomous learning ability is increasingly crucial in a rapidly changing world due to the rapid advances of science and technology. Deemed as the core competence or core literacy of talents in the future world, learner autonomy or autonomous learning ability is the basis of life-long learning and is especially important in the mode of online learning, which was the dominant teaching mode during the pandemic of COVID-19 all over the world, and in the mode of blended teaching, which is the teaching mode commonly employed in universities across China at present. However, according to the research conducted by numerous scholars, autonomous learning ability of Chinese college students is relatively low, with unclear learning objectives, inadequate learning strategies, incompetence to utilize the already abundant learning resources. The present study explored the definition of learner autonomy, its connotations, theoretical bases, factors that affect learner autonomy and the methods to evaluate autonomous learning ability. Based on this, suggestions and pedagogical implications have been proposed, including improving college students' self-efficacy, strengthening training in learning strategies and optimizing assessment methods. **Keywords:** blended teaching; college students; autonomous learning; foreign language learner autonomy.

1 Introduction

In the digital times of a rapidly changing world, learner autonomy or autonomous learning ability is increasingly crucial due to the rapid advances of science and technology. Deemed as the core competence or core literacy of talents in the future world, learner autonomy or autonomous learning ability is the basis of life-long learning, and it is especially important in the mode of online learning, which was the dominant teaching mode during the pandemic of COVID-19 all over the world, and in the mode of blended teaching as well, which is the teaching mode commonly employed in universities across China at present.

In the digital era, the mode of online or blended teaching is getting more and more attention in the arena of foreign language teaching, and the mode of online or blended teaching has also been on the rise in recent years due to the pandemic of COVID-19, and the age groups covered range from elementary and middle school students to undergraduate and graduate students. However, while the online or blended teaching mode breaks the limitation of time and space, provides abundant resources and a broader platform, there are also problems such as low efficiency and inadequate self-control among students of all levels, thus highlighting the importance of autonomous learning ability, which has been strongly advocated by educators

in elementary education and those from tertiary education as well.

2 Autonomous learning ability

Autonomous learning is often used interchangeably with similar terms like learner autonomy, self-regulated learning, independent learning, self-education, self-instruction, self-planned learning, autonomous learning, self-directed learning, self-access learning, self-directed learning, self-organized learning, self-planning learning, self-study, self-instruction, self-teaching, self-access, self-managed learning, self-monitored learning, and learner-controlled instruction [1-5]. Despite abundant research on autonomous learning and related concepts, there is no consensus when it comes to the definition of autonomous learning ability or learner autonomy and its connotations have been evolving with the times [5,6].

2.1 Definition and connotations of autonomous learning ability

In the western countries, research on learner autonomy or similar concepts dates back to before the 20th century with Socrates, Rousseau, and Comenius as the main representatives [6]. Based on the research on metacognition and self-regulation in the 1970s, in 1981 Holec first introduced the concept of independent learning into the field of foreign language teaching and

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learning, and defined foreign language autonomous learning ability as the willingness to learn the targeted language and “the ability to independently assume the responsibility of foreign language learning”, which includes learning goals, learning strategies, learning monitoring and learning evaluation [7].

In the 1990s, the concept of autonomous learning was further clarified. Little believed that autonomous learning ability means that learners should have the ability to make independent decisions and learn independently [8]. Nunan claimed that autonomous learners should be able to set clear learning goals that guide their own learning process [9]. Littlewood emphasized that autonomous learning learners should have clear learning goals, make good use of learning strategies, and be able to effectively assess learning outcomes [10].

As early as the pre-Qin period, ancient scholars in China already noticed the importance of autonomous learning. Confucius, Mencius, and Mo-tse (Master of the Mohist School) were the representative figures among them [5,6]. From around the 1920s to 1930s, Chinese scholar Cai Yuanpei focused attention on the importance of heuristic learning. Subsequently, many teaching methods advocating autonomous learning, such as the Dalton Method and the Design Teaching Method, were introduced to China and profoundly influenced the development of China's education and teaching philosophy [11]. Pang [12] and Xu [4,5] are the two key pioneering researchers in China who have conducted systematic research on autonomous learning. Pang [12] held that the ability of autonomous learning includes: the ability to make plan and guide oneself, the ability to use appropriate learning strategies and methods in accordance with the actual needs of the current learning situation, and the ability to monitor and regulate oneself. According to Xu, autonomous learning ability consists of three aspects: being good at setting reasonable learning goals and plans; effective use of learning strategies and monitoring their use; and reasonable evaluation of the learning process and its effects. Later on, Xu [5] defined the autonomous learning ability of foreign language majors in China from four aspects, i.e., the ability of self-planning, the ability of self-exploration of effective learning strategies, the ability of self-emotion management and the ability of multi-interactive learning. Noticeably, the connotations keeps extending with the development of the times, digital literacies were also included in learner autonomy, including the ability to obtain information on the Internet, the ability to analyse the specific information on the Internet, critical thinking to distinguish the valuable information from unrelated or even fake information, the ability to interpret information online, the ability to produce information, and the ability to communicate and cooperate with others on the Internet, and self-management ability, etc. (ibid.)

In spite of abundant research on learner autonomy and related concepts, scholars at home and abroad differ with one another on the definition of autonomous learning ability or learner autonomy though they all emphasize learning goals, learning strategies and

learning assessment, and concur that learners should learn proactively. Nonetheless, the different concepts of learner autonomy in language teaching and learning could generally be categorized into three diverse kinds of focus: focus on learning contexts, as represented by Holec and Little, focus on learners' ability in the point of view of Dickinson, and focus on learners' psychological needs respectively, with Ryan and Littlewood as the main representatives [6].

2.2 Theoretical basis of autonomous learning ability

In the process of the formation of autonomous learning theories, many kinds of theories from diverse fields exerted their influence, including behaviourism, humanism, and constructivism, etc., among which the contribution of cognitive psychology, sociocultural theory, or the social learning theory is the most significant [6,13]. As illustrated in the previous part, the conceptualization of metacognition and self-regulation in the 1970s has laid the foundation for the proposition of autonomous learning theory in the 1980s [13].

2.3 Models of autonomous learning ability

In the process of the development of learner autonomy, scholars proposed diverse kinds of theoretical models. Up to now, there are mainly six major theoretical models of autonomous learning internationally, which were constructed from different perspectives by scholars including Zimmerman, Boekaerts, Winne, Hadwin, Pintrich, Efklides and Järvelä, etc [13,14].

Among the major theoretical models of autonomous learning, the ones formulated by Zimmerman from the socio-cognitive perspective have been considered the most influential. Zimmerman, one of the first authors on autonomous learning, proposed three models of SRL (self-regulated learning, or autonomous learning), the Triadic Analysis of SRL in 1989, focusing on the interactions of three forms of SRL: environment, behavior and person level, the Cyclical Phases of SRL in 2000, which explores the interrelation of metacognitive and motivational processes at the individual level, and the Multi-Level model in 2009, representing the four stages in which students acquire their self-regulatory competency [15,16].

2.4 Factors influencing autonomous learning ability

Numerous factors exert an influence on autonomous learning. They could be divided into internal factors including self-efficacy, setting of goals, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, learning motivation, learning style, self-esteem, age, etc., many of which belong to the cognitive, metacognitive, behavioural, motivational, and emotional/affective aspects of learning, and external factors, such as family background, teacher, educational technology, peers, learning environment, learning resources, and social culture [4,14,17,18].

Zimmerman divided the factors that influence self-directed learning into personal, environmental, and behavioural components [19]. First, personal self-efficacy and affect regulation will have an important impact on independent learning. Second, the environment is mainly divided into peripheral role models and others' learning resources to help, and peripheral role models such as teachers and classmates' alternative experience influence. Thirdly, behavioural factors mainly refer to the learners' ability of autonomous learning in the process of their learning state, and can self-regulate according to different learning states (*ibid.*).

Wenden suggested that in the process of self-directed learning, the learners' own metacognitive ability and self-efficacy would have a greater impact on the effect of self-directed learning, and suggested that the external learning environment created by the school would also have a certain degree of influence on self-directed learning or autonomous learning [20].

Li investigated the relationship between the English autonomous learning ability of non-English majors in China and their self-efficacy and found that learners with higher English proficiency had a higher level of self-efficacy and better English autonomous learning ability as well; self-efficacy was significantly positively correlated to the four dimensions of English autonomous learning ability, which include "set-up of learning goals", "use of learning strategy", "monitoring and evaluation of learning process", and "motivation" respectively; self-efficacy was found to demonstrate a linear relationship with English autonomous learning ability in general and a stronger linear relationship with "set-up of learning goals", "use of learning strategy", and "monitoring and evaluation of learning process" in particular [17]. Based on students' own problems, Wang discussed the important influence of learners' own learning goals, learning monitoring, and learning evaluation on autonomous learning ability, and found that teachers, administrative management, and school hardware and software facilities have an impact on students' autonomous learning ability [21]. Zheng pointed out that the traditional social culture and national spirit of China have a certain bearing on autonomous learning, and that the traditional "one-word teacher" teaching model and the national spirit of individuals seeking to achieve success and bring honour to their ancestors have led to a low level of learner autonomy [22], while other scholars held a completely different view, who insisted that the collectivism in traditional Chinese culture is conducive to Chinese students' autonomous learning ability [1,6,10].

In conclusion, scholars have studied the factors that affect learners' autonomous learning from the perspectives of learners' own self-efficacy, learning goals, learning strategies, and learning resources created by the external environment. Although the external environment has a significant bearing on learners' autonomous learning ability, the number of studies on the external factors is limited [18].

3 Methods to evaluate autonomous learning ability

Researchers at home and abroad employed different methods to evaluate language learners' autonomous learning ability, which mainly includes questionnaire surveys, narrative inquiry, action research, classroom observation, structured or semi-structured interview, students' learning log, and Learning Analytics (LA) [6,13,23].

The questionnaire survey, as an emic approach, if used alone, is not considered an ideal tool to describe the autonomous learning behaviours due to the fact that the preset questions are unlikely to cover all the actual autonomous learning behaviours [6]. Learning Analytics has been advocated by scholars as a brand-new, advanced, and fast-growing tool, can be utilized to analyse learners' behaviours after collecting log data, which could be used to understand and optimize learners' participation behaviour during the process of the course, thus providing a new research dimension for learners and their environment in autonomous learning [6,13,23].

4 Cultivation of college students' autonomous learning ability in the digital times

With the development of mobile communications technology and the popularization of social networking, computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) has gradually shifted to mobile cooperative learning (MCL), which is more flexible, collaborative and effective in obtaining learning resources and forming a study group and more commonly used in blended teaching mode in China, rendering it an ideal learning model to solve the spatiotemporal barriers of language learning and enhance cooperation between learners [24]. As demonstrated previously, this demands even higher autonomous learning ability from college students.

However, as has been discussed previously, researchers have found that the autonomous learning ability of college students today is relatively unsatisfying, so the following measures are proposed to cultivate the autonomous learning ability of foreign language learners from universities in the digital times.

First of all, since optimizing external conditions of learner autonomy is vital, mobile or online autonomous learning supporting centers or platforms to provide students with rich learning resources should be constructed by universities, and if possible, autonomous learning labs, centers or platforms supported by advanced technologies like virtual reality or artificial intelligence could be used to create an authentic foreign language learning environment for college students.

Secondly, college students' self-efficacy should be enhanced through diverse kinds of foreign language contests or interesting dubbing activities organized by universities on campus or teachers in the classroom, to boost students' self-confidence in foreign language learning, thus enhancing their sense of self-efficacy and their autonomous learning ability.

Thirdly, different approaches of teaching such as heuristic teaching, cooperative learning, inquiry learning, project-based learning, task-based learning, together with modern information technology, should be introduced to provide college students with abundant autonomous learning opportunities, and to enhance the learners' experience of learning and promote the development and internalization of learners' autonomous learning ability [5,24].

Furthermore, training on learning strategies is also demanded. College students' learning strategies could first be trained through classroom activities, which requires teachers to have a wide knowledge of systematic strategy training, such as cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and resource management strategies and in the meantime focus on developing students' habits of using learning strategies.

Moreover, college students' ability to screen and identify resources need to be bolstered. The cultivation of the ability to identify online information resources enables students to filter out fake or even harmful information and select appropriate learning resources through multiple comparisons [5].

Last but not the least, formative evaluation is recommended to foreign language courses in universities. Learning evaluations serve as feedback on student learning outcomes, and thus teachers should use scientific, detailed, diversified ways to evaluate students' performance in the whole process of one or more semesters instead of using a single score or grade in the final.

5 Conclusion

In the digital times, autonomous learning ability, considered as the core competence or core literacy of talents in the future world, is key not only to college students' foreign language learning but also to their future development. After the expounding of the definition, connotations, theoretical basis, models of autonomous learning ability, factors that affect learner autonomy and the methods to evaluate autonomous learning ability, suggestions are proposed to cultivate college students' autonomous learning ability in the digital times, including making full use of advanced technology to optimize the external learning environment on campus, and enhancing college students' self-efficacy, strengthening training in learning strategies, employing different approaches of teaching and formative evaluation in foreign language courses.

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