

# Promoting Learner Autonomy Through Cooperative Learning

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## Abstract

Learner autonomy has become a hot topic and goal in the research of foreign language education. However, it is the most difficult question to define language learner autonomy and any answer to it is likely to be subjective. On the basis of expounding upon the different definitions concerning the research on learner autonomy in language teaching and learning, this study was to explore how cooperative group learning helps to improve learner autonomy. The survey's findings indicate that the group work helps to improve students' learning attitude, interest and motivation. It also reveals that students' language competence and awareness of using learning resources are improved. This article discusses plausible explanations for the survey findings and makes recommendations on the roles and knowledge that language teachers should play and have to facilitate the development of learner autonomy.

**Keywords:** learner autonomy, foreign language, language teacher, cooperative learning

## 1. Introduction

From the 1960s, with the change from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness in education, learner autonomy has become a hot topic in foreign language teaching and research. It is noted by many researchers and educators (e.g., Broady & Kenning, 1996; Benson, 1997; Benson 2004; Allford & Pachler, 2007; Jiménez Raya & Lamb, 2008) that one of the most important goals in education is to foster learner autonomy. Just as Little (1991) points out that developing learner autonomy has gradually been regarded as the ideal objective of foreign language education, and the major manifestation of effective teaching and learning.

The origins of the research on autonomy in language teaching and learning can be dated back to the mid-1970s (Holec, 1981; Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Broady & Kenning, 1996; Benson & Voller, 1997; Littlewood, 1999; Lamb, & Reinders, 2008; Smith, 2008).

Until now, learner autonomy is still of the remarkable interest in sense of self-regulation, motivation, socio-cultural theory and teacher development (Benson, 2005, 2011). Particular concerns include the ways in which conceptions of autonomy are changing with times, and the ways in which new conceptions of autonomy fit in with broader developments in language teaching and learning theory, educational practice and social thought (Han, 2014).

Much of the early research on learner autonomy focused on the discussions of its definitions and connotations (e.g., Benson, 2006; Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1991; Xu, 2006). Because it is probably the single most difficult question to answer about learner autonomy in language teaching and learning, any answer to it is likely to be subjective. There are a number of terms related to learner autonomy that can be distinguished from it in various ways. Most people now agree that learner autonomy and autonomous learning are not synonyms of 'self-instruction', 'self-direction', 'self-access', 'distance learning', or 'out-of-class learning'.

In the present study, on the basis of a brief review of the development of learner autonomy and its connotations in language teaching and learning, the focus is upon the investigation and analysis of promoting learner autonomy through cooperating group learning in an English Listening and Speaking course at a key university in China.

## 2. Research Background

### 2.1 The Connotations of Learner Autonomy

The idea of autonomy in language learning originated in the late 1960s through the adult movement in Europe

and North America, and for many years it continued to be associated with adult learners who had left formal education (Benson, 2004). Thus early work on autonomy was mainly concerned with learners who were learning on their own.

In 1981, Holec's book *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* was published, signifying the very beginning of research on learner autonomy. Since then, learner autonomy has gained momentum and become the focus of relevant research in the past three or four decades. Generally, autonomy can be interpreted as the capability/ability of taking charge of one's own study.

The definitions of learner autonomy have been changing with times, among which Holec's (1981) has remained the most widely cited definition in the world. "Ability" is often replaced by "capacity", while "take charge of" is often replaced by "take responsibility for" (Benson, 2011). It pays much attention to an attribute of learners rather than learning situation.

In the context of foreign language learning, Holec (1981) defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". An autonomous learner is therefore a person who is capable of taking charge of his or her own learning.

Upon reviewing the different definitions and connotations of learner autonomy, based on what is proposed by Shu and Zhuang (2008), Han (2013, 2014) puts forward a working definition for the term as follows. Learner autonomy has the following three important characteristics. Firstly, learner autonomy refers to language learner's attitude and motivation of learning. Language learner is willing to take an active attitude and motivation towards his or her language study, and takes the initiative to be responsible for the study. Secondly, learner autonomy is viewed as capacity of learning. Through learner training and teacher support, language learner can develop the capacity and learning strategies to learn independently. Last but not least, the development of learner autonomy cannot be accomplished without supportive environment or context. Here environment includes the teacher's guidance, teaching and learning facilities, and learning materials and resources. Based on the above discussion, we consider learner autonomy as the constructive process how language learners develop their autonomy within the supportive environment or context.

### *2.2 The Importance of Cultivating Learner Autonomy in College English Teaching in China*

Developing learner autonomy has become an educational goal in modern languages education, not only at college and university level, but also a life goal for language learners in China.

In 2007, the reformed College English Curriculum Requirements is issued by the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education, providing the colleges and universities with the guidelines for English instruction to non-English major students.

According to College English Curriculum Requirements, the objective of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future work and social interactions they will be able to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels, and at the same time they will be able to enhance their ability to study independently and improve their cultural quality so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international changes (Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education, 2007). Moreover, the traditionally teacher imparting the language and skills in class will be replaced by fostering students' ability to use the language and ability to learn independently.

### *2.3 The Listening and Speaking Course at a Key University in China*

The Listening and Speaking course is offered to non-English major students on the second semester of the first year at a key university in China. At the first class of the course, students are divided into cooperative learning groups of four or five, with different roles for each member such as *Leader*, *Resource*, *Questioner*, *Presenter* and *Secretary*.

The cooperative learning process goes as follows. Firstly, each member of the group is required to listen or watch VOA or BBC news, and find a piece of news that is interesting and instructive. Secondly, the group leader will organize the members to discuss and decide which news is the one that the group is to present and share in the class. Thirdly, the group will make a PowerPoint using video clips, pictures and scrip of the news. Finally, the group will present and share the news in the class. After the presentation, other students and the teacher will ask questions or have comments on the group's news sharing.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Questions

There are two research questions that guide the inquiry of the study:

- 1) Does the group work (news sharing) promote the development of learner autonomy? If yes, in what ways?
- 2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of group work in promoting the development of learner autonomy?

#### 3.2 Participants

The study was conducted among 168 first-year non-English major college students (ages 18 to 20) coming from three classes. The three classes were convenient participants which were taught by one teacher with the same teaching materials and teaching periods. At the end of the course, students were asked to fill in an online questionnaire.

#### 3.3 Instrument

Based on Han's (2013) questionnaire on learner autonomy, a questionnaire is designed to find out how the cooperative group learning promotes the development of learner autonomy.

The researchers designed 20 closed items for the questionnaire, which consisted of three components: students' learning attitude and motivation (6 items), learning capacity and strategies (10 items) and learning environment and resources (4 items).

In addition to the 20 closed questions, the questionnaire has two open questions. The closed questions are based on a five-point Likert Scale. The five-point Likert scale was used in order to weigh each item in the questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = unsure; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree).

After the collection of the questionnaire, SPSS (the Statistical Package of Social Science) 16.0 is used to analyze the data. The inter-rater reliability of the 20 items was analyzed and the Cronbach's Alpha was 0.922, which means the questionnaire has good reliability. According to the factor analysis of KMO and Bartlett's Test (see Table 1), the KMO is 0.880 and the significance is 0.000 ( $P < 0.05$ ), which shows that the questionnaire also has good validity.

Table 1. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.880
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1.402E3
	df	190
	Sig.	.000

### 4. Results and Discussion

At the end of the semester, the researchers conducted a survey in the three classes. Of 168 total students, 118 students completed the online questionnaire, and all of them were valid. Of the 118 non-English major college students who completed the online questionnaires, 46 (39 percent) are male students and 72 (61 percent) are female students. The responses to the statements about how group news sharing promotes learner autonomy are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Responses to statements about how group news sharing promotes learner autonomy

Statement	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Unsure %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
1. I like doing English news sharing.	3.4	5.9	44.1	33.1	13.6
2. I carefully choose and prepare the news to share.	1.7	4.2	22.9	42.4	28.8
3. I am confident while doing the news sharing.	2.5	11.0	37.3	33.9	15.3
4. I learned many new words and	0	11.0	31.4	34.7	22.9

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expressions through news sharing.					
5. I reflect on the effect of the news sharing.	3.4	11.0	26.3	32.2	27.1
6. I still listen to or watch English news after doing the news sharing.	7.6	37.3	35.6	12.7	6.8
7. Besides the news websites recommended by the teacher, I look for other news resources.	8.5	28.0	28.8	24.6	10.2
8. I learned a lot from other students' news sharing.	1.7	12.7	34.7	37.3	13.6
9. Doing news sharing aroused my English learning interest.	1.7	17.8	37.3	27.1	16.1
10. Doing news sharing helps to improve my English listening ability.	4.2	8.5	24.6	39.0	23.7
11. Doing news sharing helps to improve my oral English.	2.5	2.5	18.6	39.0	37.3
12. Doing news sharing helps to improve my English reading ability.	2.5	10.2	24.6	40.7	22.0
13. Doing news sharing helps to learn English more actively.	4.2	7.6	37.3	33.1	17.8
14. Doing news sharing helps to develop critical thinking.	2.5	10.2	30.5	38.1	18.6
15. I am very nervous while doing news sharing.	6.8	12.7	25.4	28.0	27.1
16. Doing news sharing helps to improve my autonomous learning ability.	2.5	8.5	19.5	44.9	24.6
17. I have English news APPs on mobile phone.	15.3	18.6	13.6	21.2	31.4
18. I often listen to or watch English news on mobile phone.	13.6	36.4	29.7	11.0	9.3
19. I wish the teacher recommend more English news resources.	4.2	9.3	22.0	33.9	30.5
20. The teacher's comments help me to reflect on the news shared in depth.	4.2	5.9	21.2	38.1	30.5

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The overriding purpose of this study was to achieve a detailed exploration of how student's cooperative group learning through doing news sharing influences the development of learner autonomy. In answering the two research questions, descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used.

For research question 1, based on the 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire, does the group work of news sharing promote the development of learner autonomy? If yes, in what ways?

According to the analysis, most of the students (71.2%) carefully chose, discussed with other group members and decided which news to share in the class. About half of the students (46.7%) liked doing the news sharing, and showed their (49.2%) confidence in doing the group work. In addition, 43.2 percent of students expressed that the group news sharing aroused their English learning interest. Moreover, half of the students (50.9%) agreed that doing news sharing help them to learn English more actively. In short, students' learning attitude, interest and motivation are improved and increased through doing the group news sharing.

The group news sharing helps to improve students' learning strategy and language competence. For example, 57.6 percent of students agreed that they learned many new words and expressions through news sharing, and

50.9 percent of students thought that they benefited a lot from other students' news sharing; 59.3 percent of students reflected on the effect of the news sharing. What's more, the group work helps to improve students' language skills. For instance, the group news sharing helps to improve students' listening ability (62.7%), oral English (76.3%), English reading ability (62.7%). In addition, 69.5 percent of students thought doing news sharing helps to improve their autonomous learning ability, 56.7 percent of students expressed that doing news sharing also helps to develop their critical thinking, 68.6 percent of students benefited from the teacher's comments on the shared news.

As to the use of learning resources, 52.6 percent of students installed English news APPs on mobile phone to listen to English news. Surprisingly, 64.4 percent of students wish the teacher would recommend more English news resources.

For research question 2, what are the strengths and weaknesses of group work in promoting the development of learner autonomy?

As is analyzed and discussed above, the strengths of the group work lies in the following three aspects. Firstly, the group news sharing helps to increase and arouse students' English learning attitude, interest and motivation. Secondly, the group work helps to improve students' learning strategy and language competence, and it can also help to develop students' critical thinking. Finally, the group work increases students' use of learning resources.

From the study, the following weaknesses of the group work are discovered. First, only 19.5 percent of students would still listen to or watch English news after doing the news sharing, whereas 44.9 percent of students probably would not. Second, 55.1 percent of students thought that they were very nervous while doing news sharing; only 19.5 percent of students were at ease while doing the news sharing by contrast. Finally, Though more than half of the students (52.6%) have installed English news APPs on their mobile phones, only one fifth (20.3%) students often listen to or watch English news on mobile phones, half (50%) of the students probably do not often use the news APPs to listen to or watch news.

Just as researchers (Benson, 2005, 2011; Cotterall, 1995; Voller, 1997; Xu, 2007) point out, teachers should play the role of "facilitator" to develop learner autonomy. Therefore, the present researchers need to facilitate and help the students to further activate their initiative and motivation, raise their autonomous learning awareness, have a study plan, organize their time and form the habit of listening to English news.

According to some researchers (e.g., Arnold, 2000; Benson, 2005, 2011; Voller, 1997), in the process of developing learner autonomy, teachers should also play the role of "counselor" who responds to the ongoing needs of individuals. In foreign language learning, learners' affect factors, such as emotion, mood, interest, motivation, attitude and anxiety will influence their learning behavior and outcome (Arnold, 2000; Aoki, 2000). Therefore, as "counselor", language teachers should be aware of the negative affect factors (such as nervousness in the present study) that may hinder learning, and help learners to reduce and ease them.

As Benson (2005, 2011) asserts that language teachers should be "resource". Foreign language teachers are not only the source of information, but also are capable of developing learners' ability to use learning resources effectively and efficiently. In the case of the present study, the researchers need to learn about the students' needs and provide more learning resources in the future.

## 5. Conclusion

The result reached in the present study led the researchers to conclude that the cooperative group learning can promote and improve learner autonomy. In light of the result of the present study, the following points are recommended.

First, the awareness of learner autonomy should be further raised and increased. Language teachers can help students learn and increase their knowledge and met-cognition of learner autonomy. Then students can be more clear and aware of how the cooperative group learning helps to improve their learner autonomy.

What's more, as learner autonomy is intricately intertwined with the language teacher's professional understanding of his/her role and task, emphasizing the need for the teacher to understand well what learner autonomy is and what roles to play are significant. If language teachers lack of the knowledge or awareness to develop learner autonomy, how can they be expected to play their respective roles in promoting learner autonomy. Thus a series of courses and training should be designed to well facilitate the development of language teacher's awareness and knowledge of learner autonomy.

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