

# Learner Autonomy in China: English Teachers' Attitudes and Practice

Zhe Wang\* and Xiaoyuan Chen

Department of Foreign Languages, Xianda College of Economics and Humanities, Shanghai International Studies, Shanghai, China

Email: 445414582@qq.com (Z.W.); cxy-321@qq.com (X.C.)

\*Corresponding author

**Abstract**—In response to college English curriculum reform, a questionnaire and interview were conducted to explore English teachers' views on learner autonomy in higher education. Based on the literature reviewed the items in the questionnaire are grouped under 4 variables: (1) Teachers' perceptions of the present conditions for learner autonomy; (2) The relationship between teachers and learners; (3) Classroom activities are considered beneficial for self-directed learning; (4) Teacher's professional development. Findings point to a clear cognizance of learner autonomy, and teachers' generally favorable outlooks; while many are ready to treat students as equals, they still experience some perplexity. The primary issues lie in the assessment system, class sizes, and teacher professional development requirements.

**Keywords**—learner autonomy, language learning, teachers' attitudes and practice

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the increasing further study on the theory and practice of China's higher education, learner autonomy capability has become the key criterion for cultivating talents and the basic condition for talent development, and one of the important aims in higher education. Establishing a new teaching model of individuation learning and learner autonomy in China has become the mainstream in education reform.

English, a compulsory public basic course for most non-native English speakers during the undergraduate education stage, is an indispensable part of talent cultivation. College English teaching seeks to cultivate students' aptitude for applying English, bolster their cross-cultural communication cognizance and proficiency, foster autonomous learning capacity, augment comprehensive cultural literacy, enable them to employ English proficiently in their studies, life, social interaction, and future endeavors, and satisfy the demands of national, societal, educational, and individual growth.

However, in China, students have received at least 12 years of basic education before entering the university.

China's basic education is basically based on the traditional teacher-centered teaching model. Students have long been used to passively accept the information conveyed by teachers, which phenomenon of students' over-dependence on teachers, due to the arrangement and guidance of educators, has resulted in a loss of autonomy for them. When entering the university, students break free from the shackles of teachers and parents to learn independently, but students do not know what to learn. How to learn? How to arrange their study time? Without learning goals and future planning, they lose the motivation to learn and most of them are in a confused state. Cultivating and enhancing students' learner autonomy is an urgent issue in China's educational reform practice. Not only does university learning necessitate this cultivation, but it also demands that we recognize the idea of lifelong education and construct a learning society - both at school and beyond.

This paper intends to carry out an investigation into English teachers' attitudes and practice in learner autonomy on the part of teachers instead of learners because the success of the curriculum reform lies primarily in higher education in the beliefs and performance of College English teachers in the field. This inquiry seeks to answer these queries: Do educators view learner autonomy? How do they put it into practice? What kinds of obstacles are there in promoting learner autonomy in a language classroom?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of autonomy in education is typically characterized as the capability to take charge or be accountable for one's own learning [1]. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that this concept is multifaceted, allowing for various interpretations from different people and even from the individual themselves in varying situations or at different times. Aoki [2] has highlighted the fact that, due to its rapid proliferation, the term "learner autonomy" has been given a variety of interpretations, which can sometimes lead to confusion as to what it truly means. To gain a more thorough comprehension of learner autonomy in this study, it is essential to first examine the roots and pertinent issues related to autonomy before delving into its definition.

---

Manuscript received October 6, 2023; revised November 29, 2023; accepted December 25, 2023; published April 18, 2024.

### *A. Research on Autonomous Learning Abroad*

Scholars from abroad have conducted extensive studies on autonomous learning, with various schools of thought having distinct interpretations and understandings. Vygotsky [3] in the Virelu school believes that autonomous learning is essentially a self-directed speech process wherein individuals employ internal language to control their education. Reactive to external rewards or punishments, autonomous learning is fundamentally an operational behavior with three sub-processes: self-monitoring, self-guidance, and self-strengthening. Social learning theory posits that autonomous learning is a combination of behavior, environment, and individual internal factors. It is believed to be an activity in which students adjust and manage their education through comparison and assessment between the expected conduct, plans, and actuality, including three distinct processes: self-observation, self-assessment, and self-response. Freire [4], representing the cognitive constructivist school, postulated that autonomous learning is a metacognitive supervised learning – a process in which students modify their strategies and efforts to suit their own aptitude and task requirements.

Holec [5] further asserted that autonomous learning implies learners “can be accountable for their own education” during the educational experience. Little [6] proposed that autonomous ability is composed of three distinct abilities: the capacity to objectively and critically reflect, make decisions, and take independent actions. This concept was first developed by students who set learning goals for themselves before monitoring, regulating, and controlling their cognition, motivation, and behavior in accordance with these objectives and emotional characteristics. In this process, individuals can learn actively with or without the help of others. Determining the objectives of learning, deciding on strategies for instruction, and assessing outcomes are all tasks that learners undertake. Dickinson [7] postulated that autonomous learning is not only an attitude to learning but also a capability in its own right. Zimmerman [8], an American scholar, summarized the views of various schools in the 1990s and pushed the theory of autonomous learning to a new height. To explain the concept of autonomous learning, he identified six aspects: motivation for learning, method of instruction, time spent studying, behavior in practice, material environment, and sociality. He asserted that when students are actively engaged with metacognition, enthusiasm, and conduct, their education is self-governing. To reflect on oneself at various stages of learning, such as planning, organization, self-direction, monitoring, and evaluating themselves, is referred to as metacognition. Motivation involves transitioning from passive education to active knowledge acquisition; students may transition from “You want me to learn” to “I want to learn”, viewing themselves as successful in their own discipline. Behavior, meanwhile, refers to the capacity for pupils to independently construct an atmosphere conducive to learning [8]. Littlewood [9] postulates that autonomous learning is the capacity of

learners to gain knowledge autonomously, without depending on instructors. Khalid, Bashir, and Amin [10] defined autonomous learning as the ability of individuals to actively adjust their learning without seeking help from others.

### *B. Research on Autonomous Learning at Home*

In the mid to late 1980s, domestic scholars initiated a discourse on autonomous learning. Examining and debating the implications of autonomous learning through an overview and examination of foreign autonomous learning theories and the actual circumstances in China, they delved into this topic. As mobile communication technology, artificial intelligence, and other burgeoning information technologies have advanced rapidly in recent times, teaching reform institutions and universities are increasingly concentrating on a hybrid approach to instruction that combines online learning with traditional Internet-based methods. The promulgation and execution of a series of documents, such as the National Medium-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020) Outline and Ten-year Development Plan for Education Informatization (2011–2020), has been instrumental in fostering an extensive use of information technology within education. The Ministry of Education’s 2.0 Action Plan for Informatization in 2018 proposed to “promote the deep integration of information technology and education” by 2022, with a goal of achieving this through continued progress. The most critical factors are learner attitude and learner motivation. In 1921, Lou [11] divided the concept of achievement-oriented teaching into four elements that influence college students’ autonomy in learning: A knowledge-based curriculum, a teacher-centered model, and an evaluation system for curriculum evaluation. In the “Fourteenth Five-Year Plan” and its Outline of Vision and Objectives for 2035, the Ministry of Education [12] declared that education reform in this new era should focus on constructing a high-quality educational system from ‘learning’ to ‘learning’, cultivating citizens who can learn and acquire knowledge throughout life, and creating an educated society. An important indicator to judge whether learners have learned to learn is their metacognitive ability. Metacognition emphasizes that learners plan, monitor, and regulate their various cognitive activities, which is a high-level, implicit, and abstract thinking process [13].

## III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper reports on a survey on learner autonomy, which was conducted in a seminar held in Shanghai in 2022. This research aims to uncover the teachers’ perspectives on learner autonomy and their autonomous language teaching techniques. It is hoped that the inquiry will provide insight into how prepared the educators are for independent instruction/learning, as well as if the present school environment is suitable for the growth of student independence. The findings will also provide pedagogical implications for classroom practice and teacher education.

The investigation survey covers 4 major areas, namely: a) Teachers' perceptions of the present conditions for learner autonomy; b) Relationships between teachers and learners; c) Classroom activities are considered beneficial for self-directed learning; d) Autonomous teaching and teacher's professional development.

The "National English Teaching Seminar" invited English teachers to partake, who were then given the questionnaires. The questionnaire, containing 52 items, was expected to be filled out by those taking part in the interview and questionnaire, with the remaining questionnaires collected before their departure.

Using SPSS 11.0 for Windows, a statistical analysis of the data was conducted initially. This analysis entailed computing the percentages of responses to various statements and searching for a general trend in the teachers' attitudes toward each variable. The survey was supplemented with data from informal conversations between teachers and students, allowing for generalization. The responses of the participants – "strongly agree" and "agree", as well as their "disagree" and "strongly disagree" answers – were all presented together to facilitate this.

#### IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

##### A. Teachers' Perceptions of the Present Condition for Learner Autonomy

As has been reviewed, Chinese educational tradition does not seem to be a positive condition for the promotion of learner autonomy. The teacher-centered English language teaching approach has been practiced for years [14]. In recent years, the notion of learner autonomy has been vigorously championed in China; however, the Ministry of Education's mandated curriculum has yet to demonstrate any tangible effect. How much do teachers accept the concept of learner autonomy? How do they perceive the present condition for its development? Are there any difficulties? And are there enough preparations and training courses for both teachers and students?

##### 1) Teachers' awareness and attitudes to learner autonomy

Table I shows the sources and channels through which teachers acquire the concept of self-directed learning, revealing at different levels the prevalence and degree of promotion of self-directed learning in China.

TABLE I. WHERE DID YOU GET THE CONCEPT?

Types	Item 40. Where did you get the concept?		
	Count	Responses	Cases
Teacher training	52	27.4	52.5
Books and journals	56	29.5	56.6
Colleagues	22	11.6	22.2
School authority	40	21.1	40.4
Project group	12	6.3	12.1
Others	8	4.2	8.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>190.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>191.9</b>

TABLE II. TEACHERS' AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNER AUTONOMY

Item No.	Items	Awareness and Attitudes		
		Frequency		
		1	2	5
4	Individual autonomy can be learnt independently	35 32.4%	4 3.7%	4 3.7%
5	Learner autonomy is inconsistent with Chinese culture and tradition	31 28.7%	12 11.1%	5 4.6%
6	Essential knowledge is surpassing cultivation of autonomous learning aptitude	20 18.5%	12 11.1%	4 3.7%
8	Autonomous learning is not suitable for young learners	13 12.0%	20 18.5%	5 6.5%

The data from Table II show that 32% of teachers consider individual autonomy necessitates that students be able to learn independently, without the assistance of others. 28% of teachers agree learner autonomy is a Western concept, so it is inconsistent with Chinese culture and tradition. 18% of teachers admire that passing on to learners the essential knowledge they require for life is of utmost importance in education, surpassing the cultivation of autonomous learning aptitude. Only 6.5% of teachers disagree autonomous learning is not suitable for young learners since students have not yet acquired the self-directed skills that are needed.

In the investigation survey, learner autonomy is quite a good approach. I'm going to keep on using it in the future (78.3%). The practice of learner autonomy did not produce effective learning. I'm thinking about going back to my original practices (21.7%) in Item 4.

Before discussing the actual effects of the innovation curriculum, the first question asked is whether teachers have heard about or understood the concept of learner autonomy. It has been found that the concept of learner autonomy has been conveyed to many teachers via various channels.

With the implementation of the curriculum reform, all the respondents claim that they have heard about the concept (item 40), but they learn about the concept from different sources. Books and journals (52.9%), teacher training courses (48.1%), and school authority (37.0%) are the three most frequently selected sources. Other resources selected by the teachers include their colleagues (20.4%), and project group of learner autonomy (11.1%). 8 teachers claim that they have heard about this concept from some other sources. The added resources on the list are: the Internet, TV programs, MA in TEFL courses, and one teacher said that she just knew it. This shows that the majority of the participants have learned about the concept of learner autonomy, and many may have attended teacher-training courses and formed the habit of reading educational journals. 55.5% of the teachers (item 45) claim that they have actually participated in the experiment of autonomous learning. Among these teachers, 78.3% of them see autonomous learning as a good approach, and are prepared to keep on practicing it in the future (item 47). It shows that the concept is approved by many teachers.

Invited to articulate their views on certain significant ideas about autonomy, the majority of educators (83.3%) responded in a favorable light. Most teachers disagreed with the notion that imparting some fundamental knowledge is more essential than cultivating autonomous learning aptitudes in schools (item 6). The development of autonomous learning abilities is evidently a priority for teachers, and the formation of these capabilities may be just as essential as knowledge acquisition. Those students guided by educators who comprehend this concept have an improved opportunity to gain autonomy in their studies.

The concept of learner autonomy, historically linked to independence and individualization, is strongly opposed by the majority of educators (85.2%) who believe that learners should be able to learn independently without assistance from others – as item 4 states. The emphasis of autonomy has changed from learners’ autonomy to interdependence, yet independent learning is still viewed as a critical step in the growth of autonomous learning aptitudes [15]. The response from the majority of the participants implies that teachers do not find their roles as teachers marginalized with the promotion of learner autonomy in the present innovation. It could also imply that teachers are prepared to promote the concept with some efforts for cooperative learning.

However, after doing the questionnaire, one of the participants offered a rather revealing comment on the issue of context:

*“I stayed in the United States for two years as a visiting scholar. There I visited many American schools. From a tender age, children in the United States have been exposed to autonomous learning and independent activities. For years they have been exposed to open-ended queries and classroom tasks. Furthermore, individualism, human liberty, and an inclination to confront existing beliefs are deeply entrenched within people’s mindsets. However, these concepts are not so much appreciated in the Chinese culture, let alone the Chinese classrooms, where discipline and collectivism are considered to be more important. I have tried to introduce autonomous learning to my students after coming back from America, but the results are not encouraging. Students could not cope with this new learning approach.”* (Teacher A)

Teachers’ responses are more divided than unanimous in item 8, which says that autonomous learning is not suitable for young learners who have not yet acquired the self-directed learning skills that are needed. 36.4% of the participants agree with this statement while 44.9% take the opposite position, and 18.75 are not sure.

Another phenomenon that is worth noting here is that although statistically it has been proved that all teachers have learned about the concept of learner autonomy, and the majority of them express positive attitudes towards it, the concept does not seem to be as rooted in teachers’ minds actually. Each time when the questionnaires were to be delivered, a brief description of the questionnaire was given: “It is a survey about teachers’ beliefs and practice of learner autonomy”. Frequently many teachers’

responses at this point would be: “What is learner autonomy? I have never heard about it. Could you first explain it to me?” the puzzling responses from the teachers show that those teachers might all have learned about learner autonomy, but they could not remember it at the moment it was brought up. And it was after doing the questionnaire that they were reminded of what they had learned before.

Notably, though statistically it has been established that all teachers have acquired knowledge of learner autonomy and the majority of them display a favorable outlook on it, the notion does not appear to be as deeply entrenched in their minds. Each time when the questionnaires were to be delivered, a brief description of the questionnaire was given, “It is a survey about teachers’ beliefs and practice of learner autonomy”. Frequently many teachers’ responses at this point would be, “What is learner autonomy? I have never heard about it. Could you first explain it to me?” the puzzling responses from the teachers show that those teachers might all have learned about learner autonomy, but they could not remember it at the moment it was brought up. And it was after doing the questionnaire that they were reminded of what they had learned before.

College English teachers have evidently come to recognize learner autonomy, though some areas still remain perplexed and uncertain. Their confusion and doubts are further exposed when they are invited to reflect upon their relationship with learners in autonomous language learning.

TABLE III. TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE EXISTING DIFFICULTIES

Difficulty Types	Item 44. Please mark out what you think are most prohibiting to promotion of learner autonomy in Chinese schools		
	Count	Responses	Cases
Teachers not interested	24	4.9	24.0
Students’ non-cooperation	53	10.8	53.0
Students feel at a loss	41	8.3	41.0
It is a sign of teachers’ irresponsibility	41	8.3	41.0
Classroom out of control	44	8.9	44.0
Lack of teachers’ training courses	63	12.8	63.0
Inconsistent with assessment system	73	14.8	73.0
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>493</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>493.0</b>

Although teachers’ attitudes and reflections on learner autonomy are generally positive, the majority of them admit that there are lots of difficulties in its implementation in Table III Item 44. Among those perceived difficulties, the existing assessment system is the most serious one, and teachers’ lack of interest is the least serious. The difficulties perceived by the teachers are listed from the most serious to the least serious.

It can be seen in Table III. In China, the least serious of the difficulties in the execution of autonomous

learning is perceived to be teachers' lack of enthusiasm. This further demonstrates teachers' positive attitudes towards learner autonomy. It is on how to put autonomous learning into practice that teachers get confused with. Many difficulties raised in this item concern teachers' classroom management and lesson preparation skills under the mode of autonomous learning /teaching. And it seems that many teachers have not yet acquired the skills that they need. Systematic training courses will be needed to improve teachers' autonomous teaching skills.

### 2) Teachers' perceptions of the applicability of learner autonomy under the present assessment system

The task for students in universities, the promotion of learner autonomy can hardly be carried out. Items 3, 33, and 52 solicit teachers' views about learner autonomy within the framework of the present assessment system.

To teachers who claim to have experimented with autonomous learning (item 52), 60% say that in a graduating class, traditional examination-oriented education would be more appropriate; and 40% say promoting learner autonomy is equally applicable to students from graduating classes.

Many teachers think the present assessment system is the biggest barrier to the implementation of learner autonomy. However, it seems that the findings have not indicated an overwhelming rejection of autonomous learning under the present circumstance. Though 53.7% of educators assert that autonomous learning is not suitable due to the University Entrance Examination's excessive strain (item 3), 28.7% of those surveyed do not agree. 17.6% of the participants are not sure about their position on this issue. When teachers were interviewed on this topic, their comments tended to fall on two extremes. The two most representative comments are summarized as follows:

*"Everything will be easy to cope with without examinations. With it, any innovation will be nothing but old wine in a new bottle."* (Teacher B)

*"We have stopped using the traditional exam-oriented teaching approach for years. We always encourage our students to engage in project work, to do investigative learning, and to choose suitable homework on their own. Though they are short of time doing examination papers compared with students from some other schools, their marks in examinations are quite high. We always put a strong emphasis on improving students' capacities to solve problems by themselves. With their abilities improved, their exam scores naturally improved, too."* (Teacher C)

It seems autonomous learning has been accepted by some teachers, but there is still a long way to go before it can be widely accepted. Concrete experiments will be needed before it can be accepted by teachers who are not yet confident.

### 3) Teachers' perception of the newly developed textbooks and other learning materials

Table IV reveals that it is commonly thought that having access to a wide range of second language

materials would provide learners with chances for self-directed learning. Rich and multileveled materials equip learners with alternatives to pursue their individual learning.

TABLE IV. TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF MATERIALS

Item No.	Perceptions of materials	Frequency		
		1	3	5
9	There is a self-access center for English learning in our school	24 22.4%	21 19.6%	4 3.7%
14	I have no time to introduce extra teaching materials to my students	13 12.0%	9 8.30%	6 5.6%
35	The official teaching material I use presently is not good for learner autonomy	6 5.7%	26 24.5%	7 6.6%
36	In my school, it is much more convenient for teachers to use the school library or other learning resources compared with students.	14 13.0%	18 16.7%	4 3.7%

Item 35 invites teachers to comment on textbooks. Teachers' responses are divided in this item, too. 40% of the participants believe that the textbooks are quite suitable for the development of learner autonomy, while 34% consider it not suitable and 24.5% choose neutral. To further find out teachers' attitudes towards the new textbooks, some teachers were interviewed. Their comments are summarized below.

*"The new textbook that has been adopted for use in recent years is too difficult for our students. Compared with the textbooks being used by other universities, I guess the level of difficulty is quite similar. Maybe this is good to the excellent students, but to ordinary students, this leads to nothing but frustration."* (Teacher D)

At the suggestion that the students could be invited to set their own pace, and choose by themselves what they thought was the most important for them to learn, a teacher expressed her strong reservation:

*"I don't think that's a way to solve the problem. Even if students could set realistic objectives for themselves, they will get frustrated, since they naturally assume that what is written in the textbook is for them to memorize and grasp. The textbook is made of ten units; each of them with one specific topic, for example, environment, friendship, etc. According to the new syllabus worked out by the school authority, students should do project work on each topic of the units, which means students should carry out 10 research each term. That's too much for our students. Besides English, they still need to learn mathematics, physics, Chinese, and so on. There are only 24 hours each day. How could they find time to finish so many projects?"* (Teacher E)

At the suggestion that a student could be asked to do just one or two projects which interest him/her most each term, and do it in groups, the teacher accepted that it could be a way to solve the problem. Comments from some other teachers are quite different from the previous one, for example:

*“The new textbook is much better than the one which had been used for years. Students are equipped with more chances to use the language. There are many activities for students to do in the new textbooks.”* (Teacher C)

Since teachers are actually using the same textbooks, it seems that what matters most is not the content of the textbook, but the teachers’ way of making use of it.

Besides the textbooks, teachers and learners need to use other materials in class. A self-access center could be a way of providing students with a large amount of learning materials. When teachers are asked whether there are self-access centers in their schools (item 9), most teachers (61.3%) deny their existence. 20.4% say they are not sure, and 18.5% say there are. What makes it more interesting is that teachers from the same school can often have different responses to this item. This shows that teachers’ understanding of self-access centers varies. And the self-access center is not a popular concept in China’s education.

To the statement that says that they have no time to introduce extra learning material to learners since learners’ time is densely occupied with a predetermined teaching syllabus (item 12), three-fifths (56.4%) of the participants disagree. 32.2% of the participants agree. And 8.3% are not sure.

#### *B. The Relationship between Teachers and Learners*

Though teachers cannot do much to change the traditional Chinese cultural context, the existing assessment system, or the textbook they use, they can work to change their relationship with their learners. The relationship between teachers and learners, according to Ref. [15], is the single essential factor that encourages learner autonomy. To Ref. [15], the single central quality that fosters learner autonomy is the quality of the relationship between teachers and learners. And to Ref. [16], this relationship needs to be understood on two different levels morally and pedagogically. That is to say, though students should be treated as “equal moral agents” morally, and pedagogically there is still a significant inequality between the student as a novice and the teacher as an expert. And this inequality between novice and expert has nothing to do with moral agency. In the following part, the relationship between teachers and learners will be examined in light of these two aspects.

##### *1) The moral relationship between teachers and learners*

Teachers’ views on item 10 are quite equally divided. 35.5% of the participants believe that they will feel uncomfortable if they are not directing the class; 39.3% of participants claim that they will not have such feelings, and 25.2% say they are not sure. Teachers’ uncertainty in this area may have a strong correlation with the pedagogical practice in developing learner autonomy.

In items 10, 22, and 32, teachers are expected to reflect upon their moral relationship with their learners. Do they treat their students as equal moral agents, or as passive knowledge receivers who are inferior to them? The findings in the present study suggest that such kind of teacher arrogance is changing. Most teachers (87%)

declare they frequently praise and encourage their students (item 32). When teachers are asked about something they don’t know, most of them (97.2%) would admit that they don’t know, 61% of the participants would even encourage their students to find out answers by themselves and then introduce the answer to the whole class (item 42). And as recalled by many students interviewed, their teachers will not get angry if they are contradicted in class. Even if a student contradicts a visiting scholar with some absurd individual ideas in public, most teachers (98.1%) would not see it as a behavior totally unacceptable, only one teacher declares she would ask her student to ‘sit down and shut up’ (item 41). At the same time, however, many teachers (62%) claim that though there is nothing wrong with student’s behavior, they would ask their students to take the social context into consideration when they speak. It seems that to many teachers showing respect for the view of an expert is still more important than hearing out the view of an ordinary student.

Teachers are not as sure about item 22 which says ‘I would like my students to maintain strict silence while I’m giving a lecture, 58.3% of the participants concur with item 22, which states that they would prefer their students to remain silent during a lecture; however, 29.6% disagree and 12% are uncertain. And 12% are not sure. The finding shows that many teachers are more comfortable with a disciplined and ordered class. It could also mean that the belief that discipline guarantees effective learning is presently not as much appreciated by teachers as before. To clarify their opinions on this issue further, some participants were invited to elaborate on their views on classroom discipline after doing the questionnaire. Their comments are summarized below.

*“I don’t require my students to maintain strict silence in my classroom since I would like to let them all have some say, not just me.”* (Teacher E)

*“If the discipline is too strict, students will be reluctant to ask questions.”* (Teacher F)

*“I once tried to give my students more freedom in my class, but it caused me much trouble. Very often students got over-active. And the classroom soon became very noisy. Sometimes I could not hear my own voice. When such things happened, I felt a strong need to recall discipline. Sometimes I got very annoyed, so I would criticize my students. Then the students became quiet and nervous again, but this was actually not what I wanted to see.”* (Teacher G)

*“Basically, it is important to give students chances to speak out. But if their discussion becomes irrelevant, teachers have to know how to make good control. And when students mention something interesting, teachers have to know how to dig into the topic. Actually, discipline is very important to some extent. It is the suitable disciplines that guarantee every student an equal chance of learning. Before enjoying freedom, students have to first of all learn the arts of communication; the way of listening and getting useful information; and how to respect the rights of both others and themselves.”* (Teacher H)

2) *The pedagogical relationship between teachers and learners*

Instead of seeing teachers and learners as equal moral agents, the pedagogical dimension to learner autonomy focuses on teachers' role as experts. What are teachers' responsibilities as experts in language study? To what extent should they give directions to their students in language learning?

Statistics show that though teachers' moral relationships with their learners are generally positive, they are not so certain in the pedagogical dimension. Opinions and practice in the classroom concerning the development of learner autonomy are more divided than unanimous.

However, teachers are quite unanimous in their view of their students' readiness for autonomous learning. Item 1 says most of my students prefer to be directed by teachers, most teachers (79.6%) agree with this position.

When teachers are asked to compare the effectiveness of self- and teacher-directed learning (item 7), 32% of participants believe that learning could be more effective if it is teacher-directed, 38.9% don't agree with this position, and 28.7% are not sure. Teachers' responses are quite similar in item 37: 43.5% of the participants agree that the practice of learner autonomy would occupy too much precious classroom time, and 40.7% argue against the statement. And 15.7% remain neutral on this statement.

Since language learning is highly discipline-based, many experiments need to be carried out before teachers become sure that learners can obtain deep-level learning through autonomous learning or communicative activities. Chinese English teachers in secondary schools are not as confident as indicated by their responses. Though 44.4% of the participants don't think that the practice of students' self-directed language learning would cause a decline in students' language proficiency (item 19), 25.0% of teachers believe that is the case. And 30.6% of the participants are not sure.

From the above evidence, it seems that Chinese secondary school teachers don't have much faith in their students' autonomous learning abilities. To some teachers, learners' lack of autonomous learning abilities is a crucial factor prohibiting the implementation of learner autonomy. One of the teachers interviewed said:

*"Personally, I would like to introduce autonomous learning in my classes, but I am afraid my students cannot deal with it. Most of my students are still quite low in their language proficiency. I have to spend a lot of time each class doing spelling checks, explaining grammatical points, and analyzing the text. Under such circumstances, if I do not give them direction, how could they learn any English? So in my university, the idea of learner autonomy is hardly applicable."* (Teacher I)

At the same time, it seems that many teachers still need to improve their facilitating abilities. When teachers are asked whether they know about each of their learners' language proficiency levels and their learning styles (item 14), 50% of the teachers claim they do. 19.45% of them say they don't. And a much higher proportion of them

(30.6%) are not sure. It is quite doubtful whether teachers would be able to give their students suitable guidance if they don't know their students. Learning in this sense could hardly be learner-centered, not to mention autonomous.

It is generally accepted that as experts, one of the teacher's responsibilities is to get their students motivated so that the students can be more involved in their own learning. Many teachers doubt their ability to become good motivators. To item 28 which says 'I am good at motivating my students', though many teachers 57% claim to have this ability, 36.4% of the participants are not sure if they are.

From the above findings, it is clear that though teachers generally accept the concept of autonomy, and they are quite willing to treat their learners as equal moral agents in their class, teachers are found to have much confusion when it comes to the pedagogical level, for instance how to actually improve their students' autonomous learning abilities, especially when it is concerned with some discipline-based knowledge. This could be elaborated by the activities teachers use in their classrooms.

3) *Class activities conducive to autonomous learning*

Item 43. What's your student's reaction to their classmates' statements?

As reviewed, though there is no automatic link between autonomy as a teaching goal and the ways in which it might be pursued, certain activities like learner training, decision delegation, project works, and so on are assumed to be beneficial to the development of learner autonomy. To gain a deeper insight into educators' views on student independence, the exercises they utilize in their classrooms must be inspected. Actually, many of the teachers' practices are believed to be in accordance with their attitudes towards learner autonomy.

C. *Autonomous Teaching and Teachers' Professional Development*

1) *Autonomous teaching*

TABLE V. AUTONOMOUS TEACHING

Item No.	Perceptions of materials	Frequency		
		1	3	5
2	Many teachers still need to improve their autonomous learning skills	1 0.9%	9 8.3%	29 26.9%
29	I usually amend my syllabus according to students' needs	2 1.9%	14 13.90%	27 25.9%
38	Reflecting my own teaching, I have a habit of continuing to instruct dairy	2 1.9%	11 10.2%	12 11.1%
39	I usually discuss with my colleagues about how to improve our teaching.	0 0.0%	12 11.1%	16 14.5%

Seen from the above findings in Table V, it appears that what matters most is not which kind of activities are used in class, but the ways in which the teacher and students manage and interpret them. In order for students

to become engaged in the activities autonomously, the teaching process has to become autonomous in the first place. According to Ref. [17], teachers need also to become researchers and learners. By self-monitoring, teachers continue their professional development, reflect critically on their teaching practices, and narrow the gap between their imagined view of their own teaching and actuality.

Most teachers have come to recognize the significance of self-governance, as evidenced by the results. Most of the participants (81.5%) claim that they won't just follow what the curriculum requires them to do (item 29); most of the teachers who have experimented with the innovative curriculum (81.7%) frequently modulate their teaching methods so as to cater to their students' needs. Many teachers (64.8%) have habits of keeping teaching dairies to reflect on their own teaching methods (item 38). And 88.7% frequently discuss with their colleagues about the ways of improving their teaching performance (item 39).

The above findings indicate that autonomous teaching has been accepted by many teachers. Yet it is important to note that the majority of teachers (87.1%) still believe teachers need to improve their facilitating abilities for autonomous learning (item 2). So here the question is: Even if teachers are equipped with some freedom to decide on their own teaching methods, and even if some of them now have their own ways of interpreting the textbooks, could these really lead to learner autonomy? Much of the confusion on the part of the teachers as manifested by the research findings calls for innovations in the programs for professional development of the teachers.

#### *2) Teachers' professional development*

- (a) Item 46. a) The curriculum reform is carried out abruptly. And teachers are caught unprepared (49.2%);
- (b) There are thorough preparations before the curriculum reform for teachers. We have experienced teacher's training courses (50.8%).

One way to improve teachers' facilitating abilities for autonomous learning is through teacher training. And since learner autonomy is a new thing in China, it takes a lot of changes in the attitudes and approaches of the teachers to make it possible. It is through the teacher training programs that teachers are to be equipped with the theory and practical guidance needed.

The finding shows in-service teacher training in higher education is widely practiced nowadays. And many of them cover the issue of learner autonomy. 52.5% of the participants declare that they have heard about learner autonomy in the teacher training classes (item 40). 41.8% have received systematic teacher training with regard to learner autonomy (item 11). In retrospect, 50% of the participants who have promoted autonomous learning in their classes declare that there have been teacher-training courses before the experiments were actually carried out (item 46). However, when teachers are invited to reflect upon the existing difficulties, 62.6% of the participants complain about the lack of teacher training courses (item

4). The results in this sense are quite controversial. In the interviews, when teachers were asked to describe their training courses, most described it as a traditional training modal where all the participants sit quietly listening to one expert giving lectures. Despite teacher-training courses, the controversy that has arisen may be partly attributed to the lack of full comprehension of the concept. The courses need to be better designed; otherwise, teachers can hardly get the essence and the competence for implementing learner autonomy in their own classrooms from these courses.

According to Ref. [6], teacher education for autonomy should also be experiential. The idea could not be simply imparted to teachers. Teachers need to be personally experiencing goal-oriented learning, group work, discussion, projects, and presentations in training courses first before they can confidently introduce these methods to their students.

#### *D. Discussions*

The present study has provided some understanding of English teachers' attitudes and language teaching practices regarding learner autonomy in universities in China. It has helped to raise the teachers' awareness and expectations that they should bring learner autonomy to teaching in the classroom. Although the survey results are based on teachers' responses to a self-designed questionnaire and therefore need to be treated with caution, further discussions on teachers' responses to the relevant issues are enlisted to provide support for the statistics data.

Firstly, it seems that teachers' attitudes towards learner autonomy are generally positive. There is certainly an awareness of the concept of learner autonomy. Reflections from teachers who have experimented with the innovative curriculum further indicate that more and more teachers are quite willing to foster autonomous learning abilities among their students. This is a progress when compared with the higher education in the past. Most teachers are ready to encourage and praise their students in class now, and more and more students are encouraged to have their own voice and individual perspectives on learning.

However, when the concept of learner autonomy is put into practice, many teachers seem to have confusion. Teachers recognize the numerous obstacles to its realization, as well as numerous external impediments that impede the advancement of learner autonomy. The most significant obstacle, according to the instructors, is the current assessment system. When it concerns the national standard tests, neither teachers nor learners are left with any alternatives. Much needs to be done before people can see how seriously the present assessment system will hold back the development of learner autonomy, let alone how autonomous learning could also lead to students' improved scores.

Another serious problem is the fact that there are always too many students in one class in China's higher education. Many teachers claim that it is hard for them to manage the class because of this. The difficulty of being



precise regarding the language aptitude and educational approach of their pupils renders this issue even more dire. The Chinese classrooms in this sense could hardly be learner-centered. The problem will not be easily solved by just encouraging students to do group or pair work. The consequence of this is the necessity for fresh classroom dynamics and a distinct connection between educators and students. Teachers' perceptions of their students' autonomous learning abilities also vary. Many teachers don't have enough trust in their students. Some claim that autonomous learning could not possibly be carried out in their classrooms because their students do not have the abilities needed. How could autonomous learning be best carried out with learners with low language proficiency, this is a question confusing many language teachers and needs to be addressed in future research.

To some extent, it seems that teachers' perceptions of their students' autonomous learning abilities, their classroom practice, and perceptions of the assessment system are closely related factors. As seen from the interviews with teachers and students, the innovative curriculum seems to be better implemented in the key schools. Teachers from key schools tend to have more trust in their students so in practice they tend to design for their learners a greater variety of classroom activities and give them more chances to take control of their learning.

The curriculum reform has brought some innovations into Chinese classrooms; some of them are well received while others are not. Research findings show that English teachers in China's higher education nowadays put a strong emphasis on students' communicative skills. Though a lot of these activities are considered to be conducive to autonomous learning, teachers still assume a lot of responsibility in giving instruction in those activities. It could be possible that language learning in China's higher classrooms is becoming much more communicative nowadays, but there is still a long way to go before autonomous learning becomes the trend.

Although many teachers declare that they can exercise a certain amount of freedom in class management and embrace the concept of autonomous teaching, the findings have shown that learner autonomy has far from been achieved in Chinese higher education. Although autonomous teaching is a prerequisite for learner autonomy, it will not, however, automatically lead to learners' autonomous learning. Teachers have to be trained on how to foster learner autonomy under various circumstances. As has been presented in this study, the lack of systematic training in autonomous learning facilitating skills is perceived by many participants as a serious problem that holds back the implementation of learner autonomy in China. Consequently, English teachers' professional development programs must be augmented to ensure they can gain autonomy through experiential learning prior to implementing it in their own classrooms. They need to develop an understanding that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing concept and that it can be realized at different levels. What a teacher can do is

create a positive learning environment that will lead the students to move towards autonomy step by step.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The present study's findings demonstrate that College English teachers are cognizant of learner autonomy, and their outlooks towards it are generally favorable. Many classroom activities that have the potential to improve students' autonomous language learning are currently in practice. And students are more and more treated as equal moral agents instead of passive containers who are inferior to teachers. In spite of the resistance from some teachers, there are no major objections against the principles and the implications of learner autonomy.

A clear understanding of their duties and obligations in the classroom was revealed by the study to be a major discovery. There are numerous indications in the study that teachers generally regard themselves as mainly/more responsible for language-related decisions though they claim to regard autonomy as important. This indicates a rather strong preference for a relatively more facilitating role for the development of autonomous learning for the students in the classroom.

Teachers clearly saw one of their responsibilities was to encourage what could be seen as autonomous practices. However, generally, there seemed to be a less positive teacher attitude toward students' readiness to accept responsibility for their own learning. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why teachers cannot withhold their responsibility for the majority of decisions, especially those discipline-specific decisions.

Another important conclusion of the study is that there are many constraining factors in China that serve to hinder the development and promotion of learner autonomy. The major issues such as the assessment system, class size and teacher professional development are evident, thus, much work must be done before Chinese classrooms can truly appreciate and realize learner autonomy.

Basically, developing learner autonomy at the intermediate level in China is an ongoing endeavor. It is a complex issue evolving re-conceptualizing and recreating the entire teaching and learning process and context. Therefore, assessment systems and the teaching and learning process is therefore necessary to allow more space for greater negotiation, discussion, and decision-making on the part of students in the classroom. The experimentation results of a concrete nature must be conducted to ascertain the correlation between autonomous learning and the current assessment system, as well as the full growth of students at intermediate level. To further aid teachers in comprehending the fundamentals of autonomous learning and enhancing their facilitating abilities, training courses for educators' professional development should be enhanced.

Although this study has been elaborately designed and much preparation work was done before the experiment, there are still some limitations in the study. Firstly, as a research project on teachers' attitudes and practice of

learner autonomy, the present study has not provided enough information from the perspectives of the students due to limited time and space. Learner autonomy in higher education will be better understood if both teacher's and student's responses can be solicited, compared, and analyzed. Secondly, the design of the questionnaire has covered too many aspects of learner autonomy, so some important aspects like items concerning the assessment system and many class activities that are conducive to learner autonomy are not fully discussed. Thirdly, though it is hoped that the study could throw some light on the present conditions for the development of learner autonomy in China, it has to be admitted that it could not provide a whole picture. Due to limited time and space, the questionnaire was only carried out by English teachers in secondary schools. Yet, it is very possible that both teachers and students in colleges or universities will have different attitudes and practices of learner autonomy due to various reasons and different life experiences. Similar surveys in colleges or universities as well as long classroom observations, more interviews need to be carried out in order to get a better understanding of the overall situation in China.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Zhe Wang conducted an overall design and review of the survey questionnaire, personal interviews, paper framework design for the research question; Xiaoyuan Chen analyzed the data and wrote the paper; all authors had approved the final version.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors wish to thank all the teachers who participated in the questionnaire survey and individual interviews in the "National English Teaching Seminar". They provided their true thoughts and suggestions about self-regulated learning teaching, as well as the confusion and problems they encountered in the process of implementing self-regulated learning teaching. Without their first-hand information and data, it would be difficult to complete the writing of this paper. Here, we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to them.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] P. Benson, *Teaching and Research Autonomy in Language Learning*, Essex: Pearson, 2001.
- [2] N. Aoki, "Affect and the role of teachers in the development of learner autonomy," in *Affect in Language Learning*, J. Arnold, Ed., Cambridge: CUP, 1997.
- [3] L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- [4] P. Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1974.
- [5] H. Holec, *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning*, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981.
- [6] D. Little, "Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy," *System*, vol. 23, pp. 175–181, Feb. 1995.
- [7] L. Dickinson, "Autonomy and motivation a literature review," *System*, vol. 23, pp. 165–174, 1995.
- [8] B. J. Zimmerman and R. Risemberg, "Self-regulatory dimensions of academic learning and motivation," in *Handbook of Academic Learning*, G. D. Phye, Ed., Academic Press, 1998, pp. 105–125.
- [9] W. Littlewood, "Defining and developing autonomy in East Asia contexts," *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 20, pp. 71–94, Jan. 1999.
- [10] M. Khalid, S. Bashir, and H. Amin, "Relationship between Self-Directed Learning (SDL) and academic achievement of university students: A case of online distance learning and traditional universities," *Bulletin of Education and Research*, vol. 42, p. 131, 2020.
- [11] L. Lou, "Cultivation of students' autonomous learning ability in application-oriented universities," *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 11, pp. 422–429, 2021.
- [12] Ministry of Education. (March 2021). The "Fourteenth Five-Year Plan" and the 2035 long-term goal outline propose to build a high-quality education system. [Online]. Available: <http://www.moe.gov.cn/>
- [13] W. Hongjiang, L. Zuokun, L. Xiaoling, and H. Xiuying, "How does online autonomous learning Xingwei represent metacognitive ability," *Research on Audio-Visual Education*, vol. 6, pp. 94–103, 2022.
- [14] J. Ho and S. Crookall, "Breaking with Chinese cultural tradition: Learner autonomy in English language teaching," *System*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 235–243, 1995.
- [15] D. Boud, *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning*, New York: Kogan Press, 1998.
- [16] P. Candy, *Self-Direction for Life-Long Learning*, San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
- [17] P. Voller, "Does the teacher have a role in autonomous language learning?" in *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*, P. Benson and P. Voller, Eds., London: Longman, 1997, pp. 98–113.

Copyright © 2024 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License ([CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)), which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided that the article is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.