

## **An Empirical Investigation of Learner Autonomy In Some EFL Classes in China**

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### **Abstract**

The learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) in China is gaining popularity and importance as China opens its doors economically and culturally to the world at large. This has resulted in a flood of Chinese students enrolling in EFL courses at colleges and universities across the country. This paper argues that traditional Chinese teaching methods requiring passive learning are not sufficient to meet this demand, and that encouraging greater learner autonomy greatly assists students to learn efficiently and effectively. The paper begins by providing an overview of the current trends in Chinese Tertiary Education and then exploring current understandings of learner autonomy and the implications of teaching for learning autonomy. The paper will then suggest strategies for fostering learner autonomy in the Chinese context.

The paper looks at an investigation into the benefit of developing learner autonomy and implementing autonomous learning strategies conducted by the Shanxi University of Finance and Economics. This investigation compared the results obtained using either traditional or autonomous teaching approaches with four groups of non-English major undergraduate tertiary students studying EFL at the University. The results of this investigation show autonomous learning strategies result in improved EFL outcomes for this group of students in Chinese tertiary education.

### **Chinese Tertiary Context**

Since opening the door to the outside world, college English teaching in China has made great progress. Remarkable changes and achievements have been made across the country in order to improve tertiary students' English proficiency levels. However, the developments of each university in China are quite different. Chinese students' English proficiency is rather limited. Teaching English as a foreign language in China still leaves much to be desired (Zhou Liuxi, 2003:224).

After studying English for over ten years, most tertiary students continue to find reading English books a difficult task. Understanding oral English, especially English spoken by native speakers, is considered an even tougher task than reading aloud. But, even more difficult, is the job of expressing themselves clearly and fluently in spoken English. Quite a few students who are able to pass the higher-level English examinations with high grades and even obtain the certificates of CET-4 or CET-6 are actually poor at using the language. The teachers of English are often troubled by the complaints, "High grades, low ability" (Yang Min, 2002:9).

Compared to similar cohorts in Western countries most students in China are introverted, and this is due to the impact of Chinese culture. China is bound by a very

strong adherence to Confucian values with a strong emphasis placed on co-operation, 'face' (dignity and honour) and self-effacement. Each of these concepts has had enduring implications for the language teaching classroom. Co-operation and 'face' account for the reason why students prefer not to speak out in open response to questions from the teacher; self-effacement reflects their society's need for modesty and balance and appears to be counter-productive for encouraging 'critical self-awareness'.

Chinese students are active in their minds rather than in their behaviour. This means that even if the answer is known, generally only a small percentage of students will become involved in answering the teacher's questions. Prior to the trialling of autonomous learning, the students involved in this project did not ask the teacher questions. Those who were asked to respond generally tried to speak or read with fluency, clarity and confidence. However, this was something that students did only when they were instructed to do so. Chinese educational authorities have tended to structure classes in such a way that students regard the teacher as the provider of knowledge and the student as the receiver.

The traditional voice of the Chinese educational culture has been one of obedience to authority, that is students were expected to obey, and not challenge; to listen, absorb and then regurgitate when asked (Littlewood, 1996:45). The roots of this style of education are derived from Confucius, Manlius and Shun Tzu, all educators from two thousand years ago.

Since the beginning of EFL in China, the Grammar-Translation Method has had a dominant place in college English teaching. Indeed, many teachers of English still think it practical and effective. Thus, this traditional method has had a long-lasting influence on EFL teaching in China, even after the self explanatorily named Communicative Approach and Cognitive Approach won great popularity throughout the world.

College English teaching in China remains didactic, product-oriented and teacher-centred. Correspondingly, students are frequently passive, dependent and lacking in initiative. They are reluctant to speak in class unless they are sure of their linguistic accuracy. This traditional methodology stems from reliance on a text-based pedagogy. Students study a text by listening as the teacher explains the vocabulary in both their first language and English. The teacher then invites students to read out sections. In the final stage of the lesson, students prepare a small role-play that they act out in front of the class. The teacher chooses the most extroverted to perform.

As almost all the students have been educated through the traditional methods, they are quite passive in their learning. In class they are used to listening to the teachers and taking notes but not anticipating in or asking questions. There is no exchange of information (Yang Xuanyan, 2003). The only response students give is answering questions or reading the text. Teachers primarily pay attention to the linguistic points of English and do not address points concerning learning strategies. As a result, we are faced with a serious situation of "time-consuming, less-effective" English teaching in China. (Li lanqing,1996).

The most recent syllabus released by the Chinese government has set out to take up

the task of challenging the traditional approach. The government has stated that instructions should be designed to be appropriate for students' different levels, and students should be taught according to their aptitude, disposition and interest (The College English Syllabus,1999).The reason for this change agenda is that while there are many differences between tertiary institutions in teaching conditions, teaching staff, and students enrollment levels, but all are faced with the prospect of developing new ways of dealing with the flood of new enrolments.

Since the end 1990s, university enrolment across the country has been expanding annually. This has plunged college English teaching into a new series of problems: including an increasingly severe shortage of teachers, increased class sizes and a widening gap in the proficiency levels of English students. The current teaching ratio of teachers to students is 1:100 and the question must be asked as to whether teachers can undertake teaching on such a scale using traditional methods. It has been clearly indicated that student numbers will continue to increase for the foreseeable future (Zhang Raoxue, 2003). Even key universities have found it necessary to employ graduate students untrained in teaching to conduct EFL lessons, sometimes being required to teach dozens of classes each week. This must clearly result in a great deal of pressure upon such teachers, negatively impacting upon their performance. The best way to make students learn both actively and effectively in such a situation is to challenge the traditional methods that have proved insufficient.

Graded English language teaching (ELT) involves:

- arranging classes according to the students' English level,
- preparing lessons appropriate for each class level,
- adopting appropriate teaching methods in classrooms and reforming the marking mechanisms,
- organizing English quality education activities accordingly,
- fulfilling the objectives of effectively implementing EFL, and
- conscientiously strengthening the students' language application abilities.

Graded ELT meets the varied learning demands of students at different levels. By organizing graded ELT, the students can improve in classes suited to their own needs, and teachers prepare their lectures reflecting the levels of the teaching subjects and adopt appropriate teaching methods.

Chinese tertiary students are required to study English courses for two years with each year divided into two bands (similar to semesters). As a means of assessing these courses, the Chinese Ministry of Education implements what is called the "National College English Test" (CET) - a unified, single course-based and standardised test. The test is structured in accordance with the College English Syllabus studied within regular undergraduate courses of non-English majors. The test itself is divided into two sections namely, College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) and College English Test Band 6(CET-6).

It has been a general practice in Chinese universities that EFL has been taught at progressively more difficult levels, beginning with Band 1 and progressing to Band 4. At the end of English courses from Bands 1, 2 and 3, students are assessed internally and at the completion of the period of Band 4, they take the CET-4. The testing that

occurs as the final assessment of Band 4 is the national CET-4 which is detailed above.

Successful Band 4 students can extend their English studies with Band 6 advanced courses which are assessed in a similar, standardised manner. The only Bands that are formally assessed by standardized test are Bands 4 and 6. There are currently 2,400,000 students taking either CET, 4 or 6 each year. An important aspect of the EFL restructuring program has been the necessity to make adjustments to the way that students are assessed in English competence.

The students of the Shanxi University of Finance and Economics, which conducted this investigation, come from all parts of the country and their English proficiency levels are quite different in both receptive skills and productive skills. A 'one size fits all' approach is not adequate. In order to meet the requirements of the College English Syllabus (1999) with its intention of raising the quality of English teaching, the Foreign Language Faculty of Economics and Trade decided to reform the teaching model to meet the needs of individuals and to give instructions suited to a student's level. It was decided that an investigation would be conducted using the non-English major undergraduates of Grade 2001 to trial this approach. The autonomous learning model was of particular interest to the practice of this university.

## **Concepts of Learner Autonomy**

Over the last 20 years, autonomy in language learning has been a topic of widespread discussion in the West countries. Just as 'communicative' and 'authentic' were the buzzwords of the 1980s, learner autonomy is fast becoming of the strategy of choice in EFL teaching in the 1990s (Broady and Kenning, 1996; Little, 1990). Great progress has been made in the exploration and implementation of the concept of autonomy. However, much less concern has been shown and "little formal academic discussion about learner autonomy" (Wu Hongyun, 2001) has been held in China.

Learner autonomy is defined in many different ways by many different researchers and theorists. Holec (1981: 47), one of the earliest advocates of autonomy in language teaching has defined it as the "ability to take care of one's own learning." This point is developed further by Wenden (1991) who summarizes the issue:

In effect, successful or expert or intelligent learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous.

The concept of autonomy is explained by Littlewood (1996:97) as "learners' ability and willingness to make choices independently". He goes on to elaborate by suggesting that:

[a]bility depends on possessing both knowledge about the alternatives from which choice have to be made and necessary skills for carrying out whatever choices seem most appropriate. Willingness depends on having both the motivation and confidence to take responsibility for the choices required.

The point is emphasized by Littlewood (1996:98) who argues: “Students’ willingness to act independently depends on the level of their motivation and confidence; students’ ability to act independently depends on the level of their knowledge and skills”. It is these latter focus points that are at the centre of the discussion.

As “learner autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner’s psychological reaction to the process and content of learning” (Little, 1990:7). The implication of this approach is that it gives learners an opportunity to select and implement appropriate learning strategies in order to allow them to learn at their own pace. It also gives students an opportunity to play a considerable role in setting the goals of learning, in organizing the learning process, and fulfilling it. Thus, the learning and teaching of EFL maybe considered less than efficient if it is not based on learner-centred approaches and learner autonomy, as suggested by contemporary researchers.

Kelly (1996) discussed the importance of the environments where learning takes place. He said that if materials and classrooms are considered separate entities from personal experience and the immediate application of what is learned, they will not affect overall personal constructs. Camborne (1988: 33) argues that when students are totally immersed in the learning environment and fully engaged in the task they are better able to internalise the meaning of what is being learned. Individuals must be enabled to construct their own private learning spaces according to their needs and fill them with personally meaningful learning material.

Another major influence on the concept of learner autonomy has been the Soviet psychologist Vygotsky. Central to his ideas is the importance of social relationships to the development of mental abilities and learning. A central term in his theory is the ‘zone of proximal development’. The zone of proximal development is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978:86).

This collaborative process is also reflected in natural child development: Little (1991:5) has argued that “[t]he developmental learning that unimpaired small children undergo takes place in interaction with parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, family friends, neighbours and so on”. Education, whether institutionalised or not, if it is to be effective, is likewise an interactive, social process. For most of us, important learning experiences are likely to be remembered at least partly in terms of our relationships with one or more other learners or with a teacher. Vygotsky's approach, then, emphasises that social interaction and collaboration are essential to the learning process. This involves the extensive use of alternative learning environments. When this is facilitated, students are able to collaborate and interact in pairs or larger groups as well as experience new environments that have not been shaped by teacher-centred, non-collaborative classrooms.

Kelly's theory of personal constructs (1996) suggests public spaces could ideally complement the private learning spaces and that external social interaction and internal cognitive interaction are, of course, inseparable and influence each other. The idea that learners need to become aware of and accept responsibility for their learning process is thus extended to include the learning process of their peers.

There is broad agreement in the theoretical literature that learner autonomy grows from the individual learner's acceptance of responsibility for his or her own learning (e.g., Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). The term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways (Benson & Voller, 1997: 2):

- *Situations* in which learners study entirely on their own;
  - A set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
  - An inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education;
  - The exercise of *learners' responsibility* for their own learning;
  - The *right* of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.
- (Adapted from Benson & Voller 1997:1)

Autonomy and autonomous learning are not synonyms with 'self-instruction', 'self-access', 'self-study', 'out-of-class learning' or 'distance learning'. These terms basically describe various ways and degrees of learning by one's self, whereas autonomy refers to the abilities and attitudes (or whatever we think the capacity to control one's own learning consists of). The point is, then, that learning in isolation is not the same as having the capacity to direct one's own learning. These two concepts, however, do not have to exist completely independently, as the ability to be able to work in isolation can play a role in autonomous learning.

## **The Shanxi University of Finance and Economics Investigation**

The Foreign Language Faculty of Economics and Trade organised the investigation to examine the effectiveness of autonomous learning in EFL at the Shanxi University of Finance and Economics. Two teachers and 220 students are involved in the investigation, over a two-year period out using qualitative observations to support the data.

### ***Hypothesis***

In the intensive reading course of College English teaching, the teaching model of autonomous learning arouses students' interest and learning initiative, improves students' learning effectiveness and develops students' autonomous learning capacity compared with the traditional teaching model.

### ***Investigational design***

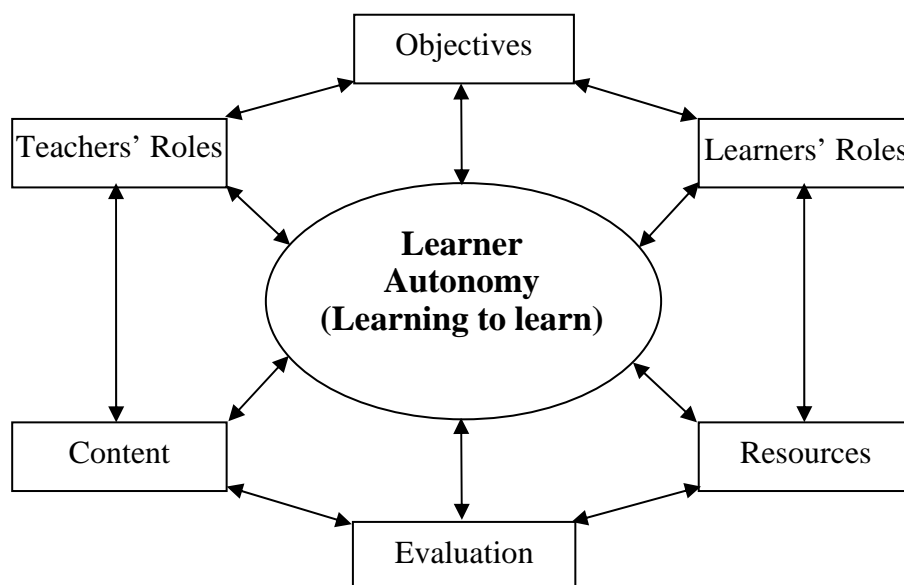
The design of the investigation adopts Candy's (1991: 270) concept of constructivism, which 'leads directly to the proposition that knowledge cannot be taught but only learned (that is, constructed)', because knowledge is something 'built up by the learner' (von Lagerfeld & Smock, 1974: xvi, cited in Candy, 1991: 270).

The general social, political, economic and cultural contexts and features of China are different to those in western countries. In keeping with this understanding, the accepted objectives of teaching are also different and the descriptions of learner autonomy of Western countries does not exactly reflect the situation of most Chinese students. Nevertheless, in the design phase of this investigation, a wide range of Western literature concerning learner autonomy was examined. Consideration was

then given as to how this could be applied within English teaching practice in Chinese contexts. The author considers that learner autonomy in EFL in China should involve the learner:

- taking charge of his/her own learning;
- setting realistic goals and plan programmes of work;
- using learning strategies effectively and develop strategies for coping with new situations;
- creating and making good use of study environments; and
- evaluating and assessing his/her own learning process.

The author, taking into account the theory of Constructivism and exploring the relationships between teachers, students, teaching content and resources, created a visual model of autonomous classroom teaching (Fig. 1). This was done to emphasise the importance of a clear focus for teaching and learning and to provide feedback on the practices in the classroom, the factors of ‘objectives’ and ‘evaluation’ have been included. Learner autonomy has been placed in the model because both the product and source of the actual learning occur within the classroom.



**(Figure 1)**

This model has been designed to help learners develop their communicative competence. Teachers are the organizers of the teaching process and it is their tasks to act as instructors, or more importantly they should become facilitators for improving learner autonomy. This change of role by teachers will enable students to become more active constructors of knowledge; the changed content will then provide the substance of the students’ active construction of new meaning.

Many implications for foreign language education flow from the concept of learner autonomy. For example, the use of small groups--including pairs represents one means of enhancing learner autonomy (Harris & Noyau, 1990; Macaro, 1997).

Nunan (1997) found “encouraging learners to move towards autonomy is best done inside the language classroom”. He proposes five levels to do so:

- awareness: learners are made aware of pedagogical goals, contents and strategies;
- involvement: learners are actively involved in the learning;
- intervention: learners are encouraged to modify and adapt their goals, learning styles and strategies;
- creation: learners set up their own goals and plans for self-directed learning;
- transcendence: learners move beyond classroom setting for independent learning.

For the teacher who wishes to promote opportunities for students to become more autonomous learners, there are many positive strategies which can be adopted.

In this investigation, from the very beginning, the teacher’s roles and students’ roles are introduced to the students. Teachers must first provide students with appropriate tools and with opportunities to practise using them, i.e. teachers have to facilitate the change. The presupposition here is that teachers are willing to change and shift their roles in the classroom from information providers to facilitators, shifting from ‘teaching knowledge-based’ to ‘supervising students learning-based’, from ‘a protagonist’ on the stage to ‘a director’ behind the scenes, becoming students’ director of knowledge-constructivism.

If autonomous learning is to succeed, teachers have to be prepared to accept their new roles in classrooms. Voller (1997) identifies three roles for teachers working on an autonomous pedagogy:

- the teacher as facilitator;
- the teacher as counsellor, and
- the teacher as resource.

How will the roles of a facilitator be fulfilled in the classroom? One possible Solution is to “promote learner autonomy through the curriculum” (Catterall, 2000), i.e. to make it an important and explicit goal of a learning programme and to integrate the principles of autonomy into:

- the learning goal;
- the learning process;
- tasks;
- learner strategies; and
- reflection on learning.

If the classroom is a stage in theatre, the students are the actors. Students are active constructors of knowledge through experience and opportunities to discover and

enquire. This implies students are co-learners, using available knowledge through interaction with others in socially significant tasks of collaborative work.

Students are encouraged to be interdependent and to work collaboratively, the fewer students depend on their teacher the more autonomous they will become. Collaborative learning is an educational approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of students working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. According to Gerlach, "Collaborative learning is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social act in which the participants talk among themselves. It is through the talk that learning occurs." (Gerlach, 1994:28).

Group work is used to help students individualize instruction, promote a positive effective climate, and above all motivate learners to learn. Due to Chinese classroom situations such as over-crowding, fixed furniture, and entrenched student attitudes, the class as may be taught as a whole group, work on their own, or perform tasks in pairs or groups according to the learning content. In pairs or groups, students can read dialogues together, do information-gap activities and consult each other on the meaning and clarification of the task at hand.

Students are encouraged to record their learning process with introspective/self-search methods. Students should be able to know their learning better by doing this, and start to consider how to become an autonomous learner. Students write down their learning experiences regularly noting their own successes and failures, and analyse the reasons. After a while, the teacher may help students analyse their learning situation according to their past experiences, and make appropriate suggestions. This method is beneficial to increasing to know their learning strategies and meanwhile they can realize the necessity of assessment of their learning goals and outcomes. "Without such a realization learners may come into their original conceptive and action model without such a realization so that they will never become real autonomous learners" (Wenden, 1998:?).

The teacher requires a clear picture of each student's learning situation. If the teacher does not know the student's actual abilities, level and background, no matter how warm-hearted he is, his aimless instruction will miss the point (Yang & Zhao, 1989). The best way to raise the efficiency of one's teaching is to know one's students well, know what they are lacking and how to help them overcome this. To assist the teachers in this process, the author surveyed students at the first class. Each received a seven-question questionnaire concerning their educational background, their present competence of English listening, speaking, reading and writing.

In developing learner autonomy, the teacher-student relationship is crucial. The trust and cooperation between the teacher and the students makes the students feel comfortable and secure in the classroom. Only then can the students have the confidence to adventure in language learning (Celce-Murcia & McIntosh, 1979). The distance between the teacher and the students is shortened through face-to-face talks. During the intervals, the teacher and the students chat freely just as good friends do. In class, the students are fully involved in the teaching activities and the teaching atmosphere is very harmonious and light.

The students are encouraged to use only English in class. This is a great chance for them to use only English and few opportunities exist for this. Part of the role of the

language teacher is to create an environment where students feel they should communicate in the target language and feel comfortable doing so. Heavy reliance on the students' native language may sidetrack efforts to reach optimal levels of the target language in the classroom.

The final strategy used is to raise the students' "awareness of strategy use" and help students to reflect on the way they learn, by giving them strategies for dealing with different kinds of activities and problems and offering them different learning-style alternatives to choose from. In class the students are presented with the teaching aim on the blackboard and the students were encouraged to ask questions about the texts and their materials, to take responsibility for their own learning and to pay more attention to their process of learning rather than products of learning. It is said that the new illiterate are those who don't know how to learn. As the old Chinese proverb says: "Give a man a fish, he can eat for one day. Teach him how to fish, he will benefit for a life-time."

### ***Research Approach: Contrastive investigation***

The Foreign Language Faculty of Economics and Trade organized students to attend the English graded test with co-operation of the Office of Academic Affairs when the undergraduate students of Grade 2001 enrolled in the university. According to the results of the overall grades, (Test results are 60% and results of College entrance examination are 40%), students are divided into high-level Class A and average-level Class B.

The students in Class A start to learn from College English Band 2, from the first term to the fourth term studying College English Band 2 to Band 5. There are four class hours every week for Band 2 to Band 5. The content of College English Band One is learned by students themselves, key points and difficult points are explained and answered in class by the teacher of a class. Students are required to attend CET-4 at the end of the third term and those who have passed CET-4 may attend CET-6 at the end of the fourth term.

The students in Class B start to learn from College English Band 1, from the first term to the fourth term studying College English Band 1 to Band 4. There are four class hours every week for Band 1 to Band 4. Students are required to attend CET-4 at the end of the fourth term.

In this investigation, two classes were chosen at random from nine higher-level classes. One higher-level class was referred to as Class A1, and the other higher-level class investigated as Class A2. The same process was used to choose participants from the average-level students, resulting in Class B1 and Class B2. The population of the study comprised of 220 non-English major undergraduates of Grade 2001.

Experimental groups A1 and B1 were taught by facilitating autonomous learning and the Control groups A2 and B2 received lessons based on the traditional teaching model in which the teacher did not develop students' autonomous learning.

To support the investigations, findings and give a qualitative illustration of the differences created between the autonomous learning and control group classes, qualitative data were collected. This was done by means of the teachers regularly

describing the nature of the learning environments in their classrooms to the researcher.

## **Data**

Data were collected at the end of the first academic year (see *Appendix 1*). After one and a half academic years, the groups sat the CET-4 organized by “National College English Examination Committee of Band 4/6” in January 2003. At the end of the fourth term, those who had not passed CET-4 sat CET-4 again. The overall passing rate of CET-4 of the autonomous learning groups and control groups is shown in Table 1.

### ***The independent variable:***

Two different teaching models are involved in the research: Teaching model of autonomous learning and traditional teaching model.

### ***The dependent variable:***

The test marks of the third term; Marks of National College English Test Band 4 when the investigation was finished.

### ***Reliability and Validity***

The overall results of every term include students’ attendance, performance in class, homework, and final exam. According to the teacher’s record, the three aspects are 100% and students’ final exam is 90% of final examination results

To control for the possible contaminating variable of existing academic ability upon the ability of students to function in an autonomous learning environment, both the higher-level and average-level student groups were included in the investigation. An autonomous learning and control group was selected from each level creating four groups in total.

The higher-level autonomous learning group was referred to as Class A1 and the higher-level control group as Class A2. This was done to ensure that the autonomous learning groups and control groups were as similar in their English proficiency levels as possible at the commencement of their studies. The same process was used to choose participants from the average-level students, resulting in Class B1 (autonomous learning group) and Class B2 (control group).

This was a blind study. Students were unaware throughout the investigational phase that they were taking part in an investigation. This was done to avoid the possibility of students intentionally or unintentionally altering their study habits or other behaviour due to their awareness that they were being studied themselves.

Classes A1 and A2 were taken by the same teacher, and B1 and B2 were taken by a second teacher. This was to prevent individual differences in teaching style contaminating the results within each ability level. These two teachers also have similarities in age, record of formal schooling, teaching experiences and a similar level of dedicated professionalism.

All groups worked from the same textbook. This book was *College English* published by the Shanghai Foreign Education Publish House. All groups received four class

hours each week. The text book was progressed through at the same rate in each class, and almost the same number of assignments was given after class.

The amount of time that students spent studying outside class was a variable that could not be directly controlled during the investigational phase. At the end of every term, however, the teachers investigated the average time that the students spent studying out of class so as to take this into consideration during the analysis of the results.

### ***Procedure for data analysis***

The research does some analysis of the data that the investigation obtained with statistical software SPSS10.0. By using a set of independent samples “t-test”, the investigational groups and control groups are compared at their respective levels in listening, speaking, reading and writing. The purpose is to examine if there are some differences and if there exist outstanding differences when two groups of samples accepted the classroom teaching model of autonomous learning and traditional teaching model. Statistical results of the 2-tailed test of the samples are indicated as Table 1:

Table 1: The total results of the third and the fourth CET-4

Investigational samples	Students numbers	Average marks of CET-4 results	Standard Deviation	Passing rate of CET-4 results	t value	p value (2-tailed)
Class A1	55	76.50	8.20	94.6%	3.12	0.002
Class A2	55	71.30	9.15	85.4%		
Class B1	55	68.56	9.30	79.5%	3.58	0.000
Class B2	55	63.20	9.89	68.4%		

Note: Class A1 is higher-level autonomous learning group  
 Class A2 is higher-level control group  
 Class B1 is average-level autonomous learning group  
 Class B2 is average-level control group

By examining t-distribution table, (Deg-freedom is 108), the “highly significant (0.05), critical value is 2.000. The t-values obtained by using t-test were 3.12 and 3.58, both >2.000. The p-values of 0.002 and 0.000 clearly indicate that no difference hypothesis can be rejected and there are significant differences between CET-4 scores of autonomous learning groups and those of control groups.

The teachers reported that there was no significant difference between the autonomous learning groups and control groups for time that students spent studying outside class time. Therefore, this variable was not factored into the results.

### **Association of Findings in relation to the Literature**

Through the classroom observations of developing learner autonomy in groups A1 and B1 over two years, the investigation found that most of students could take charge of their own learning. Students’ motivation to study was aroused and most of them volunteered to find appropriate reading materials to read and to persist in listening to the radio station in their spare time every day. They could take an active part in all

kinds of activities outside class, such as English speech contests, English corner and English singing contests at the university.

Students have become used to some learning strategies. Everybody made his/her own detailed everyday timetable for study and activities. Students realized that, in the area of foreign language learning, an increased awareness of the learning process is very important so they paid more attention to process than product of study and took an active role in class activities such as in pairs and small groups.

From the analysis of the students' CET-4 (standardised test) results of the third term and the fourth term, the outcomes of autonomous learning groups were shown to be higher than those of control groups. The classroom teaching model of autonomous learning was shown to be superior to the traditional teaching model for both the higher-level students and the average-level students.

This investigation supports the concepts that autonomous learning is also by no means "teacher-less learning." As Sheerin (1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 63) succinctly states, teachers 'have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and in helping them to stay afloat'. In this investigation, we found that it is a great change for both teachers and learners. Teachers are no longer in their dominant position as speakers in class while learners are not passive receivers any more. However, it does not necessarily mean teachers are less important. On the contrary, the teachers' job is more demanding and challenging in helping students grow up as creative and independent learners. Teachers must focus their attention on how to learn instead of how to teach. They must play different role in class as guides, facilitators and anticipators. In order to make students become learner autonomy teachers must become teacher- learner autonomy first.

This investigation supports the view that developing some degree of autonomy is essential if learners are to become effective language users (see Littlewood, 1996; Nunan, 1997; Breen, 1984). This view is most succinctly summarised by Knowles, (1975: 34). "There is a convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught" The results of this project support the existing literature that learner autonomy will result in enhanced students' outcomes. It is without doubt the best way to reach our educational goal.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of the process of cultivating learner autonomy, it was found that when students did become more autonomous learners, their self-confidence in conversing in English Language has improved. Furthermore, students recognised that in order to be autonomous learners they need to learn how to collaborate with others. Students became more aware of pedagogical goals, content and strategies and they became much more actively involved in the learning. Students set up their own goals and plans for self-directed learning, and move beyond classroom setting for independent learning.

The students at SUFE, who have become autonomous learners will, surely, be a great asset to China. They will not only have learned language skills but will also have

developed the capacity to think and be independent. Yet, despite the success of this investigation, promoting and facilitating learner autonomy in China will not always be an easy task. Indeed, learner autonomy does offer a challenge to both education providers and the community. Since the newly autonomous learners will be recognised as an asset to the country they do, at the same time, challenge well established cultural norms in education.

In China it will sometimes be difficult to proceed swiftly in promoting autonomy in the classroom. However, this investigation has demonstrated that we seem to be moving in an appropriate direction, towards “an essential goal for all learning” (Cotterall, 2000) the achievement of personal autonomy in scholarship. Nevertheless, and despite the positive results in this investigation, it will not always prove easy to develop learner autonomy in the singular context of the Chinese cultural environment.

This investigation seems to suggest that EFL teachers in China should concentrate on developing students’ positive attitudes towards becoming autonomous learners. Indeed, staff must be supportive and encouraging if students are to gain the confidence to take charge of their own learning. Thus, teachers who are aware of the need for cultivating students’ capacity for autonomous learning must also create a supportive environment in which teachers address the need for new and different assessment procedures in the learning process. Most importantly, adjusting the teacher’s and students’ roles, and establishing proper relationship are the keys to the success of promoting autonomous learning.

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## **Appendix 1:** The Questionnaire for English Learning

**Section A:** *It is important that your responses are honest and serious with respect to your learning experiences. Please read each of the statements below and circle the response which best describes how you are feeling right now.*

1. What is your attitude to learner autonomy?
  - a. Learners should be as autonomous as possible, and teachers should ensure this autonomy
  - b. Only partial learners' autonomy is possible and the teacher should decide what the learners do independently.
  - c. Only partial learners' autonomy is possible and the learner should decide what to do independently.
2. What do you think of learner-centred training
  - a. very necessary
  - b. necessary
  - c. not very necessary
3. What pattern do you prefer in your learning EFL?
  - a. learner-centred
  - b. teacher-centred
  - c. learner-centred plus teacher's facilitation
4. Which type of teacher-learner relationship do you think to be the most suitable in EFL?
  - a. teacher knows better (the teacher should choose the goals, contents, methods of teaching/learning)
  - b. learner knows better (learners should choose the goals, contents, methods of teaching/learning)
  - c. a compromised one(all decision are made on the basis of teacher-learner agreement and negotiations)
5. What are the main goals you get for yourself in LEFL?
  - a. for communication
  - b. for general development
  - c. for future job or specialty
  - d. for exams and tests
6. How do you think English should be taught in EFL?
  - a. communicative skilled should be taught from the very beginning
  - b. basic forms(grammar and vocabulary) should be taught all the time
  - c. both a and b
7. Which of the following activities do you think may arouse your interests in English study?
  - a. pair work
  - b. group discussion
  - c. having debates
  - d. other suggestions
8. What did your English study mainly focus on?
  - a. the mastery of grammar rules and recitation of vocabulary
  - b. communication skills
  - c. comprehension skills
  - d. writing skills

9. Do you prepare your lessons before English class?
  - a. Often
  - b. sometimes
  - c. never
10. How do you attend English class?
  - a. be attentive
  - b. be often absent-minded?
  - c. have no interest
11. What is your performance in English class?
  - a. listen to the teacher
  - b. think over and sometimes look up the dictionary
  - c. follow the teacher and answer questions
12. When there is an assignment task, I usually:
  - a. get it done soon according to the requirement
  - b. take a perfunctory attitude
  - c. copy others'
13. Do you have any after-class activities concerning English learning?
  - a. Sometimes
  - b. Seldom
  - c. Often
14. What is the problem that hinders your communication with English native speakers?
  - a. Vocabulary
  - b. Timidity
  - c. You can not speak fluent and standard English
15. What is the percentage of time you spend in English learning?
  - a. About 80%
  - b. 60%
  - c. 50%
16. How much do the teacher's teaching methods affect your English study?
  - a. No effect
  - b. Have some effect
  - c. Much effect
17. Comparing with the past, your interests of English class are
  - a. falling a little
  - b. no difference
  - c. aroused a lot
18. Do you think paying attention to the learning process?
  - a. not important
  - b. important
  - c. very important
19. Did you find any changes in teacher's teaching model Compared with the past?
  - a. no change
  - b. obvious changes
  - c. great changes
20. What's the main problem in English teaching?
  - a. Poor teachers' quality and their poor responsibility
  - b. Out-of-dated teaching method
  - c. Poor teaching facilities

**Section B:** *It is important that your handwritten comments in this section are constructive in relation to teaching and learning issues.*

21. Which do you think is more important, listening and speaking, or reading and writing, or idioms and culture? List your reasons briefly.
22. What is the most difficult problem in your learning of English?
23. What are your final goals of learning English? Why?
24. How do you think of the classroom activities the teacher has employed?
25. What are the teacher's roles and what are students' roles in teaching/learning English?