

## **Pedagogical Suggestions on Boosting Learner autonomy in China**

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### **Abstract**

*Educators have argued convincingly that schooling cannot prepare students with all contingencies in a constantly changing world. Instead of spoon-feeding students with a static body of knowledge, teachers need to raise students' consciousness as their center of learning and train them how to learn in order to make them responsible for their own learning. In our classrooms, due to the overbearing influence of the traditional teaching methods in China, most students don't have the self-direction to organize their studies. They don't even know what they are expected to do before and after class unless it is made explicit. Therefore, it becomes excessively urgent that learner autonomy should be developed to meet the demand. This paper intends to provide some pedagogical suggestions on boosting learner autonomy in China, including raising students' awareness; building self-confidence; enforcing strategy training, and endowing teachers with new roles, etc.*

**Key words:** learner autonomy; definition; status quo; pedagogical suggestions

### **1. Introduction.**

Since the term autonomy was put forward by Holec in the 1980s [1], it has taken on a growing importance in the field of education. Nowadays, developments in technology and society have made an undeniable contribution to the spread of autonomy. The tape-recorder, the fast-copiers, the photocopiers, magazine, newspapers, faxes, and the computer, all these provide a rich variety of tools and techniques for the implementation of autonomous learning. By the internet, learners can gain access to rich resources of learning materials and communicate with people all over the world. The rapid development of science and

technology as well as the quick changes of the society makes knowledge modified at an ever-increasing speed. To adapt to the quickly changing circumstances and keep up with the latest development in their own fields and others, learners should never stop learning. Hence, teaching students how to learn by themselves is of great significance for education. According to Rogers (1969) [2], only when people know how to learn and how to adapt to the changing circumstances and adjust themselves accordingly, can we say that they are educated. The purpose of school education should not be confined to imparting knowledge. Therefore, promoting learner autonomy should be the ultimate goal of education. Boud (1988) points out that a fundamental purpose of education is assumed to develop an individual's ability to make his/her own decisions about what he/she thinks and does [3]. From the 1970s, especially with the information age coming, it becomes less possible for teachers to teach students everything in class. It is more essential for teachers to enhance students' autonomy. The information explosion, information technology and increasing student numbers may not only mean integration within the traditional classroom-based teaching, but also the complete re-assessment of the mode of delivery of education generally. Institutions could become total providers of autonomous learning and the traditional classroom could disappear entirely in some institutions. What is critical is the recognition that alongside the organization changes there must be an appropriate methodology which directs those changes and ensures their success.

## **2. Definition of learner autonomy**

For defining autonomy, the most frequently cited one is found in Holec' (1981) report to the Council of Europe, where autonomy is defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". To take charge of one's learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the aspects of this learning, i.e.: determining the objective; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking; evaluating what has been acquired. On a general note, the term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways (Benson & Voller, 1997) [4]:

1. for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institution education;

4. for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
5. for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

So for Holec, learner autonomy is a capacity to make decisions at successive stage of the learning process. The autonomous learner is able to direct the course of his/her own learning by making all the significant decisions concerning its management and organization. Also, in David Little's words, autonomy is "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails that learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed in the way learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider context" (Little,1991) [5]. In this definition, the capacity to take responsibility for one's own learning is described in terms of control over the cognitive processes involved in effective self-management of learning, so Little's definition is complementary to Holec's, but adds a vital psychological dimension that is often absent in definitions of autonomy. Dickson (1987) characterized the learner autonomy as a "situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decision concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions" [6]. For Houttunen (1986), a fully autonomous learner is one who can work individually or in a group, taking responsibility for the planning, monitoring and evaluating his studies [7]. Nunan (1997) described the autonomy as "a situation in which the learner is not only responsible for all of the decisions concerned with learning, but also for the implementation of those decisions. The fully autonomous learner therefore operates independently of classroom, teachers or textbook"[8]. From the definition mentioned above, we can find that autonomy manifests itself in different ways and different perspective. Generally speaking, autonomy is a capacity to make decision as to what, why and how to learn, to implement the plan and evaluate the learning outcome and should be in charge of learners themselves without being subject to the will of others.

### **3. The status quo of learner autonomy in China**

Over the past centuries in China, traditional teacher-centered teaching method in education was prevalent. Teachers paid more attention to their teaching tactics, but overlooking the learning of students. Compared with the western method of learning, Chinese method is more teacher-centered, expecting students to rely on teachers to tell them rather than discover

things for themselves. Mainstream education in China is tremendously strict and rigid, demanding that children attend lessons and follow a national curriculum. This curriculum and the importance of achieving good exam results tend to reinforce a more teacher-centered approach, as both teachers and students find the time leaves less opportunity for an exploratory approach to learning. Too many teacher-directed activities cannot be expected to effectively assist children in learning because of the rigid structure. As for the role of teacher, students exhibit a high degree of teacher-dependence. According to my survey, a fairly high percentage of students expect the teacher to tell them exactly what to do, where their learning difficulties are, what progress they are making and to evaluate their learning. Chinese students lack knowledge of metacognitive strategies. Most of them are not good at setting goals, monitoring learning progress and evaluating learning outcomes, and especially weak at measuring their own learning progress. Chinese students measure their learning progress mainly according to different kinds of exams. However, examination results can only partly account for their learning efficiency. Students need to frequently do some self-test activities to evaluate and summarize their learning so that they can take better control of their learning progress.

#### **4. Pedagogic suggestions**

However, in the last years of the twenties century, changes in society influenced the goals of education. Generally, the goal of current education is to enhance learner autonomy and cultivate their overall quality so as to enable them to survive successfully in the society. Thus learner-centered approach has been advocated replacing the traditional teacher-centered approach. Learners are no longer passive “recipients” but assumed to be responsible for their own leaning activities. It is more essential for teachers to enhance students’ autonomy. Teachers need to emphasize the qualities that make each student special. Students are seldom expected to memorize information; instead, they are encouraged to think for themselves, find answers on their own and come up with individual solutions. At an early age, students learn to form their own ideas and opinions, and to express their ideas in class discussion.

##### **4.1 Raising students’ awareness of autonomy**

It is most important job for teachers to raise students’ awareness of autonomy. We know that no matter how well teachers perform in fulfilling their role, it is students themselves who

constitute the decisive factor in their ultimate learning outcome. Therefore teachers should help students with the responsibility for their own learning progress. They must be able to make choices, be self-pacing and often be self-testing. In a word, it is of importance for students to develop autonomy in their learning.

Students should be provided with enough knowledge of learner autonomy including the necessities of autonomous learning and the essence of it. Teachers should help students absorb the principles of learner autonomy gradually. Since autonomy was defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981) and this ability is not something people are born with, learners have to be taught how to determine their own needs, goals, ways of learning and how to assess their own learning progress. Just as Sinclair (1999) points out that “without an explicit and conscious awareness of the processes involve in learning a language, learners will not be in a position to make informed decisions about their own learning.”[9] In order to raise students’ awareness, teachers need to help students develop both cognitive and metacognitive strategies as follows:

Personal awareness: self-concept, self-esteem and self-direction; awareness of the learning progress: progress management and Task awareness.

By this way, teachers can make students aware of the learning progress and help them find ways suit their needs best and eventually foster their autonomy.

#### **4.2 Building up learners self-confidence**

Self-confidence is a significant motivational factor in learning and may strongly enhance or inhibit learner autonomy. Therefore, it’s crucial to build up learner’s confidence in their ability to work independently of the teacher. This aim can be achieved through the following key steps:

1) Matching tasks to students’ ability. In class, tasks assigned to students need to be adapted to their present level and ability; teachers should try to convince students that the task is not as difficult as they think, and try to arouse their interest and help them build up self-confidence.

2) Setting clear, specific and achievable learning goals. In the learning process, tasks assigned to students should be specific and could be accomplished easily by students; otherwise, students may feel confused and depressed, thus losing their self-confidence.

3) Encouraging students as often as possible. Encouragement can create a supportive and motivational learning environment within which students feel at ease and self-confident. So teachers should inspire students as often as possible no matter how little progress they are making. They should never be criticized and derided when they commit an error.

#### **4.3 Enforcing learning strategy training**

“In formal educational contexts, learners do not automatically accept responsibility for their learning and will not find it easy to reflect critically on the learning progress” (Little, 1995)[10], so teachers must give students more instructions of learning strategy to enable them to plan and monitor their learning, evaluating their learning efficiently, and provide them with opportunities to practice using them, finally become more autonomous by developing their own individualized strategy system. After offering learners opportunities to practice a set of strategies, learners should be encouraged to use strategies independently and promote learner autonomy by helping learners take responsibility for the selection, use, evaluation of various strategies that they have been taught.

Each step in this training approach can make learners be aware of the strategies they use and be able to exert appropriate strategies; learners have a chance to practice, use, and transfer strategies, and engage in self-monitoring and evaluating strategies.

The most important point teachers should make sure, before any strategy training, that training is conducted in accordance with learner’s needs, expectations and their situations of learner autonomy. That is, before training, it is necessary to make some investigations into the situation of learner autonomy.

#### **4.4 Endowing teachers with new roles in fostering learner autonomy**

In traditional mode of teaching, there were two main roles which teachers perform. The first is that of knower: the teacher is a source of knowledge. In other words, the teacher is a figure of authority who decides on what should be learned and how this should best be learned. The second role is that of activity organizer: the teacher sets up and steers learning activities in the right direction, motivates and encourages students, and provides authoritative feedback on students’ performance.

In learner-centered approach, in addition to these two roles, teachers will need to assume a further role, that of learning counselor. Counselor is a person whose job is to give advice to

people who need it (Voller, 1997) [11]. In concrete, there are five main functions that teachers may perform as counselor:

1) Preparing learner: teachers should help students develop awareness as a learner, self-awareness of learning goals, etc. This will generally involve the teacher making suggestions and providing students with information, such as learning strategies or study options. More importantly, the teacher has to help students to look at themselves and learn in an open and constructive manner.

2) Analyzing learner needs: A learner-centered approach to needs analysis and goal setting asks two things of the teacher. One is to assess how much students have to contribute as this varies a lot between students; and the other is to help students to formulate their insights in a pedagogically useful form.

3) Selecting methodology: Learner-centeredness in choice of methodology is more complex than in goal-setting. Adopting a learner-centered approach to choice of methodology will generally operate in two stages: first, the teacher must get to know students on a number of counts, though in particular with respect to their preferred learning style and their attitudes to or experience of learning; the second stage involves students participating actively in the planning of their learning program.

4) Transferring responsibility: This does not mean that responsibility is wholly transferred to the students. Teachers remain ultimately responsible for ensuring that effective learning takes place. Assessing how much, and which areas of responsibility to transfer to students is a key aspect of the teacher's role.

5) Involving learners: Teachers draw up a list of the decisions that students have to make, and then select from this list where their students seem most likely to be able to make a sensible contribution to decision-making.

## **5. Conclusion**

Generally, learners are considered as passive receptacles to be filled with knowledge in China. The teacher has a "jug" of knowledge to pour into the student's "mug". If teachers view their learners just as receptacles, they will adopt methods which mainly involve knowledge transmission, neglecting learners' expression of productiveness and self-actualization. Students do not favor classes in which they sit passively learning. The teacher must consider

students' desire for self-actualization, acknowledging each of them as an independent entity and a separate and autonomous individual (Maslow, 1970)[12] by involving them in decisions, affecting their learning---getting them to take responsibility for their own learning process, and to constantly develop learning skills. Researches have proved that “learner are even capable of being involved in planning, organizing, and managing and evaluating their own learning” (Dam & Gabrielson, 1988) [13]. It's widely acknowledged that spoon-feeding does students more harm than good, therefore, it's time to take a strong stance and initiate a change towards autonomous learning in China.

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