

## Autonomy in EFL Education

### AUTONOMIE DANS L'ÉDUCATION D'EFL

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#### Abstract

This paper probes into the prospect of introducing learner autonomy and teacher autonomy in the context of EFL education. Starting with some basic definitions of autonomy, learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, the paper explores the roles played by both learner and teacher in the process of cultivating autonomy and presents eight practical stages in the integration of learner autonomy and teacher autonomy in order to carry the point of being autonomous in EFL education.

**Key words:** Learner autonomy; Teacher autonomy; EFL education

#### Résumé

Cet sondes texte de la perspective de l'introduction de l'autonomie des apprenants et de l'autonomie des enseignants dans le contexte de l'éducation d'EFL. En commençant par quelques définitions de base de l'autonomie de l'apprenant, et l'autonomie des enseignants, le document examine le rôle joué par des apprenants et des enseignants dans le processus de cultiver l'autonomie et présente huit étapes pratiques dans l'intégration de l'autonomie des apprenants et de l'autonomie des enseignants en vue de porter le point d'être autonome dans l'éducation EFL.

**Mots clés:** Autonomie de l'apprenant; Autonomie des enseignants; Education d'EFL

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#### INTRODUCTION

In 1960's, with the furious debates about the development of life-long learning skills and independent thinking, the concept "autonomous learning" occurred. From then on, many researchers gave their understandings towards this term, such as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning"(Holec, 1981); "situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his/her learning and the implementation of those decisions"(Dickinson, 1987); "a recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems"(Benson, 1997) and so on. Over the past 25 years, autonomy has been a popular focus for discussion and increasingly influential in foreign Language education. And most research is concentrated on learner autonomy, while teacher autonomy has been seriously neglected. But recently, researcher and experts have realized that to enhance learner autonomy, we must enhance teacher autonomy (e.g., Benson 2000; Little 1995; Little, Ridley & Ushioda 2003; McGrath 2000; Thavenius 1999), teacher autonomy is now recognized as an important factor that affects the development of learner autonomy in English education.

#### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

##### 1.1 Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy, as a subject for research and as an educational goal, has gained a lot of traction in recent years. It is often believed that autonomy is sustained learning that could attain long-term success. In general, there is now a broader awareness of the importance of developing language and autonomous learning skills in addition to the language competencies. In order to take charge of one's own learning, learners are supposed to

have ability and to hold responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning. Holec (1981) sees the ability and responsibility as operating in five main areas which are crucial to the practice of autonomy. They are: (1) determining objectives, (2) defining content and progressions, (3) selecting methods and techniques to be used, (4) monitoring procedure of acquisition and (5) evaluating what has happened. Littlewood (1996) highlights the independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions. This capacity comprises learners' ability and willingness which assume responsibility for their learning to be the core of the notion of autonomy and that "willingness depends both on the motivation and the confidence to take responsibility for the choices required". Little (1996) argues that learner autonomy grows out of the individual's acceptance of his or her own responsibility for learning. The learner is regarded as a decision-maker who has or will develop the capacity for choosing from among available tools and resources to create what is needed for the task in hand (Holec 1985; Little 1991; Dickinson 1995). Viewing from their points of view, motivations and necessary skills are regarded as key points to the success of the development of learner autonomy.

## 1.2 Teacher Autonomy

In order to improve learner autonomy, some "learner training" or dedicated strategy instruction should be carried out in contact with the idea of autonomy and some appropriate skills in the language course. In EFL classroom, English teacher is likely to have a major impact on students' development towards autonomy. Teacher autonomy has been defined as the ability to improve one's own teaching through one's own efforts (Lamb & Reinders, 2008). It is usually conceived of as including the ability to understand the students' learning needs and the ability to support them in their development towards autonomy.

McGrath (2000) identifies two different but related dimensions of teacher autonomy: teacher autonomy as self-directed professional action or development; and teacher autonomy as freedom from control by others. The two dimensions are mutually constitutive: in order to be self-directed, teachers need to have freedom from control by others; in order to be free from control, teachers need to be self-directed.

Smith (2003) defines teacher autonomy in two independent but interrelated domains: domains of teaching and (teacher-) leaning, which broadens the concept of teacher autonomy to integrate teacher autonomy and teacher-learner autonomy. His framework reflects the multidimensional nature of teacher autonomy as shown in blow.

Dimensions of teacher autonomy (adapted from Smith, 2003)

In relation to professional action: Domain of teaching

A. Self-directed professional action (= "self-directed teaching")

B. Capacity for self-directed professional action (= "Teacher autonomy (I)")

C. Freedom from control over professional action (= "Teacher autonomy (II)")

In relation to professional development: Domain of teacher-learning

D. Self-directed professional development (= "self-directed teacher-learning")

E. Capacity for self-directed professional development (= "Teacher-learner autonomy (I)")

F. Freedom from control over professional development ("Teacher-learner autonomy (II)")

## 2. INTEGRATION OF LEARNER AND TEACHER AUTONOMY

### 2.1 Learners' Role

Since we believe that learner has the power to take charge of his own learning, he/she is supposed to make his/her plan, to implement the plan, to monitor, organize and assess his/her implementation, to make adjustment so as to form a new plan. In this way, an autonomous cycle has been formed.

In order to foster autonomy, learners should be equipped with two basic factors: willingness and capability.

Firstly, learners should have desire to take responsibility for their learning, such as setting learning tasks, selecting learning method, and evaluating learning process, etc. We often conclude that desire to learn as motivation. Language learners should find the suitable ways to motivate their desire to learn by promoting positive language-related values and attitudes (Dornyei, 2001).

It involves three value dimensions: intrinsic value, integrative values and instrumental value. Brophy (1999) once argues that the curiosity is inherent for students and the learning process should be enjoyable and intrinsic pleasure. At the same time, language learning is influenced by society and culture. If a learner wants to learn effectively, he/she must be exposed to everything that has connection with that language, such as culture, literature, traditional customs and native speakers, which falls into the scope of integrative values. As to instrumental value, it is related to the practical benefits that the mastery of the target language will produce, such as getting a better job; earning more money; going abroad to study (Dornyei, 2001).

Secondly, at the practical level, autonomous learner requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to proactive in self-management and in interaction with others. To specific, Wenden (1998) concludes seven roles of autonomous learners in aspect of language learning: 1).Autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies; 2). Autonomous

learners take an active approach to the learning task at hand; 3). Autonomous learners are willing to take risks, i.e. to communicate in the target language at all costs; 4). Autonomous learners are good guessers; 5). Autonomous learners attend to form as well as content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriateness; 6). Autonomous learners develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; 7). Autonomous learners have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

## 2.2 Teachers' Role

There are two aspects of teacher autonomy: teacher's ability to make decisions about teaching and their own professional development; and a set of teaching skills relevant for developing autonomy. As to EFL education, we often discuss the latter role that a teacher should take on in order to improve the ability to understand the students' learning needs and support them in their development towards autonomy.

Wright (1987) believes that the teachers' roles are multiple in autonomous learning situations. Besides transmitting language knowledge, teachers should carry on more responsibilities in the process of language education, such as counselors, facilitators, coordinators, organizers, assessors and even resource. Gardner & Miller (2002) concludes EFL teachers' roles from the aspect of management as counselors, assessors, evaluators, material developers, administrators, organizers and leaders and so on. In this sense, in the process of promoting and helping students' autonomous study, English teachers are supposed to help students establish study goals, choose the learning content and progress, select the learning method and strategy, monitor the learning process and evaluate the learning effect.

## 2.3 Interplay between Learner and Teacher Autonomy

With the development of learner-centered models of language learning, it does not simply diminish teacher responsibilities (Arnold 1999), but rather reorient teacher roles to share out the power with learners and to give them opportunities to take greater control over their learning (Dickinson 1996). Although most adult students are conscious that learning is learners' own responsibility and they are willing to take responsibility for their own learning. They have confidence in learning English well through their own efforts. At the same time in the real practice of autonomy, they also call for teacher's guidance, encouragement, monitoring, cooperation and so on.

There is a framework for self-directed learning developed by one of the authors (Reinders, 2010). This includes eight stages in the self-directed learning process (see Figure 1). These stages are iterative; they form a cycle that repeats and builds on itself. Both learners and

teachers will be involved in the process of building up the self-directed learning during which they are interplayed with each other to foster their reflection, motivation and interaction in order to enhance the ability of autonomy. They are widely considered to be the key skills learners need to be able to self-direct their learning. We will focus on the more practical skills involved in the development of autonomy of both learners and teachers.



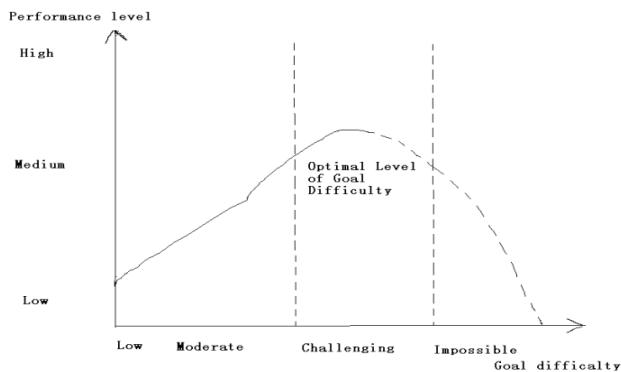
**Figure 1**  
**The Iterative Self-directed Learning Process**

### Stage One: Identifying Learning Need

At this stage, teachers try to help learners find out an explicit understanding about their language learning beliefs, motivations, habits as well as expectations in the EFL course with the help of questionnaire, interactive discussion and interview. According to the data collected from all students, teachers should help learners form a correct belief of learning a foreign language and train learners to have autonomous senses because learners' beliefs and attitudes to foreign language autonomous study will influence the development of their autonomy. Then teacher may induct learners to substitute intrinsic and integrative motivation for instrumental one because the nature of having interest and curiosity towards the target language as well as its society and culture will provide long-term momentum to probe into language learning autonomously. In addition, teachers should know about students' learning habits in order to give them corresponding guidance according to their different levels, and make them have clearer understanding about their own learning requirement and expectation. As to teachers, it is important to lucubrate in the aspect of EFL learners' needs because it will set a direction for further foreign language teaching to avoid a wrong way to go, which will lay a good foundation for teaching autonomy.

**Stage Two: Setting Goals**

From stage one, teachers may have helped students establish a clear view about their own self-learning circumstances which sets a good preparation to the following stages. Since learners have proper evaluation about their learning level and learning expectation, teachers may guide students to set up their own autonomous learning goals according to their different levels which consist of long-term goals and short-term goals. The former comprises curriculum goals, academic goals as well as semester goals. The latter refers to setting goals for each unit, each class, even for each learning group’s learning activities. When setting goals, teacher should instruct students to command optimal level of goal difficulty(as shown in figure 2), that means, the goals should be challenging: learners could easily get to their goals without too much difficulties if they are too low which results in that the driving force of self-learning will not be long-termed; On the contrary, learners will give them up since it is impossible for them to realize their goals if they are too difficult.



**Figure 2**  
Effect of Goal Difficulty on Performance (McShane & Glinow 2003: 85)

By helping learners set up their goals, teachers may set up corresponding teaching goals to enhance the realization of both learning goals and teaching goals autonomously.

**Stage Three: Planning Learning**

According to learners’ different level of goals set up in the previous stage, teachers may urge students to identify their objectives, determine how they will achieve them and make a detailed learning plan (as shown in figure 3). A time limit should be set on each detailed planning, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, translating... They may have different activities and time limit according to their habits and levels in control of that skill. Planning may also go on while a task is being performed. Here, learners may change their objectives and reconsider the ways in which they will go about achieving them. After finishing each activities, learners should reflect the work they did today and write a few words to remain themselves of their performance or anything they need to

consider in future self-access work and give the further learning plan activities, may be a long-term one.

Learning plan-

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Time I plan to spend on English \_\_\_\_\_

Today I plan to do the following-

Activities	Time on activity-
1. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____

After you have finished your work, complete the second section of this plan. -

Reflection: Consider the work you did today. Write a few words to remain yourself of your performance or anything you need to consider in your future self-access work. -

Further learning plan-

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 3**

Being conscious of learners’ detailed learning plan as well as further learning plan, teachers become to be clear about the teaching plan to arrange a series of teaching activities, and within a time limit, the teaching plan and teaching activities may allocate some emphasis and priorities upon one another.

**Stage Four: Selecting Resources**

Nowadays, many universities have established foreign language self-access resources, which can enable autonomous learners to scan, select, listen to, copy written or listening materials. Autonomous learners not only need discuss, debate or communicate with others, but also need pen-pals, e-pals and partners of other forms. Self-access resources such as networks and websites can gather learners and offer them a platform or activity base, provide a virtual language learner environment and at the same time it can monitor the whole process. Facing with multifarious language learning materials, teachers should take charge of the selection of material, counseling, organizing and try to combine the learning content of self-access resources with the teaching content in class in which beneficial surroundings can be supplied to autonomous learners, so teachers can design a great deal of communicative activities which can be used in class according to learning content in self-access resources.

**Stage Five: Selecting Strategies**

Teachers may combine with the class teaching to introduce learning strategy and techniques and foster the learners’ ability of autonomy through the model of strategy training, which consists of cultivation of cognitive strategy and cultivation of metacognitive strategy. The former can help learners learn about all kinds of learning strategy skills, such as listening skills, communicative strategies, reading strategies, writing techniques, translation skills and question-answer skills, etc.; the latter can help learners form a good habit of making study plan, choosing study method, arranging study task, monitoring the study process, and checking the flow of study tasks.



Only by implementing the above strategies can learners abilities of autonomy be gradually improved.

The main task for teachers at this stage is to cultivate learners' strategies in practical situation: 1) Presentation: teachers present the strategy which will be used; 2) Modeling of strategies: teachers show learners how to use this strategy; 3) Scaffolding: teachers provide the learners with the related material in order to do the related exercises; 4) Evaluation: teachers check the learners' the performance about newly-learned strategy; 5) Expansion: teachers will offer learners chances as many as possible to do the comprehensive training about all kinds strategies.

#### **Stage Six: Practice**

Learner autonomy is set based on the teachers' withdrawal of the dominant roles in the EFL process, so teacher should be converted to be a partner in the process of language learning. In practice, when problems emerge, teachers appear to handle them cooperatively and their support should be appropriate. The opportunity to practice a foreign language should always be kept for learners.

#### **Stage Seven: Monitoring Progress**

At this stage, language teachers may facilitate language learners to keep learning reports to ask themselves questions such as: "How am I doing? Am I having difficulties with this task?" and so on. Keeping learning reports is a good way to monitor one's own learning process and evaluate one's own learning progress. Learners can be fully aware of what and how they are learning by recording their own learning performances as well as reflecting their strong and weak points while performing certain learning tasks. By examining those learning reports, teachers may have a full glimpse of progress of each learning section, and accordingly adjust teaching contents and speed to language learners' needs. If learners can foster the habit of keeping reports throughout their learning processes, they can assume more responsibility in their own learning and thus cultivate autonomy in language learning.

#### **Stage Eight: Assessment and Revision**

Self-assessment is an attractive alternative or addition to traditional forms of assessment for the language teachers which aims to help students develop characteristics of the "good language learner". It involves the ability to assess their own performance and the ability to be self-critical. Teachers may instruct learners to record their learning situations, such as their studying feeling regularly and record their success and failure and then analyze its reason in order to have a better understanding about their own autonomy, and begin naturally to reflect on how to become more successful autonomous learners. After a period of time teachers can help learners analyze their study situations according to learners' recording, and make reasonable suggestions in time. Revision in time may help learners reinforce their memory and command of previous learning and facilitate the out-put of foreign

language. This can not only help learners get better insights into their used strategies but also help learners realize the necessity to evaluate their study goals and outcome continually.

Based on assessment and revision, learners and teachers can cooperatively adjust learning needs, set new goals, make new learning plans, select new resources, select appropriate strategies, carry on refreshed practices, monitor new progress and form a new assessment to form an autonomous cycle in language learning with the dynamic interaction between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy.

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## **CONCLUSION**

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All learning is ultimately autonomous in the sense that learning depends on the efforts of the learners themselves, so autonomous way of thinking should be cultivated and developed among EFL learners and teachers. They need to be more aware of the benefits that autonomy brings forth to English education and be ready to take on their new roles, and interactively cooperate with each other to enhance autonomy abilities. Teachers should design and organize various activities to prepare students for more independence and responsibility.

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