An Investigation of Non-English major Undergraduates' Net-based Autonomous College English Learning

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of an empirical study carried out with Chinese college students on net-based autonomous college English learning (NCEL). Through questionnaires and interviews, the study reveals that students have a positive attitude toward NCEL in general. However these students display only a medium level of autonomous learning behaviours. The correlation between students' attitudes and behaviours is not high enough to guarantee that positive attitudes will bring about high frequency of NCEL behaviours, and consequently the promotion of autonomy in English learning.

Key words: Net-based autonomous College English learning (NCEL); students' attitudes and behaviour; learning autonomy.

Introduction

After the Reform of College English Teaching and Learning by MOE (Ministry of Education of China), net-based college English learning has become the primary focus of College English Teaching and Learning syllabus. Such autonomous learning is becoming more and more important in the students' English study, guiding and leading their study and learning activities and strategies. There has been a lot of academic discussion in recent years on the promotion of learner autonomy in College English learning in the territory of China.

These studies, however, have not fully addressed the specific relationship between net-based autonomous College English learning(NCEL)and learner autonomy. Benson (2001) argues that "claims made for the potential of new technologies in regard to autonomy need to be evaluated against empirical evidence of the realization of this potential in practice". It is not clear yet what perceptions the students hold toward NCEL. It is still largely unknown whether students get ready to take on autonomous learning. With its focus on the English

learners in the net-based learning setting, this study aims to probe into Chinese non-English major undergraduate students' autonomous English learning outside the classroom particularly their attitudes and behaviours and attempts to determine how ready they appeared to be to take on NCEL.

Theoretical background

Net-base language learning

Net-based learning refers to the use of computer devices for learning, such as Internet/Intranet/Extranet, interactive TV, online mobile and so on (Kaplan-Leiserson, 2000). In the 1990s, Multimedia Approach to Foreign Language Learning (MAFLL) was adopted, which tremendously promoted language learning. As an integral part of MAFLL, net-based language learning became popular for its vividness, animation, and conveniences. Since then, net-based autonomous English learning mode has been on its way to gaining popularity on campus.

It is generally accepted nowadays that online learning greatly benefits the learners. Lefever's study (2004) investigated an e-learning environment used for teaching distance education English courses at Iceland University of Education. The three main components investigated were communication, autonomous learning and cooperative learning. Information and communication Technology (ICT) in the form of course websites, Internet links and asynchronous net-based tools was the common factor in the learning environment. Students participating in the program were asked to evaluate the content, organization, and the pedagogical effectiveness of the learning environment. The findings were positive in general and focused on how ICT generated more opportunities for student-teacher communication and feedback. It also assisted students separated by physical distance to work together in their studies. Finally, it also provided students broad access to information and resources and hence fostering learner autonomy.

Coll's study (2004) examined the effects of online learning for beginning Spanish classes in higher education in Shawnee State University, Portsmouth, Ohio. In this study, two

first-level elementary Spanish classes were compared. One class underwent listening and writing activities using only audio compact discs whereas the other class had the added advantage of working on online activities as homework. The students from the two classes were monitored closely through formative evaluations until the end of their third level to assess their acquisition of listening, speaking, reading, writing and cultural skills. The study showed that the online program benefited both students and teachers. Students in the second class found the language instruction more meaningful and varied and they were interested and motivated to work harder in and outside of the classroom environment. They were also more autonomous learners.

Zhu (2009) investigated teachers' and students' perceptions of the efficiency of the Smart School Program by using questionnaires and interviews. The Smart School Education Program integrates teaching and learning with ICT applications, which include computer-based teaching and net-based learning. This program started with four subjects, English, Mandarin (Chinese official language), Science and Mathematics. The findings showed that both teachers and students were confident and ready to accept learning English through this method and 79.5% of the teachers felt comfortable with their new roles as facilitators. They also revealed that limitations in infrastructure reduced the effectiveness of this mode of teaching.

Chen & Wang (2003) looked into Form Two students' perceptions of the use of computers in one of the Smart Program schools in China. The data were collected mainly from classroom observations and interviews. The findings revealed that students' attitudes towards the use of computers in the classroom were generally positive. They agreed that computer activities helped to improve their proficiency in English. This was particularly so when they were followed by discussions, role-plays and presentations. The study demonstrated that weak students were not actively involved in the follow-up activities. The findings further showed that students who lacked the necessary computer skills tended to have negative attitudes towards computer usage. Despite the overall positive attitudes towards the computer, it was clearly that the students felt that teachers were indispensable. They generally felt that their teachers would be able to give better explanations than computers did, which to them were "mere machines".

Learning Autonomy

Over the last two decades, "autonomy" has been a popular focus of discussion in foreign language teaching. Learner autonomy is often regarded as a defining characteristic of all sustained learning that attains long-term success (Little, 1996). It is being promoted far more widely in different contexts than ever before.

Online learning also encourages autonomy. In net-based language learning, students are encouraged to exercise learner autonomy outside class by making use of the abundant language learning resources on the Internet.

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in the promotion of learner autonomy in English language learning in China. Compared to their western peers, Chinese students are often perceived as "syllabus dependent, passive and lacking in initiative" (Pierson, 1996). Numerous reports have also suggested that Chinese students tend to confine their work to what is specifically taught on the course (Balla, Stokes ＆Stafford, 1991). For a long time English teaching in China has been dominated by a teacher-centred, book-centred, grammar-translation method and the emphasis on rote memory (Hu 2003; Rao, 2002).The teacher-centred and authority-oriented tradition of Chinese education does not seem a promising ground for the promotion of learner autonomy. Constraints, such as the reliance on the teacher-dominated, expository, didactic teaching methods, the emphasis on the strictness of discipline and the excessive pressure of the competitive examination system, could all have meant diminished motivation to learn autonomously (Balla et al, 1991). Consequently, Chinese students could appear less motivated and ready to learn autonomously than their western peers. However, research on learner autonomy with Chinese students has not yet come to any definite conclusion about the applicability of learner autonomy in the context of China.

Methodology

Research questions

The key research questions under investigation are as follows：

a. What is the general attitude of sample Chinese undergraduate EFL learners toward NCEL?

b. What types of NCEL behaviours do they report to have?

c. What relationships, if any, exist among NCEL attitudes and behaviours?

Subjects

Participants in this study are 128 non-English major undergraduates from a university in south China, out of whom 126 students' questionnaires are valid. The sample consists of 74 males (59 %) and 52 females (31%), coming from a range of academic departments. Their average score of English entrance examination was 100. 6 points (full score was 150 points). They all have taken six years of English study in middle school. Their ages range from 18 to 21. At the time of the study, they were undertaking their first year English course, a compulsory course that is carried out under the new College English Curriculum Requirements. This university is required to use New Horizon College English online system to support their English learning. In terms of computer access, the students can do their course work either in the computer learning centre or on their own computers.

Instrument

The data was collected through a questionnaire and personal interviews. The questionnaire was designed on the basis of combining theoretical input suggested in the literature with first-hand information initially derived from our own teaching experience and through discussions and interviews with teachers and students. It consists of three parts.

Part one aims to acquiring personal information of the subjects, including gender, major and score of English entrance examination.

Part Two centres on subjects' attitudes toward NCEL. Based on Cotterall's (1995) study about learner belief and attitudes, the focus of this part is the learner's confidence in conducting NCEL, the effectiveness of NCEL, the teacher's and the learner's role in NCEL.

Part Three focuses on the effect of net-based English learning. This part contains items about self-study each week on a single learning activity and open questions that require respondents to offer whatever information they had about their strategies and problems in self-study. The open questions are also the ones used in the interviews. The factors that affect net-based learning--as well as the pros and cons on net-based language study--are also questioned in this part.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to the students in regular class time and it took about 15 minutes for them to complete all the three parts. Thirty eight items were incorporated into the questionnaire with a statement for each item. Except for Part One about background information, the students were required to respond to the items in Part Two (Attitude toward NCEL) and to the items in Part Three (NCEL behaviours) along the open questions.

Data analysis

In order to identify the general student attitude toward NCEL and their types of NCEL behaviours, students' responses to each of the items were tailored. Four attitudinal factors and five NCEL behaviour factors were analyzed. The results of this study proved to be highly reliable.

Results and analysis

This study is intended to find out the non-English major undergraduate students' general behavioural patterns for net-based autonomous English learning. The results reveal the following findings and these findings might have implications for college English teaching in China.

Table 1. Degrees and frequency of students' performance on net learning

ITEM	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS
Learning English on net	2 %	46 %	32 %	18 %	2 %
Assignment received	4 %	21 %	46 %	24 %	5 %
Finishing assignment on time	5 %	20 %	42 %	31 %	2 %
Self-assessing and evaluating	13 %	33 %	35 %	13 %	6 %
Interacting with teacher	36%	28 %	24 %	11 %	1 %
Exchange with peers	11 %	14 %	40 %	22 %	10 %
Having difficulty when learning	19 %	23 %	31 %	22 %	5 %
Computer skills affecting learning pace	25 %	22 %	34 %	8%	11 %
Needing teacher's instruction	29 %	26 %	33 %	9 %	3 %

Table 1 demonstrates the degrees and frequency of students' performance on net learning. As is shown in the table, 46% of the students rarely learnt English on the net and 32% sometimes did, while only 2% always did. 6% of the students rarely learnt English on the net, 32% sometimes did and only 2% of the students always did.46% asserted that the assignments on net learning were just fairly proper or sometimes proper. 45% of them were sometimes able to finish their tasks and only 2% could always do that. On self-evaluation and assessment, 35% sometimes did it and 33% rarely did. 36% students claimed that they never interacted with the teacher when learning on the net, plus 28% who rarely did. 31% said they sometimes had difficulties when learning. Students tending to exchange with peers took 31% of the total and 42% seemed to remain independent. Students' computer skills were affecting their learning and it took a percentage of 34%. As for teachers' instruction, most of the students claimed that it was not indispensable, with a high of 88%, which may result in their unrealistic goal setting and random learning.

Learners' Attitude towards Net-Learning

As Zhu (2009) claims, the second component of autonomous learning is attitude: learners should be active towards their study, i.e. be responsible for their study and devoted to their learning. From the analysis of Table 1, students' attitude needs changing to be changed in order to foster learner autonomy.

Table 2.Student's Attitudes towards net-based autonomous learning

Factor	**Attitude**	**Number of**	**Percentage**
Factor 1	Effectiveness of NCEL	126	41%
Factor 2	Confidence in NCEL	126	50%
Factor 3	Teacher's role	126	60%
Factor 4	Learner's role	126	40%
	General attitude	126	78%

Table 2 also gives an overall picture of student's attitudes toward net-based autonomous learning. As can be seen in Table 2,the overall percentage for student attitude is 78%, which means that students had a general positive attitude toward their NCEL experience. For Factor 3 and Factor 4, the percentage of respectively 60% and 40% indicates that psychologically the students have partly accepted the shift of responsibility for taking charge of their learning from their teacher to themselves. In contrast with the higher percentage for teacher's role and learner's role under attitudes toward NCEL, the percentage of Factor 2(confidence in WAEL)and Factor 1(effectiveness of NCEL)were relatively lower(50% and 41%). Lower scores on these two factors tended to illustrate that although nearly half of the students had confidence in conducting NCEL, there were a quite number of students who did not think that NCEL was beneficial to English learning and expressed a low interest level in NCEL. This may be due to the fact that students did not know much about net-based language learning and had preference for the language teaching paradigm in

middle schools. A lack of prior autonomous learning experience was considered as another important factor in the development of learner autonomy.

Based on the results of four attitudinal factors, it can be extrapolated that students in general have a positive attitude toward NCEL. This finding has been supported by other research done to identify student attitude toward NCEL. For example, Ayres(2002)finds that "learners appreciate and value the learning that they do using the computers" and that 80% of the students see net-based language learning as relevant to their needs. Stepp-Greany (2002)also reports that students' attitude toward online learning and assessment is positive. Similarly, Greenfield(2003)finds that 84% of the students who are included in her study indicate a preference for learning English with computers.

Place and Time of Students' Net Learning

The majority of the students did the net learning through the campus intranet, which account for 93%, and only 7% report to learn through the internet.

As for the time spent each week on net-based English learning, most of the students only spent a little time in net learning: just 2-6 hours per week.

It is obvious that students' net learning was not so good. Their learning activities were mostly limited to the campus intranet, which was not suitable for the purpose of cultivating their autonomy. In other words, learners are advised to learn more from the internet where more sources for learning are available.

Students' Reaction to the New Learning Mode

Table 3 and Table 4 are concerned with Students' satisfaction with net-based autonomous learning mode and students' preference on net-based autonomous learning. Table 3 shows that 57% of the respondents were fairly satisfied with the new mode. Table 4 indicates that 53% of the subjects fairly liked it with only 4% who liked it very much. Table 5 shows how the students regard the role of net-based autonomous learning. A very high percentage of them agreed it should have an active role. 48% of them fairly agreed, 32% agreed and 6% strongly agreed.

Table 3. Students' satisfaction with net-based autonomous learning mode

Satisfied very much	Satisfied Fairly	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Strongly Dissatisfied
2%	23%	57%	9%	9%

Table 4. Students' preference on net-based autonomous learning

Like it very much	Like it	Fairly like it	Dislike it	Strongly dislike it
4 %	23%	53%	10 %	10 %

Table 5. Whether net-based autonomous learning should be the primary means of English learning

Strongly agree	Agree	Fairly agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
6%	32 %	48%	4 %	10 %

The three tables effectively conclude that students have not been adapted to the new mode to a great extend. They did not show their full recognition for the mode at present. That is to say, there will probably be some time before learners to make use of the conveniences provided by the new mode.

Table 6. Benefits that can be gained from net-based autonomous learning in English

Time saving	40 %
More ease English learning environment	58 %
Enlarging knowledge scope	80 %
More easiness and freedom when expressing opinions	61 %
Material searching becoming easy	61 %

Benefits Gained From the New Learning Mode

The main benefits gained from net-based learning are shown in Table 6 and most of the subjects considered it to be a good learning mode.

Problems in the New Learning Process

Table 7 and Table 8 disclose individual problems and difficulties in net-based autonomous learning and net problems respectively. Table 7 shows the common individual problems and difficulties in the learning process. 81% complained about the computer set and facilities and 65% said they possessed a lack of vocabulary to fully benefit from net learning. In Table 8, common problems with net-based English learning were collected. 83% of the respondents said the environment was unsuitable for net-based English learning and 79% admitted that they were in great need of self-control and regulation when learning on the net.

Table 7 Individual problems and difficulties in net-based autonomous learning

Poor computer proficiency	41%
Lack of English vocabulary	65%
Poor computer sets	81%
Poor connection of LAN	32%
Not knowing what to learn	40%
Others	18%

Table 8 Common problems with net-based English learning

Poor self-control and regulation	79 %
Limitedness and pressure of learning time	30 %
No auto-learning ambience	83 %
High fees	15 %
Poor management in the computer and network centre	15 %

With regard to the problems encountered in self-study, one of the most serious ones was related to vocabulary. The respondents of the open net-based learner autonomy questionnaire and the interviews reported that they had difficulties in both remembering new words and using the words they had newly memorized and that their vocabulary is not enough for them to engage in net-based English learning. In addition, a high percentage of questionnaire respondents disagreed that peer students could help them with the study of English; further they rarely interacted with teachers. A possible explanation may be that students did not have confidence in the other students and teachers. Another one was their poor computer skills and lack of knowledge of network technology. Fortunately, these two main hindrances may be overcome through their further study.

By comparing the benefits shown in Table 6 and the above advantages and disadvantages, it can be concluded that learners have not truly realized autonomous learning during net study and that the advantages of net-based learning cannot be seen here. It can also be concluded that time is needed for students to change their beliefs and adjust to the new mode.

Net-Based Autonomous English Learning Behaviours

As is seen in Table 9, none of the five NCEL behaviour factors reaches a high level of use. The overall mean for all the behaviour factors is low, indicating that students exhibit only moderate frequency of autonomous learning behaviour out-of-class. Four factors fell within the range of medium and one factor fell in the range of low level of use. Among the five factors the highest percentage (81%) was for Fact 4 (monitoring the learning process), which showed that most of the students paid much attention to adjusting learning contents and pace. As for Factor 1 (formulating learning objectives and plans),the subjects reported the relatively frequent use of behaviours, such as setting learning goal and arranging learning time. This behaviour factor was followed by Factor 5 (evaluating learning performance) and Factor 2 (choosing learning materials), with the percentage of 72% and 68% respectively. Out of these five factors, Factor 3(monitoring the use of learning methods) had the lowest value and the lowest standard deviation (31%).This showed that students did not know how to employ NCEL learning strategy. The low standard deviation also indicated that most of the respondents homogeneously admitted that they lacked NCEL learning methods. To put it

in more detail, in the questionnaire students reported that they did not have the knowledge nor the skills to make the right choices. They felt uncertain about making the appropriate and relevant learning-related decisions. Furthermore, many of the students in the survey appeared to exhibit only the kind of autonomous behaviour which allowed them to react to the heavy workload demands of the curriculum and to cope with their studies in general. In other words, they could be adopting an extrinsically motivated approach (that aimed only to meet the requirements for passing the course) and resorting to surface learning approaches that precluded any extra effort for more proactive language learning.

Table 9. Students' NCEL Behaviour Patterns

Factor	Behaviour	N	Percentage
Factor 1	Formulating learning objectives and plans	126	60%
Factor 2	Choosing learning materials and resources	126	68%
Factor 3	Monitoring the use of learning methods	126	31%
Factor 4	Monitoring the learning process	126	81%
Factor 5	Evaluating learning performance	126	72%

The seven most frequently reported NCEL behaviours. As the broad categorization scheme may obscure some interesting features with regard to the respondents NCEL behaviours, seven most frequently used behaviours reported by the subjects were ticked out and shown in Table 10. They were spread across the first four behaviour factors except Factor 5(evaluating learning performance).The most frequently-used behaviour that most respondents reported to do was to determine their objectives for NCEL (95%), which can be treated as the starting point in the process of autonomous learning outside the classroom. The second one that most respondents reported to do was to check learning record (90%), which showed that students had a medium degree of awareness of monitoring learning.

Table 10. Most frequently used behaviours

Individual Behaviour	N	Percentage
I set up learning objectives based on the actual situation of my English study.	126	95%
After finishing online assignments, I checked the answers with the help of the Net-based Learning System.	126	88%
I made use of the Net to do test-related exercises outside class.	126	86%
I controlled the pace of Net-based English learning.	126	80%
When some interesting information appeared on the Web, I first finished my learning tasks and then clicked them.	126	70%
I checked whether I had finished the online tasks planned in advance.	126	90%

Table 11. Least frequently reported NCEL behaviours

Individual Behaviour	N	Percentage
After class, I communicated with the teacher through e-mail, QQ or blog.	126	3%
I participated in online discussions	126	6%
When I had questions, I would post them in BBS or Blog for help.	126	8%
I cooperated with classmates to finish online learning tasks.	126	10%
When I met difficulty with Web-based English learning, I would ask the teacher for help.	126	9%
I decided what I should do next in Net-based English learning.	126	11%
When finding the learning methods not appropriate, I changed for more proper ones in time.	126	7%

The seven least frequently reported NCEL behaviours. As for the least frequently reported NCEL behaviours, the seven items were calculated and shown in Table 11.They fell in the categories of Factor 2, Factor 3 and Factor 5.The two behaviours that the least students

reported to do were to communicate with the teacher through e-mail, QQ (an instant messaging software) or blog and to participate in online discussion.

E-mail is an effective CALL activity that contributes to learner autonomy by providing opportunities for language improvement through real life communication and increasing awareness of language shortcomings (Greenfield, 2003).In the present study, however, only 3% respondents reported that they employed e-mail to communicate with the teacher or participate in online discussion activity. This suggests that students did not know much about using information technology to exchange ideas and to promote their learning. Armatas, Holt & Rice (2003) find that students have expectations based on traditional learning paradigms and have difficulty understanding what the benefits might be for learner-to-teacher and learner-to-learner online interaction.

In addition, online discussions represent a huge change in students learning mode, therefore it is essential that the teacher should explain to students their role in learning. Another issue for the teachers is their role in the online discussions. Teacher presence can be beneficial through direct interaction and feedback to students. However, if the teacher is not participating in the online discussion, then this may create a space where students are responsible for discussion and this may result in more dialogic activity (Dysthe, 2002). Feedback to students can still be provided by the teacher in class.

Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

The present study has provided a source of information on Chinese undergraduates' perspectives and their net-based language learning experience regarding learner autonomy. On the one hand it has been found that most of the undergraduate students hold positive attitudes toward NCEL and report only a medium level of autonomous learning behaviours. On the other hand lower correlations are detected between students' attitudes and behaviours, which suggests that there are still other factors which may affect their autonomous English learning either in or outside class. Through the implementation of an investigation of students attitudes and behaviours in the net- based learning environment following implications can be gained.

Firstly, technology does not automatically result in learner autonomy. In other words, introducing technology resources alone into students learning experience does not automatically cause autonomy. The teacher needs to support students to progress toward autonomy; that is to say, teachers need to scaffold instruction using technology. Only when the students have a repertoire of certain skills and strategies can they make effective use of network and thus develop their autonomy further.

Secondly, collaborative learning should also be encouraged. The second language acquisition research has shown that collaboration among learners facilitates language acquisition. Such advantages of collaboration have been noted in net-based collaborative activities such as project based learning (Debski, 2000) or other task based activities that require collaboration (Shield, Weininger & Davies, 1999). The collaborative learning mode has the potential to allow students to learn in relatively realistic and socially enriched learning contexts. Educators should provide students with more electronic collaborative experiences and incorporate collaborative learning through courses. In other words, we should increase students' exposure to the use of computer technologies for collaborative tasks, making them experience the benefits of collaborative learning. We believe the use of computer technologies for collaborative learning will be a successful reform of the traditional learning mode.

Thirdly, teacher's role should be redefined in the technology enhanced language instruction. This study also implies that language teachers have an important role in the net-based learning-environment. The negative correlations between students' attitude toward the teachers' role and all the NCEL behaviours imply that teacher facilitation is still insufficient. The teachers working in technology- enhanced learning environment need preparation to adopt new roles. Learner autonomy cannot be fully encouraged without the relevant and knowledgeable support from the teacher. In the new learning context, teachers should function as either a facilitator or a co-learner rather than merely an information purveyor. On the other hand teachers also need to provide learner training. Galloway & Labarca (1990) recommend that teachers provide scaffolding for their students at the beginning stage and then gradually withdraw support as students gain greater task autonomy. Tudor (1996) claims that teachers need to prepare students for their new role by developing students self-

awareness as language learners and their awareness of learning goals and options and of language itself. In addition, teachers need to identify which areas of responsibilities to transfer to the students where there is more scope for student involvement and what contribution students could make in the net-based language learning process.

More empirical studies should be conducted concerning the effect of such learner variables as motivation strategy use on students autonomous learning behaviourism in the net-based environment .In addition studies should be conducted concerning the role of the teacher in the technology enhanced environment in order to identify those teacher behaviours and interactions most favourable to students' language acquisition. Such studies may contribute to a future knowledge base that will improve and reform pedagogy in English teaching.

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