

Autonomy in a High-stakes Exam Context: Chinese University Students' Perceptions¹²

Dr. Xiaoli Jiang*

*: Dr. Xiaoli Jiang: *Renming University of China, xiaoli9uk@yahoo.com*

Abstract: Autonomy literature is largely based on Western experience, which might not be appropriate for the promotion of autonomy in China. The research presented in this paper was carried out from a Chinese perspective and is therefore seen as significant for informing autonomy-oriented practices with Chinese students. Interviews were carried out with students from three universities. Two different procedures were applied to the data analysis. Firstly, informed by grounded-theory, the data reveal Chinese conceptions of learner autonomy in two distinctive domains: Learner Autonomy for Academic Success, and Learner Autonomy for Communicative Ability. Secondly, case analysis focusing on domains of autonomy in the Chinese context explored the findings and reported four main types: teacher-reactive, exam-reactive, semi-proactive, and proactive autonomy. The results reveal Chinese learners' conceptions of learner autonomy in an exam-driven context and suggest that both school and family are crucial in shaping learners' conceptions. The paper suggests that when promoting learner autonomy teachers should distinguish domains as well as types of autonomy. The paper also argues for further context-based research to inform both theories and practices of autonomy in China.

Key words: learner autonomy, high-stakes exam context, perceptions

¹ The paper was supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, and the Research Funds of Renmin University of China—10XNB039

² I am grateful for Dr. David Dixon who provided insightful comments in its previous draft.

Introduction

The concept of learner autonomy has often been considered as of Western origin (e.g. Sinclair, 2000; Benson, 2001). In language education, as a matter of fact, relevant practices associated with learner autonomy were also largely based on Western experiences in various settings: technology-supported environment, traditional classroom, and the combination of both. It is reasonable that many Western scholars have expressed concerns about the inappropriateness of promoting learner autonomy in non-Western contexts. Nevertheless, if learners' experiences of language learning is the site where learner autonomy springs from and is nurtured (Benson, 2006), then it is likely that learner autonomy means different things to different people in different settings. This paper therefore aims to reveal how learner autonomy is interpreted by a group of Chinese university students who for a number of years studied in high-stakes contexts. This paper starts by reviewing concepts of learner autonomy, contexts preferable for learner autonomy, and learner autonomy in Chinese contexts. Then a study is presented which focused on Chinese university students' perceptions of English language learning which are relevant to concepts of learner autonomy.

Concepts of learner autonomy

Learner autonomy in the field of education and language education has often been considered as a concept of Western origin. For example, Benson (2001) attributes the emergence of learner autonomy to early thoughts on the concept of learner-centeredness and educational reforms as proposed by many great thinkers in the West, such as Dewey (1859-1952), Piaget (1896-1980), and Rogers (1902-1987). Their works all emphasize that learners' individualized learning needs should be catered for in education, which offers one of the strongest rationales for the promotion of learner autonomy in education. At the same time, they all stress that learners' interest and natural stages of development should be seriously considered. In line with such a belief, the embryo of constructivist theory was initiated by Piaget, and this has had great impact on contemporary discussions of learner autonomy. In language education, important definitions of learner autonomy are all seen to have a firm Western grounding. For example, Holec's (1981:3) definition of learner autonomy "the

ability to take charge of one's own learning" is the most widely cited one in the field. Likewise, Little's (1991: 4) contribution to learner autonomy from the psychological dimension has also drawn wide attention from language scholars:

Essentially, autonomy is a capacity—for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning.

More recently, Benson (2001) proposes a political version of learner autonomy, which combines individual capacity, psychological readiness and the level of freedom that entails both free choices given to learners but also freedom gained by learners through collective effort to transform the social situation and structure into one that is favorable for learner autonomy.

These Western-grounded notions of learner autonomy, which sometimes are even considered as the only legitimate version, have a significant impact on understandings of learner autonomy theory. Nevertheless, in recent years, a growing concern about concepts of learner autonomy in non-Western contexts has been voiced by a few researchers. For example, Littlewood (1999: 75) proposed two levels of learner autonomy: "proactive autonomy" and "reactive autonomy", with the former affirming learners' individuality and setting up self-determined directions, and reactive autonomy enabling learners to organize their resources for autonomous learning once a direction has been initiated (e.g. by teachers). In particular, Littlewood (*ibid*) stresses that proactive autonomy is the same as the Western concept of learner autonomy, and reactive autonomy takes into consideration the Asian contexts. Similarly, while sharing a Western understanding of learner autonomy, Xu et al. (2004) point out that in China, learner autonomy should include the ability to understand teachers' objectives.

In response to these adaptations of learner autonomy, Benson (2006) maintains that they actually reveal different degrees of learner autonomy that do not aim at a radical educational reform.

Contexts favorable for practices of promoting learner autonomy

In line with the development of learner autonomy theory, relevant practices have been experimented with in the field, most notably, in relation to the contexts of application. Contexts favorable for promoting learner autonomy have often been discussed at two levels: a broad dimension of culture and a narrow dimension of educational setting. From the cultural perspective, learner autonomy being a concept of Western origin is considered inappropriate in non-Western contexts by a few researchers. For example, Ho and Crookall (1995: 237) claim that some Chinese cultural traditions might be obstacles to promoting learner autonomy. To name but a few, the importance of “social relations” and “hierarchy” in Chinese culture, Chinese students’ “view of the teacher as the authority figure”, Chinese students’ “pre-occupation with face” that disables students’ ability to challenge teacher authority and makes teachers “reluctant to admit any inadequacies” in their knowledge” (ibid). Likewise, Sinclair (2000) also claims that individual autonomy has largely been a focus in the West whereas social autonomy is more common in collective societies that are rooted in Confucian philosophy.

From the perspective of educational settings, typical contexts in association with learner autonomy are seen as follows: self-access centers, traditional classrooms and a combination of both (Benson, 2006). When Holec (1981) first introduced concepts of learner autonomy to the language education field, his idea was based on an adult language-learning program in a self-directed learning environment. The link between a self-access environment and learner autonomy was further argued by Allwright (1988: 35) who believed that concepts of learner autonomy brought about “radical changes in language pedagogy”, namely, rejecting the traditional classroom. Nevertheless, this situation was changed when Dam (1995), based on her experiences, proposed that learner autonomy can be promoted in a traditional classroom context if learners are given the opportunity to be actively involved in the language learning process. Moreover, informative assessment focusing on communicative language use rather than summative means to evaluate learning outcomes is highly recommended (ibid). The idea of promoting learner autonomy in the classroom context is further supported by Little (2007) who maintains that language learner autonomy and communicative competence are two sides of the same coin; therefore, classrooms can be

perfect contexts for developing learner autonomy if these two aspects are both considered. With the proliferation of technology, however, it should be pointed out that self-access centers, or other kinds of technology-supported modes, in combination with classroom teaching are becoming a potential trend in autonomy-oriented practices which, according to Benson (2006), yet need theorization.

It is noteworthy that not all researchers hold that Western culture is the only appropriate context for learner autonomy-oriented practices. As argued by Holliday (2003; 2005), features that are different from the mainstream autonomy concept (e.g. of the West) may well be socially “authentic” to learners (e.g. non-Western) where autonomy springs from. Indeed, relevant research findings regarding Chinese learners are complex, but Chinese students are reported to “value freedom in language learning and the opportunity to direct their own learning” (Benson, 2006: 25).

Learner autonomy in Chinese educational contexts

As elsewhere in the world, exams are considered powerful and fair evaluation criteria for selecting students at various stages of education in China. Nevertheless, perhaps differently from their Western counterparts, exams in China are high stakes and often determine students’ future lives. Due to the large population and comparatively insufficient educational resources, exams are highly competitive. A Chinese child, from primary school, often starts to prepare for exams in order to go to a better secondary school. It is not surprising that such an expectation extends to postgraduate level. Taking the Chinese Matriculation Exam as one example, it is a highly centralized exam. Universities and colleges across China all use the exam results as the criteria to determine student admissions. As a matter of fact, exam subjects in this system are highly book-knowledge oriented. English, being a compulsory subject, is without exception, and according to Hu (2002) and Rao (2006), although English language learning is growingly popular among the Chinese and there is an increasing emphasis on communicative language use in Chinese society, hardly any dramatic change is seen in Chinese students’ English language learning because of the high stakes English exams. In brief, the exam-oriented educational system, together with

book-knowledge emphasized language learning and teaching is hardly favorable to Western concepts of learner autonomy.

Yet, it should be acknowledged that along with educational reforms in English teaching that aim at promoting communicative language use and learner autonomy, a number of studies have been done, often at tertiary level, to investigate learner autonomy in a blended mode: for example, combining technology supported learning with traditional classroom learning. According to Chen (2005), Gu (2007), and Ouyang (2009) such a new mode is effective in promoting learner autonomy in language learning. Nevertheless, when examining the detailed procedures of these practices, two problems are often found in these reported practices. Firstly, students' engagement in computer-based learning is often the teachers' requirement, for example, completing homework associated with a college English course, rather than students' self-initiated choices; secondly, students' autonomy in the classroom, as concluded by researchers, is generally learners' participation in the teaching process in the form of presentations.

On the one hand, the legitimacy of learner autonomy in the Chinese educational context remains an unresolved issue for a substantial body of Western scholars; on the other hand, Chinese scholars who attempt to duplicate Western practices of learner autonomy in language education seem to reveal few convincing results. One cannot help wondering whether learner autonomy is appropriate in Chinese high-stakes contexts. Since autonomy is grounded in identities that become individual through narratives involving self-reflection and self-thematization (Straub et al., 2005, cited in Benson, 2006), it seems particularly necessary to investigate learners' perspectives in this regard.

Research method

The present study aims to investigate Chinese learners' conceptions of learner autonomy from their accounts of English language learning experiences. Since how learners make sense of their language learning processes and how they exercise learner agency are often grounded in their long-term language learning experiences (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), learner narratives were prioritized in the present study. However, in order to avoid random

and abstract accounts, a few guiding questions were also designed. As a result, narrative-based interview was used as a major research instrument in the present study. The study expected to explore answers to the two major questions: 1) what, if any, are Chinese university students' conceptions of English language learning in relation to learner autonomy? 2) What are the influences on students' conceptions of learner autonomy if any?

Data collection

Data was collected from Tsinghua University, Beijing University of Chemical Technology, and Beijing Normal University. The criteria for selecting participants were as follows: first, the group from each university should present a mixed level (upper/middle/lower) according to Beijing university students placement tests results and teachers' own judgments; second, they should present a balanced mixture of genders and majors; third, they were willing to participate in the research; fourth, they were informed of the general research aim but were unaware of my real research questions. With the help of the researcher's personal contact, 36 freshmen (12 from each individual university) were finally recommended. After further contact, overall, 27 students, with 11 females and 16 males, from the three universities (with nine from each university) were chosen to take the interviews. Taking into consideration factors such as participants' availability, university room availability, and sufficient spare time for contingencies, the researcher finally managed to schedule most of the interviews on weekends, each of which took around 40 minutes.

Data analysis

Since the research purpose was to examine the participants' conceptions of English language learning which related to learner autonomy, my way of transcribing focused on content rather than following a CA (conversation analysis) or DA (discourse analysis) tradition. The concrete guidelines for transcription were the criteria proposed by Richards (2003: 199): "fitness for purpose, adequacy, and accuracy". Transcriptions were given back to the interviewees to have the accuracy checked. The researcher was particularly informed by techniques proposed by Strauss and Corbin (2000). In their paper on grounded theory methodology, they provide two essential strategies to open-code data: first, to combine specific parts with the whole dataset; second, to step back from all the data, and make an

overall judgment. After constant comparison, reflection and questioning as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1968), categorization of themes was eventually completed and hierarchical layers of categories were elicited.

Findings and discussion

Students' conceptions of English language learning relevant to learner autonomy

The interview data reveals that students' conceptions of learner autonomy are rooted in their understanding of English language learning. As shown in Table 1, students' perceptions of the nature of English language learning fell into two broad categories: English as a subject for exams and English as a language for communicative use.

Table 1: Students' conceptions of English language learning

Nature of English language learning	Numbers of interviewees
A subject for exams	16
A language for communicative use	13

In accordance with this distinction, students reported a number of necessary conditions that led to specific successful outcomes (see Tables 2 and 3). For example when exam results were considered as the criterion for success, students generally held that reactive responsibility, a good teacher, appropriate learning methods such as memorization and doing exercises, making effort through hard work, and holding a serious attitude were necessary conditions. Nevertheless, when communicative language use was considered as the criterion, students reported necessary conditions for success being willingness, appropriate learning methods such as obtaining language sense, learning in language use, and reviewing, taking proactive learning responsibility, persistence, and an English environment.

Table 2: Students' conceptions of English language learning as academic success

Conceptions of successful English language learning as academic achievements		Numbers of Interviewees
Reactive responsibility	Assigned tasks	all
	Optional tasks	14
A good teacher	Proper guidance	18
	Providing good learning methods	12
	Being responsible	9
	Being strict	7
	Knowledgeable	5
Appropriate learning methods	Being passionate	2
	memorization	9
	Doing exercise	16
Effort through hardworking	Time investment	16
	Quantity of work	15
Serious attitude		6

Table 3: Students' conceptions of English language learning as communicative use

Conceptions of successful English language learning as communicative language use		Numbers of Interviewees
Willingness	Interest	18
	Confidence	4
Appropriate learning methods	Obtaining language sense	14

	Learning in language use	12
Proactive learning responsibility	Improving skills	11
	Self-initiated learning tasks	7
Effort through persistence	Regular investment	8
	Good learning habits	5
	Proper amount of work	3
English environment		7

When comparing the two tables (2 and 3), apparent differences between the two categories seemed to be the teachers' role in English language learning and the need for an English language environment. For concerns about academic success, students stated as follows:

“Teachers can guide you. Like us college students, we still lack direction in many aspects. Teachers can give you a direction, just like to point out the most dazzling thing to you among the borderless book sea.” (18/145-146³)

For thoughts of communicative language use, students emphasized that:

“I think an English environment is very important. I mean the atmosphere that everyone is speaking English [...] if everyone is speaking English; you naturally come up with English. It is natural, not disconnected with what you have learned.” (12/164; 166-167)

The above findings indicated that core components of concepts of learner autonomy in Western literature were embedded in students' self-accounts of their English language learning experiences. This can be briefly summarized as: willingness to learn, freedom to learn, and self-direction.

³ 18 refers to interviewee; 145-146 refers to the lines of transcription

Willingness, as exemplified in learner autonomy theory in language education is often referred to as “intrinsic motivation” (e.g. Ushioda, 1996; Littlewood, 1996) that exists both “within individuals” and “in the nexus between a person and a task” (Ryan, Ran & Deci, 2000: 56). In the former sense, learners are profiled as ones who have genuine interest in learning, and learn for its pleasure and the satisfaction of achievement (e.g. Ushioda, 1996); in the latter sense, learners’ willingness to learn is preconditioned by the extent to which the learning process and learning contents are personally relevant (e.g. Little, 1991). Both senses were found in students’ accounts in the present study.

The freedom in learning that learners can exercise has always been a major concern of many autonomy advocates (e.g. Benson, 2001; 2006). For example, Benson (2001) emphasised important aspects of such freedom as being the free choice of the learning contents and of the learning process. Some students compared different stages of their English language learning, for example, learning in kindergarten or primary school, middle school or high school and university, and suggested that great differences in the support for learning freedom affected their degree of learner autonomy.

Holec (1981) stresses that if learners can direct all aspects of their learning, such learning is autonomous. Moreover, to consider the social dimension of learner autonomy, self-direction involves learners’ exercise of agency including negotiating and collaborating with others (Benson, 2001; 2003). The data in the present study showed that self-direction was evident among students. The most notable evidence was that when learner autonomy for academic success was the prime goal for the given educational system, such as at secondary level, quite a few students nonetheless indicated the importance of English language learning for communicative ability.

The present study also found features, such as internalized willingness, manageable freedom, and strong will, which were related to learner autonomy yet could not be explained by existing Western learner autonomy theory.

It is worth mentioning that Ryan and Deci (2000: 6) state that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are a continuum along which various types of regulation exist, depending on how “internalized” they are. It is reasonable that the importance of English language learning and

the values attached to it could be internalized by students. This can be understood from two perspectives. On the one hand, for some students who did not like learning English for exams, they fully recognized that English, being one of the compulsory subjects for the National Entrance Exam could determine the type of university they could enter, which would subsequently lead to different job prospects. On the other hand, for some students who did not like learning English, they seemed to know that communicative ability was a prerequisite for a better career with the increase of international communication. In both cases, students showed that they managed their attitude towards English language learning because the seemingly external motivation had been internalized.

As argued by Little (1991; 1996), freedom is always conditional. Therefore, the freedom to take responsibility for one's own learning can be a managed freedom within constraints. In the view of students in the present study, constraints not only came from the educational system that prescribed everything regarding teaching and learning in English, but also from the unbalanced accessibility to teaching and learning resources due to economic differences. In areas where teaching and learning resources were poor, students suggested that they could take advantage of what they could manage and made the most out of it. This included prioritizing certain language skills such as reading over listening due to the lack of the necessary learning equipment.

In a way, strong learner autonomy was conveyed by the students' struggle with the given social structure.

Not all students were willing to accept learning English as a compulsory subject. The pressure of dealing with exams often brought psychological hindrance to students. Even though some students liked English, they suggested that they felt depressed with preparations for exams. The situation was worse for those who had no interest in English. Under such circumstances, students reported the need to hold a positive attitude towards English language learning by means of a strong will or "serious attitude" in students' original words (Table 2).

In view of the overall students' accounts, their conceptions of learner autonomy fell into two distinctive domains: learner autonomy for academic success and learner autonomy

for communicative competence. Although the former seems to prevail in students' language learning experiences in the present study, evidence of the latter is also not negligible.

Factors influencing students' conceptions relating to learner autonomy

Data analysis showed that students' different conceptions of learner autonomy had respective sources of influences. In line with students' conceptions of learner autonomy for academic success, five types of influences on students' conceptions were identified: the exam system, the teachers' grammar-based teaching methods, the competitive secondary school environment, family education, and poor teaching and learning resources (see Table 4).

Table 4: Influences on students' conceptions with regard to academic success

Sources of influences	Numbers of Interviewees
exam system	all
teachers' grammar-based teaching methods	all
competitive secondary school environment	25
family education	
parents' authority	8
importance of English	10
exam-oriented instruction	4
emphasis on exam results	3
private course for exams	3
poor teaching and learning resources	
teachers' professionalism	13
non-native speakers	5
old textbooks	2

Among these factors, exam system and teacher's instructional methods ranked as the most important ones. For example, interviewee 2 reported:

“It was the result of traditional education, there was no way not to take it seriously. In the current educational system, the National Entrance Exam is the landmark. For example, my classmates, we had little difference in high school. I came to Tsinghua. He went to a local university. He felt my status suddenly increased. It was all about a type of conception. He felt graduation from Tsinghua greatly differed from local university.” (2/200-203)

In addition to the educational system that requires students to take high-stakes exams, teachers' instructional methods also had an impact on students' ways of thinking about English language learning. For interviewee 17:

“Only grammar was learned well (to get a better score). For reading, I did not do enough; for listening, we did not have specific equipment, only depending on teachers who taught some language points.” (17/11-12)

Table 5: Influences on students' conceptions with regard to communicative language use

Sources of influences			Numbers of Interviewees
flexible environment	school	tertiary free environment	16
		early optional education environment	10
teachers' concern on communicative language use	pedagogical	communicative use in classroom practice	15
		guiding students to communicative English language use	3
prestigious learning resources	teaching and	teaching resources	5
		teacher resources	5
		language schools oriented towards communicative use	2

English language learning was equated with teachers' selected linguistic items in order to succeed in various exams.

On the other hand, influences on students' conceptions of learner autonomy for gaining communicative ability were found to have four categories: flexible school environment, teachers' pedagogical concern on communicative language use, prestigious teaching and learning resources, and language schools oriented towards communicative language use.

According to Table 5, most students reported a free or freer educational environment provided opportunities for genuine interest in language use. Interviewee 21 reflected his experiences in primary school:

“At that time, English language learning was genuinely based on your interest. We did not learn it for exams [...] teachers were very good. They made you involved in all kinds of activities, singing English songs, acting out short plays. It was a time you learned English as a language for use.” (21/9-10; 13-15)

Likewise, interviewee 9 shared his observation in university:

“In the past (before university), learning English was only for exams. But now, there were always guest speakers who gave speeches in English...I felt I needed to learn English as a language for mastery.” (9/49-54)

Moreover, teachers' explicit guidance for communicative language use could be influential. A typical example was given by interviewee 3:

“My first English teacher in high school taught little about grammar, mainly about listening and speaking. With brief explanation of language points, she asked us to act out dialogues... Most importantly, English should be learned in order to use it.” (3/51-54)

This example showed that the teacher's decision on what to teach directly led to students' understanding of the purpose of English language learning, in this case, being language use.

When comparing the two tables (Tables 4 and 5), it was clear that the level of teaching facilities and the backgrounds of language teachers could all influence their

conceptions of English language learning. For example, 13 interviewees pointed out that their English teachers were unable to emphasize English language use due to their own limited educational backgrounds. As a consequence, students' English language learning was largely confined to textbook learning, with a large proportion of grammar analysis. In contrast, five interviewees mentioned that they had teachers who had overseas study experiences and their English classrooms were dominated by language use.

As can be seen from the above findings, various factors can influence students' conceptions of English language learning in relation to learner autonomy. Among others, the exam system appears to be the most salient factor for learners' choice of learning English for academic success. In this regard, students' conceptions of learner autonomy were portrayed as internalized willingness, manageable freedom and strong will. Nevertheless, learners' immediate learning environment, such as school, and their accessible teaching and learning resources can sometimes influence their conceptions in a different direction, for example, learning English for communicative competence. Accordingly, their conception of learner autonomy was expressed by willingness and freedom to learn, and self-direction.

Learner autonomy in Chinese high-stakes contexts

Despite the differences in domains of learner autonomy, students all believed that learning responsibilities lay in themselves, except that this responsibility seemed to be in different degrees depending on the involved teachers' role. When further probing learners' accounts, the following four categories were revealed:

Teacher-reactive learner responsibility

“You should finish teachers' assigned tasks first [...] .but you should learn more...it's not imposition but your interest and persistence [...] doing exercises for exams oppresses autonomy.” (16/108; 120-121)

Exam-reactive learner responsibility

“You don't need others to push you...prepare yourself for the exams...exams results became your reference for positioning yourself [...] less dependent on your teacher.”(20/267-268)

Semi-proactive learner responsibility

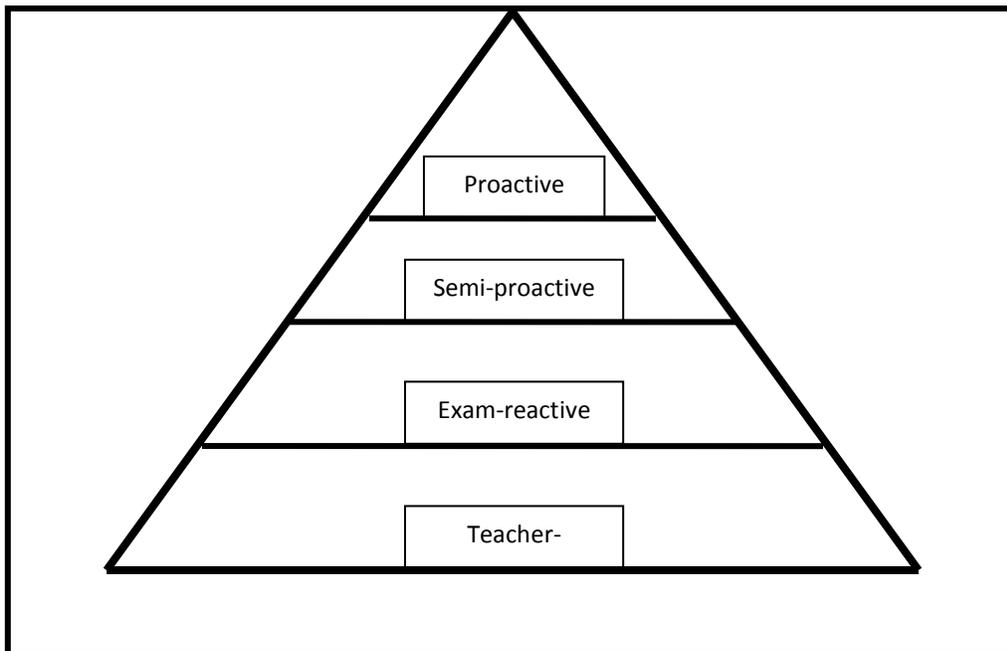
“You follow your own way of learning. First, you have a direction, teachers can help guide you the direction, but it’s your own decision as to what you should do, follow the plan and check whether you keep to it afterwards.”(2/281-283)

Proactive learner responsibility

“It is a state that you want to learn it (English), you have the freedom and you are learning it, you learn it autonomously and you know how to learn it.” (10/143-144)

In relation to Littlewood’s (1999) classification of reactive autonomy and proactive autonomy in the Asian context, the present study suggested that students’ conceptions of learner autonomy were more complex: firstly, students’ autonomy could be a self-initiated reaction to the exam system; secondly, some students recognized the importance of self-directed learning yet expected teachers’ guidance in such a process. With reference to Benson’s (2006) opinions on degrees of learner autonomy, the above findings could be possibly put in the following diagram (see Figure 1):

Figure 1: types of learner autonomy as perceived by students



According to Littlewood (1999), the top layer, proactive autonomy, is the one that Western scholars hold and an ideal for learners in Asian contexts to aim at. The remaining three types of learner autonomy as revealed in the present study, however, indicated that in high-stakes contexts, learners might have different levels of learner autonomy, pending on their expectations of teachers' role in the language learning process. In fact, expectations of teacher guidance in the learning process do not essentially contradict the idea of learner autonomy. For example, when Dam (1995) and Little (1991) argue for promoting learner autonomy in classroom mode, the teachers' appropriate guidance is always vital. However, in Chinese high-stakes contexts, students' expectations of teacher guidance might be more to do with academic success than communicative ability.

Implications and conclusions

If learner autonomy essentially concerns the learners' own capacity to manage or control their own learning, it is the learners' own choices that determine their language learning objectives. In other words, learners have the right to decide whether communicative competence is their only learning objective or not. In high-stakes exam contexts, learners can have a realistic goal of academic achievement as well as communicative language use. In accordance with such objectives, students might demonstrate different types of learner autonomy, for example, teacher-reactive, exam-reactive, semi-proactive and proactive. Moreover, certain features such as internalized willingness, manageable freedom, and strong will can all be associated with learner autonomy in high-stakes exam contexts. For teachers who expect to promote learner autonomy in these environments, it is necessary to find out students' learning objectives and then provide proper guidance. It is also argued that teachers should draw due attention to ways to help learners in changing attitudes to ones that are favorable for learner autonomy. At the same time, the ability to manage constraints and an established strong will should be constantly encouraged by teachers.

The present study asked 27 students from three Chinese universities about their English language learning experiences. The evidence showed that in high stakes exam contexts, learner autonomy could be interpreted in two distinctive forms, namely, learner

autonomy for academic success and learner autonomy for communicative ability. Moreover, factors influencing students' conceptions were seen to be related with the broad educational system and students' experiences of teaching practices. Interestingly, although students mentioned that better facilities did enhance their language learning for communicative abilities, there was no mention of whether the traditional classroom or technology-supported language learning was preferable for the promotion of learner autonomy. It is possible that technology-supported practices for promoting learner autonomy in English language learning often focus on tertiary education. Future research possibly can be done among sophomores or juniors in order to gain insights in this regard. In addition, large-scale quantitative research can be done in the future to further examine and/or generalize the findings of the present study.

REFERENCES:

- Allwright, D. (1988). Autonomy and individualization in whole-class instruction. In A. Brookes and P. Grundy (Eds.), *Individualization and autonomy in language learning ELT documents 131*. Basingstoke: Modern English Publications in association with The British Council.
- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. London: Pearson Education.
- Benson, P. (2006). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 40, 21-40.
- Benson, P. (2007). *Learner autonomy 8: Teacher and learner perspectives*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Chen, J. L. (2005). Analysis of 'learner-centeredness' in computer assisted and classroom teaching practice. *Foreign Language Teaching and Technology*, (4).
- Dam, L. (1995). *Learner autonomy 3: From theory to classroom practice*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Dam, L. (2001) (Ed.). *AILA Review 15 learner autonomy: New insights*. Bembo: Catchline.
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1968). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

- Gu, S. M. (2007). Comprehensive application of autonomous language learning mode combining computer assisted environment with classroom learning. *Foreign Language Learning and Technology*, (3).
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy in foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Holliday, A. (2003). Social autonomy: Addressing the dangers of culturism in TESOL. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Palgrave.
- Holliday, A. (2005). *The struggle to teach English as an international language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hu, G. W. (2002). Potential cultural resistance to pedagogical imports: The case of communicative language learning in China. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15, 93-105.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy I: Definitions, issues, and problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Little, D. (2007). Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1(1), 14-29.
- Littlewood, W. (1996). 'Autonomy': An anatomy and a framework. *System*, 24(4), 427-435.
- Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(1), 71-94.
- Ouyang, L. & Li, Q. (2009). A study based on application of Moodle for autonomous language learning. *Xi'an Foreign Language Studies*, (3).
- Pavlenko, A. & Lantolf, J. (2000). Second language learning as participation and the (re)construction of selves. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sinclair, B. (2000). Learner autonomy: The next phase. In B. Sinclair & T. Lamb (Eds.), *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions*. London: Longman.
- Rao, Zh. H. (2006). Understanding Chinese students' use of language learning strategies from cultural and educational perspectives. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 27(6), 491-508.

- Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25, 56-47.
- Straub, J., Zielke, B. & Werbik, H. (2005). Autonomy, narrative identity, and their critics. In W. Greve, K. Rothermund, & D. Wentura (Eds.), *The adaptive self: Personal continuity and intentional self-development*. Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe and Huber.
- Ushioda, E. (1996). *Learner autonomy 5: The role of motivation*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Xu, J. F., Peng, R. Z., & Wu, W. P. (2004). An investigation into non-English major college students' learner autonomy in English language learning. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 36(1), 64-68.