AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF CULTIVATING
STUDENTS AUTONOMOUS LEARNING CAPACITY
IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

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Abstract
This paper is a two-year empirical investigation of cultivating students' autonomous learning capacity in College English teaching at Shanxi University of Finance and Economics. The goal of the study is to optimize students' language learning and to find a new direction of teaching innovation. The paper analyzes the current teaching context and presents a critical review of the literature on learner autonomy. The author explores understanding of learner autonomy in Chinese context and produces an autonomous learning model in the experimental study. The paper presents some strategies for fostering autonomy such as instructing students how to learn based teaching and collaborative learning. It was found that only by encouraging greater learner autonomy can students raise their English learning effectiveness.

Key words
Teaching English as a foreign language, learners, autonomy, teaching innovation

1 Introduction
It is true that after studying English for over ten years, most university students continue to find reading English books a difficult task. Understanding oral English, especially English spoken by native speakers, is considered an even tougher task than reading aloud. But even more difficult is the job of expressing themselves clearly and fluently in spoken English. Many students who are able to pass the upper level English examinations with high grades are frequently poor at using the language.

Especially since 1999, university enrollment across the country has been expanding annually. This has plunged college English teaching into a new series of problems including a particularly severe shortage of teachers, increased class sizes and a widening gap in the English proficiency levels of university students. The best way to make students learn both actively and effectively in such a situation is to challenge the traditional methods that have proved insufficient.

In order to meet the requirements of work places with the intention of raising the quality of English teaching, Shanxi University of Finance and Economics called on the staff to reform the current teaching model of college English. By careful studying the modern theories of language teaching and learning of West countries, the author found that cultivating students' autonomous learning capacity in college English teaching might be an effective and efficient way. Therefore, the author produced an autonomous learning model of college English and put it into teaching practice. The paper reflects the outcomes of the two-year teaching experiment of learner autonomy conducted at the university.

2 Current Teaching Context
Since opening the door to the outside world, college English teaching in China has made great

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progress. Indeed, remarkable changes and achievements have been made across the country. However, the developments at each university in China are often quite different from each other. Chinese students' English proficiency is commonly rather limited. Unfortunately, teaching English as a foreign language in China still leaves much to be desired. Zhou Liuxi 2003}

2.1 The goal of English teaching

The teaching goals of the traditional syllabus demonstrate an emphasis on a reading for comprehension-based pedagogy, and the document nominates a basic amount of vocabulary that students were required to master. When tuition was focused on the emphasis in the syllabus the staff who delivered it regarded reading, writing, and translating as the basis of scholarly endeavor and they tended to ignore the cultivation of students' listening and speaking ability. Both are now recognized as essential to the requirements of the international business community. As a result, it is understandable that some teachers place considerable emphasis on their students’ passing the examinations and spend much time in dealing with students' examination competence. Therefore, students may demonstrate a capability to remember many words by sight but are still too frequently neither able to understand nor say them. Such students may well have acquired a basic vocabulary but have not mastered the techniques of applying it in acts of communication.

2.2 The most recent model of English teaching

The English language teaching model as it has been recently practiced in Chinese tertiary institutions generally comprised a teacher-students-textbooks and the blackboard. This equipment has been used in a classroom with students sitting in rows listening to a teacher who stood in front of them. Some classes occasionally used computers but that use has generally been very limited. Normally there are around 55 students in each class and it is clearly impossible for the teacher to instruct students individually in such a situation. The teacher will talk about grammar, do some translation, explain the text, and ask students to do some written exercises. The teacher must deal with a wide range of student competencies. Many students come from the countryside while others are from large cities. The very large gap between the levels of students' English proficiency does pose a real challenge to teachers.

2.3 The methodology of English teaching

The Grammar-Translation Method has had a dominant place in college English teaching and it has had a long-lasting influence on TEFL practice in China. Indeed, many teachers still feel more comfortable with the traditional “chalk and talk” techniques that deliver information in a predictable format. Teachers primarily pay attention to the linguistic points of English and do not address aspects of teaching concerning learning strategies. All too frequently teachers have tended to structure classes in such a way that students regard the teacher as the provider of knowledge and the student as the receiver. In class students are used to listening to the teachers and taking notes, but not anticipating a request for information from the teacher. Even if the answer is known, generally only a small percentage of students will become involved in answering the teacher’s questions. There is generally no exchange of information.

2.4 The impact of Chinese culture

Most students in China would be considered introverted when compared to similar cohorts in Western countries and this is due to the impact of Chinese culture. China is bound by a powerful adherence to Confucian values with a strong emphasis placed on cooperation, the preservation of “face” and honor, and self-effacement. Each of these concepts has had enduring implications for the language teaching classroom. Self-effacement and “face” saving may account for the reason why few students are so reluctant to speak in response to the questions from the teacher. Self-effacement reflects the society’s need for modesty and balance and appears to be counter-productive for encouraging critical self-awareness.

3 Learner Autonomy in Language Learning

Since Henry Holmes’ work “Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning” was published in 1981, autonomy in language learning has been a topic of widespread discussion in the West. Just as
"communicative" and "authentic" were the catchwords of the 1980s. Learner autonomy had fast become one of the new ELT buzzwords by the 90s. Broadly Kenning 1996.[4] Little 1990.[5] Great progress has been made in the exploration and implementation of the concept of autonomy.[5] However, much less concern has been shown and "little formal academic discussion about learner autonomy"[6] Wu Hongyun 2001[7] has been held in China.

Many researchers and theorists define learner autonomy in many different ways.[8] One of the earliest advocates of autonomy in language teaching Holec 1981.[9] Has defined it as the "ability to take care of one's own learning."[10] This point is developed further by Wenden 1991.[11] Who summarises the issue.

In effect, successful or expert or intelligent learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous.[12]

Dickinson 1995[13] considers autonomy as "both an attitude towards learning and a capacity for independent learning."[14] He elaborates the attitude as responsibility the learner is prepared to take for decision-making about his learning and capacity for critical reflection and decision-making in the learning process. That is, they can identify, formulate and change goals to suit their own learning needs and interests and are able to use learning strategies and monitor their own learning "p[15]

Littlewood 1996.[16] sees autonomy mainly as "learners' ability and willingness to make choices independently" and goes on to argue that the ability depends on possessing both knowledge about the alternatives from which choice have to be made and necessary skills for carrying out whatever choices seem most appropriate. Willingness depends on having both the motivation and confidence to take responsibility for the choices required.

It is also emphasized by Littlewood 1996[17] that the capacity and intention to engage freely will usually depend on students' motivation and confidence just as much as it does on their knowledge and skills.

Another major influence on the concept of learner autonomy has been the Soviet psychologist Vygotsky.[18] Central to his ideas is the importance of social relationships to the development of mental abilities and learning. A central term in his theory is the "zone of proximal development."[19] The zone of proximal development is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." Vygotsky 1978.[20]

Kelly 1996[21] discussed the importance of the environments where learning takes place. He said that if materials and classrooms are considered separate entities from personal experience and the immediate application of what is learned, they will not affect overall personal constructs. Camborne 1988.[22] argues that when students are totally immersed in the learning environment and fully engaged in the task, they are better able to internalize the meaning of what is being learned. Individuals must be enabled to construct their own private learning spaces according to their needs and fill them with personally meaningful learning material.

In the theoretical literature there is broad agreement that learner autonomy grows from the individual learner's acceptance of responsibility for his or her own learning.[23] Holec 1981[9] Little 1991.[5] The term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways.[24] Benson 1997.[25]

1. Situations in which learners study entirely on their own.
2. A set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning.
3. An inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education.
4. The exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning.
5. The right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.[26] Adapted from Benson 1997[25]
The general social, political, economic and cultural contexts and features of China are different to those in Western countries. In keeping with this understanding, the accepted objectives of teaching are also different and the descriptions of learner autonomy of Western countries do not exactly reflect the situation of most Chinese students. Nevertheless, in the design phase of this investigation, a wide range of Western literature concerning learner autonomy was examined. Consideration was then given as to how this could be applied within English teaching practice in Chinese contexts. The author considers that learner autonomy in TESOL in China should involve the learners in:

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

As McDevitt (1997:4) points out, “The end product of education is an independent learner” and that cultivating a learner’s independence or autonomy should be regarded as the ultimate goal that teachers or educators try to pursue. Many educators believe that developing some degree of autonomy is essential if learners are to become effective language users. Littlewood 1996, Nunan 1997, Breen 1984.

4 The Shanxi University of Finance and Economics Investigation

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

4.1 Hypothesis

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

4.2 Investigational design

The design of the investigation adopts Candy 1991 (270) concept of constructivism, which “leads directly to the proposition that knowledge cannot be taught but only learned” that is “constructed” because knowledge is something “built up by the learner” von Lagerfeld 1974 (xvi) cited in Candy 1991 (270).
The author [taking into account the constructivist learning theory and exploring the relationships between teachers and students teaching content and resources] created a visual model of autonomous classroom teaching. This was done to emphasize the importance of a clear focus on teaching and learning and to provide feedback on the practices in the classroom. The factors of “objectives” and “evaluation” have been included. Learner autonomy has been placed in the model because both the product and source of the actual learning occur within the classroom.

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

4 The roles of teachers and students

In this investigation at SUFE, if the teacher’s roles and students’ roles were introduced to the students, it was recognized that teachers must first provide students with appropriate tools and with opportunities to practice using them. Teachers have to facilitate the change. The presupposition here is that teachers are willing to change and shift their roles in the classroom from information providers to facilitators. Shifting from “teaching knowledge based” to “supervising student learning based” from “a protagonist” on the stage to “a director” behind the scenes becoming students’ directors of knowledge constructionism.

If the classroom is a stage in a theatre, the students are the actors. According to constructivist learning theory, language learners are not passive receivers of knowledge; they are recognized as active constructors of knowledge structures by finding problems by producing hypotheses by confirming hypotheses and solving problems and by finding new problems. In the process of recycling, one constantly builds up a knowledge structure. Students become active constructors of knowledge through experience and opportunities to discover and define. This implies students should become colearners, using available knowledge through interaction with others in socially significant tasks of collaborative work.

Teachers are not the only source of information and more, but act as facilitators, so that students can actively interpret and organize the information they are given. Fitting it into prior knowledge. Students have become active participants in learning and are encouraged to be explorers and creators of language rather than passive recipients of it.

4 The three panels of the teaching process

The process of the new teaching model can be divided into three panels. The first panel is learning before class, the second panel is classroom teaching, and the third panel is autonomous learning after class. During the three stages, the teacher and students set up teaching objectives, choose teaching content, and design teaching activities mutually.

The learning panel before class in the autonomous learning model requires that students achieve definite goals of learning, studying some content independently, and finishing objective testing. The teacher announces the learning objectives at the end of the previous class and makes students aware of what to learn, what problems to solve, what ability to develop, and what material to consult. Teachers instruct students how to study textbook knowledge and how to change text knowledge into ability by paying more attention to learning process. Thus, learning before class is an important step in cultivating students’ autonomous learning ability.

The in-class teaching panel requires the arrangements of the class into a three parts sequence. First, the students are given ten minutes in which they are asked to finish a quiz to check the content of the previous lesson. Secondly, the teacher acts as a guide to instruct students to learn the new content of the text and students are encouraged to participate in all kinds of classroom activities. Thirdly, the teacher will give students assignments to do after class. In this panel, it can be recognized that the pedagogy is based on constructivist approaches to learning theory in which language learners are not perceived as passive receivers of knowledge. Rather, they are treated as active constructors of knowledge.
In the case of the outside teaching panel students are required to make good use of their time to study. By surfing the Internet students can use the web that environment provided by World Wide Web for learners to engage in online talk with people all over the world. In which case they must use the target language accurately and naturally to develop their communicative skills and intercultural communicative competence. Furthermore students can use the World Wide Web to collect plenty of language knowledge and cultural materials concerning the target language so as to enlarge their knowledge to cultivate their multi-angle view and to develop their three-dimensional understanding.

4.5 Effective teaching methodology

For teachers who wish to promote opportunities for students to become more autonomous learners there are many positive strategies that can be adopted.

The teacher should have a clear picture of each student's learning situation. If the teacher does not know the student's actual abilities, level and background, no matter how warm-hearted the teacher might be, the rather aimless instruction that results from a lack of knowledge about the students will almost surely miss the point. The best way to raise the efficiency of one teaching is to know what students well know what they are lacking, and how to help them overcome this deficiency. To assist teachers in this process the students were surveyed at the first class. Each received a seven question questionnaire concerning their educational background and their present competence in English listening, speaking, reading and writing.

In order to carry out appropriate level based teaching, established on the students of situation and with a focus on individual development, it is recognized that all language learners are very different in terms of their needs, interests, strengths and weaknesses, motivations and learning styles. As an important part of the learning process students must focus on language areas in which they need help and ignore others. They can take as much time as they like and exploit any of the considerable variety of media that are on offer and they can choose which they prefer to learn from. They can work at whatever pace they feel comfortable. In this new climate of autonomy the teacher provides different worksheets to different individuals depending upon their tastes and abilities.

Students are encouraged to be interdependent and to work collaboratively. The less students depend on their teacher the more autonomous they will become. Collaborative learning is an educational approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of students working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. For example, students are required to complete a paper by collecting materials, writing an outline, and finishing a draft collaboratively in groups. According to Gerlach [7], collaborative learning is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social act in which the participants talk among themselves. It is through the talk that learning occurs” [8].

When students are given specific instructions in how to learn, another responsibility for language teachers becomes shared with the students. It is said that the new illiterates are those who don’t know how to learn. The old Chinese proverb says, “Give a man a fish, he can eat for one day; teach him how to fish, he will benefit for a lifetime.” If we raise the students’ awareness of strategy use and help them to reflect on the way they learn, we give them strategies for dealing with different kinds of activities and problems, and we offer them a range of different learning style alternatives to choose from. The students are presented with the teaching goals for each lesson and they are encouraged to ask questions about the texts and the materials. When this happens students can take responsibility for their own learning, and they can pay more attention to their learning processes rather than concentrating all their attention on the products of learning.

An important aspect of the move to autonomous learning is the recognition of the need to guide students to make good use of modern technology to improve their English proficiency levels. Teachers have all the more reason to add effective technology integration for students. The Internet provides foreign language learners with authentic natural language communication environments. On the Internet computer mediated learning using many kinds of communication such as discussions, electronic letters, electronic fora, and news groups all become instantly available. Each has the potential to provide authentic natural communication settings that can stimulate a desire to use the target language and create
for the students a foreign language atmosphere that is supportive and natural. Such an environment is conducive to improving their communicative competence.

In the autonomous program students come to realize the objectives of learning foreign languages and begin to actively plan and arrange their study. At the beginning of first term students should know their overall requirements for learning English during the periods at university. Then students can adjust and plan their detailed learning goals for each term according to their individual needs. For example, students who intend to engage in translating work recognize that translating skills and knowledge are crucial to their development. Recognizing that listening and speaking skills form the foundation for such skills, in such a case the student would organize his/her spare time and adjust the study plan for improving translating skills.

It has been our intention to establish an effectual monitoring and controlling mechanism that can carry out accurate objective evaluation while encouraging learner autonomy. The content of assessment should include comments on students' basic knowledge, skills, attitudes towards study, study habits, cooperation and general communication abilities. We recognize that every student is evaluating his/her own learning proficiency from the results of testing as well as their teachers' and fellow students' assessments of themselves. But it is not sufficient for them to just depend on others. Students must also develop the ability to self-monitor and control and make assessments of their own learning achievements. Self-evaluation refers to using such simple processes as relating the results of others' examination responses to test oneself. Only by constantly evaluating can students understand their own learning experiences and adjust their learning methods or design new objectives of learning for themselves.

5] Research Approach | Contrastive Investigation

The Foreign Language Faculty at SUFE organized students to attend the English graded test with combined operation of the Office of Academic Affairs when undergraduate students of Grade 2002 enrolled in the university. According to the results of the overall grades 60% for the test results and 40% for the results of National Matriculation English Test, students were divided into higher level Class A and average level Class B.

The students in Class A began to learn from College English Band 2 from the first term to the fourth term studying College English Band 2 to Band 5. There were four class hours every week for Band 2 to Band 5. The content of College English Band 1 was learned by students themselves while the key points and difficult points were explained in class by the teacher of a class. Students were required to attend CET 4 at the end of the third term and those who passed CET 4 could attend CET 6 at the end of the fourth term.

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

In this investigation, two classes were chosen at random from nine higher level classes. One higher level class was referred to as Class A1 and the other higher level class investigated as Class A2. The same process was used to choose participants from the average level students resulting in Class B1 and Class B2. The population of the study comprised of 220 non English major undergraduates of Grade 2002.

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

To support the investigations, findings and give a qualitative illustration of the differences created between the autonomous learning and control group classes, qualitative data were collected. This was done by means of the teachers regularly describing the nature of the learning environments in their classrooms to the researchers.

6] Data

Data were collected at the end of the first academic year of the experiment at SUFE. After one and
a half academic years the groups sat the CET[4] organized by "College English Examination Committee of Band 4[6]" in January 2004 At the end of the fourth term those who had not passed CET[4] sat CET[4] again The overall passing rate of CET[4] of the autonomous learning groups and control groups is shown in Table 1

6[1] The independent variable
Two different teaching models are involved in the research teaching model of autonomous learning and traditional teaching model

6[2] The dependent variable
Two kinds of test results are shown in the investigation the internal test results of the third term and the results of College English Test Band 4

6[3] Reliability and validity
The overall results of every term include students' attendance performance in class homework and final examination According to the teacher's record the three aspects are 10% and students' final examination is 90% of final examination results

To control for the possible contaminating variable of existing academic ability upon the ability of students to function in an autonomous learning environment both the higher-level and average-level student groups were included in the investigation An autonomous learning group and a control group were selected from each level creating four groups in total This was done to ensure that the autonomous learning group and control group were as similar in their English proficiency levels as possible at the commencement of their studies The same process was used to choose participants from the average-level students resulting in Class B1 autonomous learning group and Class B2 control group

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

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

All groups worked from the same textbook This book was New Horizon College English published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press All groups received four class hours each week The textbook was progressed through at the same rate in each class and almost the same number of assignments was given after class

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

6[4] Procedure for data analysis
The research does some analysis of the data that the investigation obtained with statistical software SPSS10[8] By using a set of independent samples "Test" the investigational groups and control groups are compared at their respective levels in listening speaking reading and writing The purpose is to examine if there are some differences and if there exist outstanding differences when two groups of samples accepted the classroom teaching model of autonomous learning and traditional classroom teaching model Statistical results of the 2ailed test of the samples are indicated as Table 1

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Table 1 The total results of the third and the fourth CETs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investigational samples</th>
<th>Students numbers</th>
<th>Average marks of CET results</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Passing rate of CET results</th>
<th>t value</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class A1</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>76±50</td>
<td>8±2.0</td>
<td>94±6</td>
<td>3±12</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class A2</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>71±30</td>
<td>9±1.5</td>
<td>85±4</td>
<td>3±58</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class B1</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>68±56</td>
<td>9±2.0</td>
<td>79±5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class B2</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>63±20</td>
<td>9±2.9</td>
<td>68±4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

By examining the distribution table the highly significant critical value is 2.000. The values obtained by using test were 3±12 and 3±58 both 2.000. The values of 0.002 and 0.000 clearly indicate that no difference hypothesis can be rejected and there are significant differences between CET scores of autonomous learning groups and those of control groups.

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

Association of Findings in Relation to the Literature

Through the classroom observations of developing learner autonomy in groups A1 and B1 over two years the investigation found that most students could take charge of their own learning. Students' motivation to study was aroused and most of them volunteered to find appropriate reading materials to read and to persist in listening to the radio station in their spare time every day. They could take an active part in all kinds of activities outside class such as English speech contests, the English corner and English singing contests at the university.

From the analysis of the students' standardised test results of the third term and the fourth term the outcomes of autonomous learning groups were shown to be higher than those of control groups. The classroom teaching model of autonomous learning was proved to be superior to the traditional teaching model for both the higher level students and the average level students. Besides students got accustomed to some new learning strategies. The students made their own detailed timetable for study and activities each day. Students realized that an increased awareness of the learning process is very important. Therefore they paid more attention to the process than the product of study and they took an active role in classroom activities such as in pairs and small groups.

This investigation supported the understanding that autonomous learning is certainly not “teacher less learning”. As Sheerin 1997 cited in Benson & Volier 1997 63 succinctly states “teachers have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self access and in helping them to stay afloat”. In this investigation we found that there is a considerable challenge for both teachers and students. Teachers are no longer in the dominant position as the sole authoritative speakers in class and students are no longer simple passive receivers of knowledge. However it does not necessarily mean teachers are less important. On the contrary the teachers' job is more demanding and challenging in helping students grow up as creative and independent learners. Teachers must focus their attention on helping students understand how to learn instead of directing all their energies on how to teach. Teachers must now play a different role in class as guides, facilitators and anticipators. In order to encourage students to become autonomous learners teachers must discover the meaning of teacher autonomy first.

This investigation supports the view that developing some degree of autonomy is essential if learners are to become effective language users see Littlewood 1996, Nunan 1997, Breen 1984. This view is most succinctly summarized by Knowles 1975 34. There is convincing evidence that people who take

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the initiative in learning learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers passively waiting to be taught. The results of this project support the existing literature that learner autonomy will result in enhanced students' outcomes. It is without doubt the best way to reach our educational goal.

8 Conclusion

This investigation seems to suggest that TEFL teachers in China should concentrate on developing students' positive attitudes towards building their capacity as autonomous learners. Students need to gain the confidence that will support them in the frequently isolating space occupied by the independent thinker. Thus teachers who are aware of the need for cultivating students' capacity for autonomous learning must also create a supportive environment in which to address the need for new and different assessment procedures in the learning process. Most importantly, adjusting the teacher and student roles in their relationship to each other is the key to the success of promoting autonomous learning.

The students at SUFE who have become autonomous learners will surely be a great asset to China because they have not only learned language skills but will also have developed the capacity to think and to take control of their own learning. This investigation has demonstrated that we seem to be moving in an appropriate direction towards “an essential goal for all learning” Cotterall 2000: the achievement of personal autonomy in scholarship. Nevertheless, and despite the positive results in this investigation, it will not always prove easy to develop learner autonomy in the singular context of the Chinese cultural environment. Indeed, learner autonomy does offer a challenge to both education providers and the community. Since the newly autonomous learners will be recognized as an asset to the country they do at the same time challenge well established cultural norms in education.

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