

# Higher Special Education Students' Autonomous Learning Ability Under the Environment of Network Education<sup>\*</sup>

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This article explores the prospect of introducing learner autonomy into English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching context under the environment of network education. The article argues for autonomy to be cultivated in EFL learners and explains how it can be developed on input-poor equipment. So, autonomous learning should be cultivated and encouraged to enhance the confidence of students to complete the task of learning. Moreover, due to this learning approach, it is beneficial to students' initiative exploration, active discovery, and cultivation of creative talents.

*Keywords:* higher special education, autonomous learning, network education

## Introduction

In the era of integration of world economy, the internationalization of science and technology, and the rapid development of knowledge economy and information, school education has not been possible for a lifetime. On one hand, lifelong learning requires people to have the ability to be independent of teachers and the classroom, then they can continue to study effectively after they have completed a formal school education in order to adapt to the needs of the era of information technology. On the other hand, the wide range of modern information technology, especially multimedia technology and network technology, also provides a good material condition and hardware guarantee for students to carry out autonomous learning. So, it is very important to cultivate learner autonomy. English teaching should not only improve learners' English level, the more important is helping them develop good learning habits and improve the comprehensive ability of autonomous learning through the teacher's guidance and supervision. Autonomous learning is not only beneficial to improve students' academic performance, but also is the foundation of its "lifelong learning" and the development of its life. The network provides a convenient condition for autonomous learning to make the students' autonomous learning show some new features. It has theoretical and practical significance to study how to promote students' autonomous learning ability under the network environment (Wang & Li, 2004, p. 65).

## Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning is a relatively new concept for Chinese English teachers and students. It is now widely believed that the ideal goal of education is to study autonomously. The concept of autonomous learning

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originated in the 1960s. At that time, the development of long-term learning skills and independent thinking were discussed. Since the 1980s, autonomous learning has attracted the attention of a large number of educational researchers. Holec (1981) defined autonomous learning as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (as cited in Liu, 2006, p. 26).

Autonomous learning should be cultivated and encouraged. It encourages students to master their own learning, because it teaches students to learn studying skills, such as vocabulary learning, reading, listening, and writing skills. It strengthens students’ positive attitude towards learning, such as self-confidence, critical thinking, and independent thinking. It guides the students to think and do self-evaluation. Therefore, it is helpful to the students to master English in many ways.

Autonomous learning provides students with more opportunities to contact in English. We have such a common sense knowledge that the more students get in touch with English, the faster they will master English. For countries like China, which has less English-speaking environment, contacting in English is very useful and necessary for our students. Because ordinarily we have limited English classes (usually 4-6 classes per week for non-English major students), this is far from the goal of successful foreign language teaching. In the environment of non-local language, autonomous learning increases the chances of learning. If autonomous learning can be organized well, it can make a large number of students spend the least time learning more English (Gao, 2006, p. 48).

Autonomous learning can cater to all levels of students. Autonomous learning is very flexible. It can be in the classroom, study room, library, and home; it can happen as long as it is convenient. It has an effect on four kinds of appraisal skills and the level of English. It applies to students with different learning styles and skills. It allows students to choose different content of learning materials. It can be carried out alone or in groups.

Students were given more freedom and autonomy, so as to improve their learning motivation and quality. The formal classroom instruction makes the students feel difficult to decide what to learn and how to learn. And autonomous learning gives students the long lost opportunity to learn from their own. Because of this kind of freedom, the students of autonomous learning have more motivation to learn than the students of depending on teachers, and they have more efficiency in learning. There is evidence that autonomous learning students learn more and better than those who sit at the foot of the teacher, passively waiting to be taught (Zhang, 2006, p. 84).

Once, the students become autonomous learners, they have mastered the habit of lifelong learning skills and independent thinking. This is useful not only in the period after graduation but also in the long-term life.

### **Design and Conduct Autonomous Learning**

Designing and conducting autonomous learning need to change the traditional role of the teachers and students. This needs to change the attitude towards autonomous learning and support autonomous learning in many ways. First, autonomous learning should become a part of classroom learning. In this way, the teacher will be able to obtain the ability and freedom to connect autonomous learning with school teaching program. Today, most schools are not aware of the great potential of autonomous learning in the help of language learning. Therefore, it is necessary to improve students’ awareness of the benefits of autonomous learning. Secondly, the school should provide students with an autonomous learning center. Thirdly, we should give the autonomous learning center financial aid. These costs are a problem to the schools with financial stress, especially those in less developed areas. But there are many successful examples of low cost autonomous learning (Hua, 2001, p. 76).

Teachers also need to be more aware of their new role. The teacher is the helper, the guider, and the source of knowledge. Teachers also need to change the traditional view of autonomous learning and recognize their center usage in the autonomous learning. According to Garder (1999), "Autonomous learning students are: the planner (in his own study), technical adviser (for himself and others), evaluation of self-study, organizers (in their own learning), proponent (for other students)" (as cited in Shen, 2008, p. 165).

### **Characteristics of Network Education**

Autonomous learning based on network environment is in the use of the premise of the advantages of the network. In the course of teaching, teachers should change teaching ideas. The role of the teacher is not just preaching or tuition, but also is a learning facilitator, guidance, encourager, consultant, provider of information materials, the designer of discussion and activities inside and outside the class, organizer, and participant. Network teaching environment provides a good external environment for the transformation of teachers' educational ideas and behavior changes. In classroom teaching under the network environment, teachers' own information literacy is very important. Therefore, teachers should improve their own information literacy as an important learning training objectives (Wang, 2009, p. 96). By strengthening learning the modern education theory, teachers should real change the traditional concept of education, set up the correct information education idea and consciousness in the educational information technology environment, strengthen the education of their information ethics, improve personal information moral cultivation, improve the level of their information technology skills, and improve their educational research ability and the teaching level of the network environment. At the same time, students must change their learning ideas from passive learning to active learning, overcome the passive dependent psychology of "waiting" and "relying on," and take the initiative to assume the responsibility of learning. Inspired, guided, coached, and helped by teachers, students with a strong desire and mood can understand and solve the problem positively. Autonomous learning is more suitable for the network environment. Network can solve a large number of resources required for the study, can help students establish group collaboration, and can enable teachers to achieve asynchronous guidance. Therefore, carrying out autonomous learning with students as the center, the key for teachers is to design a learning environment, stimulate students' learning needs and interests, and let students get rich emotional experience. Students have mastered a large number of learning materials through the network. According to their own learning methods, they may choose to study the learning contents, time, and progress initiatively. Students establish the concept of autonomous learning in the Web-based environment. Therefore, in the teaching process, teachers should reposition the relationship between teachers and students and encourage students to have a correct attitude to their study. In that case, teachers can gradually improve the students' ability of autonomous learning. At the same time, teachers should provide students with an autonomous learning environment, foreign language books, all kinds of subject matter of foreign newspapers, magazines, novels, CDs, video tapes, tapes, and other audio-visual materials, and provide students with a quiet and comfortable multimedia language learning center, allowing them to use language testing equipment in the autonomous learning center freely for the training of "vision, hearing, and speaking." In the teaching process, teachers can use the characteristics of the network and the real time performance of classroom teaching, and make full use of teachers' leading role. It will have a positive impact on the development of students' physical and mental health (Zhang, 2010, p. 154).

### Conclusion

The cultivation of students' autonomous learning ability under the network teaching environment has become the most basic idea of a new round of curriculum reform. It helps students improve their consciousness of study and develop good learning habits. Therefore, teachers should take full advantage of the three positions of the curriculum reform, i.e., school education, social education, and family education, deepening the effect of students' autonomous learning. Eventually, we can reach the goal of "teaching is not to teach" (Hu, 2005, p. 105). Let the students consciously change from the passive acceptance of learning into conscious, independent, and creative learning. Through the enhancement of students' autonomous learning consciousness, their learning ability and working ability can be greatly improved. In the network environment, students' autonomous learning method is different from the traditional way of learning; they are not dependent on the teacher's teaching and the study of the textbook, but on the network platform and digital resources, and through the collection of resources, exploration, discovery, creation, display, and other ways to carry out autonomous learning so as to enhance their confidence to complete the task of learning.

In short, autonomous learning should be cultivated and encouraged. Students and teachers need to realize the benefits of autonomous learning to English teaching. Teachers should design and organize all kinds of activities to make students more independent and more responsible, give full play to the leading role to create a good teaching environment for students, and make full use of multimedia teaching means and network resources to promote learners' autonomy. Autonomous learning should be combined with the teaching of the school. It is time for teachers to spread and develop students' long independent learning habit.

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