

ARE CHINESE STUDENTS AUTONOMOUS?

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ABSTRACT

It is often claimed that Chinese learners lack autonomy, or are even incapable of it, when it comes to learning English as a second language. This article argues that such claims could be misguided and are possibly rooted in stereotypical misconceptions of Chinese learners and narrow definitions of learner autonomy. By exploring research about Chinese students, and alternative understandings of learner autonomy, it will be argued that Chinese students are not only capable of autonomous learning, but they show evidence of autonomous learning behaviours. A reflection on the autonomous learning behaviours demonstrated by learners in a Chinese international high school is included in this discussion.

INTRODUCTION

As a teacher in a Chinese high school, I often hear reports from colleagues of students who lack autonomy, who “can only do what they are told” and whose motivation is solely dependent on teacher direction. However, my experience is the opposite; it is instead one of students who in various ways demonstrate autonomy in their English language learning. This article will argue against the notion that Chinese students cannot be autonomous learners and suggest that this could be based on inaccurate stereotypes of Chinese learners and narrow definitions of learner autonomy.

WHAT IS LEARNER AUTONOMY?

As with most concepts in education, the meaning of learner autonomy is contested and the definitions are various. One of the most influential definitions is from Holec (1981, p.3), who defined learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning...to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of his learning”. Dickinson (1987, p.11) similarly defined the autonomous learner as one who “is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his [or her] learning and the implementation of those decisions”. For Holec and Dickinson, autonomous learners are those who set their own learning objectives, decide themselves which resources to use and how to learn. This could be characterised as strong learner autonomy, in which the learner is seen as having sole or total responsibility for all learning decisions.

However, Little (1991, p.3) viewed these strong definitions as misunderstandings because they seem to conceive learner autonomy as “synonymous with self-instruction” and treat it as “a single, easily described behaviour” which requires the teacher to relinquish all initiative and control.

Other definitions, however, which could be characterised as weak learner autonomy, do not perceive autonomy so narrowly. Dam (1995, p.1), for instance, defined learner autonomy as “a readiness to take charge of one’s own learning in the service of one’s needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others”. A similar understanding of autonomy is demonstrated in Littlewood’s (1999) concept of reactive autonomy, as opposed to proactive autonomy:

“The kind of autonomy which does not create its own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal. It is a form of autonomy that stimulates learners to learn vocabulary without being pushed, to do past examination papers on their own initiative, or to organize themselves into groups in order to cover the reading for an assignment.” (p.75)

This kind of autonomy is developed with the support of others, most likely teachers, rather than separate from it, and there is some evidence to suggest that developing this kind of autonomy positively impacts students’ learning. Reeve (2016, p.133), for example, investigated teaching that provides “autonomy support” in which the teacher purposefully works with students to develop their autonomy, rather than leaving them alone to learn, and found that students receiving such support were more motivated, more engaged and learned more effectively than those who did not receive this support. There is clearly a value to weaker forms of autonomy as well their stronger counterparts.

LEARNER AUTONOMY AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS

Much has been written of the cultural inappropriateness of various TESOL theories and approaches. Critics, for example, have highlighted an “implicit

Western bias” in teaching materials and instructors (Alsayed, 2003, p.24). Hu (2002; 2004) has similarly questioned the appropriateness of Communicative Language Teaching in a Chinese context. Thinkers frequently reject imports of theories developed in the West to non-Western contexts and seek what has variously been called “culturally sensitive pedagogy” (Gu, 2005, p.5) or “culturally appropriate pedagogy” (Nguyen et al., 2006). In these efforts to seek such approaches, several theorists have questioned the relevance of learner autonomy to non-Western (including Chinese) contexts.

Jones (1995, p.228), reflecting on creating a self-access centre in Cambodia, argued that learner autonomy is “laden with cultural values, especially those of the West”. Jones claimed that “to make autonomy an undiluted educational objective in a culture where it has no traditional place is to be guilty at least of cultural insensitivity” and supposed that Cambodian students “have no aptitude or desire for independence”, unlike in the United States where, he claimed, independence has “iconic status”. Ho and Crookall (1995) reported that various Chinese cultural traits are “an obstacle to the promotion of learner autonomy” (p.235), citing the importance of “face”, “relational hierarchy” and “respect for authority” (p.237). Li (2005, p.88) similarly claimed that Chinese students have “very limited language skills and little confidence...[and] struggle to understand the learning process”, so they find that “foreign EFL/ESL teachers’ pedagogy designed to give students autonomy becomes a pedagogical imposition, and an imposition of the teacher’s own cultural values and beliefs”. Rao (2001) suggested that previous studies made similar generalisations in stating that Asian students “are less autonomous” because they are “more dependent on authority figures, and more obedient and conforming to rules and ▶

deadlines”. Pierson (1996, p.52) even demonstrated how statements from authorities such as the Toronto Board of Education suggest that Chinese students “do not readily value the freedom that Canadian education promotes” because they are assumed “to want to be told what to do [and] show little initiative...[thus] have difficulty in dealing with autonomy”.

Such claims have contributed to a view that various supposed elements of Chinese culture make Chinese students unsuited to autonomous learning, or have created, in Wang’s (2011, p.408) words, “the saying that learner autonomy is not suitable to the Chinese context”. As Pierson (1996, p.52) stated, the “general picture” is of a Chinese learner “who is conditioned by a pattern of cultural forces that are not harmonious to learner autonomy”. However, as will be argued, there are numerous reasons for doubting the validity of such portrayals.

DESCRIBING CULTURES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE “CHINESE LEARNER”

It is important to be wary of descriptions such as “Asian” or “Chinese” learners, for these categories presuppose a cultural homogeneity that is not actually present. Social anthropologists argue that “the idea that humanity can be parcelled up into a multitude of discrete cultural capsules...has been laid to rest” (Ingold, 1994, p.330). When it comes to culture, “what we do not find are neatly bounded and mutually exclusive bodies of thought and custom, perfectly shared by all who subscribe to them” (Ingold, 1994, p.330). As Geertz (1973, p.209) explained, the empirical truth of what a culture is like differs greatly from the oversimplified ideological descriptions that rely on caricature.

Though it might be expected that the internationally-minded domain of TESOL would be free from such oversimplified

descriptions of cultures, cultural stereotyping does occur, as Kumaravadivelu (2003, p.709) showed. Indeed, descriptions of Chinese students in TESOL literature are often stereotypical and overgeneralised. As will be shown, such descriptions often contradict reality.

Yuan and Qun (2013, p.21) referred to “a predominant misunderstanding of Chinese learners in the literature about international students”, citing discourses that construct “Chinese learners as a stereotyped group who are obedient to teachers’ authority, passive in class, lacking in critical thinking and adopt inadequate learning strategies”. An example of this is Flowerdew (1998, p.323), who stereotyped two groups of students in the first sentence of her article: “Why is it that when one poses a question to a group of Arab students, the whole class is clamouring to answer, while a question addressed to a class of Chinese learners may elicit no response, followed by a stony silence...?” In his review of literature, Grimshaw (2007, p.300) discovered similar stereotypes, which “include: relative lack of learner autonomy; lack of critical thinking; reticence in class; preference for a reproductive approach to learning; and reliance on a limited range of learning strategies, especially rote memorization”.

Despite the portrayals detailed above, a number of studies reveal a more fuzzy, nuanced and complex truth. Grimshaw’s (2007, p.304) ethnographic studies of students in Chinese universities found students who are not passive or powerless as the stereotype suggests, but students who are “able to take collaborative action to protect their interests”, and students who are not unmotivated and uninterested in learning, but consciously remain silent as a “form of protest” against bad teaching. Grimshaw (2007) reported observing a “considerable degree of autonomy” on campus, describing an everyday scene:

“Before the first class of the morning students find a space on campus and set about reciting their texts. Many of them are reciting from language course books. Some are listening to language tapes on personal stereos. A few are listening to Voice of America on transistor radios and mouthing phrases. Many students stand or sit around the lawn. They face inwards, towards the lawn, turning their backs on the path, where there is a constant stream of people passing by, hurrying to class. Shutting out the rest of the world, they concentrate on their texts. The students are spaced out evenly, with a distance of perhaps three metres between each person.” (p.306)

The scene described here seems to raise questions about the prevailing image of a passive, unmotivated student who can only learn under the direction of a teacher.

Furthermore, Gieve and Clark (2005, p.261) surveyed and interviewed Chinese and European undergraduate students studying an English language course at a British university and found that Chinese students appreciated the benefits of autonomy equally as much as European students, and similarly took advantage of autonomous learning opportunities.

In a number of studies, Littlewood (2000) found few differences between Chinese and European students’ attitudes towards various learning factors, and in some cases stereotypical assumptions were overturned. For instance, on average, the level of agreement with the statement “I see the teacher as somebody whose authority should not be questioned” was higher amongst Spanish students than Chinese students, and likewise agreement with the statement “knowledge is something that the teacher should pass on to me rather than something I should discover myself” was higher amongst German students than Chinese

(p.32).

Most of these studies, though, investigated Chinese learners studying as international students in British and European universities and, as such, some limitations must be acknowledged; students in such a situation might have been required by their academic context to become more autonomous.

Shi’s (2006) research provides insight into autonomous learning amongst a different group of Chinese learners: middle school students in China. His large-scale questionnaire of 300 middle school students similarly showed that Chinese students “show little difference from their Western counterparts by being active learners and preferring a more interactive relationship with their teachers” (p.122).

It is clear that the Chinese learner is not as simple a construct as the stereotypes suggest, and that the vision of Chinese students as passive, dependent and lacking in autonomy has been challenged by a number of studies as overly simplistic. It is necessary to avoid generalisation and seek “alternative and multiple explanations of this phenomenon, rather than to opt for simpler, if seductive, explanations” (Morrison, 2006, p.2)

There are several reasons why the simpler stereotypes of the Chinese learner are seductive. Said (1997, p.38), in his theory of Orientalism, argued that the West often portrays the Orient as a “series of crude ... caricatures”. He spoke mainly of Arab Muslims, but his points apply in China, as well. He demonstrated the tendency to conceptualise the Orient as the Other to the West. This projection of everything perceived as opposite to the West was an attempt to “control, contain and otherwise govern” the Orient (Said, 1978, p.48). This tendency, perhaps, influences stereotypical representations of Chinese students.

As was discussed above, in seeking to understand or control or contain students from China, Western students are portrayed as active, motivated, and independent, whereas Chinese learners are presented as passive, unmotivated and dependent. Ryan and Louis (2007) explored this in their essay False Dichotomy, in which they warned against conceptualising Western and Asian education as a series of binaries, such as deep and surface, or independent and dependent. They argued that these simplified descriptions are used uncritically and “do not take account of the complexities and diversities” (p.404).

CHINESE STUDENTS’ AUTONOMY

It seems that the prevalence of such stereotypes has given rise to the view that Chinese students are less capable of autonomy. However, as is clear from a number of studies outlined above, Chinese students value learner autonomy and demonstrate their autonomy in a variety of ways.

Pearson (2004, p.4) studied Chinese students in New Zealand’s out-of-class language learning and found high levels of participation in various language learning activities which could be considered autonomous, such as watching television or radio news and independent library study. The Chinese students researched by Gan et al. (2004, p.234) reported participation in autonomous learning activities, such as choosing to read business English articles, listening to Voice of America (VOA) every evening, or attending English corners. Gao (2008, p.66) likewise reported on the success of an English corner in China, arguing that a “collectivist culture of learning can be used as a resource to facilitate the development of mutually supportive communities for learners’ autonomous and strategic learning”.

As was mentioned above, Grimshaw (2007, p.306) observed a number of learning activities

amongst his Chinese students that demonstrate a “considerable degree of autonomy”. Grimshaw took on the role of teacher-researcher, using a method that Lankshear and Knobel (2004, p.35) would term “observation” (“emphasizes collecting data in real life, everyday contexts...[using] fieldnotes...”). He observed autonomous learning such as students listening to VOA recordings and reciting texts outside of class. Inspired by Grimshaw’s approach, over the course of a month, I recorded in a notebook any examples of students’ learning that appeared to be autonomous. I focussed on one class of 26 students, in the first year of the high school, and during four weeks I informally recorded student behaviours inside and outside of the classroom that suggested autonomous learning. Such behaviour was evident through informal observation of students during regular interactions with students, such as e-mail communication from students, or short discussions during lessons. The students referred to are Chinese nationals aged between 14 and 16 years old, and are studying in a private, international high school programme in Jiangsu province that follows the British curriculum. All students are preparing to enter higher education overseas.

As these observations were made during regular interactions with students, rather than a focussed research study, they should be seen as only a snapshot of possible student behaviour. Given the possibility of observer bias and the fact that these observations do not constitute a systematic study, only limited conclusions can be drawn. As such, these observations should be viewed as a starting point that provides indications of autonomous behaviour that might warrant more formal investigation in the future.

The following is a list of learning activities observed that seem to demonstrate autonomy. It should be noted that all of the activities ▶

were done of the students' own free will, without any explicit instruction from their teachers (although the influence of parents or guardians is unclear).

- Emailing their English teacher to ask questions about the topics that had been taught earlier that day.
- Approaching their English teacher to ask how their current grades could be improved.
- Working together in informal study groups before and after the school day, helping each other with their English homework and reviewing English lessons.
- Using electronic dictionaries during lessons to find the meanings of unknown words, and annotating the texts with these definitions.
- Spending time outside of class learning lists of words required for IELTS and TOEFL examinations.
- Spending time reading the articles in their English textbooks before and after class.
- Requesting copies of past examination papers and completing these papers (some individually and some in groups, some asking for a teacher's feedback).
- Practising their listening skills by watching English TV shows and listening to BBC news clips online.
- Attending additional English classes (outside of school) on Saturdays, aimed at helping them prepare for IELTS and TOEFL examinations.
- Organising and running a session of their extra-curricular debating club in the absence of their supervising teacher.
- Asking the school librarian and English teachers for recommendations of books to help them improve their English, and borrowing graded readers from the library.

Such learning activities seem to challenge the stereotype of the passive and unmotivated Chinese English learner, but the extent to which they are actually evidence of autonomous learning is partly

dependent on our definition of the concept. If learner autonomy is only understood to require total or sole responsibility for language learning, the strong autonomy or proactive autonomy discussed above, these learners' behaviours are arguably not autonomous. They do not take total responsibility for their learning.

However, according to broader definitions of autonomy as reactive or weak, there seems to be evidence of autonomy amongst Chinese students. In deciding, for example, to attend additional Saturday classes and memorise lists of words for their TOEFL exams or asking their teacher for past examination papers, for example, they are showing a readiness to take charge of their learning in service of their needs. They are willing to act both independently and cooperatively in doing so.

It is important to note that proactive autonomy is not the only form of autonomy, nor is it necessarily more desirable than its weaker or more reactive forms. It may be that, as Littlewood (1999, p.71) noted, "we need to match the different aspects of autonomy with the characteristics and needs of learners in specific contexts". We should approach autonomy, much as Aoki and Smith (1996) did in a Japanese context, by seeking knowledge of students that is not based on stereotype, and then looking for autonomy appropriate for that context. In this sense, as scholars such as Nunan (1996) have recognised, autonomy is a relative concept, and, in the words of Farmer and Sweeney (1994, p.30), "the degree of autonomy may vary from one context to another".

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Given the relative nature of autonomy, teachers should seek to gain knowledge of the learners in their classrooms and their particular contexts, and consider autonomy in light of that. Whilst, as has been seen, caution should be exercised when dealing with generalisations, Littlewood's (1999,

pp.87-88) "five generalizations about autonomy in the East Asian context and how it might develop in the context of second or foreign language learning" provide a useful starting point for teachers seeking to identify autonomy that is appropriate for a Chinese context:

1. "Students will have a high level of reactive autonomy, both individually and in groups..."
2. Groups of students will develop high levels of both reactive and proactive autonomy...
3. Many students will have experienced few learning contexts which encourage them to exercise individual proactive autonomy...
4. East Asian students have the same capacity for autonomy as other learners...
5. The language classroom can provide a favourable environment for developing the capacity for autonomy."

It is clear that students are capable of autonomy, and will especially show evidence of reactive autonomy, both individually and in groups, and, given that they might have had fewer autonomous learning experiences, teachers of Chinese students have the opportunity to develop autonomy through their teaching and interactions with students. Teachers can seek to develop what Reeve (2016, p.133) termed "autonomy-supportive teaching", that is, teaching that aims to "provide students with learning activities, a classroom environment, and a student-teacher relationship that will support their daily autonomy". To do so, the following recommendations could be made:

- Teachers of Chinese students should recognize that students have the capacity for autonomy and should seek to utilise and promote that autonomy as they would students of other nationalities.
- Teachers could encourage students' reactive autonomy by supporting students' independent

learning, rather than expecting them to learn completely independently of the teacher. This could be done through teacher-supported target-setting, providing additional learning materials through self-access centres and reading lists, or encouraging students' use of reflective journal writing, for example.

- Teachers could develop teaching practices that encourage student autonomy both as individuals or in groups, for example, project-based learning, or giving students guidance while granting them limited choice and freedom in their learning activities.
- Teachers could develop structures to enable students' autonomous learning outside of the classroom, such as English corners, reading groups, or supervised self-study times.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Chinese students can be autonomous. Evidence from quantitative and qualitative studies, including reflection on my observations of my own students, has suggested that some Chinese students are autonomous learners. This learner autonomy might go unnoticed by those who only hold stereotypical views of Chinese learners or narrow understandings of learner autonomy. Nevertheless, as has been shown, Chinese students are capable of being autonomous learners, and their teachers have the opportunity to develop this autonomy to benefit their learning. ○

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