



## **An Exploration of the Relationship Between Learner Autonomy and English Proficiency**

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### **Bio Data:**

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### **Abstract**

Students' language proficiency has been shown to be influenced by learner autonomy. This study investigated the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency in a sample of 129 non-English majors in a teacher college in China by means of a questionnaire and an interview. The data of the subjects were analyzed by T-test and F-test with SPSS11.0. The results of the study indicate that the students' English proficiency was significantly and positively related to their learner autonomy, and there are no significant differences among the students' learner autonomy when their English proficiency is not significantly different. But there are significant differences among the students' learner autonomy when their English proficiency is significantly different.

**Keywords:** Learner autonomy; Proficiency; Relationship

### 1. Introduction

Increasingly the imperatives of a global economy dictate that the requirements of education are less focused on the production of individuals with specific skills, and more on lifelong learning and the production of autonomous individuals who are capable of training themselves to meet changing economic needs and circumstances (Benson, 2000, p. 111). In the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning, as the theory and practice of language teaching enters a new century, the importance of helping students become more autonomous in their learning has become

one of its more prominent themes (Benson, 2001, p. 1) and a number of justifications for advocating learner autonomy in language learning have been proposed (Finch, 2000). There are two general arguments in favor of trying to make learners more autonomous. First, if they are reflectively engaged with their learning, it is likely to be more efficient and effective, because more personal and focused, than otherwise; in particular, what is learned in educational contexts is more likely to serve learners' wider agendas. Second, if learners are proactively committed to their learning, the problem of motivation is by definition solved; although they may not always feel entirely positive about all aspects of their learning, autonomous learners have developed the reflective and attitudinal resources to overcome temporary motivational setbacks. In the particular case of second and foreign languages, there is a third argument. Effective communication depends on a complex set of procedural skills that develop only through use; and if language learning depends crucially on language use, learners who enjoy a high degree of social autonomy in their learning environment should find it easier than otherwise to master the full range of discourse roles on which effective spontaneous communication depends (Little, 2002).

As Gremmo observes (1995, p. 151), the last 25 years have seen an increasing amount of attention to learner autonomy, self-directed learning, self-access systems and individualized/independent learning in second language learning literature (e.g. Harding-Esch [Ed.] 1976; Altman & James [Eds.] 1980; Holec 1980; 1981; 1987; 1985; 1988; Geddes & Sturtridge 1982; Mason [Ed.] 1984; Riley 1985; 1988; 1996; Dickinson 1978; 1987; 1988; 1992; 1995; Wenden & Rubin [Eds.] 1987; Brookes & Grundy [Eds.] 1988; Ellis & Sinclair 1989; Little 1989; 1991; 1995; Sheerin 1989; 1991; Gathercole [Ed.] 1990; Wenden 1991b; Page 1992; Esch 1994; 1997a; 1997b; Gardner & Miller [Eds.] 1994; Dam 1995; Dickinson & Wenden [Eds.] 1995; Pemberton et al. [Eds.] 1996; Benson & Voller [Eds.] 1997, Cotterall 2000; cited in Finch, 2000). The general acceptance of these terms in the profession has prompted Little (1991, p. 2) to describe autonomy as the 'buzz-word' of the 1990s, and Wenden to observe that "few teachers will disagree with the importance of helping language learners become more autonomous as learners" (1991, p. 11).

In other words, learner autonomy is one of the most important issues that determine whether an individual reaches his/her potential or falls short of that potential. The personal and social expectations and socio-economic circumstances into which the learners are born may limit them.

Learner autonomy, achieved through learner training and strategy training, which have been described as methods of developing the skills that learners need for autonomy (Benson, 2001, p. 11), above all else, can enable each individual to come to terms with or surpass his/her circumstances.

Almost all research in the field of autonomy is based on the three hypotheses: the nature of autonomy and its components, the possibility of fostering autonomy among learners and the effectiveness of some approaches to fostering autonomy in terms of language learning (Benson, 2001, p. 183). However, the concepts of learner autonomy (now seen as a legitimate goal of language education), and autonomous learning (now regarded as more or less equivalent to effective learning [cf. Benson & Voller [Eds.], 1997, p. 2; Dickinson, 1987, p. vii; Gremmo, 1995, pp. 156,158]) lack any theory of autonomous language learning or other applied linguistic base (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 3; Benson 1996, p. 28). Dickinson (1987) observed that most of the research on the effectiveness of self-instruction in language learning has not been done (though cf. Little, 1991; Cotterall, 1995a & b; 1999), and that "very few of the present or past methods and techniques for language learning are solidly based on research results. Either the research has not been done for them or the results are inconclusive" (Dickinson, 1987, p. 1). Much of the discussion on self-directed and autonomous learning has focused on learner training and self-assessment (Allwright, 1981; Blanche & Merino, 1989; Blue, 1988; Cram, 1997; 1994; Dickinson, 1988; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Harris, 1997; Oscarson, 1990; 1997; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), with the design of self-directed/autonomous learning materials receiving relatively little attention (Allwright, 1981; Block, 1991; Dickinson, 1987; Frankel, 1982; Hill, 1982; Hughes, 1982; Nunan, 1997; cited in Finch, 2000; Sheerin, 1989; 1991; Sinclair, 1996; Sturtridge, 1982). Empirical studies on what makes autonomous learning materials effective are scarce (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Lee 1996, p. 167, cf. Wenden 1987b, 1991a; Oxford 1990b), despite the finding that continuing interest in learning depends to a large extent on whether learners find the materials they use interesting and useful (Frankel 1982; Hughes 1982). Benson (2001, p. 189) stated that many advocates for autonomy are concerned primarily with the ability to learn effectively in terms of personal goals. One of the reasons why the relationship between autonomy and language proficiency has become a critical issue in recent years is that researchers are increasingly beginning to understand that there is an intimate relationship between autonomy and effective learning. However, to date this relationship has largely been explored at the level of theory, and lacks substantial empirical support. Another

reason is that world-wide concern with accountability in education is increasingly obliging teachers to demonstrate the effectiveness of their practices in terms of proficiency gains. For both practical and theoretical reasons, therefore, there is a pressing need for empirical research on the relationship between the development of autonomy and the acquisition of language proficiency.

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency of the 129 non-English majors in a teacher college in China. The study was designed to address the following two specific questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between their learner autonomy and their English proficiency?
- 2) To what extent is the learner autonomy of the participants with different levels of English proficiency different from one another?

## **2. Literature review**

The idea of learner autonomy is by no means a new element in the history of education. In the domain of foreign language learning it was Holec's (1981) seminal study *Autonomy and foreign language learning* which triggered a growing interest in the concept of "learner autonomy" in the last two decades. The autonomy debate has thus become a popular focus of foreign language teaching (Brookes & Grundy, 1988; Dam, 1995; Dickinson, 1987; Dickinson & Wenden, 1995; cited in Finch, 2000; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). This general debate has given rise to two inter-related directions of research. The first of these (mainly in Europe) has concerned itself with the development of learner autonomy or learner training as a primary requisite of learning beyond school in democratic societies (Benson, 2001; Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1980; 1988; Kohonen, 1987; 1989; cited in Finch, 2000;), while the second (mainly in North America) has focused on solving the "secret" of the good language learner by emphasizing learner strategies and the notion of learning to learn or strategy training (Benson, 2001; Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Cited in Finch, 2000; Wenden & Rubin, 1987). And Gremmo and Riley (1995, p. 158) identified and examined the ideas and historical contingencies which form the background to these developments, including minority rights movements, shifts in educational philosophy, reactions against behaviourism, linguistic pragmatism, wider access to education, increased internationalism, the commercialization of language provision and easier availability of educational technology. Further, Finch (2000), Benson (2001), Xu and Zhan (2004) have made a comprehensive overview on learner

autonomy in language learning respectively. Based on their research, three dimensions are mentioned, that is, the definition of learner autonomy, the factors affecting learner autonomy and the approaches to the fostering of learner autonomy. This part will mainly discuss the definition of learner autonomy and its relationship with language proficiency.

## **2.1 Definition of learner autonomy**

Learner autonomy has been described and defined in a number of ways in connection with language learning and there are different terms in literature. Dickinson (1987) and Pemberton (Pemberton et al. 1996, p. 2) identify various different terms in the literature on autonomy, some of which are used synonymously, and some of which have been ascribed a number of separate meanings (See more details in Finch, 2000). According to Benson (2001, p.48), there are a number of terms related to autonomy, which can be distinguished from it in various ways. Most people now agree that autonomy and autonomous learning are not synonyms of, 'self-instruction', 'self-access', 'self-study', 'self-education', 'out-of-class learning' or 'distance learning'. These terms basically describe various ways and degrees of learning by yourself, whereas autonomy refers to abilities and attitudes (or whatever we think the capacity to control your own learning consists of). The point is, then, that learning by yourself is not the same thing as having the capacity to learn by yourself. Also, autonomous learners may well be better than others at learning by themselves (hence the connection), but they do not necessarily have to learn by themselves. Over the last few years, for example, more and more research is coming out on autonomy in the classroom and 'teacher autonomy'. The terms 'independent learning' and 'self-directed learning' also refer to ways of learning by yourself. But these terms are very often used as synonyms for autonomy. When you come across any of these terms, it is a good idea to check what the writer means by them exactly.

When it comes to its definitions, perhaps, the most often quoted definition is that of Holec, who defines autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. To take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning:

- determining the objectives;
- defining the contents and progressions;
- selecting methods and techniques to be used;

- monitoring the procedures of acquisition ...;
- evaluating what has been acquired (Holec, 1981).

An overview of its definitions is discussed in Finch's (2000) dissertation. Recently, Little (2002) stated that learner autonomy is a problematic term because it is widely confused with self-instruction. It is also a slippery concept because it is notoriously difficult to define precisely. The rapidly expanding literature has debated, for example, whether learner autonomy should be thought of as capacity or behavior; whether it is characterized by learner responsibility or learner control; whether it is a psychological phenomenon with political implications or a political right with psychological implications; and whether the development of learner autonomy depends on a complementary teacher autonomy (for a comprehensive survey, see Benson 2001). There is nevertheless broad agreement that autonomous learners understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness (cf. Holec 1981; Little 1991). In other words, there is a consensus that the practice of learner autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others. This working definition captures the challenge of learner autonomy: a holistic view of the learner that requires us to engage with the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social dimensions of language learning and to worry about how they interact with one another.

Autonomy is usually defined as the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one's own learning. In order to say exactly what "taking charge" or "taking responsibility" means in the context of learning, Benson (2001, p. 47) defined and described learner autonomy as the capacity to take control of one's own learning, largely because the construct of "control" appears to be more open to investigation than the constructs of "charge" or "responsibility" and he argued that an adequate description of autonomy in language learning should at least recognize the importance of three levels at which learner control may be exercised: control over learning management, control over cognitive process and control over learning content (Benson 2001, pp. 76-103).

According to Benson (2001, pp.76-80), control over learning management can be described in terms of the most directly observable behaviors that learners employ in order to manage the

planning, organization and evaluation of their learning, control over cognitive process is understood as a matter of the psychology of learning, rather than directly observable learning of behaviors, although it will generally be inferred from the observation of these behaviors, and control over learning content has a situational aspect in which autonomous learners should have the freedom to determine their own goals and purposes if the learning is to be genuinely self-directed, and a social aspect, which may involve control over learning situations and call for particular capacities concerned with the learner's ability to interact with others in the learning process.

These three levels of control are clearly interdependent. Effective learning management depends upon control of the cognitive processes involved in learning, while control of cognitive processes necessarily has consequences for the self-management of learning. Autonomy also implies that self-management and control over cognitive processes should involve decisions concerning the content of learning (Benson, 2001, p. 50). Though measurement of autonomy is problematic, Benson (2001, p. 54) declared that the description of specific levels of control over learning is a far easier task than the description or measurement of autonomy in general. Consequently, it is important that research and practice in the field are grounded in an adequate description of the potential behaviors involved in autonomy learning.

## **2.2 Learner autonomy and language proficiency**

Autonomous learning is more effective than non-autonomous learning. In other words, the development of autonomy implies better language learning. This is one of the three hypotheses which almost all research in the field of autonomy is based on, and has implications for (Benson, 2001, p. 183). As Benson (2001, p. 189) stated, many advocates for autonomy are concerned primarily with the ability to learn effectively in terms of personal goals. Although autonomy may ultimately lead to greater proficiency in language use, whether autonomous learners learn more than non-autonomous learner is a secondary issue. In recent years, however, the contribution of practices associated with autonomy to language proficiency has become a critical issue for two reasons. One reason is that researchers are increasingly beginning to understand that there is an intimate relationship between autonomy and effective learning. However, to date this relationship has largely been explored at the level of theory, and lacks substantial empirical support. Another reason is that world-wide concern with accountability in education is increasingly obliging teachers to

demonstrate the effectiveness of their practices in terms of proficiency gains. If researchers can show that practices aiming at greater autonomy also lead to greater proficiency, in whatever terms this is measured, their arguments will be strengthened.

For both practical and theoretical reasons, therefore, there is a pressing need for empirical research on the relationship between the development of autonomy and the acquisition of language proficiency. The hypothesis that practices intended to foster autonomy lead to better language learning can be demonstrated empirically at two levels. One level is that research can attempt to show that a particular form of practice associated with autonomy produces gains in proficiency that are equal to or greater than other forms of practice. Another level is that research can attempt to describe the ways in which proficiency develops as a result of the distinctive qualities of practices designed to promote autonomy. Comments made on the design of action research projects focusing on gains in autonomy apply equally to research on proficiency gains. However, research on proficiency gains faces two additional problems. The first concerns the selection of relevant measures of proficiency. The second problem concerns the life cycle of programmes aiming to foster autonomy (Benson, 2001, p. 191). Research that is able to document changes in the quality of learning in such programmes will contribute a great deal to our understanding of the relationship between the development of autonomy and the development of proficiency.

To date, however, only a few researchers explored the relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency (Ablard and Lipschultz, 1998; Corno and Mandinach, 1983; Risenberg and Zimmerman, 1992; Zhang and Li, 2004). Corno and Mandinach (1983, p. 89) initially proposed that learner autonomy could help to improve the language proficiency of learners and concluded that autonomous learners were the learners of high language proficiency. Ablard and Lipschultz (1998, p. 97) also found out that different high-achievement students applied different autonomous strategies. Risenberg and Zimmerman (1992, p. 120) further pointed out that a high degree of learner autonomy among the high-achieving students would achieve high scores and the learner with low degrees of learner autonomy was likely to risk achieving the low scores if learner autonomy could augment the academic scores. Zhang and Li (2004, p.21) concluded that learner autonomy was closely related with the language levels and its Pearson Coefficient amounted to 0.6088 based on the comparison between the subjects in China and Europe.

To sum up, there is a pressing need for research that explores the relationship between the development of autonomy and the development of language proficiency. From a practical point of



view, such research can help to validate forms of practice that aim to foster autonomy in terms of language-learning gains. From a theoretical point of view, it can help us to test and elaborate the theoretical hypothesis that autonomy in language learning is equivalent to better language learning. At this stage, however, research is likely to be most valuable if it establishes proficiency criteria and assessment tools relevant to autonomous learning and documents the ways in which the development of autonomy and proficiency interact (Benson, 2001, p. 191-192).

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Subjects**

The 129 subjects were the non-English majors of grade 2004 from seven departments in a teacher college in China, among which 42 are male and 87 are female. Their average ages are 19 years old and they have studied English for seven years from middle school to the first year in college. Their present needs in English learning are to pass Practical English Tests for Colleges (Level B).

#### **3.2 Measurements**

This study applied the methods of a standard test, a questionnaire and an interview. The standard test was used to identify the participants' English language proficiency. The questionnaire was designed to explore the relationship and differences of the participants' learner autonomy. And the interview was used to explore the reasons why such relationship and differences exist among them.

##### **3.2.1 Practical English Tests for Colleges (Level B)**

The tool we adopted to measure the subjects' scores of English proficiency is Practical English Tests for Colleges (Level B)(seen in appendix 2), which is held in June and December each year in China for the non-English majors in the three-year colleges with the purpose to measure the English language knowledge and skills. All of the subjects have for the first time participated in the test held in June, 2005. Out of them, 496 passed and 254 failed. The scores of the subjects provided by the Authority of Practical English Test for Colleges (Level B) are the evidence to show their proficiency in English learning after seven-year learning.

##### **3.2.2 Questionnaire**

In order to investigate the learner autonomy of the subjects, the researcher applied the questionnaire (seen Appendix 1) designed by Zhang and Li (2004, p.23), which covered 21 questions after they were revised and predicted on the basis of the learning strategies classified by Oxford (1990, p. 17),

Wenden (1998, p. 34-52) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990). The questionnaire has been proved to have high content validity and high reliability. The researcher administered the questionnaire in person, which was done on May 18, 2005 in the teacher college in China. The subjects were required to finish the questions individually based on their own learning conditions for forty minutes.

### 3.2.3 Interview

The purpose of the interview with the teachers is to understand how the teachers evaluate the students' learner autonomy and its reasons (Appendix B).

### 3.3 Analyses

The following is the steps for collection and analysis of the data:

- 1) To turn the subjects' choices in the questionnaires into the scores based on the Likert-scale. The scores from A to E are respectively 1,2,3,4 and 5.
- 2) To put the subjects' scores of Practical English Tests for Colleges (Level B) and the scores of learner autonomy into the computer.
- 3) To analyze the data with SPSS 11.0. The analysis includes three aspects: the description of the mean and Std. Deviation of the data, the correlation between English proficiency and learner autonomy with T-test and the comparison of learner autonomy of the subjects with different levels of English proficiency by F-test.

## 4. Results

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of the scores of English proficiency and Learner autonomy

Variables	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
English proficiency	65.59	129	15.07	1.33
Learner autonomy	61.40	129	7.81	.69

Table 1 displays the mean value, the number of cases, standard deviation and standard error for the pair of variables compared in the Paired Samples T-test procedure.

Table 2: Correlations of English proficiency and Learner autonomy

Variables	N	Correlation	Sig. (two tailed)
English proficiency & Learner autonomy	129	.402	.000

Table 2 displays the value of the correlation coefficient ( $r=.402$ ) and the significance value ( $P=.000$ ) for the English proficiency and Learner autonomy used in the Paired Samples T Test procedure.

Table 3: Paired t-test Analysis of the scores of English proficiency and Learner autonomy

Variables	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
English proficiency & Learner autonomy	4.1860	13.90875	1.22460	1.7630	6.6091	3.418	128	.001

Table 3 shows clearly the results of comparing the mean scores of English proficiency and learner autonomy. The t value for the two variables is 3.418. The criterion for statistical significance at  $\alpha=.05$  and degrees of freedom of 128 is 2.0423 (using a two-tailed test).

Table 4: Description of the scores of learner autonomy of the four different levels of English proficiency

levels	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
					basic	40		
intermediate	31	61.52	6.475	1.163	59.14	63.89	44	75
upper-intermediate	33	62.48	7.155	1.246	59.95	65.02	45	79

pre-advanced	25	65.68	7.128	1.426	62.74	68.62	49	80
Total	129	61.40	7.812	.688	60.04	62.76	40	80

Legend: According to the scores of the Practical English Tests for Colleges, basic level means the scores below 59 percent, intermediate level means the scores between 60-69, upper-intermediate level means the scores between 70-79 and pre-advanced level means the scores between 80-89.

This table displays descriptive statistics for each level and for the entire data set. N indicates the size of each group. The effects of unequal variances will be reduced if the group sizes are approximately equal. The mean shows the average value. One-Way ANOVA compares these sample estimates to determine if the population means differ. The standard deviation indicates the amount of variability of the scores in each group. These values should be similar to each other for ANOVA to be appropriate. Equality can be inspected via the Levene test.

Table 5: Test of Homogeneity of Variances of the scores of Learner autonomy of four different levels of English proficiency

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.(two-tailed)
1.449	3	125	.232

Table 6: ANOVA of Learner autonomy of four different levels of English proficiency

Variation sources	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (two-tailed)
Between levels	1030.114	3	343.371	6.330	.000
Within levels	6780.924	125	54.247		
Total	7811.039	128			

Table 7: Multiple Comparisons of Dependent Variable of the scores of Learner autonomy by LSD

(I) levels	(J) levels	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound

basic	intermediate	-3.77*	1.762	.035	-7.25	-.28
	upper-intermediate	-4.73*	1.732	.007	-8.16	-1.31
	pre-advanced	-7.93*	1.878	.000	-11.65	-4.21
intermediate	basic	3.77*	1.762	.035	.28	7.25
	upper-intermediate	-.97	1.842	.600	-4.61	2.68
	pre-advanced	-4.16*	1.980	.037	-8.08	-.25
upper-intermediate	basic	4.73*	1.732	.007	1.31	8.16
	intermediate	.97	1.842	.600	-2.68	4.61
	pre-advanced	-3.20	1.953	.104	-7.06	.67
Pre-advanced	basic	7.93*	1.878	.000	4.21	11.65
	intermediate	4.16*	1.980	.037	.25	8.08
	Upper-intermediate	3.20	1.953	.104	-.67	7.06

\* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

## 5. Discussion

Based on the results of the data analysis, the researcher developed the following discussions matching the sequence of the research questions.

1) What is the relationship between their learner autonomy and their English proficiency?

As shown clearly in table 2, the correlation coefficient ( $r = .402$ ) is relatively close to 1, and the significance level ( $p = .000$ ) is very small ( $P < 0.05$ ), so the result indicates that the learner autonomy and the English proficiency of the participants are significantly positively and linearly correlated. This means that their English proficiency increases with their learner autonomy and vice versa. Table 3 indicates that  $t(128) = 3.418 > p = 2.0423$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , so significant differences exist between the participants' learner autonomy and their English proficiency as a whole. The finding implies that to foster the students' learner autonomy in the classroom or in the relevant training programs in second or foreign language teaching and learning might help improve the students' English proficiency. It also infers that the more autonomous a learner becomes, the more likely he achieves high language proficiency.

The finding confirms the ideas of the randomized controlled survey conducted by Zhang and Li

(2004) who concluded that learner autonomy was closely related with the language levels and its Pearson Coefficient amounted to 0.6088 on the basis of the comparison between the subjects in China and Europe. It also confirms the hypothesis of Corno and Mandinach (1983) with empirical evidence that learner autonomy could help to improve the learners' proficiency and the autonomous learners were the learners of high proficiency.

2) To what extent is the learner autonomy of the participants with different levels of English proficiency different from one another?

Table 5 shows that the result of the Levene test for homogeneity of variances is  $F(3,125) = 1.449$  and the significance value ( $P = .232$ ) exceeds .05, suggesting that the variances for the four levels of the participants' proficiency are equal. And table 6 shows the results of the ANOVA:  $F(df) = 6.330$ . The significance level ( $P = .000$ ) is less than .05, suggesting that at least one of the levels differs from the others. Table 7 lists the pair wise comparisons of the group means for all selected post hoc procedures which are methods used to determine which level differs. Results in this table indicated that significant differences exist between the basic level and the other levels, between the intermediate level and the pre-advanced level. These levels of participants' English proficiency, therefore, significantly differ in their learner autonomy. However, there are no significant differences between the intermediate level and the upper-intermediate level, between the upper-intermediate level and the pre-advanced level. These levels of participants' English proficiency, therefore, don't differ in their learner autonomy.

The findings imply that the high or low English proficiency of the students don't always imply that their learner autonomy will be high or low correspondingly. It confirms the ideas of Ablard and Lipschultz (1998), Risenberg and Zimmerman (1992) that the correlation between language proficiency and learner autonomy was definitely not a simple causal relationship. It also agrees with the finding of Zhang and Li (2004, p.22) that there are no significant differences among the students' learner autonomy when their English proficiency is not significantly different. But there are significant differences among the students' learner autonomy when their English proficiency is significantly different.

In order to prove the above findings based on the questionnaire, the researcher interviewed 10 teachers by telephone in the college. All the interviewees agreed that the high-proficient students

were more autonomous than low-proficient students, the factors that influence their autonomous abilities were related to the cognitive, meta-cognitive, affective and social dimensions of learner autonomy and the levels of the students' language proficiency are different from one another because of the different degree of learner autonomy. Most of the teachers said that the high-proficient students were confident of their abilities to learn English well and had a strong instrumental motivation. They were actively involved in all kinds of classroom activities and had a strong awareness of self-planning, self-management, self-monitoring and self-evaluation. They were also willing to cooperate with others in language learning. Furthermore, they knew how to lower their anxiety, encourage themselves and take their emotional temperature. In short, they had a high capacity to manage the processes of their own learning. However, the low-proficient students were less confident, passively involved in the classroom activities and lacked control over learning management, cognitive process and learning content. In other words, they had a low degree of capacity to manage the processes of their own learning.

## **6. Conclusion**

Many language teachers would agree that autonomy is a good idea in theory, but somewhat idealistic as a goal of language teaching in practice. This study explored the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency in a sample of 129 non-English majors in a teacher college in China by means of a questionnaire and an interview. The results of the study indicate that the students' English proficiency was significantly and positively related to their learner autonomy, and there are no significant differences among the students' learner autonomy when their English proficiency is not significantly different. But there are significant differences among the students' learner autonomy when their English proficiency is significantly different. These findings imply that the more autonomous a learner becomes, the more likely he/she achieves high language proficiency.

The findings of the current study suggest some implications both for English foreign language teaching and learning, especially in China. First of all, the findings can be helpful in the way of enlightening teachers so that learners can mainly depend on themselves in learning English. Secondly, teachers ought to enhance the students' learner autonomy in order to better their English proficiency, which will be much effective than the only a large quantity of teachers' efforts. For

instance, by giving students more responsibility, teaching learning strategies, cultivating positive attitudes and guiding reflection, students may consciously and unconsciously employ more metacognitive strategies. However, it should be noted that not all the identified strategies suit individual preference. Some other strategies may also contribute to success in learning. Thirdly, learner autonomy, affected by learners' motivation, is one of the most important factors deciding learners' English proficiency, for English as a language needs learners' own efforts and investment of time and energy in it. Therefore, it is important to inform the students of the importance of learner autonomy and increase their awareness of learner autonomy in order to facilitate the language learning process. With students making their learning schedule and designing lessons and materials and presenting in the class, the teachers encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning and develop the ability to control their own learning.

However, a limitation of this study is that it used only the limited subjects from a single college and future research should include testing subjects in the elementary or middle schools throughout the country and around the world. Further, one subject that remains to be explored is how to determine whether the learner autonomy of male and female learners is related to English proficiency or not.

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#### Appendix A: Questionnaires to investigate the Learner autonomy of the subjects

Direction: In order to investigate the Learner autonomy, will you please circle the one closest answers to the following questions according to your true cases. Thank you very much for your help and patience!

- Part I (A. never B. rarely C. sometimes D. often E. always.)
1. I think I have the ability to learn English well. A B C D E
  2. I make good use of my free time in English study. A B C D E
  3. I preview before the class. A B C D E
  4. I find I can finish my task in time. A B C D E
  5. I keep a record of my study, such as keeping a diary, writing review etc. A B C D E
  6. I make self-exam with the exam papers chosen by myself. A B C D E
  7. I reward myself such as going shopping, playing etc. when I make progress. A B C D E
  8. I attend out-class activities to practice and learn the language. A B C D E
  9. During the class, I try to catch chances to take part in activities such as pair/group discussion, role-play, etc. A B C D E
  10. I know my strengths and weaknesses in my English study. A B C D E
  11. I choose books, exercises which suit me, neither too difficult nor too easy. A B C D E

#### Part II

12. I study English here due to:
  - A. my parents' demand
  - B. curiosity
  - C. getting a good job, help to my major
  - D. interest of English culture, such as film, sports, music, etc.
  - E. C and D
13. I think the learner-teacher relationship is that of:

- A. receiver and giver
  - B. raw material and maker
  - C. customer and shopkeeper
  - D. partners
  - E. explorer and director
14. I think my success or failure in English study is mainly due to:
- A. luck or fate
  - B. English studying environment
  - C. studying facilities(aids)
  - D. teachers
  - E. myself
15. Whether students should design the teaching plan together with teachers or not, my opinion is:
- A. strongly agree
  - B. agree
  - C. neutral
  - D. oppose
  - E. strongly oppose
16. When the teacher asks questions for us to answer, I would mostly like to:
- A. wait for others' answers
  - B. think and ready to answer
  - C. look up books, dictionaries
  - D. clarify questions with teachers
  - E. join a pair/group discussion
17. When I meet a word I don't know, I mainly:
- A. let it go
  - B. ask others
  - C. guess the meaning
  - D. B and E
  - E. look up the dictionary
18. When I make mistakes in study, I'd usually like the following ones to correct them:
- A. let them be
  - B. teachers
  - C. classmates
  - D. others
  - E. books or dictionaries

19. When I am asked to use technologies that I haven't used before(e. g. internet discussion),
- A. I usually try to learn new skills
  - B. I learn them following others
  - C. I feel worried, but anyway
  - D. I put it off or try to avoid it
  - E. I resist using them
20. I think the following way is most useful in my English study:
- A. taking notes
  - B. mechanic memory
  - C. doing exercises of grammar, translation, words etc.
  - D. classifying or grouping or comparing
  - E. group discussion
21. I usually use materials selected:
- A. only by teachers
  - B. mostly by teachers
  - C. by teachers and by myself
  - D. mostly by myself
  - E. only by myself

#### Appendix B: Questions for interview with teachers

1. Do you think that the high-proficient students are more autonomous than low-proficient students?
2. What are the factors that influence their autonomous abilities?
3. What are the differences of learner autonomy between high-proficient students and low-proficient students?
4. What's your opinion on the classroom performances of the high-proficient students and the low-proficient students?