

# The Connotation and Influencing Factors of Learner Autonomy in College English

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**Abstract:** *In the realm of education, "learner autonomy" signifies the capacity of individuals to steer their own learning journey. This article delves into a comparative analysis of three empirical studies, each exploring factors that contribute to the autonomous learning abilities of college English learners. The findings reveal that the four key dimensions of autonomy in English learning — goal autonomy, planning autonomy, strategy autonomy, and evaluation autonomy — are jointly influenced by both external environmental factors and internal learner-specific factors. Consequently, it is advisable for English educators to be mindful of these dual influences on learners' autonomous learning capabilities. Teachers should prioritize fostering learners' subjective cognitive construction, while simultaneously striving to cultivate an external learning environment that caters to the needs of autonomous learning.*

**Keywords:** *Learner autonomy, Connotation, Influencing factors, College English*

## 1. Introduction

The renowned American futurologist, A. Toffler, famously pronounced that those destined to be illiterate in the future would be those who remain ignorant of the art of learning. In our contemporary era, marked by the relentless march of technological progress and the imperative need for constant knowledge updates, fostering students' autonomous learning capabilities holds paramount importance in higher education. The essence of "learner autonomy" extends beyond mere independent task accomplishment; it embraces the learners' capacity to self-direct, self-motivate, and self-monitor throughout the learning journey. This philosophy firmly believes that active learner engagement and self-responsibility are the keys to unlocking the most profound and effective learning outcomes. Learner autonomy has always been at the core of educational aspirations, as it equips students with the tools to embark on a lifelong quest for knowledge. Additionally, this concept is rich and multifaceted, encompassing not only autonomous learning beliefs and behaviors, as stated by Xu Jinfen (2013:40)[1], but also subjective consciousness and objective abilities, according to Li Heng (2016:237)[2]. The transformation from autonomous consciousness or belief to actual behavior signifies the growth and internalization of learners' capacity for autonomous learning.

Furthermore, the communicative and interactive essence of language learning underscores the fact that autonomous learning in a foreign language is a steadfast attribute cultivated through learners' engagements and exchanges with the external environment. Also, it epitomizes the desired condition for learners to strike a harmonious balance between self-reliant progress and mutual reliance (Allwright, 1990:12)[3]. Additionally, this underscores the fact that learner autonomy inherently encompasses both personal and societal characteristics (Benson, 2001)[4].

Consequently, this article delves into the intricate blend of internal and external factors that collectively shape learner autonomy. It carefully selects empirical studies, specifically targeting college English learners' autonomy, from a diverse array of research perspectives. Through a comparative analysis of these studies, the article aims to delve deeper into the core essence of learner autonomy, seeking to unlock its underlying mechanisms and implications. And the selected empirical research papers comprise: Empirical Study 1 — An Empirical Research on College Students' Autonomous Learning Ability and Self-Efficacy in English Learning, conducted by Li Heng in 2016; Empirical Study 2 — A comprehensive empirical analysis of the intricate relationship between college students' motivations, learning strategies, and their autonomous learning capabilities in English, conducted by Ni Qingquan in 2010; Empirical Study 3 — A Research on the Relationship between college students' sense of social support, their belongingness to their class, and their autonomous learning abilities in English, authored by Xiao Gengsheng, Xu Jinfen, and Zhang Zaihong in 2011[5].

## 2. Comparative results from selected empirical studies

### 2.1. Research topic

The objective of this study aims to delve into effective strategies for enhancing learners' autonomous learning ability and optimizing their learning efficiency. This endeavor is undertaken by thoroughly examining the diverse factors that influence learners' autonomy, drawing from various conceptualization methods and perspectives.

In empirical study 1, Li Heng (2016) observed that the unique characteristics of college foreign language instruction necessitate the significance of students' subjective initiative and self-efficacy in actively engaging in autonomous learning[2]. However, traditional classroom settings often overlook individual psychological factors and the fostering of autonomous learning capabilities, thereby limiting students' potential for self-directed growth. Drawing from the fundamental understanding of autonomous learning as an ability that allows one to govern their own educational pursuits, encompassing decision-making in diverse facets of the learning process such as establishing goals, deciding upon content, monitoring progress and methods, as well as assessing and reflecting on the learning experience and its effectiveness, this study emphasizes the dynamic and constructive essence of learning. Bandura's (1977) definition of self-efficacy, which refers to individuals' level of confidence in their capacity to utilize skills to execute specific work behaviors (p. 191), represents their expectations, perceptions, trust, or beliefs regarding their likelihood of successfully achieving a defined goal[6]. Zimmerman (2000) aptly notes that "self-efficacy influences learning motivation through autonomous learning processes, including goal setting, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and strategy application"[7]. Self-efficacy occupies a pivotal role throughout the planning phase, behavioral execution phase, and self-reflection phase of autonomous learning, serving as a predictive indicator for learners' successful employment of diverse learning strategies in attaining autonomous learning outcomes.

In the second empirical study conducted by Ni Qingquan in 2010, a theoretical hypothesis was derived from the definition of learner autonomy[8]. This hypothesis centers on learners who possess the capacity to be self-reliant and self-manage their learning processes, emphasizing their autonomy in academic pursuits. This is evident in the learner's ability to independently establish learning goals, deliberate on the content and pace of their studies, choose appropriate learning strategies, monitor their progress throughout the learning process, and ultimately evaluate the effectiveness of their learning efforts.(Hole 1981; Higgins 1988)[9]. Ni seamlessly integrated this concept with the self-determination theory, emphasizing that within the realm of language learning principles, autonomous learning holds a pivotal position in the acquisition of a foreign language. Furthermore, the extent of autonomous learning can significantly determine the ultimate success or failure of the learning process (Deci & Ryan, 1985). He proposed that there exists a profound connection between autonomous learning and academic performance in foreign language studies (Wenden, 1991). However, it is noteworthy that the autonomous learning process is susceptible to a wide array of variables, encompassing factors such as age, psychological development, cognitive capabilities, cognitive inclinations, learning motivations, strategies employed, learning environments, and cultural backgrounds, among others. Amongst these variables, learning motivation and the chosen learning strategies emerge as pivotal factors that exert a profound influence on autonomous learning (Pang Weiguo, 2001).[10]

In the third empirical study, the author initiates the exploration by delving into learners' inherent needs and subsequently organizes the factors that impact autonomous learning ability into two distinct categories: internal and external. Internal factors encompass a diverse range of elements such as self-efficacy, attribution styles, goal setting, cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, volitional level, learning motivation, learning style, self-esteem, and age. These factors play a crucial role in shaping an individual's approach to learning and their overall academic performance. On the other hand, external factors primarily consist of family background, teachers' influence, educational technology, peer groups, learning environment, social culture, and numerous other variables. These external influences can significantly impact an individual's learning process and outcomes, often complementing or intersecting with internal factors. Drawing upon definitions of social support offered by esteemed researchers such as Cobb (1976), Kahn (1994), and Orford (1992), and adopting a student-centered perspective, social support is envisioned as the compassionate care and invaluable assistance rendered by teachers and classmates within the academic sphere[11]. This includes the encouragement and acknowledgment received, which play a pivotal role in fostering a positive learning environment. Furthermore, social support can be categorized into two main types: teacher support and classmate support, based on the source of assistance, and academic support and emotional support,

depending on their functional and content-based aspects. This study further investigates the intricate relationship between the external environment and English autonomous learning ability among college students in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China, while also considering their sense of class belonging as a significant factor in this equation.

## **2.2. Subjects and Methods**

Three studies were conducted, focusing on college students as the target population and utilizing a comprehensive approach that combined qualitative and quantitative research methods. In the qualitative phase, structured one-on-one interviews were conducted. For the quantitative aspect of Study 1, four dimensions of self-directed learning were explored: goal setting, utilization of learning strategies, self-monitoring and evaluation, as well as learning motivation. The research employed the General Self-Efficacy Scale and the Self-Directed English Learning Ability Questionnaire, developed by Xu Jinfen and Peng Renzhong (2004)[12]. Data analysis was meticulously performed using SPSS Statistics 19, a renowned software for social science analysis. In Study 2, a questionnaire survey was conducted using a five-point Likert scale, encompassing three key areas: self-directed learning ability, learning strategies, and learning motivation. For Study 3, the College English Self-Directed Learning Ability Scale, the College Social Support Scale, and the College Class Belonging Scale were utilized for the quantitative research. The choice items were also graded on a five-point Likert scale, ensuring the reliability and validity of the research outcomes.

## **2.3. Research results**

In the realm of diverse conceptual frameworks and research viewpoints regarding learner autonomy, Studies One and Two delve deeply into the underlying meaning and coping mechanisms of learner autonomy from an internal standpoint. On the other hand, Study Three, in tandem with the current landscape of learner autonomy research, explores the social attributes and external environmental prerequisites of learner autonomy. Through their respective fieldwork investigations and rigorous data analysis, all three studies converge on a unanimous conclusion: the factors examined are positively correlated with learners' autonomous learning capabilities.

## **3. Discussion and Enlightenment**

Learner autonomy is a diverse and intricate concept that emphasizes learners' capacity to embrace ownership of their educational journey (Holec, 1981)[9] and exercise autonomy in their learning endeavors (Benson, 2001)[4]. This concept encompasses learners' readiness and proficiency in making informed decisions across various dimensions of the learning process. This involves establishing self-guided learning objectives (goal autonomy), designing personalized learning plans (plan autonomy), selecting and implementing effective learning strategies (strategy autonomy), as well as evaluating and reflecting on the progress and outcomes of their learning (evaluation autonomy) (Xu Jinfen, 2013)[12].

Regarding the factors that influence learners' autonomous learning, the chosen empirical research reveals that factors pertaining to learners' internal control, encompassing motivation, strategy utilization, and self-efficacy, are intimately associated with autonomous learning capability and can be strengthened through individual endeavor. These components hold paramount importance in bolstering autonomous learning proficiency (Li Heng, 2010)[2].

Firstly, instrumental motivation exhibits a more robust linkage with autonomous learning capacity compared to integrative motivation. Meta-cognitive strategies exhibit a stronger correlation with autonomous learning ability than other strategies, making them crucial for fostering English autonomous learning among students. Teachers must take proactive measures to stimulate students' strong learning desires, leveraging instrumental motivation to cultivate integrative motivation, and ultimately enhancing overall motivation levels. By doing so, they can effectively promote autonomous learning and empower students to take ownership of their English learning journey. Furthermore, teachers ought to consistently offer strategy training, especially meta-cognitive strategy training, in order to refine students' proficiency in employing effective learning strategies.[13-17]

Meanwhile, self-efficacy serves as a pivotal determinant in individuals' capacity for autonomous English learning. Notably, self-efficacy is a pivotal factor in autonomous learning, and the university stage marks a crucial juncture in fostering this ability. Therefore, it is imperative to bolster self-efficacy,

enabling college students to engage in positive emotional regulation during autonomous learning, thereby unleashing their latent potential and subjective initiative to achieve their established learning objectives. Therefore, in the realm of teaching practices, teachers must prioritize the augmentation of students' self-efficacy, viewing it as a pivotal aspect in fostering their autonomous learning capabilities in English.[18] To accomplish this, teachers must initially evaluate students' current developmental level and anticipate their potential for growth. Subsequently, they should zero in on the "zone of proximal development" and craft tasks that possess an apt level of difficulty, thus igniting students' latent abilities and passions. These tasks should afford students opportunities to garner enriching and successful learning experiences.

Moreover, teachers must establish a foundation of trust, set clear expectations, and provide constructive positive feedback. Boosting self-efficacy can inspire students to adopt optimistic attribution styles, which, in turn, supports the nurturing of their autonomous learning abilities. This optimistic attribution can further reciprocate and enhance learners' self-efficacy.

Finally, the perception of social support and a sense of belonging within one's class holds a pivotal role in the realm of English autonomous learning. The experiences of college students regarding academic and emotional support from teachers, classmates, as well as their sense of belonging in class, all demonstrate a strong correlation with their English autonomous learning ability.[19] Notably, the emotional support provided by classmates emerges as the most significant predictor in this context. It serves as a pivotal factor in fostering learners' ability to flexibly adopt learning strategies, sensibly monitor their application, and effectively conduct learning assessments. Simultaneously, this emotional support spurs learners to engage actively in learning, internalize knowledge, and foster personal development, thereby enhancing their autonomous English learning capabilities. Consequently, English teachers ought to encourage learners to mutually encourage, care for, and assist each other in the classroom, fostering a learning environment that is characterized by mutual assistance, collaboration, unity, and friendship in the pursuit of English learning.

Moreover, learners' sense of belonging to the class holds a profound positive relationship with every facet of their autonomous learning capacity, and this sense of belonging serves as a predictor for their ability to learn independently. The intensity of learners' attachment to their class greatly influences their capacity to engage in autonomous English learning. Consequently, it is imperative for teachers to implement effective strategies that foster a stronger sense of belonging among learners. This can be achieved by encouraging students to participate in diverse extracurricular team activities, promoting collaborative learning, and fostering a spirit of teamwork. Such measures will not only enhance students' sense of identification and affection towards their class but also contribute towards the establishment and strengthening of their collective sense of belonging.[20]

#### **4. Conclusion**

In essence, learner autonomy is a multifaceted concept that incorporates elements of environment, behavior, psychology, and aptitude. The nurturing of self-learning abilities is a intricate journey, shaped by diverse factors. Learners' capacity for independent study is, to a significant degree, a product of the intricate interaction between internal and external factors. The external factors are extensive, encompassing schools, families, class communities, and the ambient environment, particularly the humanistic aspects such as the selection, organization, and presentation of educational materials, teachers' intellectual caliber and personal traits, as well as the learning ambiance within schools and classrooms.

To enhance learners' autonomous learning ability, teachers should, on one hand, actively foster a sense of self-efficacy among students, encouraging them to effectively regulate their emotions while engaging in autonomous learning. This involves implementing various strategies aimed at igniting strong learning motivations and conducting efficient strategy training, particularly focusing on metacognitive strategies. On the other hand, teachers also need to incorporate learners' subjective cognitive frameworks, emphasizing emotional connections with students and offering timely humanistic care and support throughout the process of imparting linguistic knowledge and skills. Only by doing so, they will foster a sense of social support and belonging among students in the English learning environment, thereby cultivating a positive and harmonious atmosphere conducive to the development of autonomous learning abilities.

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