Promoting Language Learner Autonomy in the New Era: Empirical and Theoretical Summary Based on the Online Chinese Teaching Experience

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This article centers on factors that may affect language learners’ autonomy in face of the challenges and the potential opportunities in the new era of post pandemic. It is of great significance to shed light on empirical approaches that serve to support teachers and learners to seek for multi-dimensional strategies on enhancing the learner autonomy where remote and virtual learning has been indispensable for both learners and teachers worldwide. It has become our consistent motive and responsibility to effectively address language learners’ academic goals as well as their personal development in a more inclusive and collaborative learning community.

Keywords: learner autonomy, remote learning, language learning, inquiry-based learning, learning strategies

Introduction

Virtual learning or remote learning is not a new-emerged educational mode in recent years. Mobile technologies have by all means placed the educators and learners under the revolutionary transition from traditional teaching-learning scenarios to much more complex learning environment with multiple accesses to achieving learning resources, multimodal content, and platforms for informative interaction. All these supporting equipments have provided unprecedented opportunities for the development of learner autonomy. However, the opportunities have brought us to those new research objects including the strategies on how instructors are able to manage the language class with the support of technology efficiently. Findings also revealed the fact that learners who have possessed adequate training in mobile technology use in the language classroom might not engender additional autonomous behavior outside the classroom as expected (Research-publishing.net, paper presented at the EUROCALL 2016 Conference). These new findings have evidently proposed an unprecedented research theme for us as language instructors: Strategies on Promoting Language Learner Autonomy in the New Era.

Literature Review

Conceptions of Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy has been articulated as a significant concept in relation to lifelong learning skills, especially in foreign language education in the past decades. In general, “autonomy is the ability to take charge...
of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1979/1981, p. 3); it stresses that the focus on teaching can be transferred to learning (Frank Lacey). As researchers have analyzed and proved, “In order to help learners to assume greater control over their own learning, it is important and inevitable to help them become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use” (Holmes & Ramos, 1991, as cited in James & Garrett, 1991, p. 198). Herein, as foreign language teachers, apart from devising well-structured lessons for students to obtain linguistic or culture related knowledge, it is necessary to guide students to be aware of the approaches to achieve better learning effectiveness in a long run.

Promoting Learner Autonomy

To enhance learners’ autonomy, educators are supposed to develop a “capacity for reflection and analysis, which is central to the development of learner autonomy” (Little, 1996, p. 210). However, autonomous learning does not indicate that students are supposed to learn independently without being provide the access to collaborative learning tasks or activities, rather, learner autonomy is viewed as “a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person” (Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander, & Trebbi, 1990, p. 102). According to Lap’s perspectives (2005, p. 23), learners’ cognitive ability, affective factors like attitudes, motivation, readiness, self-confidence, meta-cognitive strategies including goal setting, materials selection, self-assessment, and social factors like willingness to collaborate with others are all crucial elements to learner autonomy.

General Review on Language Learner Autonomy

As an ever-important educational goal over these decades, the concept of Language Learner Autonomy entails complex contexts including the development of linguistic and metalinguistic awareness of an individual, and shaping the ability to reflect on one’s own learning procedure and outcome. Aiming at more efficient control over their own learning in and outside the classroom, under the circumstances of either face-to-face or remote learning mode, on top of being aware of their own language learning process, autonomous learners illustrate higher demands and expectations on collaborative work with mentors, teachers, peers with advanced language proficiency, and native speakers (Schwienhorst, 2012). Findings gathered are analyzed mostly based on ESL/EFL programs, and a large number of researches seld the light on specific approaches that serve to promoting language learners’ awareness of autonomy as well as the methods that teacher could apply in classes of a foreign language.

Factors That May Affect Learner Autonomy in a Foreign Language Class

Before implementing learning activities that involve and promote learner autonomy, it is necessary to collect the data on learner autonomy. The teacher needs to crystalize the specific factors that may affect the learner autonomy. For instance, a survey of learner autonomy can be administered in the class at the very beginning of each semester as a pre-assessment, and after the implementation period, at the end of the semester as a post-assessment. The survey aims at making sense of students’ expectation of the online course, their attitudes towards the learning experience, and their self-evaluation of the language acquisition and learning effectiveness.

Individual and Self-Regulated Language Learning Styles

Individual learners differ in their learning habits, interests, needs, and motivation, and develop varying degrees of independence throughout their lives. Learning styles and learning autonomy have been linked in a
number of studies (Hurd, 2006; Hurd, Murphy, & Norman, 2005; Nunan, 1997). Nunan (1997) describes the awareness of individual learning styles as the first step towards learner autonomy. To achieve this goal, as teachers who offer online courses currently, we need to make use of different instructional approaches such as open-ended discussion, TPR, Flipped Classroom, etc., to address students of different learning styles.

Based on the data (see Table 1) of a pre-course survey targeting 22 foreign students at Hubei University of Technology as illustrated below, students who intentionally select audio (36.4%) or verbal (40.9%) learning resources and contexts to address their own interactive learning style tend to show relatively higher motivation in learning Chinese language, and they turn out more likely to meet the academic standards and achieve the learning goals effectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning style (preference)</th>
<th>Student(s) num. (%)</th>
<th>Frequency of self-study on Chinese num. (%)</th>
<th>Average score of the final exam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Barely”</td>
<td>“Occasionally”</td>
<td>“Weekly”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>8 (36.4)</td>
<td>1 (12.5)</td>
<td>1 (12.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>9 (40.9)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (22.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>5 (22.7)</td>
<td>2 (40)</td>
<td>2 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Communicative and Interactive Modes**

Collaborative remote learning environments and distributed virtual environments (DVEs) (Bouras, Philopoulos, & Tsiatsos, 2001) provide an online environment where learners can participate and communicate to address their own needs. Under the special circumstances of pandemic, more effective approaches of differentiation are in need for teachers in empowering students to use various forms of technology beyond the traditional settings of the classroom, by which students can bring the outside real world (e.g., encourage students to share and summarize how they overcome the difficulties and how people fight against the epidemic to go through the tough time together) into the remote learning environment. The incorporation of technology enables teachers to utilize different communicative modes and interactive platforms that have varied impact on students’ language learning outcome and effectiveness. Therefore, comprehensive types of communication should be taken into account while designing online activities that serve to enhance student engagement in applying target language acquisition or illustrating socio-cultural cognition.

In response to the teaching arrangements of online during the pandemic period, teachers are actively applying multiple online tools to provide quality teaching and off-line tasks to enrich students’ learning experience. As a result, the majority of students revealed that they did benefit a lot from teachers’ effort within these platforms; in addition, a large portion of introverted learners are even more likely to output and contribute to group work within the online platforms under less social anxiety. It has been a solid proof that varied interactive modes and the incorporation of technology would serve to support students’ learning process, and they could be employed as supplementary teaching methods for reinforcing the learning outcome of language learners.

**Goal Setting and Approaches of Assessment**

Findings have continually shown us that if the uniqueness of learning goals is highly articulated, they are more likely to be achieved. Furthermore, learners stick to the commitment to the goals consistently; the possibility of achieving the goals will be high accordingly (Shih, 2018).
Studies in the past decades have been conducted on the use of goal setting, and in face of the wide application of technology in the new era, one of the findings revealed by Chang, Tseng, Liang, and Liao (2013) proved us that web-based goal-setting mechanisms might be able to facilitate self-regulated learning (SRL). In addition, students who set learning goals through web-based mechanisms made better performance than those with a paper-based portfolio.

In light of language learners under the remote learning settings, especially in face of the challenges and crisis of epidemic, it is evident that an effective assessment is not only a tool that evaluates learning, but it is also an instructional step designed in order to enhance students’ learning effectiveness and maintain the continuum of their learning mentally and academically. Assessment can also contribute to the learners’ growing consciousness, and enables them to go on with learning positively. Varied ways of assessment can definitely have different influence on students’ learning attitude and their motivation for further learning.

**Equipping Students With Inquiry-Based Interpersonal Learning Strategies**

Traditionally, most curriculum settings have tended to impart knowledge and skills rather than focusing on teaching students how to learn in a more productive manner. In terms of language teaching, especially remote teaching, we prefer to concentrate on teaching linguistic points via demonstrating the language items in carefully graded steps, at the expense of teaching people how to learn the language (Olivareas, 2002). Furthermore, rather than just shedding light on how learners can use the language as a tool, it is always worthy that we provide students with multiple accesses to developing their appropriate habit of learning. In light of this, there are varied strategies that can be employed to encourage students in developing their inquiry-based learning skills, leading them to make comparisons and connections analytically and reflectively.

**Focus on the Experiences, Voices, and Communications of Language Learners**

The transformative 21st-century classrooms have continually proved to us that our focus should be transferred onto the voices and experiences of students. “Students need to develop the capacity to speak up, to negotiate, and to be able to engage critically with the conditions of their working lives” (New London Group, 1996, p. 67).

One of the applicable solutions to improve language learners’ “unnatural or improper way” of using target language is to support them in developing communicative competence through authentic learning contexts and a natural way of receiving comprehensible messages (Krashen, 1981; 1985). As an effective trigger that encourages language learners to build up their habit of communicating in target language, it is significantly necessary to guide them to arise proper questions and inquiries based on current learning objectives and scenarios. In this context, learners are imbibing the language as a way of thinking, as part of their real life. In response to the inquiries, language learners lead the important role of problem solvers, which allow them to further shape and share their worldview through the target language that unites everyone in the same learning community while they are not physically interacting or negotiating with each other in person.

**Inquiry-Based Interpersonal Tasks**

With the emphasis and significance attached to building 21st-century skills in learners, teachers of foreign languages are confronted with the increasing challenges of designing teaching activities that serve to building language proficiency while activating learners’ higher-order thinking in the target language (Wonder, 2020).

On basis of this point, I have been employing the QFT (Question Formulation Technique) to drive students’ participation in some inquiry-based tasks. For instance, while talking about “困难”, students are
invited to share their thoughts on the real difficulties that they are currently facing related to the epidemic (Covid-19), and in turn, I encouraged other students to shared their perspectives on how we could fight against these obstacles.

**Strategies on Forming Inquiry-Based Teaching-Learning Contexts**

Effective inquiry-based teaching-learning process needs to be well prepared, and it requires teachers to design and articulate the goals, procedures, and the assessments before it is conducted.

**Applying I-chart in a Flipped Classroom mode.** Teachers need to provide each student with a blank I-chart and assists with topic selection

OR provides the pre-selected topic based on the learning objectives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample I-chart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding Question 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What We Know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By implementing the I-chart above, teachers need to guide students to deeply explore different perspectives stemmed from the target topic with different information sources (i.e., E-textbook, external reading materials, handouts, other online resources, etc.) before the online class. Under the circumstances of Flipped Classroom, students will engage in the discussion of forming questions about the topics prior to the class. Teachers can share interesting reading materials based on the learning objectives, and lead students to establish an effective connection between the learning objective and their previous acquisitions. The “class notes” function provided in the online meeting room also can offer clues for students to discuss and fill in their own I-chart.

Students are supposed to discuss their thoughts in groups, and report their views in a personalized way after the discussion. In this process, students may come up with conflicting ideas from different sources, and carry out a list of new questions based on conflicting or incomplete information they have collected in their study group.

**Integrating and evaluation based on the I-chart.** For language learners that struggle in direct interaction with both peers and teachers, it is rational to guide them to make a summary of their I-chart based on the questions they have come up with. Teachers may provide students with differentiated options which allow them to integrate their collected information for creating a learning product (i.e., research paper, written report, brochure, or PowerPoint presentation, etc.). Students are encouraged to employ visual aids and personalized web tools such as personal website (Weebly, Wordpress, etc.), or real-time sharing websites (Padlet, Googleshare, etc.) that enable students to work collaboratively on preparing and performing their products
regardless of the space and time barrier. In addition, students are also encouraged to apply audio software (Audacity, Vacaroo, etc.) for composing their work in the form of verbal output. Apart from these aforementioned web-based tools, an online form can be conducted where every student can contribute their recommendations of accessible technology or web tools that serve to support their learning process and outcome. In turn, these tools function as the channels for teachers to evaluate students’ work in a diverse way.

In terms of the Language Experience Approach, it is applicable to require students to choose an event that can be adapted into a script relating to the discussed questions and answers. Thus, students will write a story based on it and post the recording as an assignment. For the reading session of next class, students will be assigned with a story written by one of their classmates and read it out loud. All students will take notes of their questions while giving a listening ear to the story. In this way, the inquiry-based learning may turn out an accessible vehicle all students would use to convey their learning outcome (Seglem & Garcia, 2018).

**Creating Diverse Access to Supporting Students’ Language Output**

In supporting independent language learning and reconstructing autonomy in language education under the remote learning background, we may look at the structures for self-access learning, giving learners choices. In other words, the first step to equip students with autonomy is to provide them with differentiated options and allow them to work as decision-makers.

**Goal Setting: Implementing Routines, Procedures, and Strategies to Support Students’ Remote Language Learning**

In terms of the aforementioned significance of promoting language learners’ awareness of autonomy through goal setting, a secure and smooth-running learning environment which is based on the consistent procedures, rules, and learning objectives can always lay a solid foundation for students to make progress in academic accomplishments as well as learning strategies. For instance, as I have incorporated in my Chinese language class, teachers can embed a weekly routine in the language class where students take turns to play the role of language instructors. In this way, students are required to visually and verbally present one thing, a person or an event that they would like to share, illustrating and interpreting the information they collect, modeling the way how the key words (in target language) are pronounced and used appropriately under specific social or cultural contexts. As part of the final assessment, each student will be randomly assigned a card of a classmate’s presentation, and he/ she is supposed to interpret the content in the target language.

(Artifact: Implementing routines, procedures, and strategies to support students’ remote learning)
According to the final evaluation of the oral test, it has been shown that students scored higher on the part of aforementioned peer presentation achieved relatively better academic performance in other related language courses. The essence of quality remote language teaching, rather than imparting lexical resources or cultural knowledge on learners, lies in the contexts where language learners are guided to make sense of the way how they can use target language as a tool in their own real-life situation, and further provide students with more instructions on developing appropriate habit of processing acquired knowledge, making the target language a way for them to make connection between the world and themselves, crystalizing the worldview that everyone is living in the community where we strive for the achievements of all humankind.

**Interdisciplinary Language Learning Outcomes**

According to Bruner, learning is maximally effective when it is proactive and “given over to constructing meanings rather to receiving them” (Bruner, 1986, p. 84). Compared with face-to-face class, remote learning in the new era requires teachers to attach even more value to students’ assignments, trying to create the relevance between their work and the real-world life. As an indispensable component that accounts for improving student motivation in the class and doing their work, the value of target learning content is the key to activate students’ willingness and arise their curiosity targeting new learning objectives. Hence, teachers need to attach more significance to student learning outcome, elaborating the achievement and success within having the task done.

Teaching and learning in the new era of post-epidemic constrained by time and space requires teachers to pay more attention to the selection of materials and goal setting for students’ output, so that students’ learning outcomes can be reflected in their real life. Through the interdisciplinary curriculum, students’ higher-level thinking order and multiple intelligences are activated to help them constructively use the target language as a tool, and the language becomes one of the research approaches for other subjects. In turn, students’ exploration of interdisciplinary contexts will also help them learn the target language accordingly.

In reference to the curriculum and syllabus of students’ specific major, teachers can guide students to construct hypotheses, conduct investigations and research, and demonstrate their interdisciplinary language learning outcome based on the Chinese learning topics and specific language points of each unit. In this way, students are no longer waiting to absorb the content that the teachers intend to convey, but play a specific role in the collaborative task, collecting, filtering, sorting, and analyzing the learning resources they choose. In this process, teachers need to provide theoretical support for the use of Chinese language, and provide students with adaptive and reflective suggestions to help them revise and refine their projects in time.

**Interpreting and Reflecting on the Learning Outcome**

Autonomy can be reinforced with student logbooks or journals that are a documentation of learning and a tool of reflection. Fortunately, this goal would be achieved with the help of numerous online tools at the moment. Critical reflection can lay a foundation for learner autonomy while learners shift their attention to the way they learn as well as to their learning goals and content. Being focused on autonomous language learners, Ridley (2003) further articulated two main sorts of reflection: meta-linguistic skills (analyzing the structures of target language or developing control over the language input) and meta-cognitive skills, which learners exercise when they “stand back and assess what they are learning and the way in which they go about it” (p. 78).

In this way, teachers can guide students to reflect and document their learning products in many innovative ways within different online platforms. For instance, students are encouraged to use a weekly learning log or min program within the WeChat to summarize and analyze the Chinese learning objectives, content,
effectiveness. In addition, they can illustrate their learning outcome and acquisition by using visual or audio aids, organizing their commentaries with graphs or forms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>主题 (zhèng tè) 单元 (dān yùn)</th>
<th>题目 (tí mù)</th>
<th>我学了 ... (wǒ xué le ...)</th>
<th>我发现 ... (wǒ fāxiàn le ...)</th>
<th>我想知道 ... (wǒ xiǎng zhī le ...)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>第一课 (dì 1 kè) 单元 (dān yùn)</td>
<td>我要买牛奶</td>
<td>I learned how to express my willingness of buying things like milk and bread... and how to say specific amount of money/Chinese currency.</td>
<td>It’s difficult to memorize and to say all words quickly and fluently.</td>
<td>more words of classifiers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>第二课 (dì 2 kè) 单元 (dān yùn)</td>
<td>我要买苹果</td>
<td>I learned to ask and answer questions about price; Unit of measurement like half kilogram and some words like: 太, 便宜, 斤, 等.</td>
<td>It’s difficult to memorize all words in Chinese characters.</td>
<td>the authentic way of bargain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>第三课 (dì 3 kè) 单元 (dān yùn)</td>
<td>我要买衣服</td>
<td>I learned words and phrases about shopping online, and different kinds of clothes.</td>
<td>It’s difficult to know all kinds of color, and distinguish them.</td>
<td>I want to know about days of week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.** Chinese learning journal—sample.

As shown in the figure above (see Figure 3), students are encouraged to reflect on the learning outcome and the problems he encountered in his own learning process. On the one hand, students summarize the Chinese language acquisition systematically, and on the other hand, they attach importance to the further improvement of their own learning skills. The reflection of students laid a solid foundation for the teacher’s teaching adjustment, by which the teacher is able to adapt the lessons based on students’ feedback.

### Stakes and Challenges

As discussed above, in terms of different learning styles, learners’ approaches of processing information differ greatly. Thus, inevitably, a number of learners might suffer the anxiety in the course of employing learning strategies conducted by the teacher. Therefore, teachers need to take more efforts in providing differentiated options that allow students to select according to their learning styles. Furthermore, in order to lessen students’ anxiety of employing new learning strategies, teachers should demonstrate well-structured guidelines and references for students to establish and reinforce their learner autonomy at their own pace. In the attempt to promote learner autonomy, students will be directed to take more control of their own learning process and outcomes, that is, in turn, teachers have to take less control of students learning. As a result, it is possible that teachers may be confronted with challenges in managing the class in a more collaborative remote learning setting, conducting instructional activities in a virtual learning environment.

### Conclusion

In response to the changes in technology application and teaching environment in the new era, remote and virtual learning requires us to promote language learners with broad and comprehensive accesses for them to talk and think productively about their language learning, and this process encourages them to explore various and more efficient learning styles in a more inclusive language learning community. Teachers should guide
language learners to arm themselves with self-regulated learning strategies beyond the traditional classroom settings, and allow them to personalize language learning strategies by associating them with individual constellations of learning styles to address multiple tasks and the needs of their personal academic development.

In promoting learner autonomy for language learning in the new era, teachers need to scaffold the learning content for students to establish the relevance between the learning objectives and their real-life situation, and further design scenarios where language acquisitions are encouraged to be illustrated and shared in an interactive learning environment or interpersonal task. This process as a means of developing their language learning strategies will lead a positive role in boosting their motivation for learning in the post pandemic era, and in the long term, preparing learners for more complex, ever-changing, and multicultural learning and social environments.

Conflict of Interest

I declare that there are no relationships, organizations, or activities that could appear to have influenced the manuscript entitled, “Promoting Language Learner Autonomy in the New Era: Empirical and Theoretical Summary Based on the Online Chinese Teaching Experience”. There is not any commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in connection with the work submitted. Informed consent was obtained from all individuals involved in the content of the study.

Ethical Statement

I certify that this manuscript is original and has not been published and will not be submitted elsewhere for publication at this stage. The study is not split up into several parts to increase the quantity of submissions and submitted to various journals or to one journal over time. No data or theories by others are presented as if they were my own. No data have been manipulated (including images) to support my conclusions.

Author Contribution

The author He Yujing contributed to the conception, data collection and analysis, manuscript preparation and writing of the paper.

Data Availability Statement

All data, models used during the study are available from the corresponding author by request.

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References


