

# Status of Learner Autonomy in English Language Learning among EFL Learners in Chinese Vocational and Technological Colleges

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i3/22476>

DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i3/22476

*Published Online:* 31 August 2024

## Abstract

This study explored the status of learner autonomy in English language learning among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners attending Chinese vocational and technological colleges. In Chinese research on the autonomous learning of EFL learners, there has been little focus on the EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges. Due to factors such as language foundation and learning environment, studies primarily focusing on undergraduates cannot fully apply to EFL learners in vocational and technological colleges. Therefore, this study targets 10 EFL learners randomly chosen in a vocational and technological college, using semi-structured interviews to explore the current state of their autonomous learning. The investigation's results reveal that influenced by the examination-oriented education system, Chinese EFL learners in vocational and technological colleges have a relatively limited understanding of autonomous learning, demonstrate an excessive reliance on their instructors, engage in a limited range of autonomous learning activities, and lack a deficiency in fundamental proficiency on learning strategies. The results of this study will assist EFL teachers in vocational and technological colleges in gaining better insights into their students, allowing them to choose more effective teaching methods.

**Keywords:** Learner Autonomy, Autonomous Learning Activities, Chinese Vocational and Technological Colleges, EFL Learners.

## Introduction

In recent years, vocational and technological education, as a form of higher education in China characterised by the practicality of the learning process, has developed rapidly with the support of the Chinese Ministry of Education (Fan, 2020). Unlike undergraduate students, EFL learners in vocational and technical colleges have a weaker learning base. For example, the enrolment mark for the 2022 National College Entrance Examination (with a total score of 750 points, including 150 points for English) in Henan province is 190 for vocational and technological colleges, while the admission mark for general undergraduate schools is 445. This discrepancy demonstrates that the former students begin their college-level studies at a disadvantage in terms of learning foundation compared to undergraduates. Furthermore,

when contrasted with undergraduates' and vocational and technological college students' assessments of their academic achievement or failure in English, the students in vocational and technological colleges ranked external assistance at the top of the list of external factors influencing academic success (Sun, 2020). It means most of them are deeply influenced by the traditional Chinese culture of respecting teachers and relying more on teachers than undergraduates. This reliance surely makes it harder for students from vocational and technological colleges to learn independently throughout their lives and lowers their social competitiveness.

Learner autonomy is defined as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (Benson, 2011, p. 58). Holec (1981, p. 3), on the other hand, believes that autonomous learning is manifested in the setting of learning objectives, the determination of learning plans, the selection of learning methods and strategies, the monitoring of the learning process, and the evaluation of learning outcomes. The ability to make wise decisions and take charge of one's own learning is enhanced by the development of autonomous learning abilities. In the 1960s, the idea of learner autonomy was first used in language instruction. Since then, the growth of learner autonomy has been regarded as one of the key objectives of language education. Autonomous learning is not a language learning method, "but an attribute of the learner's approach to the learning process" (Benson, 2011, p. 2). The autonomous individual who learns language on this basis can freely choose the information to be learned and effectively take responsibility for learning (Mehdiyev, 2020). Developing learner autonomy "has come into language education through an interest in the ways that language learning connects with personal and social identities" (Benson, 2011, p. 4). Insights and ideological direction for the study of autonomy in language learning are often sought from disciplines outside of language education. Humanism learning theory and constructivism learning theory are intimately related to autonomy in language learning and are intricately tied to research in this field. Autonomous learning allows language learners to work on different tasks at different times and equips them with the choice of both input and output of language information. Those who understand the importance of identifying their own learning styles and utilizing effective learning strategies can greatly enhance their ability to acquire a foreign language (Khulaifiyah, et al., 2021).

Students in vocational and technological colleges have long been subjected to exam-oriented education, leading to a fixed mindset. As a result, they do not fully recognize the importance of autonomous learning (Chen et al., 2021). These students tend to view English learning merely as preparation for tests, lacking strong motivation for English study, which hinders the development of effective autonomous learning and the improvement of their language proficiency. A study about web-based autonomous English learning for students in vocational and technological colleges suggests that while the internet provides personalized learning platforms for EFL students, the lack of motivation and scientific self-study methods results in poor autonomous learning abilities (Chen, 2021). Additionally, in a survey on autonomous learning among vocational and technological college students who major in Business English (Liao, 2022), it was found that "low self-efficacy leads to a lack of awareness in setting learning goals, resulting in unclear autonomous learning objectives." The study also notes that some vocational students' immature minds and poor self-discipline, coupled with insufficient long-term external monitoring by teachers, create a gap between external control and self-regulation, leading to concerns about autonomous learning conditions.

In general, there is a paucity of research on the autonomy of EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges. In many cases, students attending higher education are treated as a homogeneous group, with little consideration given to the distinct characteristics of students from different levels of institutions. Particularly, there is a lack of investigation into the autonomous learning status of EFL students in vocational and technological colleges. Moreover, domestic research on autonomous learning among EFL students in vocational and technological colleges predominantly employs quantitative research methods, with qualitative research methods being relatively scarce. Compared to quantitative research, qualitative interviews enable researchers to probe deeply into participants' perspectives, emotions, and experiences, thereby attaining a more profound understanding of the research issues. This approach can uncover complex social phenomena and individual experiences that go beyond the scope of simple statistical data. Therefore, this study conducts a qualitative research exploration into the current state of autonomous learning among EFL students in vocational and technological colleges. The aim is to identify their issues and deficiencies, gain a thorough understanding of their difficulties and needs, and thus contribute to the future formulation of targeted solutions. This study explores three research questions as follows:

1. What are EFL learners' perceptions and attitudes towards autonomous learning in the context of Chinese vocational and technological colleges?
2. What autonomous activities do EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges engage in to improve their English language ability?
3. What challenges do EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges face in autonomous learning?

### **Research Methodology**

This study aims to explore the current status of autonomous learning for EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges. The vocational and technological colleges are struggling with the transition from a mechanical, teacher-centred educational system to one that is learner-centred (Liu, 2015). Thus, this study utilizes the in-depth interview approach to provide insights into the participants' perceptions of autonomous learning.

### **Participants**

This study collected qualitative data through random sampling since in this way those who are conveniently available and eager to participate in the study are chosen as participants (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). As a result, the accessibility and availability of the participants inspired 10 sophomore EFL learners from a vocational and technological college in China to participate in the study. They are obliged to attend a range of classes focused on learning the English language in this college over the period of three years, including reading, listening, writing, speaking, grammar and translating. Table 1 shows the respondents' profiles.

Table 1

*Information of interview participants*

No.	Age	Gender	Entrance Scores of English Language
S1	20	female	96/150
S2	20	female	102/150
S3	19	female	75/150
S4	20	male	87/150
S5	21	female	91/150
S6	20	female	82/150
S7	21	male	78/150
S8	19	male	53/150
S9	20	female	72/150
S10	20	male	68/150

**Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Totally 10 individuals were conducted in semi-structured interviews in the 2023 Fall semester. According to Patton (1987), "Interviewing form method is prepared to receive the same type of information from different individuals by gravitating them towards similar subjects" (p. 109). Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behaviour and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behaviour (Seidman, 2005). This study used semi-structured interviews that were constructed in accordance with the objectives and questions of the research. The interview questions were emailed to three researchers for review before conducting the interviews. In order to establish the trustworthiness of the study, a pilot study was carried out on four students who were not included in the participants group to gather their feedback regarding the interview questions. Besides, the participants were informed of the significance, aim, and scope of the study. With the participant's consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and notes were taken during the interview, and the words of the participants were then transcribed into written form. One goal of this work is to be able to trace interview data to the original source on the interview tape at all stages of the research (Seidman, 2005). Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in the participants' native language, which was Chinese, in order to make them feel at ease and calm during the process and to prevent any potential language hurdles.

Thematic analysis, which is a means to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017), was used to assess the qualitative data for this study. After repeatedly reviewing the interview data, the data were organized in a meaningful and systematic way. In this process, the codes were organized into four themes, which seemed to illustrate specific aspects related to the research questions. When necessary, direct quotes from interview content were used to maintain their original form as closely as possible.

## Results

### *EFL Learners' Perceptions and Attitudes towards Autonomous Learning in the Context of Chinese Vocational and Technological Colleges*

The results of the interviews show that EFL learners from Chinese vocational and technological colleges have varying understandings of autonomous learning. The interview findings were analysed under the following four themes, which emerged from the analysis of the interview content:

1. autonomous learning means learning by oneself, free from external interference.
2. autonomous learning means students positively studying by setting goals and choosing learning content that meets their specific needs.
3. autonomous learning means learning on one's own without the help of teachers.
4. autonomous learning means completing the assignments after class.

Some interviewees equal autonomous learning with learning alone, and people or events from outside will interfere with their learning state. For example, two interviewees reported that:

*"Autonomous learning is learning on your own, without being dictated to by other people. Then it is to concentrate on learning without distractions from outside."* (S1).

*"Since the previous semester, I have been studying on my own. ... After all, each of us has a different goal, therefore everyone needs to put in different efforts. I also don't want to let my friends' actions impact how well I do in my study."* (S3).

Many interviewees believe that autonomous learning means students take the initiative to study after setting goals and selecting learning content that suits their particular needs. The responses of the three respondents shown below exemplify this theme:

*"In my opinion, autonomous learning is about learning in your own way, in which the learner needs to be self-motivated and also a little bit stronger in self-control."* (S5).

*"Autonomous learning is most likely the ability to acquire knowledge that you need on your own via reading and so on."* (S6).

*"Autonomous learning is learning on your own initiative. You have to know what you want to learn before you start to learn."* (S8).

Some interviewees viewed autonomous learning as being in opposition to receiving help from teachers. Their opinions generate the third theme:

*"I think autonomous learning means not relying on the teacher and finding books and materials to study by yourself... Learning content should be suitable for yourself."* (S7).

*"Compared to traditional learning methods, autonomous learning is more spontaneous, there is no need to follow the teacher's arrangements, but more*

*based on my ideas to make the decision.” (S4).*

Some interviewees believe that autonomous learning is simply completing the assignments given by the teacher after class. For example, three interviewees reported that:

*“...taking the initiative to do the tasks set by the teacher. I hope the teacher can allocate the study time and assignments in detail so that I can complete all the contents step by step according to the teacher’s requirements.” (S2).*

*“Autonomous learning means that you find time to work on the homework assigned by your teacher after class, and figure out how to solve the problems you don’t know in your homework.” (S9).*

*“I think students should follow their teachers’ instructions, whether in class or after class, autonomy issues should not be considered by the learners, all I need to do is listen and obey.” (S10).*

Based on the interviews, it can be deduced that the majority of these EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges have a vague understanding of autonomous learning and think that it is the process of learning on one’s own initiative.

### **Autonomous Activities EFL Learners from Chinese Vocational and Technological Colleges Do to Improve Their English Language Ability**

The results of the interviews show that EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges have many different activities to improve their English language ability and four themes emerged from the interview content including goal setting, learning plan formulating, learning strategy using, and strategy monitoring.

#### *EFL Learners’ Activities in Goal Setting Process*

Goals are basic defining attributes of human actions and they constitute an answer to the question of why an individual wants to learn, and goal-setting is an effective strategy for increasing learner autonomy. If learners are able to identify reasonable goals, the learning process becomes an authentic and dynamic self-experience for learners.

The goal setting can be concluded from three responses (S2, S9, and S10). They set short-term and long-term goals in their English learning process, as shown in the following excerpts:

*“I need to get prepared for the coming College English Test 4th (hereafter referred to as CET-4), so my autonomous learning is all related to the College English Text.” (S2).*

*“My short-term goal is to pass the CET-4 because my teacher said that passing this exam will give me some advantages when I look for a job after graduation. And my long-term goal is to pass the Upgrading Examination because my teacher also said that if I get a bachelor’s degree, I’ll be able to have better employment opportunities.” (S9).*

*"I am mostly working on practices for the Upgrading Examination. I arranged my study by my goal since passing the Upgrading Examination is my only goal during the study process in this college. Currently, studying for the examination consists solely of memorizing vocabulary followed by doing practices." (S10).*

These statements can be interpreted as reasonable goals working as internal motivation to offer learners impetus to focus on the learning process, during which autonomous learning is conducted. The interviewees who mentioned defining goals concurred that they learn English with the only intention of passing the English examinations, and they pay little attention to other goals. This perception causes students to lose motivation to engage in learning activities that have little to do with improving their examination performance. In addition to low enthusiasm and poor engagement in English class activities.

#### *EFL Learners' Activities in Learning Plan Formulating Process*

Effective autonomous learners have positive expectations for their success and know how to design their learning process, and these are reflected in their learning plans. In China, instructors grant students more freedom in vocational and technological education than they do in secondary education. Students need therefore be in charge of organizing their academic schedules. The importance of a logical learning plan thus becomes apparent.

The learning plan formulation can be concluded from two responses (S4 and S7). They developed detailed learning plans, as shown in the following excerpts:

*"For me, it is useful to have a detailed learning plan of after-school time arrangement. I make it a habit to complete my daily plan. However, at the initial stage, my plans would be too detailed and out of touch with reality, resulting in my failure to complete the plan. However, after a period of adjustment, I am now able to accomplish all of my daily planning." (S4).*

*"I'm focusing on memorising vocabulary for the College English Examination. Almost every morning I make a plan about what I'm going to do this day and then consider how I'm going to finish it." (S7).*

These statements can be interpreted as formulating a learning plan that plays an essential role in the autonomous learning process. A small proportion of the respondents would formulate learning plans and they believe that setting a clear learning plan and implementing it is beneficial to improve their learning efficiency. However, it is difficult for some of them to make a reasonable learning plan.

#### *EFL Learners' Activities in Learning Strategy Using Process*

Richards et al. (1992) define learning strategies as intentional behaviours and thoughts to help learners understand, learn or remember new information. Students use learning strategies in the processing of new information and the realization of learning activities (Rezalou & Altay, 2022). Successful autonomous learners are capable of using suitable learning strategies in the learning process.

The learning strategy using can be concluded from six responses (S1, S2, S3, S5, S6, and S8). They used various learning strategies, as shown in the following excerpts:

*"I use the simplest method, which is copying English texts. First, I look up all the words I don't know in a dictionary and then do English to Chinese translations while copying the text." (S1).*

*"For me, I sometimes read grammar books and take notes. In addition, there are many videos related to English learning on the Bilibili website, for example, there are videos explaining grammar knowledge, correcting pronunciation, and introducing English learning methods. I often go to this website to watch these videos and I gain a lot in the process." (S2).*

*"I am using an App to memorize English vocabulary. The App will remind me to memorize vocabulary on time every day and to review what I have memorized earlier. ... Moreover, I think the most interesting thing about this app is that users can find friends online who memorize vocabulary together, so I sometimes supervise and communicate with these friends online." (S5).*

*"I prefer to read foreign novels. Although it is difficult to understand the original books at my current language level, I get a lot out of reading the bilingual versions. I can learn many interesting English expressions, and I usually copy these expressions in my notebook. In addition, my best friend and I frequently swap reading notes because we both enjoy reading and have similar reading patterns." (S6).*

*"I like listening to English songs. I keep listening to these English songs over and over again and sometimes I automatically understand the meaning of the lyrics. In many cases, I will look up unfamiliar words by using a dictionary App." (S8).*

These statements can be interpreted as cognitive strategies and social strategies that affect the learning process of these EFL learners. Most of the interviewees use various cognitive strategies, such as practising, memorizing, translating, etc., as a way to aid in their improvement as language learners. Besides, S5 and S6 use social strategies that contribute to learning indirectly and learning language by collaborating with others.

#### *EFL Learners' Activities in the Learning Evaluating Process*

Since learning evaluation is a crucial component of learning assessment and a sign of learner autonomy, it would be necessary for learners to be more aware of their learning to build learner autonomy.

The learning evaluation can be concluded from three responses (S5, S8, and S10). They used various learning strategies, as shown in the following excerpts:

*"I am using an App to memorize English vocabulary. The App will remind me to memorize English vocabulary on time every day and to review what I have memorized earlier. I now make it a habit to review the vocabulary from the previous day, primarily to ensure that my study schedule has been followed. And I occasionally check my memorization efficiency by dictating the words I've learned." (S5).*

*"The quizzes and final examinations are how learning is evaluated. I'll also evaluate my progress through exam results." (S8).*

*"I would video-call my mother and ask her to help me with the vocabulary dictation, so I can see how many words I've memorized today and how many I haven't mastered." (S10).*

These statements can be interpreted as learning evaluation affects the learning process of these EFL learners. S5 often checks how well a plan is working in the course of a task. S8 consciously applies the newly obtained knowledge into practice, and S10 is active in collaboration with others in English learning.

### **Challenges that EFL Learners in Chinese Vocational and Technological Colleges Face in Autonomous Learning**

EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges engaged in autonomous learning faced several challenges, which had an impact on the effectiveness of their autonomous learning efforts. Three themes emerged from the interviews: lack of persistence and willpower, lack of mastery in learning strategies, and lack of evaluation and feedback.

#### *Lack of Persistence and Willpower During Autonomous Learning*

Many of the interviewees confessed to lacking perseverance and willpower during autonomous learning. Their learning emotions are more susceptible to outside manipulation and intervention due to weak willpower. Moreover, a lack of learning willpower prevents them from developing a sense of autonomy in their learning. Six responses (S2, S4, S6, S7, S9 and S10) that mentioned persistence and willpower are shown in the following excerpts:

*"I get distracted a lot when I'm studying on my own. Sometimes as soon as I start studying, I feel drowsy and I just can't keep going on." (S2).*

*"I just can't focus on the learning content. I don't have goodwill power and it makes me feel disappointed with myself." (S4).*

*"I don't have enough willpower since I was young... Besides, there's the fact that when I'm reading, I often lose my concentration and start thinking about something else before I notice." (S6).*

*"I'm easily distracted by the outside world. For me, I give up easily if the study content is difficult." (S7).*

*"I have less willpower. At times I know that I need to learn something, for example, to review the content or to preview the text, but in many cases, I just give up halfway through." (S9).*

*"Usually when I memorize English words, I don't want to continue after a few minutes of memorizing and basically give up. I feel like it's difficult for me to keep learning." (S10).*

In the context of autonomous learning, many interviewees indicated that there was a discontinuity in their autonomous learning and that they were not able to persevere and persist in their learning.

#### *Lack of Mastery in Learning Strategies During Autonomous Learning*

The significance of language learning strategies in enhancing learning effectiveness has been emphasized by many educators, who have also conducted extensive studies on these tactics. The learning strategies are used to complete the cognitive process, and the correct selection and application of learning strategies will benefit the learning progress. Many of the interviewees felt that the biggest difficulty they encountered was the lack of mastery of learning strategies, which led to a reduction of effectiveness during autonomous learning. Six responses (S1, S2, S3, S5, S8 and S10) that mentioned about learning strategies are shown in the following excerpts:

*“When I learnt English autonomously, I don’t know which contents in the textbook were the key points, and I don’t know which part should I memorize. It’s always been challenging for me to internalize the knowledge from the textbook into something I can apply in writing or speaking.” (S1).*

*“I often fail to fulfil my learning plan. It could be that the plans I make are not realistic, but I don’t know how to make a change.” (S2).*

*“There is a mismatch between the effort I put in and what I get out of it. I put effort into my College English Examination preparation, yet I ended up with a subpar exam result. Anyway, my problem is that I’ve put in the effort, but I just didn’t get the results I wanted.” (S3).*

*“My major challenge is that I’m not sure how to memorize new words effectively or prevent forgetting the ones I have already learned.” (S5).*

*“When I completed a reading comprehension exercise, I was probably able to understand the content of the original text, but when I answered the following questions, I often made mistakes.” (S8).*

*“I consulted about learning strategies with my classmates with good scores in English, but no one has ever been able to answer me clearly. Teachers also rarely mention learning strategies, much less how to proceed at each stage.” (S10).*

Based on the interviewees’ answers, it is easy to see that the vague understanding of cognitive and metacognitive strategies is an obvious problem for learners in the process of autonomous learning. Even if learners have a willingness to start engaging in learning activities, they might not be able to do so if they lack sufficient learning strategies and the expertise to use them effectively.

#### *Lack of Evaluation and Feedback During Autonomous Learning*

For both students and instructors, accurate and timely evaluation and feedback are crucial.

An evaluation and feedback mechanism can let students know what knowledge they have not yet acquired and can offer sufficient preparation for the following learning activities. On the other side, teachers can quickly grasp the learning dynamics and circumstances of their students, which enables them to give them focused direction and support. Some interviewees claim that when they learn English autonomously, the learning obstacles are not solved on time.

Three responses (S1, S3, and S9) that mentioned about learning strategies are shown in the following excerpts:

*“When I learn English on my own, I don’t know which contents in the textbook were the key points, and I don’t know which part should I memorize..... I need the teacher’s assistance with my exercises since I don’t grasp the explanation of the grammar, but it’s difficult to contact the teacher after class.” (S1).*

*“.....Sometimes the teacher skips over the previously assigned practice, in which case I didn’t know what I’ve done wrong in the practice or if I’ve mastered what I’ve learnt.” (S3).*

*“When studying autonomously, I often come across content that I don’t understand. Sometimes I would consult my classmates, but in most cases, it was hard for them to explain clearly. And it was difficult to get in touch with teachers and consult them with the questions after class, so some problems could never be solved.” (S9).*

Respondents’ answers indicate that learners need to develop feedback and evaluation mechanisms as a way of testing the outcomes of autonomous learning. Learners from Chinese vocational and technological colleges struggle to assess their learning outcomes and effectiveness because of their weak language foundation.

## **Discussion**

### *EFL Learners’ Perceptions and Attitudes towards Autonomous Learning*

In summary, most respondents have an overly simplistic understanding of autonomous learning during their studies, often equating it merely with studying on their own. The educational community generally accepts Benson’s definition (2011) of learner autonomy, which means “the capacity to take control over one’s learning” (p. 2), and it includes the right to decide on all aspects of their educational path. Consequently, autonomous learners are expected to take control of each step of their learning process. Some interviewees have the false impression that they are solely responsible for organizing their learning and do not require any external assistance. Also, the majority of interviewees incorrectly equated autonomous learning with ‘learning on their own’ while omitting the crucial phases of self-monitoring and self-evaluation. These viewpoints suggest that EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges have not yet attained the necessary autonomous learning abilities as well as the basic knowledge of metacognition which is closely linked with learner autonomy. Furthermore, a sizable part of them is unable to show the basic characteristics of autonomous learners or recognize the beneficial impact of autonomous learning. This also indicates to some extent that the majority of EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges have hardly received any training on autonomous

learning awareness and strategies. Throughout their learning process, they almost entirely lack autonomous learning awareness, which is largely related to the weak emphasis teachers place on training students' autonomous learning abilities.

A number of interviewees prefer a teacher-led learning style, which has to do with the teacher-centred model they've always received. They expressed a strong desire for teachers to provide them with precise instructions on learning plans and learning strategies, which they could subsequently implement on their own outside of the classroom. Most of them were accustomed to the traditional approach, in which they had little influence on the learning content. Their main responsibility was to follow their teacher's instructions and complete their requirements. Their primary method of learning English is by rote memory, and they lack intrinsic drive and the capacity for autonomous learning. Moreover, the motivation of most interviewees is to pass examinations. They hardly ever think about long-term objectives, much less pursuing lifelong learning. This indicates a deficiency in both motivation and the fundamental capacity for autonomous learning.

From another perspective, the weak sense of autonomy in learning among Chinese vocational and technological EFL learners is closely related to the lack of teachers' efforts in fostering students' autonomous learning awareness and abilities. In the research on the ecological approach to online autonomous learning for vocational and technological college students, Chen (2021) also believes that some teachers, while selecting teaching content, overlook the development of students' innovative abilities. This severely impacts students' intrinsic motivation for learning. Furthermore, some teachers lack a strong sense of responsibility, resulting in their teaching duties being superficial and lacking effective supervision and guidance for students. Coupled with the fact that vocational and technological college students hardly adapt to autonomous learning models, the effectiveness of their English learning cannot be significantly improved. The weak awareness of autonomous learning among students is not solely their responsibility. Teachers' failure to systematically guide students on how to engage in autonomous learning and provide sufficient learning strategies and tools is also a crucial factor contributing to students' lack of autonomy and self-management skills in the learning process.

### **Autonomous Activities EFL Learners Do to Improve Their English Language Ability**

#### *Setting Learning Goals*

According to Chen (2014), many language learners struggle to express the difference between their beliefs of their learning demands and their real learning deficiencies. In other words, many of them don't have a grasp of their strengths and shortcomings, which could make their learning goals less effective. Reasonable learning goals can give students a direction that will help them avoid blind learning and ineffective input (Kumm, 2021). When setting goals, the majority of the interviewees generally restricted their English learning objectives to passing the CET-4 exam or the upgrading exam. Other possible learning objectives received little attention or even no consideration at all. Students who are used to the exam-oriented education system only regard learning as a way to pass the exam. This phenomenon resulted in low learning motivation for knowledge of little relevance to exams and impromptu after-class reading or English practice. And students may lose out on numerous chances to hone their language proficiency and broaden their knowledge in such a circumstance. Additionally, virtually no interviewees were able to describe their motivations for wanting to pass the GET-

4 exam or the upgrading exam. Some of them cannot delve further into their motivations and blindly follow their teachers' instructions since they believe that following the requirements set out by their teachers is the basic obligation of a student. The majority of Chinese students learn in teacher-centred environments, and they are accustomed to doing as they are told without asking why. Some other interviewees selected passing the exams as a learning goal primarily because the students around were doing the same, and they felt the need to keep up. However, they had not given much thought about whether the goals were appropriate for their situations. This demonstrates that many EFL learners from Chinese vocational and technological colleges lack fundamental self-awareness, learning motivation, and the ability to autonomous learning.

### *Formulating Learning Plans*

Making a sensible learning plan is a crucial step in developing excellent study habits and self-discipline, as well as helping students learn more effectively (Porath & Hagerman, 2021). An effective study plan can help students define their learning goals and time constraints, which improves learning efficiency and reduces time wasted. Most of the interviewees had a basic understanding of making a study plan, yet the actual implementation was quite limited. A significant factor contributing to this limitation is a deficiency in autonomous learning skills. Many students tend to rely on teachers for detailed extracurricular learning plans and are inclined to strictly follow their instructions. Some learners are unprepared for autonomous learning and lack fundamental knowledge of making reasonable learning plans. Consequently, they struggle to allocate specialized study time effectively, resulting in often impractical and overwhelming plans. As a result, students frequently experience difficulty carrying out their learning plans, and eventually, they stop doing so and switch back to unplanned learning.

### *Using Learning Strategies*

Based on the cognitive learning theory, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) divided learning strategies into three categories: metacognitive strategy, cognitive strategy, and social-affective strategy. Understanding and controlling the cognitive process through tasks like planning, monitoring, and evaluating are aspects of metacognitive strategies. Recognizing, remembering, and comprehending the knowledge and concepts required for learning are all covered by cognitive strategies. Methods that promote learning through social contact or controlling emotions and motivation are referred to as socio-affective strategies.

Cognitive strategies form the fundamental aspect of learning strategies, constituting the primary and direct methods employed in language acquisition endeavours. According to Biber (2023), skilled learners modify their strategies based on their unique cognitive preferences, learning objectives, and competence levels as opposed to copying or employing a single strategy in all learning scenarios. According to the interview, unlike more flexible strategies like utilizing contextual clues and word creation, mechanical practices like reading aloud and copying are favoured for vocabulary retention. Most believe that 'memorizing more and retaining more' is crucial for English language proficiency. Due to influences from peers and instructors, students rarely sought out alternate tactics even when they were aware of the approach's low efficiency. It is clear that Chinese EFL students from vocational and technological colleges tend to exhibit a rigid and conformist cognitive style, which favours more mechanistic cognitive strategies.

Furthermore, an immersive language learning setting is vital for language acquisition. This is important while learning a foreign language because understanding and mastering the language significantly depends on the context and other linguistic resources. To speed up the learning process, it is essential to use numerous senses at once. The approaches and formats taken in autonomous learning have a direct impact on the standard and potency of language assimilation and expression. The results of the interviews show that the majority of EFL learners primarily use textbooks as their cognitive resources for autonomous learning. Only a small portion have access to authentic linguistic situations made possible by the internet and smartphones. In conclusion, Chinese EFL students from vocational and technological colleges frequently lack different contexts for language intake and output and instead rely on a single cognitive method.

Social-affective strategies encompass questioning, clarification, collaboration, and so on. Since language is a tool for communication, full mastery can only be achieved by actively using it. The importance of using the language as a medium of communication, actively seeking opportunities to use it in real-world contexts, and developing interpersonal skills all go hand in hand. However, only a small part of EFL learners continuously seek out opportunities for communication outside the classroom, according to the interview results. Chinese EFL learners from vocational and technological colleges usually adopt a passive learning strategy, which is impacted by the conventional teaching techniques they have experienced. Many EFL learners are reluctant to participate in collaborative learning because of their weak language foundation and the fear of possible mistakes. In addition, English-speaking professors and foreign exchange students are in short supply in most Chinese vocational and technological colleges. This, in part, results in a language environment that is less conducive to learning English.

Metacognitive strategies exert a regulating influence on the application of language learning strategies and it can be argued that the use of metacognitive strategies and the level of mastery at which they are applied influence the degree of learning success to some extent (Ni, 2010). However, the results of the interviews showed that almost all students lacked the ability to use metacognitive methods, indicating a fundamental deficiency in this area. Very few learners actively engaged in evaluating the effectiveness of their learning strategies or tracking their progress throughout their autonomous learning endeavours. Furthermore, none of them consistently took actionable steps to address problems they experienced while autonomous learning. This circumstance demonstrates how most learners are unaware of the enormous influence that metacognitive strategies have on the learning process. In general, Chinese EFL students from vocational and technological colleges have a limited theoretical understanding of learning strategies and have a scant comprehension of the various possible types of these strategies. The interviews reveal that the majority of EFL learners from Chinese vocational and technological colleges employ inflexible strategies to enhance their English proficiency, like committing words to memory, reciting texts, and engaging in intensive practices. Furthermore, the strategies they employ tend to remain unchanged across various stages of their learning journey. The limited understanding of learning strategies diminishes learners' comprehension of available tactics and confines their selection of strategies. This, in turn, hinders their capacity to adapt strategies in accordance with their unique cognitive styles and learning aptitudes.

### *Evaluating Learning Process*

Learner engagement in evaluation is beneficial to foster the improvement of learner autonomy since effective evaluation enables EFL learners to assess their performance and development during the language learning process. This self-awareness is crucial for developing realistic goals and monitoring personal growth while conducting language-related autonomous learning. Unfortunately, most interviewees lacked evaluation during autonomous learning. The results of the interviews showed that only a few Chinese EFL learners from vocational and technological colleges would give a succinct summary of their learning experience and engage in evaluation once it was finished. However, many students believe the evaluation is solely the teacher's responsibility and only tied to exam results, overlooking its personal relevance. This prevailing paradigm permeates English-language instruction in China, where many students only associate learning assessment with exam results. This result highlights how crucial it is for Chinese EFL learners from vocational and technological colleges to understand the value of evaluation in autonomous learning.

### **Challenges that EFL Learners Face in Autonomous Learning**

Based on the interview results, it is discovered that Chinese EFL students from vocational and technological colleges struggle with challenges in autonomous learning, particularly in terms of persistence and willpower, learning strategies adoption, as well as valuation and feedback. When conducting autonomous learning, these EFL learners have trouble remaining persistent and with willpower. This is largely blamed on the positioning of themselves, they see themselves as passive recipients, but not active participants in the educational process. Therefore, they approach autonomous learning with a negative and passive perspective, lacking a deep desire for information and a natural incentive to study. These innate characteristics make it difficult for these EFL learners to maintain a consistent approach to autonomous learning.

In China, students typically follow an exam-focused approach in the elementary education process, relying on teachers for guidance. Colleges provide them with a more flexible management system, allowing for more latitude in their schedules as opposed to elementary education. Students may become less focused since teachers may not routinely evaluate and control their academic progress. College students' motivation to learn declines when the novelty of a new academic year wears off, which directly hinders the growth of their ability for autonomous learning. Additionally, compared to their elementary education process, college EFL learners have more possibilities for autonomous study within the context of the digital media landscape. However, a sizable portion of college EFL learners fail to fully use the benefits of the Internet. This tendency has led to suboptimal internet resources becoming a detrimental influence on the autonomous learning endeavours of college EFL learners. Their attention is captured by a wide variety of information while they are watching TikTok videos and playing mobile games. In this environment, students who encounter academic difficulties are more inclined to give up on their current learning goals and become engrossed in the online world, finding it challenging to break out. Their efforts at autonomous learning are ultimately disrupted as a result.

Many college EFL learners lack a fundamental understanding of learning strategies. They frequently adapt mechanical learning, while ignoring flexible strategies. The instructional tactics and contents used by teachers are largely to blame for this. Grammar-centric teaching

methods are frequently used in foreign language instruction in Chinese vocational and technological colleges. The efficiency of college-level English instruction is noticeably affected by this dependence on grammatical lectures and repetitious activities. The curriculum prioritizes learning grammar and vocabulary over equipping EFL learners with effective learning strategies. EFL students are generally unfamiliar with metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies. As a result, they struggle to choose suitable learning strategies in the process of autonomous learning, ultimately hindering the enhancement of their autonomous learning abilities.

Additionally, there is no comprehensive system of assessment for autonomous learning in most Chinese vocational and technological colleges. Currently, the traditional lecture style is still used as the primary teaching strategy in Chinese vocational and technological colleges. The teacher typically imparts knowledge to the students on a one-sided basis. The importance of fostering autonomous learning abilities is ignored. Consequently, this ultimately diminishes the effectiveness of their learning. Unsolved challenges in autonomous learning can lead to unclear objectives and reduced effectiveness for EFL learners. On the contrary, they will be more likely to achieve the learning objectives and, as a result, have greater success in their autonomous learning endeavours if educators and institutions offer timely evaluations and feedback on learning progress, as well as guidance for students to adapt the study strategies.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

By analysing the interview data, it was found that the awareness of autonomous learning among EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges is weak, their ability to learn autonomously is low, and they have a high dependence on teachers. Some interviewees set simple learning goals and plans, but most use mechanical learning strategies, leading to low learning efficiency. Besides, most respondents place the responsibility of monitoring their learning on teachers and generally lack awareness of evaluating the learning process. Furthermore, the difficulties they encountered in autonomous learning mainly included a lack of self-discipline and willpower, ineffective learning strategies, and the absence of evaluation and feedback platforms. Moreover, it was found that the lack of teachers' efforts to cultivate students' awareness of autonomous learning is also a significant factor contributing to the low autonomy of EFL learners. If teachers remain at the centre of the classroom in English teaching and do not shift their role to that of an organizer, evaluator, material provider, manager, or supervisor, then students' autonomous learning abilities are unlikely to improve. Achieving this is very challenging and the key is for teachers to develop an effective method for guiding learning. By giving EFL learners the central role in the classroom, teachers ought to allow students to transition from being passive listeners to active participants, becoming the main actors in the learning activities.

This study focuses on Chinese vocational and technological college EFL learners, conducting a survey on their current autonomous learning status. Compared to some studies that group vocational and technological college students and undergraduates together, this research is more targeted and contextually relevant. The research is more targeted, with a background that is more relevant. Understanding the current state of autonomous learning and the challenges in this process is essential for effectively helping these students proactively adjust their learning approaches, adapt to the demands of higher education, and improve their autonomous learning abilities. For EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological

colleges, this study helps them gain a deeper understanding of their autonomous learning characteristics. This study will also provide a practical basis for EFL teachers in Chinese vocational and technological colleges to improve and reform their teaching practices. It will help them gain a more detailed understanding of the issues their students face in autonomous learning activities and the underlying causes, thereby laying the foundation for further improvements in teaching and increased efficiency, as well as providing timely and scientifically grounded feedback and evaluations of students' learning performance. For schools, recognizing the material conditions and technical support needed for students' autonomous learning enables more targeted improvements in both hardware and software facilities, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of student development. Considering the unique characteristics of EFL learners in vocational and technological colleges, achieving the ultimate goal of enabling learners to use the acquired language fluently in various fields for seamless communication—an ability that benefits learners for a lifetime—requires the indispensable prerequisite of autonomous learning abilities. This is not only for effective teaching but also for the lifelong development of students.

Finally, as an EFL teacher in a Chinese vocational and technological college, the researcher has long been aware that a considerable number of EFL learners experience “double the effort for half the results” in their English learning processes. They often spend a significant amount of time studying without seeing results and frequently complain about being unable to engage in classroom learning and being clueless about how to study after class. Therefore, fundamentally improving this situation and enhancing students' autonomous learning abilities is a key solution. This study will provide valuable references for EFL teachers and students in vocational and technological colleges to better conduct teaching and learning in the future.

### Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. Due to the nature of the EFL classroom and the small sample size, the results of the study cannot be generalised to different groups of students from various majors in Chinese vocational and technological colleges. However, this study can provide a realistic reference for stakeholders to help them formulate policies that are conducive to the development of EFL learners in Chinese vocational and technological colleges.

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