

# Analysis on Students' Beliefs about Teacher's Role in Online Learner Autonomy of College English

Hao Peng

Foreign Languages School, Wuhan Polytechnic University, Wuhan, China, 430024

allenholdshisown@qq.com

**Keywords:** Students' beliefs, Teacher's role, Learner autonomy.

**Abstract:** The present paper attempts to investigate students' beliefs about college English teachers' role in developing learner autonomy by putting forward three research questions. The answers were explored through the designed questionnaire. This paper reports the results of a comprehensive investigation into Chinese college students' beliefs about the teachers' role in developing online learner autonomy. The findings of the study will provide a general picture of learner beliefs held by college students in China and their link with learner autonomy. It can be expected that these findings will help foreign language teachers and learners further understand learner beliefs about online learner autonomy, which may enable them to achieve successful college English teaching and learning.

## 1 Introduction

The term "learner autonomy" was first coined in 1981 by Henri Holec, the "father" of learner autonomy. It is a truism that one of the most important spin-offs of more communicatively oriented language learning and teaching has been the premium placed on the role of the learner in the language learning process (see Wenden, 1998: xi). It goes without saying, of course, that this shift of responsibility from teachers to learners does not exist in a vacuum, but is the result of a concatenation of changes to the curriculum itself towards a more learner-centered kind of learning. In other words, there is a consensus that the practice of learner autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others.

Besides, in autonomous learning teachers are expected to transcend its traditional role and play various roles as guide, facilitator, organizer, assessor, supervisor and psychological coordinator etc. Teachers play an important role in fostering online learner autonomy, which has a direct effect on developing autonomous learning ability as well as comprehensive quality among learners. Thus, based on the relevant theories at home and abroad, this study attempts to explore the students' beliefs in college English teachers' role in developing learner autonomy with the adoption of questionnaires. It is committed to exploring the following three specific research questions: What are the students' beliefs about the teachers' role in developing learner autonomy? Does teachers' actual behavior match students' expectations? Are there any differences between students of different levels in their beliefs about the teachers' role in developing online learner autonomy?

## 2 Organization of text investigation to the analysis

### 2.1 Section headings subjects

The subjects taking part in this investigation are 300 non-English major sophomore students from Wuhan Polytechnic University, with their average age of 19. Based on the results of English proficiency test in their first year students are classified into three different levels to finish their college English learning. Students with higher scores in the test who have higher English

proficiency, are called Level A (LA) students; accordingly, the ones with lower scores have lower English proficiency, belonging to Level C (LC) students; the other students in between are Level B (LB) students with comparatively intermediary English proficiency. In order to make the research result more conveniently analyzed, 300 non-English major sophomore students were chosen randomly and equally from the three different levels, with 100 students from each level. The actual total subjects are composed of 228 (78.9%) male students and 61 (21.1%) female students in the study.

## **2.2 Investigation Procedures**

In order to figure out the three research questions, a questionnaire with due reliability and validity was designed on the basis of the SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) by Oxford. Then the questionnaire survey was administered among 300 objects. It further goes to the data analysis stage, which is not quite easy. The five-point Likert scale was employed to correspond with the choices of every statement item. Choices A, B, C, D, and E were given certain value with 1 point, 2 points, 3 points, 4 points and 5 points respectively. After all the answers given by respondents were recoded and typed into the computer with the software SPSS, it could be ready for data analysis.

## **3 Investigation results and analysis**

### **3.1 Analysis of students' beliefs section**

Based on data analysis, it can be found that students have positive beliefs about teachers' role in developing online learner autonomy, which can be illustrated in the following aspects. Firstly, teachers are supposed to play more roles such as students' guides and cooperators in the learner-centered learning environment in order to foster learner autonomy. Secondly, students also believe that teachers are also advocators of the concept of autonomous learning and developers for students' awareness of learner autonomy. Thirdly, teachers are expected to act as instructors in English learning strategies by getting students familiar with relevant learning strategies and involved in any possible chances for practicing these strategies. Fourthly, students hold that teachers should act as monitors and assessor in their English learning process by employing various channels, such as getting students to have frequent reflection on their learning process, offering immediate feedback to students' performance having regular communication with students. Then teachers are viewed to play the role as the facilitator in developing students' positively affective factors so that students' interest and enthusiasm in English learning can be aroused and maintained, their confidence can be gained and their negatively affective factors can be hopefully hindered. The last point about significance of teachers' role lies in the fact that students eagerly expect teachers to create the appropriate English learning environment in which students can benefit from democratic and friendly teacher-student relationships and improve their English proficiency as well as the autonomous ability.

### **3.2 Analysis of teachers' actual behavior section**

The second research question attempts to find whether teachers' actual behavior matches student expectations. The following Table I provide the frequency and percentage of all the items in the section, which can show a wealth of information about the respondents' answers to 23 statement items in Section Two.

**Table 1: Frequency and percentage of teachers' behavior**

Item	A	B	C	D	E
Advocating autonomy	35(12.1%)	113(39.1%)	106(36.7%)	33(11.4%)	2(0.7%)
Communication	15(5.2%)	67(16.3%)	109(37.7%)	88(30.4%)	10(3.5%)
Plan-making	20(6.9%)	47(16.3%)	103(35.6%)	85(29.4%)	34(11.8%)
Learning strategies	25(8.7%)	102(35.3%)	125(43.3%)	29(10%)	7(2.4%)
Providing chances	36(12.5%)	85(29.4%)	106(36.7%)	55(19%)	6(2.1%)
Class activities	83(28.7%)	91(31.5%)	71(24.6%)	37(12.8%)	7(2.4%)
After-class activities	62(21.5%)	85(29.4%)	85(29.4%)	43(14.9%)	14(4.8%)
Reading	33(11.4%)	93(32.2%)	100(34.6%)	53(18.3%)	10(3.5%)
References	14(4.8%)	47(16.3%)	115(39.8%)	93(32.2%)	20(6.9%)
Websites	20(6.9%)	47(16.3%)	103(35.6%)	85(29.4%)	34(11.8%)
Self-reflection	25(8.7%)	102(35.3%)	125(43.3%)	29(10%)	7(2.4%)
Journal-keeping	36(12.5%)	85(29.4%)	106(36.7%)	55(19%)	6(2.1%)
E-mails	83(28.7%)	91(31.5%)	71(24.6%)	37(12.8%)	7(2.4%)
Grading	62(21.5%)	85(29.4%)	85(29.4%)	43(14.9%)	14(4.8%)
Learning progress	33(11.4%)	93(32.2%)	100(34.6%)	53(18.3%)	10(3.5%)
Self-evaluation	14(4.8%)	47(16.3%)	115(39.8%)	93(32.2%)	20(6.9%)
Interest	36(12.5%)	85(29.4%)	106(36.7%)	55(19%)	6(2.1%)
Conference	83(28.7%)	91(31.5%)	71(24.6%)	37(12.8%)	7(2.4%)
Negative affection	62(21.5%)	85(29.4%)	85(29.4%)	43(14.9%)	14(4.8%)
Speaking bravely	33(11.4%)	93(32.2%)	100(34.6%)	53(18.3%)	10(3.5%)
Atmosphere	14(4.8%)	47(16.3%)	115(39.8%)	93(32.2%)	20(6.9%)
Role	25(8.7%)	102(35.3%)	125(43.3%)	29(10%)	7(2.4%)
Match	18(6.2%)	131(45.3%)	15(5.2%)	31(10.7%)	74(2.5%)

Obtained data are categorized into three basic scales in Section Two where originally there are five choices corresponding to one statement item: fulfillment, unfulfillment and divergence. If the item gets the total percentage of Choice A and B that exceeds 50% from the respondents, it is accepted that teachers can basically fulfill the practice which corresponds to the mentioned statement item. On the contrary, if the total percentage of Choice D and E overruns 50%, teachers are considered to have failed to carry out their roles to develop online learner autonomy in their teaching practice.

Considering all the above data analysis, it can follow that in the broad sense teachers' actual behavior fails to correspond with students' beliefs about teachers' role in promoting online learner autonomy despite of the fact that 51.5% respondents agree that their English teachers' actual performance matches their perceptions

### ***3.3 Analysis of students' beliefs in different levels***

Since the subjects in this study are under a three-level system, and at the same time the study intend to obtain more information about students' perceptions of teachers' role, it is necessary to find out where there are some differences between students of different levels in their beliefs about teachers' role in developing online learner autonomy by employing One-way ANOVA analysis provided by the software SPSS.

**Table 2: One-way ANOVA results about significant differences among the three levels**

Item	Level	Level	Sig.	Is there statistically significant difference between the two levels?
A1 No teachers' instruction	A	B	.003	Yes
	A	C	.000	Yes
	B	C	.665	No
A2 Encouragement	A	B	.133	No
	A	C	.879	No
	B	C	.044	Yes

As shown in the above Table 2, among the three groups of students there are significant differences on two items. Item A1 states that students can learn English autonomously without teachers' class instruction. Then the means of LA, LB and LC students on this item are respectively 3.2424, 2.7473, 2.6162, so LA students are inclined to disagree with this opinion while LB and LC students tend to hold it. Meanwhile, the significance value for LA and LB students is 0.003, which is less than 0.05, so there is a significant difference between them. Likewise, the significance value for LA and LC students is 0.000, which is obviously smaller than 0.05, so a significant difference also exists between them. Therefore, LB and LC students are more likely to believe that students can autonomously learn English well without teachers' instruction than LA students. Item A2 means that teachers should encourage students to participate in class language communicative activities such as debates, speeches, group discussion and role-play performance. The means for LA, LB and LC students on this item are 1.6667, 1.9121, 1.6061 separately and also the significance value for LA and LC students is 0.044, which is less than 0.05. So there is a significant difference between LB and LC students, and LC students more prefer teachers to encourage them to get engaged in these communicative activities to practice English than LB students. As for other items in Section Two their significance values are all more than 0.05, so there are no significant differences for them.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Based on all the above analysis, we can get a list of major findings in the process of explore the three research questions. As for teachers' role in developing students' English autonomous learning ability, students' perceptions are in agreement with scholars and teachers' opinions. From students' perspectives, teachers are considered to play an important and essential role in developing online learner autonomy. Their roles are highlighted as follows: they are viewed to have a major role to play in teaching students' English learning strategies; they are expected to devote more attention to monitoring and evaluating students' English learning process in various ways; they should be responsible for developing students' positive affection and overcoming negative counterpart; meanwhile, teachers should be responsible for creating the appropriate learning environment. Besides, broadly speaking, teachers' actual behavior doesn't match students' expectations though there still exists certain agreement between teachers' performance in class and students' perceptions. The following points are brought to stress the discrepancy between teachers' actual performance and students' expectations: a lack of teachers' communication with students about their English learning problems, inadequate guidance from teachers in helping students make English learning plans, deficient instruction from teachers about English learning strategies and scarce chances provided by teachers to practice these learning strategies, insufficient work for teachers in monitoring and evaluating students' English learning in various ways as well as unsatisfactory application of positive affective factors to students' English learning and teaching by teachers all go contrary to students' expectations.

Facing the discrepancy between teachers' behavior and students' expectations in the current college English teaching, college English teachers are expected to provide English learning strategies for students, monitoring and evaluating students' applying affective factors tool to the

teaching and varying teachers' role in different contexts.

### **References**

- [1] Holec, Henri. *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* [M]. New York: Pergamon Press, 1981.
- [2] Little, D. *Learner Autonomy I: Definitions, Issues, and Problems* [M]. Dublin: Authentik, 1991.
- [3] Healy, D. *Theory and Research: Autonomy and Language Learning* [J]. *Research, Practice and Critical Issues*, 1999 8(5) 391–402.
- [4] Littlewood, W. *Defining and Developing Autonomy in East Asian Contexts* [J]. *Applied Linguistics*. 1999 20 (1) 71-94.
- [5] White, C. *Language Learning in Distance Education* [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.