

Developing Students' Autonomy to Resolve a Paradoxical Issue in China's Secondary School Education

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Abstract

Students' autonomy in learning is becoming more important in education. An ethnographic research study was conducted on institutional strategies for student autonomy in secondary schools in China, having found a paradoxical issue that is the "quality education" in the curriculum and teaching for testing system in China's secondary schools. We propose developing students' autonomy to resolve this paradoxical issue. Schools are applying some strategies in developing students' autonomy, such as strict schedules and motivating students in learning. Although these strategies may increase students' willingness to learn to some extent, the drawbacks are obvious. Schools need to adopt other strategies to develop students' autonomy to a higher level.

Key words

autonomy, paradoxical issue, strict schedule, motivation, strategy

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Introduction

With the development of artificial intelligence, especially the recent ChatGPT, it is even more vital that students develop their autonomy in learning. Students need to be critical, creative and capable of continuing their learning throughout their life, adapt to new situations and add new skills to their repertoire. They should be capable of motivating themselves to solve issues and developing new demands for meaningful lives in the future. Therefore, learning autonomously is necessary for students' personal development. Nowadays, social and political changes, especially the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, greatly influence individuals' view of life. People from different countries or cultures hold diverse ideas about such severe issues. It can be inferred that people are easily influenced by their governments or cultures. To some extent, people are controlled by certain external factors. Thus, it is necessary to develop personal autonomy which ensures people are open-minded. Sin Wang Chong and Hayo Reinders (2022) conducted a scoping review of research and practice on the autonomy of English language learners. Out of the 62 studies reviewed, only 5 studies were conducted in secondary schools, and only 4 of the studies used qualitative research methods. Therefore, we decided to conduct ethnographic research on institutional strategies on student autonomy in secondary schools in China. In the first part, we discuss a paradoxical issue that is "quality education" in the curriculum and teaching for testing system in China's secondary schools. We propose developing students' autonomy to resolve this paradoxical issue. In the second part, we analyze the advantages and disadvantages of school strategies to develop students' learning autonomy.

Theoretical concepts of learner autonomy

Learner autonomy has been researched for over 40 years. It is often related to language learning. According to Benson (2007), the literature on autonomy, including contributions to major journals, book-length publications, summary articles, guides for teachers and learners, chapters in general guides to language teaching, and papers published since 2000 exceeds the literature published over the previous 25 years.

Researchers' definitions of learner autonomy

Learner autonomy is such a complex issue that it is hard to reach a consensus on the definition. The following are definitions of learner autonomy in different categories.

Definition of Autonomy as an ability

Holec states that learner autonomy is “the ability to take charge of their own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 32). This means that an autonomous learner should be able to make all the decisions related to all aspects of their learning during the learning process. Little states that autonomy is “a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts” (Little, 1999, p. 4). Benson defines autonomy as “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (Benson, 2013, p. 58). Littlewood defines an autonomous person as one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices that govern his or her actions (Littlewood, 1996, p. 73).

Definition of autonomy as a situation

Another common understanding of learner autonomy is stated by Leslie Dickinson as “a situation in which the learner is responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions” (Dickinson, 1987, p. 11).

Definition of autonomy as a state or a way of living

Allwright regards autonomy as “...a constantly changing but at any time the optimal state of equilibrium between maximal self-development and human interdependence” (Allwright, 1990, p. 12). Breen and Mann see autonomy as “a way of being in the world; a position from which to engage with the world” (Breen & Mann, 2016, p. 134). They hold the idea that autonomy is “not an ability that has to be learned, but a way of being that has to be discovered or rediscovered” (p. 134). Everhard defines learner autonomy as “a way of being or sense of self achieved through co-operatively making decisions about learning, through access to both internal and external resources. The ability to exercise autonomy depends on particular dispositions and predispositions and fluctuates according to circumstances” (Everhard, 2015, p. 11).

Comprehensive definitions of autonomy

Some researchers try to cover all the aspects that are involved in autonomy. Oxford attempts to give an all-embracing definition of autonomy in language learning.

Learner autonomy includes

the (a) ability and willingness to perform a language task without assistance, with adaptability related to the situational demands, with transferability to other relevant contexts, and with reflection, accompanied by (b) relevant action (the use, usually conscious and intentional, of appropriate learning strategies) reflecting both ability and willingness. (Oxford, 2017, p. 80)

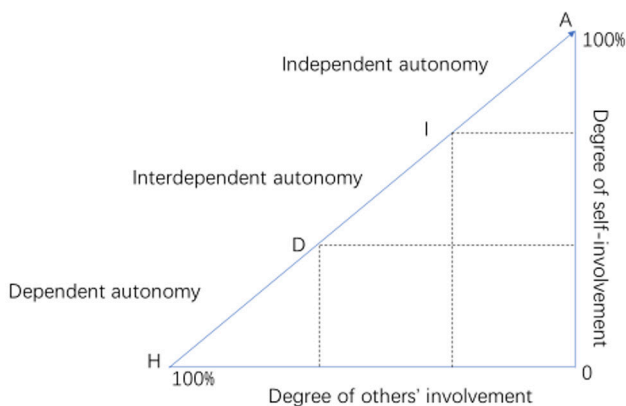
Jiménez Raya, Lamb, and Vieira define teacher and learner autonomy as “the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation” (Jiménez Raya et al, 2007, p. 1).

Our own understanding of learner autonomy

From the above concepts of learner autonomy, a consensus is that autonomous learners should possess both the willingness and ability to learn in order to take up their responsibilities in the learning process. Willingness refers to students’ emotion or affection in learning, which mainly includes motivation and feelings. According to Benson’s (2011) perspectives on autonomy, willingness is viewed as a psychological perspective and ability as a technical perspective. The ability refers to students’ ability to make a decision or choice on the different aspects related to learning, such as learning goals, learning materials, learning strategies, monitoring of the learning process, and evaluation of learning results. As such, we regard willingness and ability as two keys to achieving learner autonomy.

Based on Jonassen’s (1991) three stages of knowledge acquisition and Vygotsky’s (1978) children’s developmental law, we divide learner autonomy into three stages concerning the interrelationship between students and others: dependent autonomy, interdependent autonomy, and independent autonomy. “Oneself” and “others” are two forces that act on a student. Others plays a more important role at the primary stage of a person’s development. Oneself is what we pursue to realize personal autonomy. Whether a student should rely on oneself or others depends on which one plays a more positive role in students’ development.

The others include parents, teachers, institutions, states, social customs, etc. We developed a chart (the stages of learner autonomy development) to illustrate the development process of autonomy more clearly.



Stages of learner autonomy development

As shown in the above chart, the development of autonomy is like a slope from point H to Point A. Point H represents 100 percent others' involvement (being extremely heteronomous), and point A represents 100 percent self-involvement (being extremely autonomous), neither of which, we think, exists. The range from point H to Point D, about 2/3 of others' involvement with 1/3 self-involvement, can be the first stage of autonomy: dependent autonomy. In this stage, students mostly depend on others, including parents, teachers, etc. The range from point D to point I, about 1/3 others' involvement with 2/3 self-involvement, can be the second stage: interdependent autonomy. In this stage, students can interact with others around them. The last stage can be the range from Point I to Point A. Students are not greatly influenced by others or even create a situation in which others can be supportive.

We hold the point that students' autonomy should develop from the first to the third stage. Dependent autonomy is a condition of interdependent autonomy, and interdependent autonomy is a condition of independent autonomy. It is like the process of a person's growing up from a baby to an adult. Others take more responsibility when we are young, then we take more and more responsibilities until we take up whole responsibility as an adult. But we should be aware that when a student has reached the stage of independent autonomy, he can choose to stay in the stage of dependent autonomy on a certain learning activity or event. Based on this understanding, we reached a definition of learner autonomy as a state of taking responsibility for one's learning. The fulfillment of the responsibility depends on one's willingness and ability to learn. Stages of learning autonomy vary due to the different degrees of learner's responsibility.

Research methods

An ethnographic study on students' learning activities in a Junior secondary school was conducted for four months. The data were collected by using the research methods of observation and interview. The researchers joined the English class to observe teachers and students as an outsider and attended 26 classes delivered by 6 teachers. The data of observation were recorded through field notes, anonymized, and later transcribed into a computer application. The interviews with 7 teachers and 10 individual students, and 16 students in 3 groups were recorded. The transcription was stored on a computer in the form of password-protected MS Word files. Three teachers and four students from a private senior secondary school were also interviewed through telephone or online chat software. We kept collecting information from the schools' social media accounts. One of the researchers continuously informally talked with his son and his friends, secondary school students, and his wife, a secondary school teacher, in order to get a full understanding of the situation. From the field note transcripts, recording transcripts, and collected information, the activities were coded into themes by using the Atlas.ti software. The activities were grouped and analyzed to find out their relationship with learner autonomy.

The project obtained a positive opinion from the Ethical Board of the University of Lower Silesia in Poland: no. 8/2018.

Results

1. A paradoxical issue - "quality education" in curriculum and teaching for testing system in schools

In China, most students spend 3 years in kindergarten. Then they complete nine years of compulsory education including 6 years in primary school and 3 years in junior secondary school. After finishing compulsory education, students need to take part in a public exam, the secondary school entrance examination (Zhong Kao), to continue to the 3-year senior secondary education. For higher education, students need to learn 4 years for a bachelor's degree, another 3 years for a master's degree, and an extra 3 years for a doctoral degree.

Secondary schools in China conduct their teaching activities based on national curriculums issued by the Ministry of Education. In April 2022, the Ministry of Education officially released the compulsory education curriculum program and standards. China's 9-year free compulsory education system covers primary school and junior secondary school. It states that the aim of compulsory education is to

develop students into fully developed persons with ideals, abilities and a sense of responsibility. The state council of China (2021) issued “guidelines to ease the burden of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring for students undergoing compulsory education”. They describe requirements in areas including reducing homework and improving quality of education and after-class services provided by schools. They also pledge to adopt a strict approval and supervision system for off-campus tutoring programs on curriculum subjects such as math and physics at weekends and on holidays.

The ministry of education (2020) also issued “curriculum standards for senior secondary schools”. The aim of senior secondary education is to develop students into persons with ideals and faith, a sense of social responsibility, scientific and cultural literacy, life-long learning capacity, autonomous development ability, and the ability to communicate and cooperate.

From the curriculums and guidelines for secondary school students, we can see that the aim of China’s education system is for students to reach full development, especially their sense of responsibility and abilities. However, what happens in secondary schools does not seem to be in accordance with the national policies. Prof. Cui Yunhuo (2022), a leader of the compulsory education curriculum plan revision group, states that the concept of “independence, cooperation and inquiry” advocated by the new curriculum has greatly promoted classroom transformation. However, a prominent problem is that the inquiry is less rigorous and disciplinary typical, and that a form of “fake inquiry” still exists in classrooms. Therefore, there is a call for real disciplinary inquiry “from practices, in practices and for practices”.¹ Moreover, the result of easing students’ burden from homework and off-campus tutoring is not positive. The worry about students’ excessive homework load and the high costs of private tutoring was replaced by a worry about students’ marks at examinations, which may result from reduced tutoring and homework. Students and parents are trying to get more off-campus tutoring from private teachers on weekdays, which costs more money and time. In the secondary schools we researched, student knowledge acquisition was highly prioritized. Slogans in big characters to stress the importance of learning are placed prominently on the walls of corridors and classrooms, such as “one minute earlier into the classroom, you take the first step in learning”. Students are ranked according their score after each monthly test. It is also common for the top students to get a seat which is closer to the teacher’s lecture board. The students’ schedule is fully arranged for more classes for subjects, like math, which

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are regarded as “more important” because they occupy more scores in further education examinations. Schools seem to implement teaching for testing because the grades of exams are almost the only requirement for enrollment into higher education. All of this shows that secondary schools in China is undergoing a system of teaching for testing.

This teaching for testing system may be formed due to many reasons, such as the influence of neoliberalism and the strong belief in the power of education. China’s education is experiencing a paradox between “quality education” in curriculum and teaching for testing system in schools. We propose developing students’ learning autonomy to resolve this issue. When students reach a higher stage of autonomy, they will have a high sense of responsibility and ability which are in accordance with the aim of secondary school curriculum standards. Students’ autonomy can also ensure their high achievements in academics.

2. Schools’ strategies to develop students’ autonomy – strict schedule and motivation

Schools implement strict discipline to guarantee students’ time in learning. Educational institutions believe in students’ study habits. Students can form study habits with the supervision of institutions, after which their habits would drive them to study autonomously. The schedule of students in the private senior school is typical in the management of students’ time on learning. Students get up at 5:30 in the morning and go to bed at 22:00 in the evening. Nearly all the activities are included in the schedule, such as time for classes, eating, naps, etc.

Schools also try to motivate students to study autonomously. The slogans, exhibitions, and competitions play an important role in motivating students. Chinese schools are characterized by their slogans and exhibition boards on campus, in corridors, and in classrooms. Slogans such as “I study hard, I fight for success” and “Dash to the final examination, succeed in the future” are very common. Awards are regarded as an effective way to motivate students in learning. Schools often hold award ceremonies to honor the top students or classes with high grades in recent exams. The other part is to organize a competitive activity to motivate students to study with more energy for the following examination. An activity called “challenging” is performed in the private school. Classes challenge each other to get higher grades in the next examination.

Discussions

1. Strict schedule constrains students' autonomy

The strategy of using a strict schedule to form a learning culture is good for student autonomy to some extent. Students may form the habit of spending as much time as possible on learning due to the structure of the schedule. It can foster students' disposition from one perspective, such as persistence, responsibility, patience, or strong-mindedness. However, the strict schedule restrains students' autonomy in learning in the long run. All of the schedules are managed by the schools; the students' involvement is just to obey them. The strictness of the schedule is controversial in some educational theories, such as humanistic education, student-centered education, and critical pedagogy. Students may lose interest or willingness to learn under the pressure for a long time. Students may have the dependent autonomy at most if they choose to follow their teachers and schools.

2. The ineffectiveness of extrinsic motivation in students' autonomy

Schools choose to use slogans, speeches, ceremonies, and awards are to motivate students to learn. They try to invoke students' extrinsic motivation to ensure students learn autonomously. Although such motivation strategies can have an instant effect on students' learning, they may cause severe problems for their personal development in the long run. Students may get accustomed to such strategies and their motivation may disappear. Li and Hein (2019) state that self-determination theory "specifies two types of autonomous behavior: intrinsically motivated behavior and well-internalized extrinsically motivated behavior" (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 2). The process of transforming one's extrinsic motivation into one's own regulations is a continuum of internalization. The motivation may develop from the least autonomous extrinsic motivation, external regulation, to introjected regulation, and finally reach identified regulation or intrinsic motivation. According to Li and Hein, external regulation means that "people behave for external contingencies" (Li & Hein, 2019, p. 3). Introjected regulation happens "when people 'take in' external regulations but do not identify with them as their own internal regulations." "Identified regulation occurs when people consciously identify with the importance and values of external regulations." Li and Hein also give vivid examples of the different types of regulation:

The reason 'Because I'll get in trouble if I don't' would be conceived as external regulation; 'Because I will feel ashamed of myself if I don't'

would be introjected regulation; ‘Because it’s important to me to work on my classwork’ would be identified regulation; ‘Because it’s fun’ would be intrinsic motivation. (Li & Hein, 2019, p. 4)

David Palfreyman (2003) also states that “autonomy tends to be associated with intrinsic motivation” (Doelomsp, 1995; Ushioda, 1996; Van Lier, 1996, cited by David Palfreyman, 2003, p. 9). Learners with intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation are likely to become more effective learners. Therefore, both identified regulation and intrinsic motivation are more effective in promoting students’ autonomy because they are truly internal for students learning. The emphasis on extrinsic motivation needs to be well internalized.

3. Critical thinking to the “teaching for testing” educational system

This teaching for testing system may be formed due to several reasons, such as the influence of neoliberalism, social constructions, ideologies, etc. In order to develop students’ learning autonomy, the development of critical thinking with respect to the “teaching for testing” educational system needs to be stressed. Only when students are clear about the situation they are in, can they become autonomous by reflecting on themselves. The autonomy in student learning is intertwined with the development of critical thinking with respect to the educational system.

The curriculums and guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education of China for secondary school students aim to fully develop students, including in the sense of being autonomous. However, due to restraints in the current situation, such as a large population of students, lack of teachers, the big gap between cities and villages, etc., GAOKAO (the college entrance examination) is currently regarded as a fair way for students to obtain higher education. It is reasonable that both teachers and students dedicate most of their effort to achieving good test scores. Regardless, student development will always be the aim of education. It would therefore be better for the administrative department of education and teachers to develop students’ learning autonomy while simultaneously helping them obtain higher grades in tests.

Conclusion

There is a paradoxical issue in China’s secondary school education between “quality education” in the curriculum and teaching for testing system in schools. We propose developing students’ autonomy to resolve this issue. Schools are following certain strategies to develop students’ autonomy, such as strict schedules and motivating students in learning. Although these strategies aimed at ensuring

students in learning may affect students' willingness to learn to some extent, the students greatly depend on schools, teachers, and contexts. Therefore, we would say they possess a degree of dependent autonomy in learning. Schools need to adapt more strategies to develop students' autonomy to a higher stage. While developing students' autonomy, autonomy in student learning needs to be intertwined with the development of critical thinking with respect to the educational system.

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