



Developing Learner Autonomy: Chinese University EFL Teachers' Perceptions

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Overview

- Learner autonomy (LA) in Chinese education
- Research questions
- Research setting and participants
- Data collection and analysis
- Major findings
- Discussions and implications

LA as a western concept

- LA has been introduced into Chinese EFL education as a western concept. For example:

‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’

(Holec, 1981, p.3)

‘the capacity to take control of one’s own learning

(Benson, 2001, p. 47)

LA & Chinese traditional culture

➤ LA has its origins in traditional Chinese educational culture.

Self-instruction or self-discovery/acquisition was well-advocated and applied in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism

(Pang and Xue, 2001)

Confucius' saying "*bu fen bu qi, bu fei bu fa*" reinforced the value of students initiating inquiry as a prerequisite for LA.

(Wu, 2011)

Current Chinese LA theories

- LA was also embedded in 20th century education theories:
Yu Ziyi's (1896-1970) emphasis on the willingness for learning,
Chen Heqin's (1892-1982) maxim of "learning in doing" and
Ye Shengtao's (1894-1988) vision of "to teach in order not to teach".
(cited by Xu & Zhu, 2014)
- Chen Heqin and Ye Shengtao also emphasized teacher's roles as
guide, supporter and facilitator in genuine education.



Chinese interpretations of LA

- 4 dimensions of LA (Yu, 2001):
learners acting on initiative,
independent learning prior to teachers' instruction,
addressing individual differences,
whole-person education.
- 4 essential elements in LA (Pang, 2001): :
learners' agency,
willingness for learning,
knowing how to learn,
learning persistently.



LA & Chinese EFL teaching reform

- College English Teaching Requirements - the national guideline for tertiary EFL teaching reform:

“to promote the development of individualized study methods and the autonomous learning ability” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8).

Shift the instructional control from teachers to students, in which “the ability to use the language and the ability to learn independently are cultivated” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8).

The present study: Research space

The publication of the Requirements led to many LA-oriented teaching reforms and research after 2004.

However, problems and limitations were detected in both the promotion of the idea and the corresponding research.

Importantly,

Studies of English teachers' understanding of the concept of LA have been as scarce in China as elsewhere in the world (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a).



Research questions

1. How did a group of Chinese university EFL teachers perceive LA?
2. What practices did the teachers report regarding the development of LA?
3. How did the teachers perceive the desirability and feasibility of implementing LA in their specific contexts?
4. How have the teachers' perceptions and practices regarding LA been affected by professional development workshops?

Setting and Participants

- The study was conducted in a non-national-key university in northern China (referred to as LGU).
- 44 English teachers participated
- 75 female: 25% male
- Experience: from 5 to 20+ years
- Qualifications: BA = 6.8%; MA = 91%; PhD = 2.3%
- Students: English majors = 34.1%; non-English majors = 65.9%



Data collection: Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012b

Questionnaire

Bilingual in English and Chinese; 44 valid responses

Interviews

10 participants from survey

LA-focused PD workshops

Workshops 1 & 2: understanding the concept of LA

Workshops 3 & 4: LA-oriented reflective practices and action research

Follow-up emails

To elicit participants' feedback on the PD workshops



Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed (through MS Excel) to generate descriptive statistics.

Qualitative data were subjected (through NVivo 10) to a grounded analysis ([Charmaz, 2006](#)): a systematic process of initial and axial coding, categorizing, and constant comparison and contrast.

Triangulation was implemented within and across data from the multiple sources.

Teachers' conceptions of LA

These opinions are illustrative of the general tone:

Students having the ability to learn by themselves (Peng).

Learners take initiative for their own learning, not forced by teachers, responsible for his or her own learning, self-management and self-decision-making (Ling).

Learners know their own aims, have their own learning methods, control their learning pace and assess their own learning outcomes (Mei).

Students are able to complete tasks independently, using various resources including internet resources, and knowing appropriate methods (Xiao).



Impact of LA on (language) learning

The surveyed teachers' views were overwhelmingly positive.

97.7%: agreed/strongly agreed on the positive effect of LA

95.5%: LA allows language learners to learn more effectively

Interviewed teachers further stressed the significance of LA in:

general learning

lifelong personal development

the fulfillment of individual needs

adapting to changes



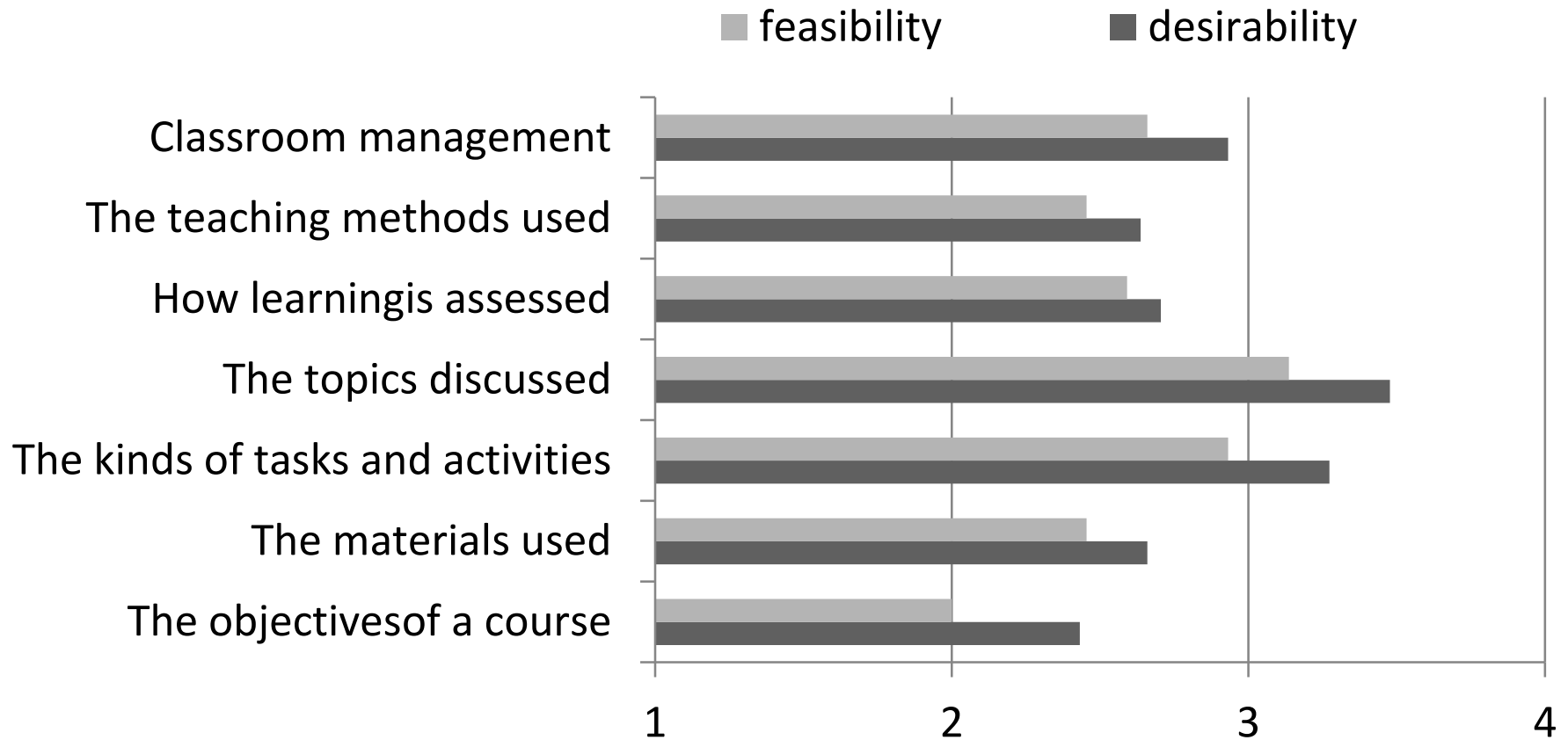
Teachers' LA-Oriented Practices

- Teachers' responses were highly positive:
 - 88.64% felt they did promote LA with their students;
 - 4.54% disagreed;
 - 6.82% were unsure.
- The open questions in the questionnaire and the follow-up interviews provided various examples of tasks and activities that the teachers used to foster LA.

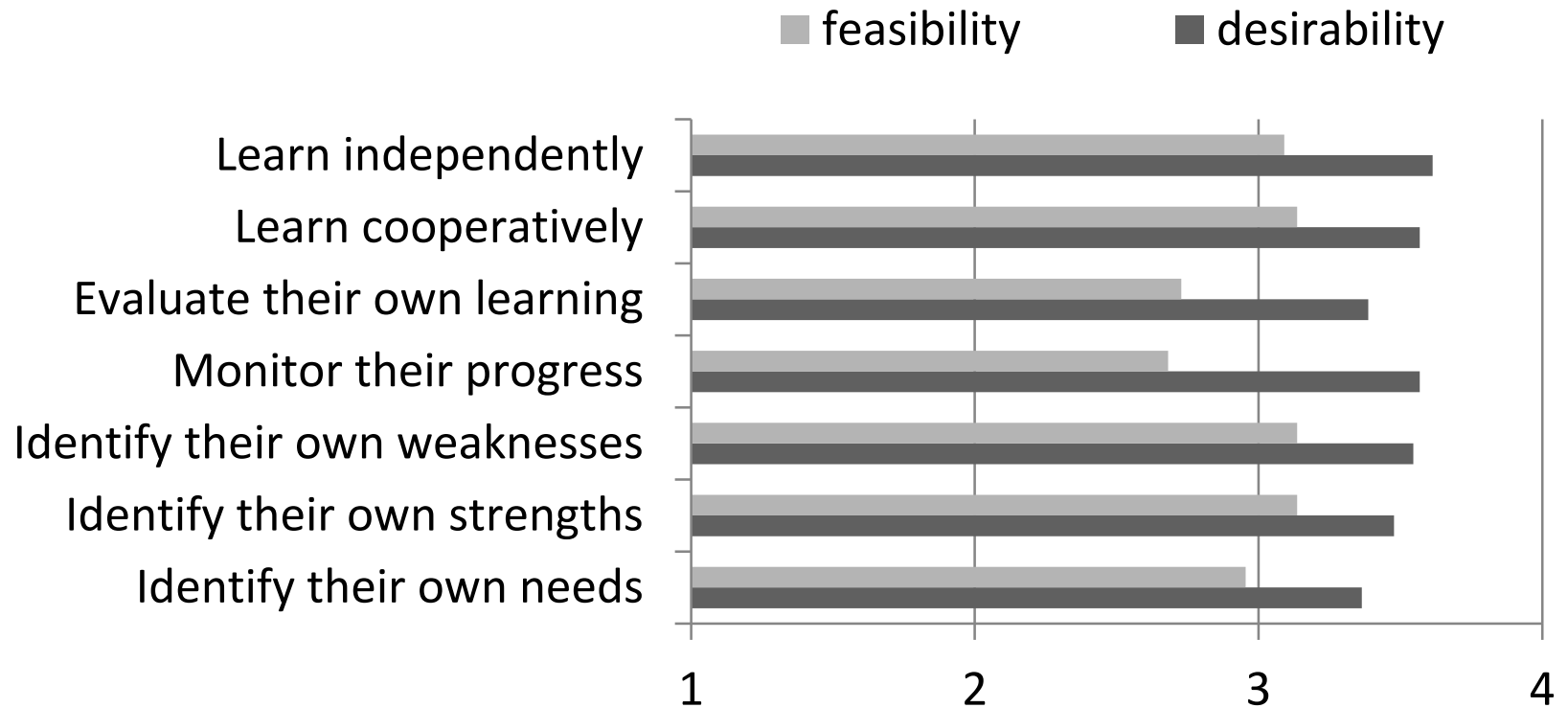
Reported LA Practices

- Getting students to research given topics in relation to classroom learning
- Asking students to self-edit and/or peer-grade their writing
- using various groupwork tasks
- assigning students to teach textbook materials
- conducting unit quizzes
- assigning online work
- getting students to do free reading out of class and share in class
- organizing extracurricular activities (e.g., debates, speaking / singing / film dubbing contests, short plays)
- allowing opportunities for students to share learning experiences and methods
- recommending useful web sources and encourage self-directed study
- talking to students about the importance of LA
- training students with autonomous learning strategies

Desirability & feasibility of promoting LA



Desirability & feasibility of promoting LA





Constraints to LA

Students

- Poor attitude; passivity; low motivation; lack of study skills (except for exams)

Institution

- Administrators' lack of understanding; strictly-fixed syllabus and regulations; limited teaching autonomy, large class sizes; insufficient resources and facilities; lack of training opportunities

Chinese culture

- Teachers used to traditional approach; administrators' concern for stability

Teachers

- understanding the concept; practical skills for its implementation; willingness and perseverance of long-term investment of extra time and energy;



Impact of the workshops: 1

Teachers' understanding about LA was generally enhanced.

Some teachers developed different ideas about LA from what they held before and some had deeper insights and more critical perceptions.

“These workshops make me rethink what learner autonomy is. It does not just mean studying all by oneself, it’s more about genuinely taking responsibility. Teachers must consider what roles they should play, when and how to play the different roles. It’s an ever-changing dynamic process” (Mei)



Impact of the workshops: 2

The workshops also enhanced teachers' understanding of LA practices:

*"I learned that group division plays an important role in the effectiveness of group work, so next semester I will re-group my students, with more consideration about differences in a group".
(Yuan)*

"speaking is not the only way for presentation, and group-work is not just limited to speaking activities, and speaking is not the only way to share opinions". (Hong)

*"I decide to ask students to write reflective journal for the next semester and I myself will do a reflective teaching journal."
(Peng)*



Impact of the PD Workshops: 3

The workshops developed teachers' understanding of research engagement regarding LA:

I used to just think about teaching, like a teaching machine, not having the awareness of linking my practice with doing research. (Juan)

Seeing some of what the research experts are doing is what I'm doing. This builds up my confidence to continue my minor research about LA. (Peng)

They provided me some primary knowledge about action research and reflective practice. I began to feel like I want to do one. (Ling)

Cultural appropriacy

Some teachers argued that LA was hard to promote in the Chinese context.

Is LA culturally appropriate? (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003)

Chinese learners are no more passive than their Western counterparts (Zhang & Li, 2004),

The cultural stereotype of Chinese students remains an issue which should be addressed.

Constraints

Constraints to the development of LA were shared among the LGU teachers .

These were also found in other studies conducted in Asian contexts ([Ding, 2013](#); [Nakata, 2011](#)).

But no context is free of constraints at any time.

Therefore, teachers should critically engage with situated constraints and re-conceptualize autonomy as a “useable” construct for the normal classroom condition. (Benson, 2007, 2011)



Intake and take up

The professional development workshops enhanced teachers' understanding of LA as well as some specific operational skills.

However, feedback teachers' enthusiasm for the discussion of the topic faded as time passed.

On this basis and after some further discussions with some teachers on this issue, an idea for a virtual teacher learning community ([McGrath, 2000](#)) was initiated and is now under construction.

Conclusion

The teachers fully agreed with the notion of learner autonomy

The aim of LA is as culturally appropriate and relevant in Chinese contexts as elsewhere.

Their pedagogical know-how knowledge in relation to actual implementation needs to be further enhanced.

The same reported constraints to LA exist in China as elsewhere.

The question is: how can these constraints be overcome?

So, where do we go from here?



Thank you!

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