

## ***Autonomous English Learning among Postgraduate EFL Learners in China: A Study of Attitudes and Behaviors***

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In the field of foreign language education, learner autonomy, one of the ultimate goals of education, has been greatly promoted in China ever since the late 1990s. The present study examined via a questionnaire the status quo of Chinese postgraduate students' autonomous English learning (AEL), aiming to present a clear picture of students' autonomous learning situation for the improving of pedagogy. 292 postgraduate students from 7 universities were asked to report their attitudes towards AEL and actual out-of-class AEL behaviors. The findings revealed that postgraduate students generally held strongly positive attitudes towards AEL but exhibited only moderate frequency of autonomous learning behaviors outside of class. Students' attitudes and behaviors were statistically significantly correlated, but the correlation was not high enough to guarantee that positive attitudes will bring about high frequency of AEL behaviors. Except for the perception of the importance of classroom teaching and learning, students of different genders showed no significant differences in either attitudes towards AEL or AEL behaviors. Suggestions on postgraduate English teaching were subsequently discussed.

**Key words: postgraduate English teaching, autonomous English learning (AEL), attitude towards AEL, AEL behavior**

## INTRODUCTION

The last 25 years or so has witnessed an immense interest in the study of learner autonomy as one of the ultimate goals of education in the field of second and foreign language education. In China, in the year of 2004, *College English Course Requirements* was implemented, calling for and emphasizing the need of fostering autonomous learning nationwide at the tertiary level. There have mainly existed three modes of developing learner autonomy in college EFL teaching ever since. One is developing autonomy in the classroom by offering students more say in the decision-making of materials, approaches, and assessment. The other is promoting autonomous learning in self-access language learning centers as a supplement to classroom teaching. The third is encouraging learner autonomy outside of the classroom, guiding and motivating students to gain control in their out-of-class independent English learning by making full use of the abundant language learning resources on campus.

Horwitz (1987) argues that a large proportion of students' language learning goes on outside of the classroom and that how students regulate this aspect of learning is crucial to their success as language learners. Moreover, in the context of China, only the independent learning outside of the classroom is autonomous learning in the real sense. Due to the nature of traditional classroom instruction and large class size, regular English classes still follow the prevailing lecture-based teaching style where students do not enjoy much autonomy. The learning in self-access centers is also required or controlled by the teacher, indicating students' low autonomy or only "reactive autonomy" (Littlewood, 1999, p. 76). Contrastively, students' out-of-class independent learning takes place in a situation where the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his/her learning and the implementation of those decisions (Dickinson, 1993). However, not many studies have probed into this dimension of autonomous learning. In addition, although numerous studies have been done on a variety of types of learners (e.g. non-English major undergraduate students, high school students, etc.),

postgraduate-level learners of English have been largely ignored on the assumption that they must be more autonomous in their learning thanks to maturity and more conducive environment for autonomy when pursuing postgraduate study. Thus, the present study attempts to survey on Chinese postgraduate EFL learners' out-of-class autonomous English learning, in particular their attitudes towards autonomous learning and their autonomous learning behaviors outside the classroom.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Holec's definition of learner autonomy, "the capability of taking charge of one's own learning" (1981, p. 4), provided the theoretical framework for the future research in the field. Later, Little (1991), Dickinson (1993), Benson (1997), Littlewood (1996) etc. put forward their definitions. For instance, Dickinson (1993) put it in terms of a situation, Benson (1997) divided it into three dimensions, Little (1991) saw it as a capacity and Littlewood (1996) considered it as a continuum that can be displayed at different levels. As a matter of fact, no matter how learner autonomy has been defined, the core is that the learner takes charge of or is responsible for his/her own learning, a notion based on such theoretical foundations as humanism (Rogers 1969, cited in Williams & Burden 2000, p. 35), constructivism (Benson 1997, p. 21), and positivism (Benson 1997, p. 33).

After the concept was defined, how to increase or foster learner autonomy became the central concern. Some researchers conducted experiments to integrate the use of new technology into the language learning curriculum so as to enhance students' autonomy development (e.g. Chang, 2005; Luke, 2006; Murray, 1999; Murray & Kouritzin, 1997; Yumuk, 2002) and many have reported positive effects. The establishment of self-access language learning centers in many colleges and universities has provided another means to improve students' autonomous learning in a free, facilitative and conducive learning environment (e.g. Gardner & Miller, 1999; Karlsson et al.

1997). To help learners better adapted to the mode of autonomous learning, learner training has become a prevailing strategy applied to raising autonomy (e.g. Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Yang, 1998) though there are a number of criticisms of it. Rees-Miller (1993, 1994) points out that the value of learner training is far from proven since there lacks evidence that strategies are either teachable or effective. Benson (1995) warns that learner training does not help learners become more autonomous unless it pays particular attention to the social context of learning.

The relationships between learner autonomy and other related factors (e.g. the teacher's role, beliefs and attitudes, motivation, learning environment, culture, language proficiency, etc) have also been investigated either through theoretical analysis or using empirical studies. The course of promoting autonomy does not make a teacher redundant, instead, he/she must work more as a "facilitator, helper, coordinator, counselor, consultant, adviser, knower and resource" (Wright, 1987, p. 62, cited in Voller, 1997, p. 100). As for attitudes towards autonomous learning, they have been seen as one of those psychological characteristics that predispose learners to undertake responsibility for their own learning (Long, 1994; Little, 1999). An EFL learner who holds a positive view of learner autonomy may be more likely to shoulder the responsibility of his/her own English learning and thus become more autonomous English learner. Based on a questionnaire study, Cotterall (1995) suggested a six-dimensional construct underlying students' attitude towards AEL. Broady (1996) tentatively concluded that different types of individuals might have distinct sets of attitudes towards AEL. Gan (2004) studied the relationship of attitudes towards self-directed learning and language learning outcomes, claiming that attitudes to self-directed learning did not seem to have a strong direct effect on language proficiency but might exert their effect through the mediation of strategies. However, in the literature, no empirical studies have been done to verify the actual relationships between attitudes and autonomous learning behaviors, letting alone studies in this aspect with mainland Chinese English learners as the subjects.

The validity of learner autonomy in Asian settings (Smith, 2001, p. 70) has

received much attention from researchers for the reason that such a concept originated from the Western ideology. There have been conflicting views but in recent studies many researchers reported to hold positive attitude towards learner autonomy in Asia. For instance, Benson et al. (2003) argued that the influence of Asian cultural backgrounds may be modified by students' ongoing engagement with target language cultures to increase their individual autonomy. Aoki and Smith (1999) detected in Japanese students' diaries the desires for autonomy which contradict the stereotype of being passive and teacher-dependent. In the studies of Ho and Crookall (1995) and Gieve and Clark (2005), ever engaged in autonomous learning, Chinese students (in Hong Kong) showed great appreciation of the benefits of autonomous study and made good use of the opportunity to promote their autonomy. However, as for whether it is appropriate to nurture autonomy in mainland Chinese English learners, almost no relative studies can be detected.

With the above background, the present study, which focuses on English learners in the Chinese EFL setting, aims to probe into Chinese non-English major postgraduates' autonomous English learning outside the classroom, particularly their attitudes and behaviors. The research questions are:

1. What types of autonomous English learning (AEL) attitudes and behaviors do the sample Chinese postgraduate EFL learners report to have?
2. What relationships, if any, exist among AEL attitudes and behaviors?
3. Is there a difference in AEL attitudes and behaviors by gender?

## **THE STUDY**

### **Subjects**

The subjects are 300 non-English major postgraduates from five universities in Wuhan, central China and two universities in Zhengzhou, north of China. Among them, 292 students completed their questionnaires validly, the

response rate resulting in 97.3%. The sample consisted of 165 males (56.5%) and 127 females (43.5%). All the participants are now on the engineering and science postgraduate programs. They all have taken six years of English study in secondary school and two years of it in college. Before their graduation from college for undergraduate study, they all have passed the National College English Test Band 4, which is an authoritative English proficiency test for non-English major college students. Now they are undertaking the English course required for postgraduate students, a course that is carried out under the same syllabus issued by the Ministry of Education.

### **Instruments**

A questionnaire was developed and used in the study. It was designed on the basis of combining theoretical input suggested in the literature (Cotterall, 1995; Dickinson, 1993; Xu et al. 2004) with first-hand information initially derived from the researcher's teaching experience and through discussions and interviews with teachers and students. It consisted of three parts. Part 1 aimed to acquire the subjects' personal information, including gender, self-perception of English proficiency, and time devoted to autonomous English learning outside class each week. Part 2 centered on the subjects' attitudes towards AEL. Based on Cotterall's (1995) study about learner beliefs and attitudes, the focus of this part was the teacher's role in language learning, the learner's role in language learning and the learner's confidence in conducting AEL. Part 3 surveyed the subjects' actual autonomous learning behaviors by adapting Xu et al.'s (2004) *Non-English Major Undergraduates' Autonomous English Learning Investigation Questionnaire* which mainly derived from Dickinson's (1993) categorization of qualities and characteristics of an autonomous learner in five aspects. Dickinson's categorization takes into consideration both the teacher and the learner, which especially applies to the educational situation in China where teachers' classroom teaching still plays an important role and students' out-of-class autonomous learning is closely associated with classroom learning.

The questionnaires were administered to the students in regular class time and it took them about 20 minutes to complete all the three parts. Except for Part 1 about personal information, the students were required to respond to the items in Part 2 along a five-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree and to the items in Part 3 also along a five-point Likert scale where 1 = I never do this, 2 = I seldom do this, 3 = I sometimes do this, 4 = I often do this, 5 = I always do this. Prior to the administration of the questionnaires, students were assured that there were no right or wrong answers and that their responses would not be submitted to their English teachers and therefore would not affect their assessment in the English course. In addition, the researcher especially made it clear to the students that all information about them would be kept strictly confidential and would be only used for research purposes. These two measures were taken in order to minimize the possibility for the response bias, i.e. a tendency to answer in the way that the subject thinks the researcher would like (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995).

Because both scales (Part 2 and Part 3) in the questionnaire were developed by the researcher instead of by adopting an existing instrument which had already been used in other researches and been tested many times so that validity was not a problem, factor analysis needed to be employed to measure the construct validity. It was also particularly useful to identify how many unique concepts underline a set of variables (Tremblay, 2001). Principal component analysis with varimax rotation was utilized in analyzing the data of both scales. For the Attitude Scale, 3 factors were extracted, which accounted for 49.04% of the variance. They were named as "Attitudes towards the teacher's role", "Attitudes towards the learner's role", and "General confidence in conducting AEL". For the Behavior Scale, 5 factors were extracted, accounting for 54.35% of the variance. They were named as "Strategy use and monitoring", "Monitoring the learning process and performance", "Formulating learning objectives and plans", "Monitoring the use of learning methods", and "Identifying the importance of classroom teaching and learning".

## Analyses

All the data were collected, coded and processed using the SPSS 13.0. Descriptive statistics were first obtained to identify the overall characteristics concerning respondents' reported AEL attitudes and behaviors. Then correlations between these two variables were computed. Lastly, independent samples T-tests were conducted to examine the variations of AEL attitudes and behaviors by gender.

## RESULTS

### Attitudes towards Autonomous English Learning

**TABLE 1**  
**Attitudes of Chinese Postgraduate EFL Students towards AEL**

Attitudes	N	Mean	SD
Factor 1 Attitudes towards the teacher's role (7 items)	292	2.35	0.58
Factor 2 Attitudes towards the learner's role (4 items)	292	4.03	0.45
Factor 3 General confidence in conducting AEL (3 items)	292	4.07	0.57

(The individual statements that fall under the factors are listed in the Appendix).

Table 1 gives an overall picture of students' attitudes towards autonomous English learning. Along the five-point Likert scale for attitudes, averages of 3.5 or higher indicate strong agreement, averages of 2.5-3.4 medium degree of support, and averages of 2.4 or lower low degree of support. The high scores of respectively 4.03 and 4.07 displayed that the respondents were fairly positive about taking charge of English learning on their own and at the same time held a rather high degree of confidence in doing so. Specifically, in their responses to the statement *To learn English well I myself should be responsible for my English learning*, 45.5% selected "strongly agree" and 44.9% selected "agree". In addition, 51.0% agreed and 34.9% strongly agreed that they should take the responsibility to make their English learning effective. And 46.6% strongly agreed and the same percentage of students



agreed that they should be active learners and teachers can only assist or facilitate their English learning. Traditional mode of learning was questioned, 91.1% either agreed or strongly agreed that the teacher should not be regarded as the unchallengeable authority and 70.2% either agreed or strongly agreed that classroom is not the only resource for English learning and without classroom teaching they can still learn English well by themselves with appropriate guidance.

In contrast with the high scores for statements under attitudes towards the learner's role and general confidence in conducting AEL, the mean score of students' overall attitudes towards the teacher's role was relatively low (2.35). This score was obtained before the items under this category were reverse-coded. Therefore, a low score on this scale tended to illustrate a strong negative attitude to the teacher's traditional roles in students' language learning and to indicate that psychologically the students have partly accepted the shift of responsibility for taking charge of their learning from the teacher to themselves. To put it in more detail, in the questionnaire, a vast majority of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that it is not the teacher but they themselves that should set learning objectives, assign learning tasks, formulate learning plans, assess learning progress and performance, find out weaknesses to adjust learning strategies, and intrigue interest in English learning, all of which have been considered mainly as the teacher's job in the traditional language teaching paradigm.

### **Autonomous English Learning Behaviors**

**TABLE 2**  
**AEL Behaviors of Chinese Postgraduate EFL Students**

<b>Behaviors</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Overall behavior (29 items)	292	3.05	0.53
Factor 1 Strategy use and monitoring (9 items)	292	2.94	0.68
Factor 2 Monitoring the learning process and performance (7 items)	292	2.80	0.66
Factor 3 Formulating learning objectives and plans (4 items)	292	3.19	0.79
Factor 4 Monitoring the use of learning methods (5 items)	292	3.20	0.65

Factor 5 Identifying the importance of classroom teaching and learning (4 items)	292	3.12	0.69
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(The individual statements that fall under the factors are listed in the Appendix).

Along the five-point Likert scale for behaviors, averages of 3.5 or higher are generally designated as high use, averages of 2.5-3.4 medium use, and averages of 2.4 or lower low use (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). As it can be seen in Table 2, none of the five AEL behavior categories reached the high level of use; all the categories fell within the range of medium use. Compared with the general strong positive attitudes towards AEL, students exhibited relatively moderate frequency of autonomous learning behaviors outside the class. Among the five categories, the subjects reported to pay much attention to the setting of objectives and the formulating of study plans (Factor 3) and exhibited a medium degree of awareness of the importance of classroom teaching and learning (Factor 5). As for Factor 4, monitoring the use of learning methods, the subjects reported the most frequency of behaviors, such as evaluating learning methods on a regular basis, raising awareness of the appropriateness of learning methods, and changing for more suitable methods when having realized that the ones adopted are not practical or effective. It demonstrated the educational concern of the Chinese to attach importance to learning methods, which equals to “general ways of learning something” or “approaches to learning something”. In contrast, as a term borrowed from the western ideology in language education, “strategy” has not been well-received by the Chinese students. For instance, Factor 2, metacognitive strategy in terms of monitoring the learning process and performance was the least conducted behavior by the subjects and Factor 1, which specifically referred to cognitive strategies and the conscious monitoring of them when developing the four language skills, received the second least frequency of use.

As the broad categorization scheme may obscure some interesting features with regard to the respondents’ AEL behaviors, five most frequent behaviors reported by the subjects when learning English autonomously outside the classroom were ticked out and shown in Table 3. They were spread across the first four categories except the last category *Identifying the importance of*

*classroom teaching and learning*. The one that most respondents reported to do is to set goals for autonomous learning outside the classroom based on the actual situation of their language learning, which can be treated as the starting point in the process of autonomous learning outside the classroom.

**TABLE 3**  
**The Five Most Frequently Reported AEL Behaviors of Chinese Postgraduate EFL Students**

<b>Individual behavior</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>OA</b>
Setting goals for autonomous learning outside the classroom	3.38	48.3%
Changing not so good learning methods for better ones	3.37	46.5%
Making an effort to realize whether the learning methods are practical or effective	3.32	43.9%
Making use of resources on campus to learn autonomously outside class	3.30	44.6%
Utilizing reading strategies	3.28	44.2%

OA = Combined response percentage of "I *often* do this" and "I *always* do this"

### **Relationships among AEL Attitudes and Behaviors**

The Pearson correlations for the three attitudinal factors and the five AEL behavior factors were conducted to examine the relationships among them. From Table 4, with the correlation coefficient being 0.20 ( $p=0.001$ ), the overall AEL attitude was significantly and positively correlated with the overall AEL behavior, indicating that students who identified with learner autonomy were more likely to carry out AEL outside the classroom. However, this correlation stayed at a relatively rather low level. According to Connolly and Sluck (1957) (cited in Gui & Ning, 1997), if the correlation coefficient is or lower than 0.20, the correlation is low and such a relationship can fairly be ignored. As for the specific attitudinal factors, Factor 2, *Attitudes towards the learner's role*, displayed the highest significant positive correlation with overall AEL behavior and demonstrated relatively higher correlation with such behavior factors as *Strategy use and monitoring (SUM)*, *Monitoring the learning process and performance (MPP)*, and *Monitoring the use of learning methods (MUM)*. It may suggest that the more learners tend to

assume responsibility for their own learning the more likely they would be to transform the positive attitudes into actions. Attitudinal Factor 3, *General confidence in conducting AEL (GCA)*, surprisingly, did not show any significant positive correlation but mostly negative correlations (though not significantly) with AEL behavior factors. More notably, it was significantly and negatively correlated with Behavior Factor 5, *Identifying the importance of classroom teaching and learning (ICT)*, though the correlation coefficient was rather low. Analyzed from the perspective of the five AEL behavior factors, only one – *Identifying the importance of classroom teaching and learning* – did not show any significant correlation with the overall AEL attitude. In the meantime, Behavior Factor 4, *Monitoring the use of learning methods (MUM)*, showed the highest positive correlation with overall AEL attitude.

**TABLE 4**  
**Pearson Correlations among AEL Attitudes and Behaviors**

		SUM	MPP	FOP	MUM	ICT	OB
<b>OA</b>	Pearson Correlation	.13**	.20**	.12*	.31**	.02	.20**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.030	.001	.036	.000	.748	.001
<b>ATR</b>	Pearson Correlation	.03	.14*	.09	.25**	-.003	.12*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.631	.021	.123	.000	.954	.041
<b>ALR</b>	Pearson Correlation	.30**	.27**	.19**	.31**	.14*	.32**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.001	.000	.016	.000
<b>GCA</b>	Pearson Correlation	-.01	.05	-.03	.09	-.16**	-.02
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.689	.389	.653	.120	.088	.734

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

OA = Overall attitude towards AEL      ATR = Attitudes towards the teacher's role

ALR = Attitudes towards the learner's role      GCA = General confidence in conducting AEL

OB = Overall AEL behavior      SUM = Strategy use and monitoring

MPP = Monitoring the learning process and performance

FOP = Formulating learning objectives and plans

MUM = Monitoring the use of learning methods

ICT = Identifying the importance of classroom teaching and learning

### Variations in AEL Attitudes and Behaviors by Gender

Independent samples T tests were conducted to find out whether there existed any differences in AEL attitudes and behaviors between male and female students. As it was shown in Table 5, the male and female subjects demonstrated no significant differences among the three attitudinal factors and four behavior factors except for “Identifying the importance of classroom teaching and learning”. Female students reported to be more aware of the importance of English classes and at the same time to make more efforts to understand teacher’s objectives, make these objectives their own goals in English study, and check whether the objectives have been achieved through their hard work. Interestingly, it was also revealed that female students’ attitude towards the teacher’s role was nearly significantly different from that of male students. They tended to assume more independence from the teacher while at the same time making better use of the teacher’s teaching and guidance in the classroom.

**TABLE 5**  
**Independent Samples T Tests Results**

	OA	ATR	ALR	GCA	SUM	MPP	FOP	MUM	ICT	OB
<b>T</b>	-1.56	-1.20	-1.28	.165	-.26	.44	-.09	-.28	-2.11*	.71
<b>Sig.</b>	.12	.05	.20	.10	.80	.66	.93	.78	.04	.55

\*p < .05, the difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

### DISCUSSION

The responses from Chinese postgraduate EFL students in this study suggested an overall positive attitude towards autonomous English learning, reflecting a desire to engage in active English learning independent of the teachers or the traditional classes. Coinciding to some extent with this overall positive attitude towards AEL, the students exhibited average frequency of AEL behaviors outside the classroom. In view of these results, the portrayal of the Chinese students under investigation did not seem to conform to the

pervasive stereotype of the passive and dependent Asian learner. It appeared to echo previous research findings that culturally seemingly inappropriate approach to learning, e.g. autonomous learning, can turn out to be equally good for Asian learners (Gieve & Clark, 2005). However, many Chinese English teachers have not cultivated such an awareness of students' positive attitudes towards and strong interest in autonomous learning since in most cases these have not been explicitly displayed in class. As Gan (2004) cautions, Asian learners have long been stereotyped as passive and teacher-dependent and these stereotypical notions may have made teachers less sensitive to their real learning orientations and needs. Teachers' teaching methodologies, which may not be based on students' true needs and expectations, have, to some extent, hindered students' experiencing a greater degree of autonomy in language learning. Therefore, to enhance autonomy in Asian learners, for example, Chinese learners, the first step is for classroom practitioners to alter their stereotypical attitudes towards and impressions of their students and promote teaching methodologies that really cater to students' genuine needs for autonomy.

Although the subjects exhibited medium frequency of autonomous learning behaviors, we can still see that there was a gap between this medium frequency of behaviors and their strongly positive attitudes towards AEL. To bridge this gap and make students actually assume greater control over their own learning, the right attitude alone is apparently far from enough. The skills to carry out autonomous learning, in particular metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies (Victori & Lockhart, 1995), are necessary ingredients in the recipe for successful promotion of learner autonomy. It is possible that some students have a predisposition to assume responsibility for their English learning but lack the ability to do so, for example, not being able to make use of learning strategies properly. Actually, this has been demonstrated in the results of the questionnaire about AEL behaviors. Students did not seem to have adequate awareness of language learning strategies, not to mention the application of appropriate strategies at appropriate time. Thus, students should be trained in cultivating both an

awareness and practical skills of developing a self-directed learning approach whereby he/she can set his/her own needs and objectives, choose learning materials and resources in accordance with the goals, and monitor and evaluate his/her own progress over time. Teachers can play a vital role in the process of helping learners develop these skills. They may combine strategy instruction with the content course of second/foreign language acquisition, guiding students through the process of self-assessment, goal-setting, planning, monitoring and evaluating language learning (Yang, 1998). To acquaint students with metacognitive knowledge, teachers may conduct cyclic diagnosis of their beliefs about language learning, preferred styles, learning needs and objectives so as to endow them with criteria for choosing optimum strategies, resources, and activities for their individualized independent learning (Vitori & Lockhart, 1995).

The major attitudinal components were found to be significantly and positively correlated with AEL behavior components, indicating that students, who held strong beliefs about the learner's role and displayed strong initiative in language learning, were more likely to report higher frequency of AEL behaviors outside the classroom. It is consistent with the findings yielded in previous research studies like Gan (2004). Yet we also found that the relationship between students' AEL attitudes and behaviors were not as strong as those indicated in previous researches that attitude can predispose learners to undertake responsibilities. It may imply that positive attitude towards AEL does not necessarily bring about actual behaviors of AEL, and consequently the promotion of autonomy in English learning. There are still many other factors that can exert impact in learners' decisions and actions of autonomous learning, such as motivation, learning environment, language proficiency, time devoted to English study compared with other subjects, learning style, etc.

The negative correlations between students' general confidence in conducting AEL (GCA) and most AEL behavior factors suggest that the more autonomous actions taken outside of class for English learning, the less confident the students feel about their ability to carry out successful autonomous learning

and to persist in keeping them on. It may indicate the complex relationships among these factors in the English learning context of China. On the one hand, students lack the ability to tackle problems encountered in their experimenting of autonomous learning outside of class. So during this course the more they try in autonomous learning, the less confident they become about their ability to do so. On the other hand, we may infer that teachers, who should shoulder the responsibility of providing students with proper counseling, resource and support in their out-of-class autonomous learning, have not fulfilled their roles well. Only when teachers provide adequate support (both socially and psychologically) for learners' learning and give expert advice when needed and where the focus is on one-to-one interaction can they establish a truly collaborative and supportive environment for students to benefit from autonomous learning experiences.

It was also reflected in the study that the respondents held contradictory perceptions and actions towards classroom teaching and learning. Relatively frequent behaviors were reported under the category *Identifying the importance of classroom teaching and learning*. In particular, those respondents who held more positive attitudes towards the learner's role in language learning tended to attach more importance to classroom teaching and learning since they thought it was part of their learning process and their role in classroom learning was crucial to their success in the final assessment of the English course. Nevertheless, their general confidence in conducting AEL was negatively correlated with this behavior factor, which may imply that the more confidence the students had in conducting AEL and in their own learning ability, the more they would be likely to ignore classroom teaching and learning since their confidence might lead to the thinking that without classroom teaching they could still learn English well autonomously. Such a finding reveals that there exists a gap between students' classroom teaching and learning and their own autonomous learning. The traditional teacher-centered and teacher-controlled English class in the form of monotonous lecturing hinders students' confidence in as well as incentive for learning. Only when it turns more autonomous can the classroom teaching



and learning become compatible with students' confidence and initiative in conducting AEL. One way to achieve this is to engage students in challenging, intriguing and motivating activities and assignments where they can play their own initiative and display their creativity and talent to the fullest potential. At the same time, students should be reminded that autonomy does not mean teacherless learning or learning alone. Taking advantage of available sources like classroom teaching helps and facilitates their language learning.

## CONCLUSION

The present research studied the current situation of Chinese postgraduate EFL learners' autonomous English learning, particularly their attitudes towards and behaviors of AEL, the relationships among AEL attitudes and behaviors, and the differences by gender in these two respects. On the one hand, it was found that Chinese postgraduate EFL learners held positive attitudes towards AEL and reported only a medium level of autonomous learning behaviors outside the classroom. To encourage more autonomous learning, teachers were suggested to adjust their stereotypical perceptions of postgraduate students, to put more emphasis on developing students' autonomous learning skills in class, and to provide students with proper counseling, resource and support. On the other hand, low correlations were detected between attitudes and behaviors, suggesting that there are still other factors that may affect students' AEL either in or outside the classroom and there needs more studies to probe into them. Future studies may examine the effect of such learner variables as motivation, strategy use and anxiety on students' autonomous learning behaviors.

It is generally acknowledged that the future English learning will be more autonomy-oriented both in and outside the classroom. Therefore, a clearer understanding of students' AEL on the part of teachers will enable them to better guide students and cater to students' varying needs in autonomous

learning. In the present study, only quantitative data from a questionnaire survey have been utilized to analyze postgraduate subjects' autonomous English learning attitudes, behaviors and their relationships. If qualitative ways such as interviews, students' journals on out-of-class autonomous learning, class observations, etc. can be employed to supplement the quantitative analyses, more objective, detailed and first-hand information will be obtained for the improving and reform of pedagogy in postgraduate English teaching.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The study has been funded by the Humanities and Social Sciences Fund for Young Teachers of Huazhong University of Science and Technology.

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## Appendix

### AEL attitudinal variables

1. Attitudes towards the teacher's role (Cronbach Alpha = .784)

- (-) The teacher should set learning goals for me.
- (-) The teacher should assign language tasks for me to accomplish.
- (-) The teacher should set learning plans for me.
- (-) The teacher should assess my English learning progress and performance.
- (-) The teacher should find out the weaknesses in my English study.
- (-) The teacher should test and evaluate my English proficiency regularly.
- (-) The teacher should intrigue my interest in learning English.

2. Attitudes towards the learner's role (Cronbach Alpha = .606)

To learn English well, I myself should be responsible for my English learning.

It is my responsibility to promote effective learning in my English study.

In English learning, learners must be active and the teacher can only assist their English learning.

- (-) In class the students must always follow the teacher.

3. General confidence in conducting AEL (Cronbach Alpha = .473)

Without classroom teaching, I can still learn English well by myself with appropriate guidance.

- (-) The teacher, as the authority, is always right
- Students should be given more initiative in class to participate actively.

### AEL behavior variables

1. *Strategy use and monitoring* (Cronbach Alpha = .917)

I choose and use English learning strategies appropriately.

I intentionally use listening strategies when practicing listening.

I intentionally use communicative strategies when practicing conversations.

I intentionally use reading strategies when practicing reading.

- I intentionally use writing strategies when practicing writing.  
I monitor my use of communicative strategies when practicing conversations.  
I monitor my use of writing strategies when practicing writing.  
I monitor my use of reading strategies when practicing reading.  
I monitor my use of listening strategies when practicing listening.
2. *Monitoring the learning process and performance* (Cronbach Alpha = .867)  
I look for and make use of various opportunities to learn English outside the classroom.  
I make use of learning resources on campus to learn English outside the classroom.  
I intentionally apply what I have learned to the use of English for communication.  
I cooperate with others to learn English outside the classroom.  
I try to make myself a more successful language learner by discussing with others or recording my learning process.  
I check whether I have finished the tasks planned in advance in English learning outside the classroom.  
I check and renew my understanding of the language previously learned in class or on my own outside the classroom.
3. *Formulating learning objectives and plans* (Cronbach Alpha = .835)  
I formulate my own English study plan outside the classroom.  
I set up learning objectives based on the actual situation of my English study.  
I have clear requirements for improvements in my English study each semester.  
I plan the learning time outside the classroom.
4. *Monitoring the use of learning methods* (Cronbach Alpha = .801)  
I evaluate my learning methods to find out the problems and solutions.  
I try to realize whether my learning methods are appropriate or not.  
When finding the learning methods not appropriate, I change for more proper ones in time.  
I try to find out my mistakes in English learning.

I analyze the reasons why I made mistakes and correct them to improve English learning.

5. *Identifying the importance of classroom teaching and learning* (Cronbach Alpha = .757)

I try to get clear about the teacher's objective in classroom teaching.

I make the teacher's objective in classroom teaching my own objective in English study.

I understand the importance of making the teacher's objective my own learning goal.

If I was lagged behind in class, I practice more outside the classroom to catch up with others.