



Two Decades of Research on Learner Autonomy: Review And Future Directions

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ABSTRACT: Learner autonomy is experiencing changes in its processes and working methods, and the advancement of new technologies in recent years has led to different concept towards it abroad and in China. Since its definition is still in developing, it is deemed necessary to conduct a review on the publications in this field to grasp how this notion is being understood and how it is being implemented in practice. For that purpose, this article is conducted to review the rapidly growing literature on learner autonomy, and to synthesize the insights emerging from research published in two decades. This article: (i) provides an overview of the connotation of learner autonomy and related concepts by different scholars; (ii) reviews the literature on the factors related to learner autonomy; (iii) summarizes studies outside and in China on learner autonomy by comparing similarities and differences between them; (iv) mentions the literature on the measurement of learner autonomy, focusing on quantitative studies by using questionnaires; and (v) highlights the future research directions on learner autonomy.

KEYWORDS: Learner Autonomy, Connotation, Factors, Measurement, Future research directions

I. INTRODUCTION

There has been a considerable rise in academic interest and publications on learner autonomy since the concept be proposed in the year of 1981. This validates the notion that it has increased not only in momentum but also in its characteristics during last two decades.

Learner autonomy has been considered as a vital element in English language teaching and learning for approximately forty years, with an increasing number of publications on (Sudusinghe & Kumara, 2021). It has been articulated as a significant concept in relation to lifelong learning (Yujing, 2021), and could also be examined out of language learning and extend to the field of education (Smith & Lamb, 2018; Kim & Yoon, 2021).

Therefore, this article builds on previous works by providing an overview of what the learner autonomy is and its related factors, studies abroad and in China, and its measurements are included, followed by future research directions on LA.

II. CONNOTATION OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

Introduced to language education by Holec in the year of 1981, the concept of learner autonomy has been attractive to researches and practices on teaching and learning (Tharumaraj et al., 2021). Scholars have attempted to conceptualize it in different ways, generally, it can be classified in four types based on timeline (See Table 1): hypothesized it in definitions (e. g. Holec, 1981; Dam et al., 1990; Little, 1996; Reinders & White, 2011), interpreted it in frameworks or models (see Littlewood, 1996; Benson, 1997; Oxford, 2003; Blin, 2010; Tassinari, 2012), explained it with the relation to digital

technology (Firat M, 2016), and evolved it into an increasingly social phenomenon (Blidi, 2017).

The first unavoidable definition on learner autonomy is proposed by Holec (1981) who triggers the studies on learner autonomy and defines it as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 102). Several years later, Dam et al (1990) viewed it as “ the capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others as a social, responsible person (p. 102).” Then in 1996, Little defined it as “learners’ ability and willingness to make choices independently (p. 97).” It can also be “the capacity for a certain range of highly explicit



behaviour that embraces both the process and the content of learning” (Kim & Yoon, 2021, p. 102). Reinders and White (2011) argue that the definition of autonomy as either an ability or a particular kind of learning act is incomplete.

Thus, some scholars have explained learner autonomy in a framework or a model, for example: Littlewood’s (1996) autonomy framework in which the author assigns three roles (communicator, learner, and person) to an autonomous individual (Sadaghian & Marandi, 2021); Benson (1997) proposed three dimensions (technical, psychological and political) of learner autonomy with diverse point of views of each perspective; on the basis of Benson’ framework, Oxford (2003) extended the conception into four perspectives by adding sociocultural perspective (Wirapatni et al., 2021); Blin (2010) connected to the CALL application and developed a learner autonomy model from the lens of Activity Theory (Aryanjani et al., 2021); Tassinari (2012) designed a dynamic model of learner autonomy which “consists of spheres of competencies that sums up psychological skills” (Rajendran & Din, 2021, p. 98).

Taken together, these studies provide important insights into the understanding of learner autonomy, namely, it is not a single behavior, but a continuum and multidimensional state in which the learner take different forms related to different contextual factors (Erel & Bedir, 2021). However,

almost all of these definitions are basically intended to highlight learner autonomy in the boundary of language education.

Besides that, it is found that there has been a gradual increasement of studies on technology-related and collaborative learner autonomy, and more scholars have appealed for studies on learner autonomy beyond language education with the focus on young learners.

Greater and easier access to digital technology provides learners more practices on learner autonomy by using social media as learning tools, and presents scholars more perspectives to define learner autonomy (Khaerudin & Chik, 2021). These scholars are including Levy and Hubbard (CALL-centered viewpoint) (Sadaghian & Marandi, 2021); Firat M (2016) (e-learning autonomy), Sudusinghe and Kumara (2021) (e-learner autonomy).

In addition, autonomy is a social construct which involves the ability to function effectively as a cooperative member in a group, so the definition has evolved into an increasingly social phenomenon (Benson, 2011; Kim & Yoon, 2021; Almusharraf, 2021). The examples of collaborative learner autonomy are including the collaborative autonomous language learning framework proposed by Kessler and Bikowski (2010) and collaborative learner autonomy recommended by Blidi (2017).



Characteristics	Researcher (Year)	Connotation	Theory	Method/Sample	Field
Hypothesize LA in definitions	Holec (1981)	The ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 102)		Secondary Education	Foreign Language
	Dam et al (1990)	The capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others as a social, responsible person (p. 102)."		Secondary Education	Foreign Language
	Little (1996)	"Learners' ability and willingness to make choices independently (p. 97).		secondary & tertiary levels	Language Learning
	Kim & Yoon (2021)	It can also be "the capacity for a certain range of highly explicit behaviour that embraces both the process and the content of learning"		University students	EFL
In frameworks or models	Littlewood (1996)	Autonomy framework in which the author assigns three roles (communicator, learner, and person) to an autonomous individual			Language Learning
	Benson (1997)	proposed three dimensions (technical, psychological and political) of learner autonomy with diverse point of views of each perspective;			Language Learning
	Oxford (2003)	extended the conception into four perspectives (technical, psychological and political) by adding sociocultural perspective			Language Learning
	Blin (2010)	connected to the CALL application and developed a learner autonomy model from the lens of Activity Theory.	Activity Theory		Language Learning
	Tassinari (2012)	designed a dynamic model of learner autonomy which "consists of spheres of competencies that sums up psychological skills" (Rajendran & Din, 2021, p. 98).			Language Learning
Digital technology related	Firat M (2016)	E-learning autonomy	Self-determination theory (SDT)	Distance Learners in different programs	Distance Education
	Sudusinghe & Kumara (2021)	Capacity and willingness to act independently and cooperate with others as a socially responsible person. This cross-sectional study aimed to assess the E-learning autonomy.		Higher Education	ESL
Evolved into an increasingly social phenomenon	Kessler & Bikowski (2010)	The nature of individual and group behavior/ Collaborative autonomous language learning abilities/ Student interaction and language use appear to benefit from flexible learning environments		Tertiary level	EFL
	Soufiane Bliidi (2017)	proposes a group-oriented and gradual approach to enhance the development of learner autonomy and to incorporate autonomous learning practices in formal and informal teaching platforms, creating learning opportunities conducive to autonomy in collaboration.	Constructivism	In the Omani context and for similar educational contexts within the Middle East and North Africa region	

Definition of Learner Autonomy And Related Concepts By Different Scholars

More importantly, previous research has suggested the extension of focus from adult language learning to younger learners and conventional classrooms (Benson & Huang, 2008; Wirapatni et al., 2021). Smith and Lamb (2018) proposed that learner autonomy "is an essential characteristic of all successful learners and can be found everywhere if we know how to look". Kim and Yoon (2021) stated that "the main point of all the definitions is that students should be the authors of their own education world".

III. FACTORS RELATED TO LEARNER AUTONOMY

Learner autonomy is complex and multifaceted (Holmes, 2021), and its development is influenced by various factors in the field of education. Previous researches have established that students' motivation (Okumus Ceylan, 2021; Kim & Yoon, 2021) and learning strategies (Gürses, 2021; Pathan et al., 2021) are all crucial elements to learner autonomy, other factors including self-efficacy (Carson, 2021) and learning styles (Admiraal et al., 2019).

[1]. Motivation

Studies abroad and at home have confirmed the positive correlation between learner autonomy and motivation, for example, Wong and Luo (2021) indicated a significant positive relationship between learner autonomy and motivation in their study; Okumus (2021) found a moderate positive correlation between motivational beliefs and autonomy, then asserted that intrinsic motivation makes learners more responsible whereas the higher level of learner autonomy produces intrinsic motivation in turn.

As for the primary school students, a study conducted in Hong Kong on Chinese Grade 5 students shows that learner autonomy plays a decisive role in students' motivation at every level of socioemotional relatedness (Bao & Lam, 2008). This view is supported by Almusharraf (2021) who puts in that students' autonomy in learning can only be developed if they have extrinsic and intrinsic motivation although some are naturally autonomous in life.

[2]. Learning Strategies

Studies found that awareness, identification and utilization of learning strategies link with learner autonomy to different extents, and the



enhancement of learning strategies usage helps improve learner autonomy accordingly (Yujing, 2021; Gürses, 2021; Carson, 2021; Pathan et al., 2021). Yujing (2021) proved that the awareness and identification of learning strategies are of importance in helping learners to assume greater control over their own learning, and then develop their autonomous learning. According to Gürses (2021), the usage of learning strategies is prerequisite for learner autonomy. In the same vein, Carson (2021) notes that learning strategies play a role in student autonomy which have been linked with academic performance.

It is found that the enhancement of learner's strategies usage is correlated positively

IV. STUDIES ON LEARNER AUTONOMY

Findings gathered are analyzed mostly based on ESL or EFL programs, and a large number of researches shed light on teachers and students' perceptions and practices, on specific approaches in promoting learner autonomy as well as on correlation between key variables.

It is interesting that distinct differences lie in researches carried out by scholars abroad and in China from the aspects of educational levels, studied areas, and the key variables.

[1]. Studies on learner autonomy outside China

The worldwide popularity of learner autonomy has made it become into a globally important notion, it has aroused considerable interests from different perspectives (Erel & Bedir, 2021). In view of studies abroad so far, three important themes (research areas) are emerged: teachers' or/and students' perceptions and practices towards learner autonomy, effects of diverse tools or methods on promoting learner autonomy, and correlation among related variables.

Teachers' or/and students' perceptions and practices towards learner autonomy

Studies reveal that students' perceptions towards learner autonomy are positive (Kim & Yoon, 2021; Azin & Ameri, 2021) while their practices are unsatisfied (Gürses, 2021; Tuan, 2021; Tian, 2023). The positive perceptions are reported in researches conducted in the context of different cultures, for example in Korean (Kim & Yoon, 2021), Iran (Azin & Ameri, 2021). In the same vein, the unsatisfied practice on learner autonomy is shown by Turkish French learners as "not highly

with their learner autonomy, that is to say, the learning strategies help students enhance their autonomy (Pathan et al., 2021). Furthermore, they revealed that the utilization of blog-mediated learning strategies is conducive to boost the engineering students' autonomy in the ESL context (2021).

[3]. Other Factors

A number of studies have found that self-efficacy, learning styles are related to learner autonomy (Carson, 2021; Yujing, 2021). Carson (2021) identified a significant positive correlation between learner autonomy and self-efficacy; Yujing (2021) stated that the awareness of learning styles is the first step towards learner autonomy.

autonomous learner" (Gürses, 2021), by Vietnamese EFL students as unsatisfactory (Tuan, 2021) and by ESL learners in Sri Lanka as "comparatively low e-learner autonomy than the previous study conducted on it using the same scale" (Sudusinghe & Kumara, 2021). Furthermore, some students expressed that they faced the challenge (Azin & Ameri, 2021) and felt the needs for autonomy training (Kim & Yoon, 2021).

Same results are obtained regarding to teachers' perceptions and practices on learner autonomy, namely, although instructors hold very positive beliefs towards learner autonomy, they face challenges and call for teachers training on this topic (Wirapatni et al., 2021; Erel & Bedir, 2021; Khotimah et al., 2023).

To date, it is noteworthy that results above were achieved with the sample from high school students to university learners in the context of EFL or ESL leaning, thus, study focused on primary school students' learner autonomy out of the field of language education is extremely needed which shown as the research gap.

Effects of diverse methods or tools on promoting learner autonomy

The investigated methods are including extensive reading which has positive effects on fostering learner autonomy of students in Vietnam (Canh, 2021), purposeful vocabulary acquisition through which female English learners in Asudi Arabia were highly positive on effectiveness of autonomous learning (Almusharraf, 2021), and integration of the project work by which students' autonomy were enhanced evidently in Indonesia (Thuan, 2021).



Purpose on	Main finding / Constructs	Sample/ Field	Author/ year	Country
Teachers' or/and students' perceptions and practices towards LA	students' perceptions are positive while their practices are unsatisfied	University students	Kim & Yoon, 2021	Korean
		University students	Tian, 2023	China
	Students' unsatisfied practice on learner autonomy	University students	Gürses, 2021	Turkey
		University students	Tuan, 2021	Vietnam
	Teachers' perceptions are very positive but face challenges and call for teachers training on practice	High school students	Wirapatni et al., 2021	Indonesia
		University students pre-service teachers	Erel & Bedir, 2021 Khotimah et al., 2023	Turkey Indonesia
Effects of diverse methods or tools on promoting LA	Positive effect of extensive reading	University students	Canh, 2021	Vietnam
	Positive effect of purposeful vocabulary acquisition	University female students	Almusharraf, 2021	Asudi Arabia
	Positive effect of integration of the project work	University students	Thuan, 2021	Indonesia
	Positive effect of Wikis	University students	Sadaghian & Marandi, 2021	Iran
	Positive effect of YouTube	University students	Rajendran & Din, 2021	Malaysia
	Positive effect of E-portfolio	High school students	Aprianti & Winarto, 2021; Kiffer et al., 2021	Indonesia France
		University students	Pospíšilová & Rohlíková, 2023	Czech
	Positive effect of Moodle	pre-university students	Tharumaraj et al., 2021	Malaysia
Correlation among related variables on the topic LA	Positive effect of ChatGPT	University students	Agustini, 2023	Indonesia
	self-efficacy, will to communicate, learner autonomy	University students	Carson, 2021	Japan
	Motivation, learner autonomy	University female students	Almusharraf, 2021	Saudi Arabia
	learning strategies, learner autonomy	University students	Pathan et al., 2021	Pakistan
	Learner autonomy perception and performance	University students	Dang, 2023	Vietnam

Similarities Among Studies on Learner Autonomy Outside China

Tools utilized in researches abroad with the positive effects on promoting learner autonomy are to some extents technology backbone which involving Wikis (Sadaghian & Marandi, 2021), YouTube (Rajendran & Din, 2021), E-portfolio (Aprianti, F., & Winarto, E. R., 2021; Kiffer et al., 2021; Pospíšilová & Rohlíková, 2023), Moodle (Tharumaraj et al., 2021), Blog (Pathan et al., 2021) and ChatGPT (Agustini, 2023).

Again, these findings are located in the field of language learning, and none of them are conducted with the sample as primary school students so far.

Correlation among related variables on the topic learner autonomy

Some studies show positive correlations between learner autonomy and variables as self-efficacy and will to communicate in Japan (Carson, 2021), motivation in Turkey (Okumus Ceylan, 2021) and Saudi Arabic (Almusharraf, 2021), learning strategies in Pakistan (Pathan et al., 2021), undergraduate students' perception and performance of learner autonomy in Vietnam (Dang, 2023).

[2]. Studies on Learner Autonomy in China

In China, learner autonomy has attracted educators' attention with the demands of education reform, life-long learning, and students' earlier

maturity (Yujing, 2021). However, besides the similarities, it is striking that researches issued on abroad in English by Chinese scholars and studies published in China by Chinese educators describe totally different profiles of two systems of researches on learner autonomy, following are analyzed from aspects of educational levels, studied areas, and the key factors.

Studies on learner autonomy issued abroad by Chinese scholars share similarities with researches conducted by foreign educators: namely, the overwhelming majority of them concern about students' autonomy at tertiary level in language education within the context of EFL or ESL (Tian & Zhang, 2021; Lin & Reinders, 2019), and correlate motivation, engagement as important factors to influence learner autonomy (Jianfeng et al., 2018).

While studies published in China in Chinese mandarin display another picture of researches on learner autonomy. Among studies searched out by keywords learner autonomy, ratios are shown in terms of educational level and learning field, top three are secondary education (35.14%), primary education (20.21%) and foreign language (14.43%) while tertiary education ranks 5 (5.26%) from the year 1986 to 2023 (China National Knowledge Infrastructure [CNKI], 2023). Zooming



to the studies on primary education, majority of Chinese educators concentrate on the subjects Mathematics (Huiqin Chen, 2022), Chinese language (Zhenjiang Zhang, 2022) and then English (Fengyan Xia, 2022) in the order from more to less. Regarding to Maths, the topic studied most is how to foster or develop learner autonomy in Math class (Wen Liu, 2022; Junhui Sun, 2022). As for Chinese language and English, learner autonomy in reading (Yang Shi, 2021; Na Li, 2021) stands out as the common interest of Chinese scholars, besides studies on the strategies of improving learner autonomy in these classes.

It is interesting that Chinese scholars have different understandings on learner autonomy in which two main categories are emerged in the literature with the possible reason as translation of the term. Some scholars regard learner autonomy as an ability students shown in their learning at different degrees (Fengyan Xia, 2022; Huiqin Chen, 2022) while some scholars define it as a new learning approach or method with the rise of new coming technology and the needs of life-long learning (Jing Zhao, 2022; Mengna Li, 2021). However, scholars with different understandings on learner autonomy share some similarities in their researches. First of all, both of them show positive

perceptions and recognize the importance of learner autonomy of primary school students strongly (Fengyan Xia, 2022; Jing Zhao, 2022). Second, most of them emphasize teacher support from the aspects of cognitive and affective (Hua Wang & Xiaoqin Huang, 2021), and consider teachers' role as the guider and helper (Liping Tian, 2021). Third, learning interest is linked as a key element with learner autonomy in high frequency (Jian Zhang, 2021; Hua Wang & Xiaoqin Huang, 2021), and collaborative learning is stressed in studies on teaching strategies to improve primary school students' autonomy (Ping Chen, 2022).

However, it is striking that scholars are used to carry out the study at the position of a teacher and propose strategies and suggestions on learner autonomy in the classroom, but neglect the role of parent involvement and disregard the significance of fostering learner autonomy out of class or at home. It is necessary to highlight that primary school students share much more time at home with their parents, in comparison to students at high school or tertiary level, therefore, the study to investigate learner autonomy of Chinese primary school students under the support of teachers and parents issued in English is desperately needed.

Difference	Studies Outside China	Studies In China
Education Levels	Overwhelming majority of studies concern about students' autonomy at tertiary level in language education within the context of EFL or ESL	*secondary education (35.14%); primary education (20.21%); foreign language (14.43%); tertiary education (5.26%).
Research Area	Very limited studies on primary education and focusing on All subjects at school	In the field of primary education, studies on LA of subject: Mathematics, Chinese language and English
Key Factors	Self-efficacy (Carson, 2021) Motivation (Almusharraf, 2021) Learning strategies (Pathan et al., 2021) learning styles (Yujing, 2021).	teacher support (Hua Wang & Xiaoqin Huang, 2021); Teacher's role (Liping Tian, 2021); Learning interest (Jian Zhang, 2021; Hua Wang & Xiaoqin Huang, 2021)

Differences Between Studies on Learner Autonomy Outside and in China

*Data from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), 2023

V. MEASUREMENT OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

Scholars selected both questionnaire and interview in qualitative and quantitative studies to measure beliefs and perceptions towards learner autonomy (Erel & Bedir, 2021; Almusharraf, 2021). As for its level in practice, the vast majority of studies have been quantitative, so questionnaires

are used most in the empirical researches abroad and at home. To detail, those questionnaires can be divided into two types in terms of the research domain. The first type is questionnaire used to measure the degree of language learners' autonomy in EFL or ESL context in which examples of variables are attitudes, skills, and strategy used (Tajmirriahi & Rezvani, 2021); readiness, ability, responsibility and use of English (Okumus Ceylan,



2021); learner independence, dependence on the teacher, learner confidence, attitudes toward language learning, and self-assessment (Abd, 2021); and learning objectives, study plans, using learning strategies, and monitoring and evaluating learning process (Jianfeng et al., 2018).

Another category is questionnaire constructed on the basis of Self-Determination Theory used to measure students' autonomy in the realm of education but not limited in language learning. They are titled as Relative Autonomy Index (Bao & Lam, 2008; Zhou et al., 2019) or the Autonomy Scale (Skinner et al., 2008), and featured by four subscales: external motivation, introjected motivation, identified motivation, and intrinsic motivation. An RAI score (Ryan & Connell, 1989) was worked out by the formula as $RAI = 2$ (intrinsic motivation) + 1 (identified regulation) - 1 (introjected regulation) - 2 (external regulation), and the higher score indicated the higher level of autonomy (Bao & Lam, 2008; Zhou et al., 2019; Skinner et al., 2008). In addition, the questionnaire and its adapted version were utilized frequently in China and abroad with the sample of primary school students (Bao & Lam, 2008; Zhou et al., 2019; Skinner et al., 2008; Zhou & Zhang, 2021).

VI. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Researchers have introduced some new frameworks and constructs on learner autonomy. However, the most dominant theoretical starting point has been used repeatedly in a recycled way. The extant learner autonomy literature is diverse but somewhat fragment, on the other hand, it still relies on a limited number of theoretical lenses. Going forward, in this area of research, new and novel theories should be called for future research. These are driven by changes at the country level, inter-country level and, most practically, educational levels.

Another interesting outcome from this review is that only a limited number of studies have investigated learner autonomy on primary school students. It is suggested that utilizing models from the tertiary level might create an opportunity to more accurately connect primary education level research with the literature on learner autonomy. Another area of opportunity lies in comparative analyses in the context of learner autonomy from foreign or second language learning to school education or even social education while drawing

on existing models, including different subjects or diverse programs. In addition, the technological development and new emerging product and problems, such as artificial intelligence (AI) (Rusmiyanto et al., 2023), ChatGPT (Agustini, 2023), and adolescents' online game addiction (Mun, I. B., & Lee, S., 2022) provide ample opportunities for the future research on learner autonomy of primary school students.

Although the methods used in learner autonomy research have grown to be more sophisticated, there are opportunities to develop integrative approaches by studying the antecedents, characteristics, and outcomes of learner autonomy simultaneously. Especially when most studies build models in single countries only, it would be very useful if researchers conduct comparative analyses either for a group of countries or for two countries with similar or dissimilar features. Thus, continued pursuit of learner autonomy research could generate meaningful contributions to scholarship, practice, and policy. From the point of view of scholarship, comparative research should identify new generalizable patterns across educational levels, and countries: leading to the development of robust new theories. Accordingly, in practice, learner autonomy research can provide better insights for decision-makers.

VII. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the definition and related factors of learner autonomy, studies abroad and in China, and measurement utilized in researches are reviewed, and future research direction on learner autonomy are provided in this article. It is shown that the existing literature on learner autonomy is extensive but focuses particularly on students at tertiary level. Although many studies were carried out on primary school students published in Chinese mandarin in China, considering the limitations discussed, there is a very relatively small body of literature that is concerned with primary school students' learner autonomy in school and at home. Therefore, there is a particular need for empirical research which focuses on learner autonomy and the case of young learners (Ömer, & Yukselir, 2021).

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