Study on Autonomous English Learning Ability of Students from Private-run Universities and Teaching Suggestion

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Abstract: *Autonomous language learning ability is an ability that helps students learn better after class in universities. This study explored autonomous learning ability of students in private-run universities taking English learning as anchor point. 496 students in different grades from 3 private-universities in Guangzhou have been surveyed through a questionnaire consisting of 36 items. It is found that Autonomous English learning ability is at medium level (M=3.0150) and there isn't significant difference in gender on Autonomous English learning ability. There isn't significant difference in students from different grade on Autonomous English learning ability, and the ability of sophomore are the lowest.*

Keywords: *autonomous learning ability, private-run universities, difference, implication*

1. Introduction

A Guidance to College English Teaching 2020 proposed that information technology should be applied in college English teaching to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability and personalized learning. Nowadays, information technology has been integrated into different aspects of teaching in colleges and universities. For example, in blended learning or flipped class teaching, students are required to learning online by themselves. So they should be equipped with ability of planning learning, executing learning, calling for help and evaluating or monitoring learning by themselves.

Private-run university is a kind of higher education which appeared in the beginning of 21st century. It is different from state-run university in many aspects, and the most prominent difference is in the admission score, that is, admission score of private-run university is much lower than that of state-run university. At the same time, learning environment is not as good as that of state-run university. Till now, some scholars have explored Autonomous English learning ability of students in state-run universities comprehensively but there is rarely any comprehensive study of Autonomous English learning ability of students in private universities. So, it is necessary to explore status quo of autonomous learning ability of students in private-run university, which includes explore whether there are gender difference and grade difference in autonomous learning ability.[1]

2. Literature review

The concept of "Autonomous Learning" originated from debate on how to cultivate independent thinkers and life-long learning skills in 1960s (Gardner & Miller, 1999). After that, "Autonomous Learning" became a hot topic. It entered into language education when Hneri Holec (1981) gave "autonomous learning" in report of modern language project with the definition of "be responsible for one's own study". Then, more and more countries put "autonomous learning ability" in language teaching objectives and the development of autonomous learning ability is one of research targets in language education.[2]

Scholars in many countries made a lot of researches on autonomous learning ability and they found autonomous learning is not independent learning. Autonomous learning ability is complex concept and could be affected by learning environment, dependence, cooperation and etc. Research on correlation between autonomous learning and learning motivation (Dickinson, 1995), research on influence of teacher autonomy on students' autonomy (Little, 1995), and research on correlation between feeling and autonomous learning (Aoki, 1999) in 20th century have contributed great to development of autonomous learning. When entering into 21st century, the studies of autonomous learning has been booming. The

number of articles on this topic is increasing year by year and researches not focus only students' autonomous learning alone. A lot of researches explored how social culture factors, classroom environment and new technology environment influence development of autonomous learning ability (Oxford, 2003; Smith, 2003; Chang, 2007; Abrahan & Williams, 2011). [3]

Relatively, the study on autonomous language learning started later in China. The first article on autonomous language learning was published in CSSCI journal in 1999 (Xu, 2014). This publication led to continuous studies on autonomous language learning in China. Many scholars started to study autonomous language learning from theoretic aspects to experimental aspects. Research methods developed from literature review to qualitative research, quantitative research and blended experimental research. The content of research varied from scholars to scholars. After studying researches on this topic in China, it is found that those researches can be divided into four categories. The first is about how to train students' English autonomous language learning ability such as using learner's log to train autonomous language learning (Zhang &Yang,2010).[4] The second is about how teachers' intervention and evaluation affect students' autonomous language learning (Jiang, 2006; Zhou & Qin, 2005). These two categories are static studies about students' autonomous language learning ability. In 2014, professor Xu published a book in which autonomous language learning of Chinese students are described diachronically and synchronically based on a large scale of survey. This book set off a craze of studying autonomous language learning in China and those studies explored deeper on autonomous language learning. For example, some scholars researched how and in what degree internal and external factors affect students' autonomous language learning (Wang & Wu, 2017; Huang & Francis Bond, 2018; Liu & Xu,2018); some scholars studied students' autonomous language learning behavior in internet + environment (Qu &Lv,2016; Ying & Ning,2019; Hua,2020).

However, the participants in those studies are from state-run universities especially first-class state-run universities. There is rarely any systematic study of students' autonomous language learning ability in private-run universities. As it is discussed above that students in private-run university are quite different from students in state-run university, and learning environment are different too. Thus, it is quite necessary to explore students' autonomous language learning ability in private-run universities [5].

3. Research design

In this part, research questions, research instruments and participants of this study is stated clearly.

3.1. Research questions

This study is a quantitative and qualitative study based on questionnaire and semi-structure interview, aiming at exploring status quo and development of college students' autonomous language learning ability in private-run university so as to find measures to cultivate students' autonomous language learning ability. So, there are three research questions:

Question 1: What is the status quo of Autonomous English learning ability?

Question 2: Are there any differences between grades and genders in Autonomous English learning ability?

Question 3: How can be Autonomous English learning ability improved?

3.2. Research instruments

Questionnaire and semi-structure interview outline are used in this study. The title of questionnaire is "A survey of Autonomous English learning ability in private-run school", which consists of two parts including 36 items. The first part has 5 items about participants' basic information: gender, grade, major, hometown, apps used learning English. The second part consists of 31 items exploring students' Autonomous English learning ability from two perspectives: Autonomous English learning attitude and Autonomous English learning behavior. Items in this part are partly from questionnaire designed by Xu Jinfeng in 2014, and partly designed by the author of this paper according to literature review and teaching experience. There are 8 items about students' Autonomous English learning attitude, 23 items about students' Autonomous English learning behavior which are planning and goaling (5 items), using learning strategy (8 items) and monitoring and evaluating (10 items).

The questionnaire is Likert Scale. For students' Autonomous English learning attitude part, the

answers rank from 1(no responsibility) to 5(all responsibility). For Autonomous English learning behavior, the answers rank from 1 (never do this) to 5(always do this). The Mean value of this questionnaire is 3. The Reliability of this questionnaire is good (α=0.812) which shows all items have good internal consistency coefficient and constructs validity.

3.3. Participants

The participants of this study come from three private-run universities in Guangzhou. There 533 participants but there are only 496 valid questionnaires which accounts for 93.1% because 37 participants choose 3 for all items. In those participants, there are 156 male students, and 340 female students. For male students, 45 are freshmen, 48 are sophomores, 62 are juniors and 1 is senior. For female students, 112 are freshmen, 88 are sophomores, 136 are juniors and 4 are seniors. As there are just 5 seniors in this study, the data of these 5 seniors are deleted when compare difference between grades. 496 participants are from more than 10 majors such as Chinese, English, Elementary education, Accounting, Computer science and etc. Most of participants from majors belonging to liberal arts, so female participants are much more than male participants. The details of participants can be show in table 1.

Table 1: Gender & Grade Distribution

		Grade one	Grade two	Grade three	Grade four	Total
Gender	Male Female	45	48	62	1	156
	Total	112	88	136	4	340
		157	136	198	5	496

4. Results and discussion

496 questionnaires have been analyzed through SPSS 26.0. The following parts will state results of this analysis and will discuss new findings of this study.

4.1. The overall status quo of students' Autonomous English learning ability in private-run universities

Table 2 shows students' Autonomous English learning ability in private university is at medium level (M=3.0150, SD=0.58465) which is almost the same as the mean value of the questionnaire. In 4 aspects of Autonomous English learning ability, the level of Autonomous English learning attitude is the highest (M=3.2886, SD=0.45774), and the level of using learning strategies in Autonomous English learning is the lowest (M=2.8949, SD=0.53608) which is lower than the mean value of the questionnaire. The mean of planning and goaling is 3.1185 and the mean of monitoring and evaluating is 3.1399.[6] From this result, it is can be found that the Autonomous English learning ability of students in private-run universities is not good and students are not good at using strategies or methods to facilitate their learning after class.

Table 2: Overall level of Autonomous English learning ability

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Attitude	496	1.00	5.00	3.2886	.45774
Setting objectives	496	1.00	5.00	3.1185	.76877
Learning strategies	496	1.00	5.00	2.8949	.53608
Monitoring and evaluating	496	1.00	5.00	3.1399	.68897
Ability	496	1.00	5.00	3.0510	.58465

A national survey of autonomous English learning ability made in 2004 by Xu Jinfen et al. showed that autonomous English learning ability of non-English majors was at low level. In that survey, there are 50 items in total with mean value of 0.5. However, in the result, the means of only 9 items are slightly higher than 0.5, among which, the highest is 0.609. The means of the rest items are in 0.4-0.5. The result of this research made in 2022 corresponds to that research made in 2004 and research made by Wei Honglan in 2020. Does this result show that the autonomous English learning ability of students has never been improved in more than 20 years? Hence, the author studied more researched made by scholars in China. In 2014, Xu Jinfen et al. made a survey of students from 3 top state-run universities (one is science and engineering university; two are comprehensive universities) in China. It is found that the average autonomous English learning ability of students are relatively high (M=4.0066) which is much

higher than the mean value of questionnaire (M=3.0000). The result of the research in 2014 is much better than this research. What caused this difference? The answer may be the participants are quite different. The participant of Wei in 2020 are students in a second-class normal university. The participants of this study are from 3 private-run universities. As it is stated in the first part, when they entered into private-run universities, the score of college entrance exam is much lower than that of students who are enrolled by top state-run universities. Research has shown that there is positive relation between autonomous English learning ability and achievements of English (Pan, 2011).

4.2. Gender difference of English autonomous English learning ability

A large number of studies at home and abroad show that there is closely correlation between gender and different dimensions of foreign language learning. Research shows that there is gender difference in autonomous English leaning ability (Xu, 2014); the degree of language learning motivation different from girl students to boy students (Guo, 2009). However, the result of this research shows that there isn't significant difference (t=-1.531, df=494, p>0.05) between male students and female students in autonomous English learning ability (see table 3). Therefore, the three aspects of autonomous English learning behavior have been explored through independent T-test to find whether there are differences.

Table 3: Overall Gender difference in autonomous English learning ability

	Male(n=156)		Female(n=340)			
Autonomous English learning ability	M	SD	M	SD	MD	t(494)
	2.9908	.65550	3.0772	.54800	-.08644	-1.531

The result in table 4 demonstrates that there is significant difference in planning and goaling of autonomous English leaning (t=-2.927, df=494, p<0.05). The mean of female students is higher than the male group (MD=0.2160). There isn't significant difference in using learning strategies used in autonomous English learning (t=0.717, df=241, p>0.05) and there isn't difference in evaluating and monitoring autonomous English leaning (t=-1.861, df=494, p>0.05) either.

Table 4: Gender difference in three aspects of autonomous English learning behavior

	Male(n=156)		Female(n=340)			
	M	SD	M	SD	MD	t(494)
Setting objectives	2.9705	.85029	3.1865	.71951	-.2160	-2.927*
Learning strategies	2.9231	.63587	2.8820	.48398	.0411	0.717
Monitoring and evaluating	3.0551	.75479	3.1788	.65407	-.1237	-1.861

*p<0.05

4.3. Grade difference of autonomous English learning ability

Autonomous English learning ability is a dynamic and some researchers found it increase with learning and training. Table 5 shows that the overall development trend of students' autonomous English learning ability is three years' learning. As there are only 5 participants from grade four, the data of seniors are deleted in this part. From Table 5, it is easy to be found after two years of college study, the autonomous English learning ability of students increased. However, this ability falls in the second year and rises to the top in the third year.

Table 5: Autonomous English learning ability of students in different grades

	N	Mean	SD
Grade one	157	3.0183	.5984
Grade two	136	2.9674	.5883
Grade three	198	3.1265	.5666

Through ANOVA analysis, it is found that there isn't significant difference (F (3,492)=2.445, p=0.063>0.05) in autonomous English learning ability of students from different grades(see table 6). In order to test the result of ANOVA, Post hoc testing is made to make comparison between two grades. Bonferroni shows there isn't significant difference between grade one and grade two, grade two and

grade three, and grade one and grade three(see table 7).

Table 6: ANOVA of autonomous English learning ability

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between groups	2.485	3	.828	2.445	.063
Within groups	166.716	492	.339		
Total	169.202	495			

Table 7: Multiple Comparisons

			Mean difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Bonferroni	1	2	.05089	.06819	1.000
		3	-.10820	.06221	.496
	2	1	-.05089	.06819	1.000
		3	-.15909	.06483	.087
	3	1	.10820	.06221	.496
		2	.15909	.06483	.087

5. Conclusion

This part makes a summary of this study and gives implication of education based on summary of results. Also, some suggestion for further study is rendered.

5.1. Summary

This research found that the overall level of autonomous English learning ability of students in private universities is just at medium level which is significant lower than students' autonomous English learning ability top state-run universities; there isn't significant difference in autonomous English learning ability of male students and female students, while, in planning learning, female students are better than male students; there isn't significant difference in autonomous English learning ability of students in different grade, however, there is a new finding that this ability falls in grade two and then rise to top in grade three.[6]

5.2. Implication

The above results shows that the current situation of autonomous English learning ability of students in private university does not respond to needs of teaching and learning requirements proposed society and higher education. Nowadays, self-learning, life-long learning, blending learning are popular learning modes for university students, which requires students to be equipped with good autonomous learning ability. [7] Therefore, it is quite necessary for private university to take priorities to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability. It is can be done from the following aspects.[8]

Firstly, private universities can purchase excellent online teaching and learning platform to facilitate blended teaching and blended learning. In order to promote students to learn autonomously, their learning results should be admitted as part of their score.

Secondly, teachers in private university have to improve their understanding of autonomous learning. Only if teachers know it better and know how to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability, can they put autonomous leaning ability in their teaching objectives and find ways to help students.

Thirdly, Students should realize the importance of autonomous learning and understand new learning modes in current university and life-long learning in our society. They should learn to plan their learning goals and plan, use different learning strategies and learn how to evaluate their learning.[9]

5.3. Limitation and suggestion

This research just explored the overall level of autonomous English learning ability of students in private universities and development of autonomous English learning ability in three years but didn't probe the reasons why it is like this and why there is a fall-rise tendency of autonomous English learning ability. In the future study, it is necessary to find why autonomous English learning ability of students in

private universities is at medium level and why it falls in the second year and then rise in the third year.

Acknowledgement

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