Relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency of EFL learners: looking at the whole picture

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Introduction

The capacity to learn autonomously is necessary for most learners' in the globalized world (Benson, 2001; Derrick& Carr, 2003; Scharle& Szabo, 2000; Suharmanto, 2003), and learner autonomy has been considered one important educational goal of today (Benson& Huang, 2008; Ponton& Hall, 2003). Previous studies looking into the relationship between autonomy and English proficiency adopted constructs related to autonomy, inclyding self-efficacy (Myartawan, Latief and Suharmanto, 2013), motivation (Spratt et al., 2002), perceived responsibility (Spratt et al., 2002) or learning strategies (Ezzi, 2018). few of them measured learner autonomy using a scale encompassing the main constructs of autonomy, that is, motivation, metacognition, and learning strategies.

Though positive relationship can be observed between learning autonomy and English proficiency in previous research, the present study is the first of its kind to directly investigate learner autonomy with validated constructs. In addition, the study further examines the differences between high- and low-ability learners' learner autonomy in terms of the three constructs: motivation, metacognition and learning strategies.

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Literature review

1. Defining learner autonomy

The definitions of learning autonomy went through three stages: beginning, and divergence and convergence. Among them, Holec's (1981) definition of learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning"(p.3) was representative of the definitions at the beginning stage. In the 90s., researchers started to describe autonomy from various perspectives. Wenden (1991) initiated the stage of divergence by stressing on autonomous learners' strategy uses. Little(1991), on the other hand, argued that autonomy is "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision and independent action." In this sense, he introduced the notion of metacognition by describing autonomy as a capacity for making decisions and taking control of one's own cognitive process. Little (2001) later included motivation into the constructs by stating that autonomy "requires…a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others"(p.1). In a similar vein, Littlewood (1996) proposed two components in describing autonomy: ability and willingness, with learners' ability being determined on their knowledge and skills, and learners' willingness dependent on their motivation and confidence. In sum, researchers at the divergence stage attempted to define learner autonomy from various perspectives. Finally, in the 2000s, a more holistic definition of learner autonomy was proposed by researchers. Sinclair (2000), for instance, described autonomy as: a capacity which could be acquired and developed, a willingness to take responsibility, a kind of metacognitive ability, being variable in different contexts, and being interpreted differently in different cultures. Benson (2001) explained autonomy in language learning as including three levels of controls: control over learning management, control over cognitive process and control over learning content. It is clear from the endeavor to defining learner autonomy that the constructs of autonomy are multifaceted and rather complex in nature.

2. Learner autonomy in English proficiency

As stated by Benson (2001), the literature on learner autonomy, especially that on the relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency, still lacks empirical support. Thought limited, previous research into the relationship between

learner autonomy and English proficiency or performance has rendered positive results (Dafei, 2007; Sakai, 2009; Hashemian& Soureshajani, 2011; Ng, et al., 2011; Myartawan et al., 2013). That is, the higher learner autonomy is, the higher level of English proficiency will be. However, a closer examination on these studies revealed that most of them adopted tools of measurement which measured constructs related to learner autonomy rather than learner autonomy itself. Dafei (2007), for example, based their questionnaire on learning strategies drawn from Oxford (1990). Wenden (1998) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990). Sakai (2009) adopted a questionnaire composed of perceived responsibility (two sections) from Chu (2004) and English learning activities outside the class (one section) from Spratt et al.(2002). Myartawan et al.(2013) was one of the few studies which adopted a learner autonomy scale which was developed and validated with factor analysis. They used Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) developed by Macaskill & Taylor (2010), in which two factors: personal enjoyment about learning and independence in learning, were identified and included in the questionnaire. In light of the lack of empirical research grounded on validated scale of language learner autonomy, the present study adopted Huang and Wang's (2015) EFL Learner Autonomy Scale. In the scale, the factors appeared to be related to foreign language learner autonomy were included: motivation, learning strategies, and metacognition. Based on literature on the factors associated with learner autonomy, Huang and Wang (2015) identified motivation, strategy, metacognition, and perceived responsibility as the four possible components of learner autonomy. They then examined popular scales associated with the constructs of learner autonomy to construct their draft scale. Confirmatory analysis revealed motivation, strategy and metacognition as valid constructs of EFL learner autonomy. It is argued that perceived responsibility may not play a crucial role in formulating one's learner autonomy ability due to the leaning patterns of East Asian students, who have the tendency to accept teacher authority and take less learning responsibility (Huang and Wang, 2015).

2.1 Motivation

Motivation has been considered as an important element of autonomy since the late 80s (e.g. McCombs& Whisler, 1989; Skinner, Wellborn & Connell, 1990; Pintrich, Marx & Boyle, 1993). Little(1996) noted that learner autonomy needs "…

a positive attitude to the purpose, content and process of learning"(p. 204), which was later identified as motivation of learning. Researchers in the 90s have generally claimed that learner autonomy was associated with intrinsic motivation (e.g. Dickinson, 1995; Ushioda, 1996; van Lier, 1996). The millennium year saw increasing studies on the connection between motivation and learner autonomy (e.g. Spratt et al., 2002) and extrinsic motivation was included in discussing motivation (e.g. Oxford, 2003).

2.2 Learning strategies

Researchers have argued that learning strategies are essential in developing learner autonomy (Cotterall, 1995; Benson& Voller, 1997; Scharle & Szabo, 2000). According to Wenden (1991), "… autonomous learners are learners who… have acquired the learning strategies"(p. 15). Littlewood (1996) argued that autonomous learners usually have the ability to use appropriate learning strategies to become independent learners, which was supportive by several researchers (Breen & Mann, 1997; Yang, 1998; Holden & Usuki, 1999) In a similar vein, Oxford (2002) considered learning strategies to be language learners' tools to "pave the way toward greater…learner autonomy" (p. 372).

2.3 Metacognition

Little(1991) initiated the discussion on the connection between metacognition and learner autonomy by arguing that autonomy is "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision and independent action." Researchers later on also pointed out the improvement on metacognitive ability enhances learner autonomy (e.g. Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Miyuki, 2001). In addition, autonomous learners were learners who were able to plan, evaluate, and regulate their learning (Nunan, 1996; Breeen & Mann, 1997; Wenden, 1999; Rivers, 2001). Researchers in the 2000s further confirmed the place of metacognition in learner autonomy (Sinclair, 2000; Chan, 2001), Sinclair (2000), for example, argued that autonomous learners are able to make appropriate decisions and proper plans, and reflect on their own learning.

Research questions

Based on the literature review of the main constructs of learner autonomy as well as its relationship with English proficiency, the following research questions were raised:

1. What is the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency of EFL learners?
2. What are the differences between high-proficient and low-proficient learners' degree of learner autonomy in terms of motivation, metacognition and learning strategies?
3. What may be the factors underlying these differences in the context of Taiwan?

Method

Participants

74 eleventh-grade students from two intact classes of National Changhua Girls Senior High School participated in the study. The participants have eight years of formal English education experience. All of them are L1 Chinese, L2 English EFL learners.

Instruments

1. EFL Language Learning Autonomy Scale

A learner autonomy questionnaire will be developed by the researcher, including two parts. The first part elicits the participants' personal information regarding age, gender, pervious English learning experience, and the second part employs the EFL Language Learner Autonomy Scale (Henceforth referred to as EFL LLAS) developed by Huang and Wang (2015), which consists of 21 items encompassing three main constructs of learner autonomy: motivation, strategy and metacognition. A five-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree) was used for the items to measure the degree of agreement of the statements (see Appendix 1). The internal consistency was established using Cronbach's coefficient alpha (0.887) for the scale.

2. Standardized English Proficiency Test

An intermediate level of the GEPT (Henceforth referred to as General English Proficiency Test) will be used to access the participants' English proficiency. The GEPT consists of two sections: reading and listening. The reading and the listening section consist of 45 test items respectively. Students will be given 120 minutes to complete the test.

Procedure

To ensure the Chinese translation of the EFL LLAS was correct and precise for the participants, the translated LLAS scale was first piloted to a small group of eleventh-grade students (N=6). Wording was revised according to students' feedback. Informed consent from the participants were obtained prior to the study. The learner autonomy questionnaire were given to the participants, which took about 15 minutes, and was followed by the GEPT standardized test, which was approximately 120 minutes in length. The Participants were given a 10-minute break between the administration of the questionnaire and the standardized test.

Results

RQ1. What is the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency of high school EFL students?

Table 1 presents the scores of GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) and the EFL LLAS (learner autonomy scale). The GEPT scores ranged from 96 to 225 (SD=32.51), and the range of EFL LLAS was 51-101 (SD=11.04).

Table 1

The Descriptive Statistics of the GEPT and the EFL Language Learner Autonomy Scale

	N	*Min*	*Max*	*Mean*	*SD*
GEPT	74	96	225	181.69	32.51
EFL LLAS	74	51	101	78.93	11.04

Before carrying out the correlation analysis, scores obtained from the two intact classes were first analyzed using independent-samples t test. The results

showed that the two classes did not vary statistically significantly in GEPT scores (p =.047) and EFL LLAS scores (p =.067). Therefore, they could be put together for analysis. The scores of GEPT and EFL LLAS were then examined for normality. The results of the Kolmogorov-Simirnov statistics show normal distributions for both the GEPT and the EFL LLAS scores (p >.05). An visual inspection of the Q-Q plots for GEPT and EFL LLAS scores also appeared to show normal distributions. After confirming the normality of the two variables, a preliminary analysis for correlation was conducted by generating a scatterplot. The distribution of the data points suggests a positive correlation between GEPT and EFL LLAS scores (See figure 1). The scatterplot revealed several potential outliers which deviated from the main cluster. Due to the relatively small sample size (N=74), it was decided that these extreme points would be kept in the dataset. The treatment and interpretation of these outliers will be discussed further in the discussion section.

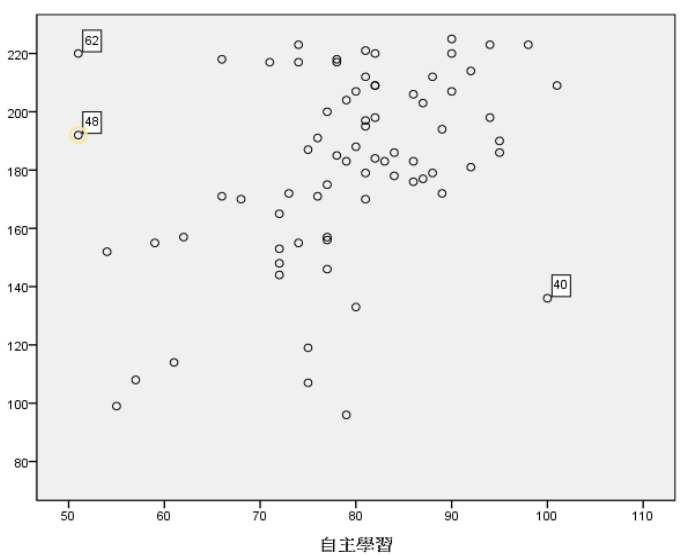

Figure 1. The scatterplot of GEPT and EFL LLAS scores

The results of the Pearson correlation test revealed a medium and significant correlation between GEPT and EFL LLAS scores (r =.382; p <.005). That is, the higher the degree of learner autonomy (as measured by EFL LLAS) is, the higher the English proficiency level is (as measured by GEPT).

RQ2. What are the differences between high-proficient and low-proficient learners' degree of learner autonomy in terms of motivation, metacognition and learning strategies?

To answer this question, students with scores less than 25% of all the scores were categorized into the low-proficient group, and those with scores greater than 75% of the all the scores were grouped into the high-proficient group. There was a total of 19 high-proficient and 18 low proficient learners. The two proficiency groups were then compared in terms of their overall EFL LLAS scores and the scores in the three main constructs: motivation, strategy and metacognition. The results of an independent-samples t-test yielded significant between-group differences in the overall EFL LLAS scores, $t(35)= 2.81$, $p =.008$, motivation, $t(35)=2.37= p=.023$, and metacognition, $t(35)= 4.19$, $p<0.001$. However, there was no significant between-group difference in the scores of strategy, $t(35)= 1.32$, $p =.196$. This showed that high proficient learners differed significantly in their EFL LLAS scores, motivation and metacognition from their low-proficient counterparts, while the strategy use for both groups were not significantly different. A closer examination at the t value revealed that within the constructs of the EFL LLAS, high-proficient learners behaved most differently from low-proficient ones in metacognition, $t(35)=4.19$, followed by motivation, $t(35)=2.37$, and strategy use, $t(35)=1.32$. Table 2 shows a summary of the independent-samples t-test.

Table 2
Main Effect of Proficiency Group in EFL LLAS

	M		*SD*		*t*	*p*
	H	L	H	L		
LLAS scores	81.74	71.00	11.84	11.39	2.81	**
Motivation	28.84	25.50	4.62	3.90	2.37	*
Strategy	25.26	23.06	5.90	4.07	1.32	.196
Metacognition	27.63	22.44	2.95	4.46	4.19	***

Note: *$p<.05$, **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$; H= high-proficient group, L= low-proficient group

RQ3. What may be the factors underlying these differences in the context of Taiwan?

To explore the group differences in the two main constructs of learner autonomy(motivation and metacognition), each item was further analyzed in terms of its main effect of proficiency group. In addition, three participants from the high-proficient group (labelled H1, H2 and H3) and three from the low-proficient group (labelled L1, L2 and L3) received semi-structured interviews regarding their answers of the EFL LLAS questionnaire.

Motivation

Within the construct of motivation, the answers of item 4 ("*I enjoy learning English*", $t(35)=3.16$, $p=.003$), 5 ("*I hate English*", $t(35)=2.52$, $p=.016$), and 6 ("*To be honest, I have little desire to learn English*", $t(35)=3.13$, $p=.003$) were shown to be statistically significant different between the high- and low-proficient groups. This is in line with the results of the post-survey interview, which showed that the most notable difference in motivation between the two groups lies in their feelings and desire for learning English. High proficient learners are genuinely interested in learning English, and are willing to spend their free time learning English for fun largely due to successful experience in English, whereas low proficient-learners tend to be resistant to learning English due to previous experience of failure in English. As H3 and H2 both mentioned that the interviews, they have developed a sense of achievement in learning English since they were in elementary school, when they attended English cram schools and enjoyed the learning experience at that time. Apart from the requirement of the coursework, they both learned English for entertainment. "I sometimes watch movies with English subtitles and videos from *Voicetube*" H2 said. Similarly, H3 mentioned that she enjoys watching "American series with English subtitles, comic videos from *Youtube* and English memes." On the other hand, low-proficient learners seem to be passive in learning English due to the frustration accumulated over the years in learning English. L2, for example, mentioned that her dislike for memorizing English vocabulary words actually came from her unpleasant childhood experience. "My mom forced me to memorize ten English words every day for quite a long time when I was in elementary school, and I was not allowed to play unless I got it done. That's why I hate it so much." L2 said. L1 believed that a sense of frustration was the main reason why she did not

want to learning English. Though L1 did pretty well in English at junior high, she became overwhelmed by the large amount of new vocabulary words to be learned daily at senior high school, and was frustrated about her poor performance in the monthly exams at school. For L1, L2 and L3, they all recognized the importance and usefulness of English and had the desire to excel in this language. However, it seems that they have gradually developed "learned helplessness" after repeated experience of failure in learning English.

Metacognition

Under the construct of metacognition, the answers of item 17 ("I can accurately judge how well I understand English texts that I am reading", $t(35)= 3.028$, $p =.005$), 19 ("When reading English passages, I can identify important information", $t(35)= 6.481$, $p <.001$), 20 ("I can motivate myself to learn English when I need to", $t(35)= 3.005$, $p = .005$) and 21("I use different English-learning strategies according to different situations", $t(35) = 3.671$, $p = .001$) were found to be significant different between the two proficiency groups. The post-survey interview generally supported the results. For item 17, H1, H2 and H3 all mentioned that they considered being able to translate the English sentences into Chinese as a way for them to check their comprehension of the English text, while L2, and L3 were not very sure about how to verbalize their judgement of understanding of English texts. For item 21, H1 and H2 both explained in detail how their strategies for learning English had changed over the years as they entered senior high school. H2, for example, said she had become memorizing example sentences of the vocabulary words since senior high, since she believed it helped her remember the large number of new words required for college entrance exam better. In addition, to help memorize new words, she began to use vocabulary apps from which she played word games and learned new English words. This was very different from when she was in junior high, when all she did was finishing the English workbook. In contrast, low-proficient learners were not able to give such detailed explanation on the shifts in strategy use according to different situations. When asked about how she used different learning strategies, L1 simply replied "I don't really have strategies for learning English."

Discussion

The present study investigated the relationship between language learner autonomy and L2 English proficiency. The results showed that learner autonomy is positively correlated with English proficiency. This lends support to the previous studies reported by Dafei (2007), Sakai (2009), Hashemian & Soureshjani (2011), Ng et al. (2011) and Myartawan et al. (2013). The results indicated that learners with higher degree of learner autonomy has higher level of English proficiency, which also confirmed Little's (2007) and Benson's (2001) hypotheses that higher degree of learner autonomy will result in greater proficiency. In addition, the present study adopted the EFL LLAS, a scale measuring the three constructs of learner autonomy: motivation, strategy and metacognition. An examination of high- and low-proficient learners' differences in the three constructs of learner autonomy revealed that metacognition made the most significant differences between the two proficiency groups, whereas the between-group difference in strategy use was not significantly different. A post-survey interview with high- and low-proficient learners generally supports the quantitative findings. In addition, it is suggested that learners' previous experience in language learning may play an essential role in his/her motivation for learning the language. The results have several pedagogical implications. First, as suggested by previous research on the relationship between learner autonomy and L2 proficiency (Hashemian & Soureshjani, 2011；Myartawan et al., 2013), a profile of language learner autonomy should be developed at the beginning of the semester by the English teacher. The teacher can on the one hand have a big picture of the students' degree of learner autonomy and on the other plan his/her lessons based on the principles of developing learning autonomy, such as allowing students' to make decisions on the contents, procedures and modes of learning and providing them with chances to reflect on their learning progress. Second, as indicated by the three constructs of learner autonomy in the present study, the English teacher can further diagnose students' difficulties in learning English and help them tackle these problems. For low-proficient learners in particular, they may need additional support of metacognitive knowledge in language learning based on the results of the current study. Finally, as advocated by Cotterall (2000), the development of learner autonomy should also be implemented at the curriculum level, with textbooks being

reevaluated and course syllabi being redesigned in order to better accommodate the need for autonomy development.

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency, and how high- and low-proficient learners exhibited different patterns of learner autonomy. The results indicated a positive relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency. Furthermore, high- and low- proficient groups were significantly different in terms of motivation and metacognition but not strategy. Given the results of the study, some suggestions are made for pedagogy and future research. First, teachers should pay more attention to students' learner autonomy at the beginning of the semester and use the EFL learner autonomy scale as a reference to locate the potential difficulties in language learning. Second, at the curriculum level, course books and syllabi should be reconsidered in terms of developing students' learning autonomy. Last but not least, the present study can be extended in several ways. Future research can: (1) look into how learner autonomy can be served as a predictor of English proficiency by constructing a linear regression model, (2) incorporate larger sample size, and (3) possibly conduct intervention studies in enhancing motivation, instructing learning strategies and developing metacognitive competence based on the results of learners' EFL LLAS.

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Appendix One: EFL Language Learner Autonomy Scale

親愛的同學您好:

本問卷是要瞭解您「學習英文的方法與感受」。請仔細閱讀每一項敘述，並依據自己的實際感受圈選同意程度。

本問卷僅作為學術研究之用並非測驗，答案並無對錯，也不影響您的學校成績。問卷中填寫的資料都將嚴加保密。請您在做完後，仔細檢查一次，確定沒有遺漏的地方。如果有任何問題，歡迎與我聯繫。感謝您的協助!

祝

學業進步

國立彰化師範大學 英語學系博士班

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壹、 基本資料

姓名_____班級_____座號_____

性別□男 □女

年級□一年級 □二年級 □三年級

貳、問卷內容

請您依<u>實際感受</u>每題圈選一個數字:

	非常同意	同意	沒意見	不同意	非常不同意
1. 可以的話，我希望我的英文成績比班上大多數同學好。……	5	4	3	2	1
2. 在英文課裡，最令我滿足的事情就是盡可能把課程內容了解透徹。……	5	4	3	2	1
3. 我認為學英文對我是有用處的。……	5	4	3	2	1
4. 我真的很享受學英文。……	5	4	3	2	1
5. 我討厭英文。……	5	4	3	2	1
6. 老實說，我真的不太想學英文。……	5	4	3	2	1
7. 當我在英文課上有不懂的地方，我會問其他人。……	5	4	3	2	1
8. 在研讀英文課文時，我會列出大綱來幫助理解。……	5	4	3	2	1
9. 在研讀英文時，我會一而再、再而三的閱讀課堂筆記和課文。……	5	4	3	2	1
10. 我會條列出英文課上學到的字詞以幫助自己記下這些字詞。……	5	4	3	2	1
11. 我通常會在一個讓我能專心唸書的地方讀英文。……	5	4	3	2	1
12. 我會善用我讀英文的時間。……	5	4	3	2	1
13. 我會問英文老師或同學來釐清一些我不太理解的概念。……	5	4	3	2	1
14. 在英文考試前，我總會找時間複習我的筆記或課文。……	5	4	3	2	1
15. 我會定期問自己我目前英文學得好不好。……	5	4	3	2	1
16. 當回答一個英文問題時，我會刻意將注意力放在問題的重點。……	5	4	3	2	1
17. 我能判斷自己對於正在閱讀的英文文章，到底了解多少。……	5	4	3	2	1
18. 我會規畫我讀英文的時間以盡可能完成我的學習目標。……	5	4	3	2	1
19. 在讀英文文章時，我能辨認重要的訊息。……	5	4	3	2	1
20. 當我需要時，我能激勵自己去學英文。……	5	4	3	2	1
21. 我會根據不同的情況需要，使用不同的策略來學英文。……	5	4	3	2	1

☺ 問卷到此結束‧請檢查一下是否有漏答 ☺

☺ 祝福您學業進步‧感謝您的配合 ☺