

# A Literature Review on English Autonomous Learning in China in the Past Ten Years

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**Abstract:** After the concept of autonomous learning was introduced into the field of foreign language teaching, it has attracted extensive attention from foreign language scholars at home and abroad. More and more researchers have begun to conduct research on English autonomous learning, and have achieved a lot of results. This paper mainly reviews the research results of English autonomous learning in China in the past ten years, and finds that the research objects are diverse, and mainly focus on undergraduates. The proportion of empirical research is basically the same as that of non-empirical research. This paper mainly summarizes the influencing factors and training methods of English autonomous learning, and reflects on and looks forward to the problems existing in related research, in order to promote the further development of English autonomous learning in the field of foreign language teaching in China.

**Keywords:** English autonomous learning; literature review; in the past ten years in China

From the perspective of lifelong learning, school education cannot provide the individual with knowledge and skills sufficient to support their lifelong social practice, and only by cultivating the learning psychology and habits of the educated can they develop the ability to update their own knowledge. The ability to learn independently is the proper

meaning of the ability to update self-knowledge. In the field of foreign language education, the Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) and the National Standards for the Teaching Quality Chinese of Foreign Language and Literature promulgated by the Ministry of Education in 2018. All of them put forward clear



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requirements for students' independent learning ability of foreign language, which has become an important direction for the development of foreign language education in China. The systematic study of foreign language autonomous learning began in 1981 with the publication of "Autonomous Learning and Foreign Language Learning", in which Henri Holec first introduced the concept of autonomous learning into the field of foreign language teaching. It proposes "learner autonomy", that is, "the ability to be responsible for one's own learning", which specifically includes determining learning objectives and content, choosing learning methods, self-monitoring and evaluation of learning outcomes, etc. In the 90s of the 20th century, the research results related to foreign language autonomous learning were introduced into China, and domestic researchers carried out useful explorations on the related research of foreign language autonomous learning (especially English autonomous learning). A wealth of research results have been formed.

At the beginning of the 21st century, researchers such as Pang Weiguo, Gao Jili, and Yin Huadong systematically summarized and reflected on the research results in this field, presenting the current research status of this field at the end of the 20th century and even the first 12 years of the 21st century. Yin Huadong found that the proportion of non-empirical research in the relevant studies before 2012 was too large, and there were some problems, such as the small proportion of empirical research, the uneven distribution of research objects, and the lack of in-depth discussion of related issues of autonomous learning. In the past ten years from 2013 to the present, what are the new characteristics of the research on English autonomous learning? The literature search time is set from 2013 to 2022, and the literature is searched in CNKI with the title of "autonomous learning" or "learner autonomy", "autonomous learning" or "learning autonomy" and "English" as the keyword. As of September 2022, a total of 188 relevant core journal papers were retrieved, 39 book reviews and other articles were deleted, and 149 research articles were finally obtained. Through the review and reflection of 149 literatures, this paper attempts to present the research progress in the field of English autonomous learning in China in the past ten years, and grasp the new trends and characteristics in this field.

## **1. Research characteristics of English autonomous learning**

Through a systematic review of the research results of English autonomous learning in China in the past ten years, it is not difficult to see that domestic autonomous learning research has not yet completely broken through the trap pointed out by Yin Huadong, but its research objects, research methods, research content have shown new characteristics. First, from the perspective of research objects, the characteristics of domestic research on English autonomous learning are becoming more and more prominent, but there are great differences in the attention between research object groups. Undergraduate students are the key research objects of English autonomous learning, accounting for 77%, while middle school students, higher vocational students, graduate students, teachers and other groups have been involved in research, however, they have not received special attention, accounting for less than 10% of the total number of studies. Second, from the perspective of research methods, there are 73 empirical studies on English autonomous learning, accounting for about 49% of the total. Among them, 54 were qualitative studies, 1 was quantitative research, and 18 were mixed studies. A total of 76 non-empirical studies were published, accounting for about 51% of the total. This result is different from the findings of Yin Huadong, who found that only 23% of the relevant results of core journals in China from 1979 to 2012 were empirical research, and 77% were non-empirical research. It can be seen that the proportion of empirical studies on English autonomous learning has increased in the past decade, and the research conclusions are more reliable. Thirdly, from the perspective of research content, the research on English autonomous learning mainly focuses on two aspects. On the one hand, this paper explores the factors that affect students' English autonomous learning from the perspective of why. On the other hand, we will discuss various ways to improve students' autonomous learning ability from the angle of how.

## **2. Influencing factors of English autonomous learning**

At present, the research on the influencing factors of English autonomous learning is mainly elaborated from two aspects: internal and external factors.

## 2.1 Internal factors of English autonomous learning

### 2.1.1 Learner characteristics

Factors such as learner gender, English proficiency, and digital literacy all have an impact on English autonomous learning. Wei Zhirong et al. <sup>[5]</sup> argue that the autonomous learning ability of higher vocational English majors will affect them in terms of gender and different English proficiency. Zhang Rui <sup>[6]</sup> pointed out that students' personality traits also affect autonomous learning, perseverance and independence have a positive impact on English autonomous learning, and short-sightedness and vulnerability have a negative impact. With the widespread use of digital technology and digital tools, learners need to have a certain level of digital literacy, that is, the ability to acquire, understand, and integrate digital information. Hua Weifen found that students' digital literacy was positively correlated with their autonomous learning ability, indicating that the improvement of digital literacy is helpful to promote students' autonomous learning.

### 2.1.2 Learner psychology

The development of learners' English autonomous learning is often inseparable from their internal psychological activities. Li Banban and Xu Jinfen believe that learning motivation, achievement goal orientation, attribution methods, learning strategies, and self-efficacy are all factors that affect students' autonomous learning.

### 2.1.3 Learner strategy use

Learning strategies are a way for learners to achieve effective learning. Xu Jinfen and Li Banban found that metacognitive strategies, compensation strategies, and memory strategies all have significant predictive power on autonomous learning ability. Therefore, learning strategies are an important part of the concept of autonomous learning, and the effective use of strategies is the key to cultivating students' autonomous learning ability.

## 2.2 External factors of English autonomous learning

### 2.2.1 Teaching methods

Traditional teaching methods can no longer meet the needs of modern students, and the continued use of lecture methods will seriously restrict students' thinking and is not conducive to students' independent learning. Therefore, teachers should change their teaching methods in a timely manner, break with tradition, and

be student-centered.

### 2.2.2 Classroom environment

The classroom environment is not only the teacher's teaching and the learning environment provided by the teacher, but also the students' classroom learning behavior and peer relationships. Li Guangfeng and Guo Fangfang <sup>[10]</sup> believe that the classroom environment is an important factor affecting autonomous learning. "Teacher's teaching" and "students' learning" are two important factors in the classroom environment that have a significant positive impact on English autonomous learning. She pointed out that the synergy of teaching and learning in a classroom environment is more conducive to students' autonomous learning.

### 2.2.3 Learning peers and learning communities

Cooperative learning is a form of learning in which students have a clear division of labor to accomplish a common task. Xu Jinfen <sup>[11]</sup> found that cooperative learning among peers can effectively promote autonomous learning in a 14-week experiment of cooperative learning outside of the classroom. The essence of a learning community is cooperative learning, and it is also a way for learners to rely on each other, communicate and collaborate with others to complete a task. Bai Guiqin <sup>[12]</sup> believes that learning communities have a great correlation with autonomous learning, and have a positive effect on the cultivation of students' autonomous learning awareness.

### 2.2.4 Teacher factor

Teachers play a pivotal role in the process of students' autonomous learning. Some researchers have found that teachers' beliefs about students' autonomous learning are disconnected from their actual teaching behaviors. They found that university English teachers agreed that the concept of autonomous learning was important, but that they were vague about how to implement it. Therefore, teachers play a very important role, and Zhu Minhua et al. <sup>[13]</sup> believe that teachers should act as resource providers and guides, collaborators, judges, and more for students. Through the transformation of different roles, students are guided to learn independently.

## 3. Cultivation of English autonomous learning ability

At present, there are a lot of research results on the

cultivation of English autonomous learning ability, and researchers have discussed it in a practical or critical way.

### **3.1 Reforming the teaching mode and stimulating the independent learning ability**

In order to cultivate students' English autonomous learning ability, some researchers have launched discussions to find the best teaching mode. Some researchers have conducted research in the form of teaching experiments. Although some researchers have not practiced it, they theoretically believe that the autonomous learning model is feasible and effective. Although the names of the teaching models proposed by the researchers are different, they generally have the following characteristics: learner-centered; With the support of modern information technology, the learning resources are rich and diverse; Pay attention to students' personalized and active learning; Pay attention to teacher-student interaction and peer-to-peer cooperative learning; Diversification of evaluation methods, etc.

### **3.2 Training learning strategies to enhance autonomous learning ability**

The content of the five aspects of autonomous learning proposed by Holec is basically consistent with the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of metacognitive strategies, so Chen Hongyu should integrate the training of metacognitive awareness and metacognitive strategies into English teaching. She believes that in teaching, we should first cultivate students' metacognitive awareness and develop the habit of using metacognitive strategies. Secondly, it helps students to clarify the appropriate English learning goals and formulate corresponding learning plans to avoid students learning blindly. In addition, it enhances students' monitoring ability and effectively manages and regulates their own learning process. Finally, students should learn to objectively evaluate the learning effect, reflect on and improve their own shortcomings, and improve their autonomous learning ability.

### **3.3 Improving evaluation methods and promoting autonomous learning ability**

Traditional one-off assessments only focus on students' final academic performance to reflect their learning effectiveness, so they are not effective in promoting

students' autonomous learning. Formative evaluation and process evaluation always pay attention to the process results of students' learning and development, and can make timely judgments and corrections on their learning quality. Therefore, in the future teaching, teachers should pay attention to the diversification of evaluation methods, not only to the final learning effectiveness of students, but also to their development at all stages, promote the development of autonomous learning awareness and ability.

### **3.4 Establishing autonomous learning centers and cultivating autonomous learning ability**

The autonomous learning center is the main place for the formation of students' autonomous learning ability, and generally needs to have two basic functions: first, it can provide learners with places and resources for independent learning to meet their personalized learning; Second, teachers can help learners master learning strategies, learn to reflect, and develop their autonomous learning skills. With the development of information technology, there are more and more platforms for autonomous learning on English networks, but there are also many problems, such as the content presented is not systematic enough, the pertinence is low, the lack of experience and the feedback is not effective. In response to such problems, researchers have conceived some online autonomous learning center constructions, aiming to provide learners with a good learning experience and achieve personalized learning.

## **4. Reflections and prospects on domestic and foreign languages autonomous learning**

The study found that in the past ten years, there have been a lot of research results related to English autonomous learning in China. In terms of research objects, the research groups are diverse, and in addition to undergraduates, the English autonomous learning of students in other grades has also received a certain degree of attention. The increase in the proportion of empirical research results in research methods indicates that researchers are beginning to adopt more convincing ways to explore the related issues of autonomous learning. A large number of studies have been carried out on the influencing factors and training pathways of autonomous learning. It is undeniable that the research on English autonomous learning in China

still needs to be further strengthened in some aspects. First, more attention should be paid to the research of secondary school students, vocational students and graduate students, and to the vertical development of their autonomous learning ability. In recent years, the research on English autonomous learning in China has mainly focused on undergraduates, while the research on students in other grades is very limited. Therefore, more attention should be paid to the research of students in other grades except for undergraduates. In addition, some studies only focus on learners' autonomous learning ability in a specific period, and few researchers conduct studies from a longitudinal perspective. Therefore, researchers can conduct retrospective and continuous studies on their autonomous learning to explore the changes in their English autonomous learning ability. Second, it is necessary to increase the proportion of empirical research and pay attention to the use of mixed research methods. In the past decade, the proportion of empirical research and non-empirical research in English autonomous learning research has been basically the same. Due to the lack of convincing power of non-empirical research, for example, at the level of autonomous learning ability training, some researchers have not yet carried out practical exploration, and only theoretically believe that a certain method is feasible. This makes the corresponding measures unconvincing and unreliable. In addition, a large number of empirical studies only use qualitative research methods, ignoring the use of quantitative research methods, which makes the research results unreliable. Therefore, in future research, researchers should continue to use empirical research methods and adopt quantitative research methods as much as possible to make the research results more comprehensive. Thirdly, there is still a gap between the research on the influencing factors of English autonomous learning and the research on the cultivation pathway, so it is necessary to combine the two studies. At present, the research on English autonomous learning mainly focuses on two aspects: influencing factors and training pathways, among which the cultivation pathways are only discussed from the perspective of some influencing factors, and there is no one-to-one correspondence between them, and there is a certain gap between the two. This requires researchers to effectively cultivate from all angles of

influencing factors. For example, research on how teachers can play multiple roles to promote student autonomous learning; Cultivate learners' autonomous learning ability based on their characteristics, mental activities, etc. Therefore, future research can focus on exploring from these perspectives, so as to make the research on English autonomous learning comprehensive and systematic.

## Conclusions

Through the collation and review of the research related to English autonomous learning in China in the past ten years, the author analyzes and summarizes the research on autonomous learning from the perspectives of research methods, research objects and research contents, and sorts out and reflects on some problems existing in the existing research. It is expected that future researchers will achieve new breakthroughs in this field as soon as possible.

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