

Abstract of PhD thesis

**AUTONOMY, AGENCY AND IDENTITY
IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING**

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2008

This study is an in-depth investigation of the long-term development of autonomy among students in a particular social and institutional context. Adopting an “insider” (learner and teacher) perspective, the study addresses two broad questions: (1) How do students develop their autonomy within the long-term process of EFL and TEFL learning? (2) What is the relationship among agency, identity, and autonomy in the two processes of EFL and TEFL learning in the Chinese EFL context? The research followed an interpretative-qualitative paradigm, and used some of the principles of the “grounded theory” research framework in conceptualizing research problems and in analyzing data to allow important categories and concepts to emerge naturally. Major research participants were English majors in a four-year BA TEFL degree programme in a non-prestigious teacher-education university in mainland China. Data sources included learners’ autobiographical accounts, interviews focusing on learner experiences, observation, documents, and fieldnotes.

Through examining the general characteristics and patterns within the long-term development of autonomy among the students, the current enquiry put under close scrutiny a number of fundamental issues in the field of autonomy in foreign language education, such as reactive autonomy in relation to proactive autonomy, personal autonomy in relation to learner autonomy, other control in relation to self control in the “multi-control model” of autonomy, and also issues of autonomy in the transition from foreign language learning to foreign language teaching. Findings and insights regarding these issues contribute to our understanding of how students go through a transition from more reactive autonomy to more proactive autonomy over the four years in university, and also connect students’ foreign language learning and their long-term development of autonomy to their larger life circumstances and goals. Previous research seldom explores the relationship among the interrelated concepts of identity, agency and autonomy in a rather explicit way. Bringing the more “describable” concepts of identity and agency (and the related issue of learner agendas) to bear on the development of autonomy in foreign language learning and teaching, the research has demonstrated that agency and autonomy are better treated as distinct, though interrelated complex concepts. It is argued that

these three constructs of identity, agency and autonomy should not be understood as any one contributing only one way to another but interact with each other in a complex way; and that identity conceptualization and construction may be both an origin (through agency) and an outcome of autonomy in EFL learning. It is suggested that for individuals in a homogeneous context, it is the combined work of self-identity, agency and agenda that substantially explains their differences in the development of autonomy in the long run. The thesis also offers recommendations about appropriate approaches to the development of autonomy in the Chinese EFL context, and closes with a call for long-term research on the complex notion of autonomy in line with the long-term development view of autonomy adopted in the study.