

## **Chinese University EFL Students' Perceptions of Learner Autonomy in Language Learning**

**Qiwei Wei**

Corresponding author (jokerwei@163.com)

School of Foreign Languages,  
Suranaree University of Technology and  
Qiannan Normal University for Nationalities  
Duyun, 558000, P. R. China

**Peerasak Siriyothin**

School of Foreign Languages,  
Suranaree University of Technology  
Nakhon Ratchasima 30000, Thailand

**Andrew-Peter Lian**

School of Foreign Languages,  
Suranaree University of Technology and University of Canberra,  
City, Country: Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand, and Canberra, Australia

### **Abstract**

This paper explores Chinese university EFL students' perceptions of learner autonomy in language learning through a digital storytelling intervention. The survey aims to investigate whether students' learner autonomy was developed through the intervention and compared the perceptions of students of two different language performance levels. The principal measuring instruments were a questionnaire, a pretest, a posttest and student diaries. The results of the survey indicated that students' learner autonomy was developed to some extent through the intervention and that there were significant differences between successful and less successful learners, as regards their opinions of learner autonomy. It is worth noting that after the intervention, a large proportion of students were in favor of autonomous approaches than before. A significant number of students expressed the desire, in their diaries, to work autonomously rather than study passively. The survey reflects that success is related to autonomy. Autonomy therefore means success. Success is created by autonomy and vice versa.

**Keywords:** Chinese university EFL learners; learner autonomy; learners' perceptions; digital storytelling

### **Introduction**

The traditional teacher-centered approach to Chinese EFL learning has caused the "deaf and dumb" English phenomenon that is prevalent in China.

Although the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) has invested heavily in integrating computers and technology with all areas of learning, the researchers have noticed that

teachers and students, in general, struggle to incorporate computer applications into regular classroom instructional practices to enhance learning because of ineffective and inappropriate training as well as a lack of vision as to how technology can improve learning. It thus often happens in authentic situations that technology-based approaches would give some sort of challenge to the teachers and students because they have never been introduced to these activities (Pritchard, 2004). In addition, in the less developed provinces, few previous studies have examined the potential of computer-supported project-based learning as a specific autonomous activity. The impact of new technologies in educational contexts has been mostly positive as new technologies have given educators the opportunity to enhance their knowledge, skills, and therefore enhance the standard of education. However, great things come from people – not machines (Lian, 2004). People's perceptions guide their actions and their actions in return affect their perceptions. Therefore, it is necessary to

explore whether students' learner autonomy can be developed through an intervention of technology-enhanced learning activities. Moreover, it is also of great importance to investigate whether students of different language performance levels have different perceptions of learner autonomy. The present study hereby aims to investigate students' perceptions of learner autonomy in language learning in the context of a Chinese university.

### **Research questions**

The purpose of this study is to investigate Chinese university EFL students' perceptions of learner autonomy in language learning and whether students of different language performance levels apply learner autonomy differently. In accordance with the purpose of the study, the following research questions were proposed: Can students' learner autonomy be developed through a digital storytelling intervention? Are there any differences between successful and less successful learners, as regards their perceptions of learner autonomy?

### **Literature review**

There exists some disagreement on the definition of learner autonomy, especially on its details. However, there exists a general agreement on a definition first introduced in a project report to the council of Europe: *autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning* (Holec, 1981). Dryden (2010) defines autonomy as an individual's capacity for self-determination or self-governance. According to Benson (2013), autonomy can be defined as the capacity to take charge of one's own learning and the ability of learners to control their own learning. Littlewood (1996) emphasized that students' willingness to act independently depends on the level of their

motivation and confidence. Students' ability to act independently depends on the level of their knowledge and skills. The key principle of learner autonomy is the emphasis on the role of the learner rather than the role of the teacher. In an autonomous language classroom teachers do not play the role of transmitters of information but manage the activities in the classroom and maintain learning environment that encourage learners to view learning as a lifelong process (Lowes & Target, 1998; Jacobs & Farrell, 2001). Nevertheless, it does not mean the disappearance of the teacher but a role for the teacher as advisor and resource person

and as a counselor for developing the necessary autonomy (Lian, 2014). So, the purpose of learner autonomy research is to help students to take control over their learning (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Pemberson et al.1996; Benson, 2013). Educational researcher Dr. Sugata Mitra's "Hole in the Wall" experiments have shown that, in the absence of supervision or formal teaching, children can teach themselves and each other, if they're motivated by curiosity and peer interest (Mitra, 2013). Thus it can be said that the fostering of learner independence beginning in a class room environment can very well be extended beyond it (Najeeb, 2013). Different perspectives seem to be supported by different theoretical assumptions. The technical perspective focuses on the physical settings of learning; the psychological orientation cares more about the mental attributes that permit autonomy; the political or critical perspective concentrates on issues of power and control, while the socio-cultural perspective has a main interest in the roles of interaction and social participation in the development of learner autonomy. Palfreyman (2003) claims that in real educational settings such perspectives are not black-and-white alternatives. In short, what learner autonomy means to teachers and students remains largely unstudied, especially in the context of the Chinese university.

Learner autonomy in language learning can be investigated through different models of technology-enhanced learning. Traditionally, the teacher has always been the center of the language teaching class. However, nowadays, teaching style in classroom has changed from being lecture-based to being project-based (Thomas, 2000), where students become the center of learning. Güven (2014) states that

project-based learning could be used as a means to guide learners to advance towards autonomous learning through experiencing and solving real world problems. Shih et al. (2010) further reveals that project-based learning could be a student-centered learning model to promote the learning achievement of students because students learned by doing it themselves. Moreover, Pedersen and Liu (2002) point out that technology can play an important role in facilitating project-based learning by enhancing students' interest and supporting information-gathering and presentation. Rattanathavorn (2014) also showed that project-based learning helped motivate learner autonomy successfully. Moreover, from the interviews, it was found that the students in the experimental group enjoyed the project-based learning activity and thought it helpful because of the digital-storytelling aspect (Hung et al., 2012). It is therefore reasonable to attribute the success of the project-based learning approach implemented here to digital-storytelling activity since it provides not only an interesting way for the students to present their findings, but also an opportunity for them to conduct active learning and organize their knowledge. However, learner autonomy is a broad area. It not only encompasses the classroom situations but also the out-of-class situations. Regarding the contexts in which it is applied. As a particular activity of learner autonomy, a digital storytelling intervention used as a project-based learning was thus applied in this study to investigate students' perceptions of learner autonomy. It is important to explore the different perceptions of learners in language learning because no two learners are alike and individualization needs individualized support to maximize learning outcomes

(Lian & Sangarun 2017). To explore the different perceptions of EFL learners is thus to investigate their essential characteristic of precision (language) education which is the desire to access information that is as

detailed and accurate as possible about learner characteristics and performances in order to initiate the most effective intervention in support of the students' learning efforts (Lian & Sangarun 2017).

### **Participants**

The main focus of the present study was a survey conducted to explore Chinese university EFL students' perceptions of learner autonomy in language learning through a digital storytelling intervention in Qiannan Normal University for Nationalities. The survey aims to investigate whether students' learner autonomy was developed through the intervention and compared the perceptions of students of two different language performance levels. The survey was done on the basis of a 12-week digital storytelling intervention in an English speaking course. The intervention was necessary because as a project-based learning activity digital storytelling would help to detect students' perceptions of learner autonomy. The entire population for this study consisted of 100 English major undergraduates from two intact classes of EFL students that were taught by the same teacher. Both classes were in their second year of study in the School of Foreign Languages in Qiannan Normal University for Nationalities. As the number of students was manageable, the entire population participated in this study and selecting a representative sample was not necessary. All participants had studied English for a minimum of 11 years. They were homogeneous in terms of their levels of speaking skills. The reason that the researchers chose second-year undergraduate students to be participants in this study was that they had been in university for one year and had become used

### **Methods**

to the teacher's teaching method and had learned to be independent somehow in study and might have looked for some autonomous learning methods to improve their English speaking skills, which was suitable for the present study.

### **Instruments**

Firstly, the two intact groups of students were randomly assigned as the control group and the experimental group. In order to determine whether there were significant differences between the groups before the experiment, the two groups of participants were pretested with the speaking test randomly selected from previous TEM4-Oral. The two speaking tests were of about the same difficulty level. The researcher randomly chose one as a pretest and the other as a posttest. Secondly, in order to investigate whether students' learner autonomy was developed through intervention of digital storytelling and whether there were any differences between two groups and two levels of learners as regards their perceptions of learner autonomy, a questionnaire of students' perceptions of learner autonomy was administered among the students of both control group and experimental group before and after the experiment.

In order to examine the population's perceptions of learner autonomy to check whether there were any differences found between successful and less successful learners and whether there were any differences found before and after the experiment, the questionnaire was adopted

with a slight change from Joshi (2011) who prepared the tools being based on the ideas of the researchers like Zhang and Li (2004), Lamb and Reinders (2008). Before the experiment, the population was given a questionnaire about learner autonomy with responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Agree' (5) to 'Strongly Disagree' (1) for each of 31 statements. Based on students' speaking scores from a speaking pretest, they were divided into two groups labelled as "successful" and "less successful" in order to get two different types of learner samples. After the experiment, the participants were then again divided into two "successful" and "less successful" groups on the basis of their scores in a posttest in order to check whether there were any changes after the digital storytelling intervention.

In order to get in-depth data about students' perceptions of autonomous activities, a qualitative method was employed. Each participant in both control group and experimental group was asked to keep a diary to record their learning time and other aspects about their learning to speak English in and out of class including their feelings of daily learning. It was hoped that data from the student diaries would provide the researchers with an overview and in-depth information about the students' opinions and reflections on the present study. Content analysis was used when qualitative data had been collected through the student diaries. Content analysis is a procedure for the categorization of verbal or behavioral data, for purposes of classification, summarization and tabulation (Taylor et al.,

2015). The qualitative data is analyzed thematically and describes a "live" picture of the situation since anthropological and ethnographic methods are used to study the participants rather than designing an experiment which artificially controls variables (Lowhorn, 2007).

### **Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data for the research questions relating to the autonomous activities that students engage in when learning English, whether students' learner autonomy was developed through a digital storytelling intervention and whether there were any differences found between successful and less successful learners, as regards their perceptions of learner autonomy, two groups of learners (successful, less successful) were identified based on their speaking test in pretest and the posttest scores respectively before and after the experiment in order to get two different types of learner samples. Descriptive statistics were used for summarizing data frequency. A Chi-square test was utilized to identify the tendency of the distribution of the questionnaire responses.

In order to strengthen the above quantitative data, qualitative data were collected and analyzed. All 100 students in both the experimental group and control group submitted their diaries. Information from the diaries were grouped, coded, and categorized to be reported as results. The aim of context analysis was to make sense of the data collected and to highlight the important messages, features or findings.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative findings**

Based on the pretest scores and posttest scores, two groups of learners (successful

and less successful) were identified in order to get two different types of learner samples.

The mean scores of pretest and posttest were 85.63 and 88.12 respectively as seen in the Table below.

**Table 1.**

**Mean Scores of Pretest and Posttest**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest scores	100	85.63	3.876
Posttest scores	100	88.12	4.372

**Table 2.**

**Distribution of Successful and Less Successful Learners**

Group	P-value	Tests	Mean	Number	Std. D
Experimental Group	0.001	Pretest	84.96	50	3.675
		Posttest	89.60	50	4.160
Control Group	0.084	Pretest	86.30	50	3.991
		Posttest	86.70	50	4.205

It was obvious that the experimental group improved much more than the control group as seen in Table 3. In the experimental group, the mean changed from 84.96 to 89.60, an increase of 4.6 (5.5%). In the control group, the mean changed from 86.30 to 86.70, an increase of 0.4 (0.5%). It was found in pretest that there was not a significant difference between the pretest means of the control group and the experimental group ( $p = 0.084$ ) but there was a significant difference between the

**Table 3.**

**Descriptive Statistics of Pre-post Tests**

Group	Successful		Less successful	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Control group	27	19	23	31
Experimental group	21	34	29	16
Total	48	53	52	47

This result indicates that two groups were at different level after the intervention in terms of English speaking performance. In other words, in the case of speaking performance, students in the experimental group performed better than those in the

As for the pretest, students getting a score above the mean score 85.63 were grouped as less successful level ( $N=52$ ). And for the posttest, students getting a score above the mean score 88.12 were grouped as successful level ( $N=53$ ) and students getting a score below the mean score 88.12 were grouped as less successful level ( $N=47$ ) as seen in Table 2.

posttest means of the experimental group and the control group ( $p = 0.001$ ). Initially, the control group was a bit ahead of the experimental group with means of 86.30 and 84.96 respectively. After the treatment, the experimental group had made up the difference with the control group and had overtaken it by a certain amount of margin. Specifically, the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group after the digital storytelling intervention.

control group in the posttest.

Before the experiment, the number of successful students and less successful students in control group was 27 and 23, in the experimental group 21 and 29. After the experiment, the number of successful

students and less successful students in control group was 19 and 31, in the experimental group 34 and 16 (Table 2). There were no significant differences in distributions of students' level between control group and experimental group ( $p = .230$ , as seen in Table 4) before the

experiment. This indicates that the number of successful learners and less successful learners was not very much different since they were from intact classes and had been under the same instruction in the course for English speaking

**Table 4.**  
**Differences in Speaking Level before Experiment**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.442 <sup>a</sup>	1	.230
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	1.002	1	.317
Likelihood Ratio	1.446	1	.229
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.428	1	.232
N of Valid Cases <sup>b</sup>	100		

However, after the experiment, there were significant differences in distributions of students' level between control group and experimental group ( $p = .003$ , Table 5). The total number of successful students in the posttest was 53 among which 34 were from the experimental group only 19 were from the control group. This indicates that

after the digital storytelling intervention experiment, there were more successful learners than less successful learners, especially in the experimental group, which again proved the effectiveness of application of digital storytelling intervention in the instruction of English speaking.

**Table 5.**  
**Differences in Speaking Level after Experiment**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.033 <sup>a</sup>	1	.003
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	7.868	1	.005
Likelihood Ratio	9.176	1	.002
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.942	1	.003
N of Valid Cases <sup>b</sup>	100		

Table 6 below shows the different level learners' perceptions of learner autonomy before the experiment. 9 out of 31 items

were found to be significantly different in the perceptions between successful and less successful learners.

**Table 6.**  
**Different Level Learners' Perceptions of LA before Experiment**

Learner Autonomy Perceptions	Level	Disagreement		Agreement	
		N	%	N	%
1. I think I have the ability to learn English well.	SL	30	62.6	15	31.3
	LSL	30	57.7	16	30.7
2. I make decisions and set goals of my learning.	SL	25	52.1	21	34.4
	LSL	26	50	17	32.7
7. I make notes and summaries of my lessons.	SL	7	14.6	37	77.1
	LSL	18	34.6	22	42.3
9. I practice English outside the class also such as: record my own voice; speak to other people in English.	SL	7	14.6	27	77.1
	LSL	9	17.3	38	53.9
14. I note my strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improve them.	SL	7	14.6	41	85.5
	LSL	8	15.3	34	65.4
15. I revise lessons and seek the reference books.	SL	11	23	33	68.8
	LSL	12	23.1	21	30.4
21. Students have to evaluate themselves to learn better.	SL	22	45.8	23	47.9
	LSL	28	53.9	16	30.8
22. Students should mostly study what has been mentioned under the course.	SL	30	62.6	15	31.3
	LSL	30	57.7	16	30.7
23. Students should build clear vision of their learning before learning English.	SL	25	52.1	21	43.7
	LSL	27	51.9	17	32.7

**Legend:** SL = Successful learners, LSL = Less successful learners, N = Number of responses, % = Responses in percentage

Specifically, Table 7 below shows the results of Chi-square test for different level learners' perceptions of learner autonomy before experiment. There was a significant difference between successful learners and less successful learners in terms of their opinions for 9 items among which 7 items (1, 2, 7, 15, 21, 22, and 23) show that there were more successful learners than less successful learners in their agreements of applying learner autonomy in learning English. Successful learners tended to believe that they had the ability to learn English well. They also tended to make decisions and set goals of their learning. They made notes and summaries of their lessons. They noted their strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improve them. They revised lessons and sought the reference books. Successful learners also tended to agree that they should build clear

vision of their learning before learning English, but less successful students tended to agree that they should mostly study what has been mentioned under the course because studying English in undergraduate course is actually for exam purpose. It is worth noting that there were 2 items among the 9 items which show significance in their perceptions of learner autonomy in an opposite way. In other words, there were fewer less successful learners than successful learners in their agreements of item 9 and item 14, i.e., fewer less successful learners agreed that they practiced English outside the class also such as: record their own voice; speak to other people in English. There were also fewer less successful learners agreeing that they noted their strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improved them.



**Table 7.**  
**Results of  $X^2$  Test for Participants' Perceptions of LA before Experiment**

Learner autonomy perceptions	$X^2$
1. I think I have the ability to learn English well.	10.929 <sup>**</sup>
2. I make decisions and set goals of my learning.	13.709 <sup>***</sup>
7. I make notes and summaries of my lessons.	17.031 <sup>***</sup>
9. I practice English outside the class also such as: record my own voice; speak to other people in English.	8.773 <sup>+</sup>
14. I note my strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improve them.	12.607 <sup>**</sup>
15. I revise lessons and seek the reference books.	13.699 <sup>***</sup>
21. Students have to evaluate themselves to learn better.	8.214 <sup>+</sup>
22. Students should mostly study what has been mentioned under the course.	10.929 <sup>**</sup>
23. Students should build clear vision of their learning before learning English.	14.935 <sup>***</sup>

$P^+ < .1$ ,  $P^* < .05$ ,  $P^{**} < .01$

After the 12-week-intervention, the questionnaire was administered again to discover the extent of learner autonomy development. After collecting the answers from the questionnaire, a Chi-square test was used to analyze in order to identify the tendency of the distribution of the questionnaire responses as seen in Table 9. To compare with the statistics of those before the experiment, the percentage of agreements in learner autonomy development was higher. More items showed significant differences between successful learners and less successful learners. Furthermore, the successful learners tended to agree that they applied more learner autonomy activities in English learning. Totally, there were 17 items that indicated a significant difference between successful learners and less successful learners in their perceptions of learner autonomy. The 17 items are as follows: 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 20,

and 31 as seen Table 8 and Table 9. Comparing two significantly different learner groups' behavior and perception is the researcher's original point. As found in the survey prior to the experiment, there were only 7 items of learner autonomy that were applied significantly different between successful learners and less successful learners, while after the experiment, however, there were more than twice as many items that show significant difference between successful learners and less successful learners. It is worth noting that the percentage of agreement of applying learner autonomy has raised to a higher number than that of prior to experiment.

Findings from participants' perceptions of learner autonomy indicate that students have developed learner autonomy to some extent. Successful learners have proved to apply more learner autonomy activities in learning, especially those in the experimental group

**Table 8.**  
**Different Level Learners' Perceptions of LA after Experiment**

Learner autonomy perceptions	Level	Disagreement		Agreement	
		N	%	N	%
1. I think I have the ability to learn English well.	SL	11	23	31	65
	LSL	25	48	19	37
2. I make decisions and set goals of my learning.	SL	6	10	37	77
	LSL	16	30	27	53
4. I preview before the class.	SL	9	19	36	75
	LSL	24	46	24	46
5. In the class, I try to use every opportunity to take part in the activities where and when I can speak in English.	SL	11	23	32	67
	LSL	26	50	20	39
6. I speak confidently in front of the people.	SL	7	15	39	81
	LSL	20	39	28	53
7. I make notes and summaries of my lessons.	SL	10	21	32	66
	LSL	22	42	20	39
8. I talk to the teachers and friends outside the class in English.	SL	6	15	37	77
	LSL	23	44	23	44
9. I practice English outside the class also such as: record my own voice; speak to other people in English.	SL	4	8	64	88
	LSL	12	23	32	61
10. I use library to improve my English.	SL	4	8	41	85
	LSL	18	35	30	56
12. I attend different seminars, training courses, conferences, to improve my English.	SL	28	15	39	81
	LSL	7	54	19	36
13. I take risk in learning the English language.	SL	10	21	34	69
	LSL	20	39	21	40
14. I note my strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improve them.	SL	5	10	41	86
	LSL	14	27	30	58
15. I revise lessons and seek the reference books.	SL	8	17	33	68
	LSL	15	29	21	41
18. I use internet and computers to study and improve English.	SL	3	6	39	81
	LSL	14	26	35	64
19. Students have to be responsible for finding their own ways of practicing English.	SL	6	13	36	74
	LSL	24	46	17	33
20. Students should use much self-study materials to learn English.	SL	8	17	38	79
	LSL	19	37	28	53
31. Teachers need to use their authority in teaching/learning.	SL	11	23	33	64
	LSL	24	46	23	44

**Legend:** SL = Successful learners, LSL = Less successful learners, N = Number of responses, % = Responses in percentage

**Table 9.**  
**Results of X<sup>2</sup> Test for Participants' Perceptions of LA after Experiment**

Learner autonomy perceptions	X <sup>2</sup>
1. I think I have the ability to learn English well.	8.869 <sup>+</sup>
2. I make decisions and set goals of my learning.	8.588 <sup>+</sup>
4. I preview before the class.	10.590 <sup>**</sup>
5. In the class, I try to use every opportunity to take part in the activities where and when I can speak in English.	10.063 <sup>*</sup>
6. I speak confidently in front of the people.	9.978 <sup>**</sup>
7. I make notes and summaries of my lessons.	10.833 <sup>**</sup>
8. I talk to the teachers and friends outside the class in English.	13.319 <sup>**</sup>
9. I practice English outside the class also such as: record my own voice; speak to other people in English.	12.025 <sup>*</sup>
10. I use library to improve my English.	11.475 <sup>**</sup>
12. I attend different seminars, training courses, conferences, to improve my English.	21.744 <sup>***</sup>
13. I take risk in learning the English language.	9.927 <sup>**</sup>
14. I note my strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improve them.	11.243 <sup>*</sup>
15. I revise lessons and seek the reference books.	10.132 <sup>**</sup>
18. I use internet and computers to study and improve English.	8.241 <sup>+</sup>
19. Students have to be responsible for finding their own ways of practicing English.	19.755 <sup>***</sup>
20. Students should use much self-study materials to learn English.	7.931 <sup>+</sup>
31. Teachers need to use their authority in teaching/learning.	8.119 <sup>+</sup>

P<sup>+</sup> <.1, P<sup>\*</sup> <.05, P<sup>\*\*</sup> <.01

### Qualitative findings

The data collected from the students' diaries strengthen the above quantitative data. As reported in the students' diaries, the length of time spent on practicing English speaking reported both in class and outside class in the control group, was also about 8.8 hours per week, which was a bit more than the time length (8.5 hours) reported by the students in the experimental group. That is, both the experimental group and the control group spent almost the same number of hours to learn to speak English. As in the case of the students in the control group, their study time varied from early morning to late at night.

However, their study places seemed to be limited to the classroom, the dormitory and the English corners on the campus while the students in the experimental group could choose to practice their speaking anywhere anytime anyhow and they depended more on the computers. Moreover, the content of the speaking exercises in the control group were limited to what they found in their speaking textbook and the training exercises prepared by their teacher. In a nutshell students in the experimental group were more autonomous and flexible than those in the controlled group.

The feelings of the students in the control group could, in general, be summarized, in their own words as “boring”, “cliché-ridden”, “stereotyped”, and “drowsy”. Thus, while time on task was not an issue as both groups gave the same amount of time to their English learning, students in the digital storytelling group accessed and produced more variety in their texts. Regarding their feelings for the digital

storytelling intervention, 95% of students used the words “new”, “challenging”, “amazing”, “different”, and “happy” to describe their feelings while preparing, creating and presenting their digital storytelling for practicing English speaking. Not a few number of students wanted to learn autonomously rather than to study passively as is found in their diaries.

### Discussion

The results of the study implied that learner autonomy is the fundamental theory for guiding successful EFL learners. Learner autonomy is one of the most important issues that determine whether individuals reach their potential or fall short of that potential. In other words, autonomous learning is more effective than non-autonomous learning. The finding of this study shows that the application of autonomous activities helped to improve learners' languages skills and successful learners tended to be more autonomous. The findings were consistent with Kim (2014). He found that learning through autonomous learning activities can be learner-centered to increase autonomy in oral proficiency. Kumaravadivelu (2006) also found that digital storytelling as an authentic means of expression promotes learner autonomy, as students reflect on their developing identities and their sense of who they are and how they relate to the world. Miller and Kim (2015) further explored that digital storytelling as a student-centered approach that validates learner autonomy can develop within learners the ability and desire to take initiative both in the classroom and outside.

The results also reflected that there was a misconception of learner autonomy in

language learning. Learner autonomy should not be misunderstood as self-instruction. It may be true that learners can follow a path of self-instruction and successfully may have acquired a high degree of learner autonomy. Some even assume that learner autonomy in the classroom means that the teacher transfers all control to the learners and thus becomes a redundant part of the learning process. Consequently, learner autonomy is often described as a new methodology. Learner autonomy as a new methodology, can enable students become readers and writers through applying digital storytelling into practice, which is consistent with Park (2014). He found that digital storytelling has a unique characteristic in that it has an interactive narrative structure made by the writer but produces another story, by changing the conclusion through making the narrative him/herself. This is also parallel with what Joshi (2011) states that learning can happen only if learners are willing to contribute, and only if they do. In a word, only when the students enrich themselves, encourage themselves, realize themselves and adjust themselves step by step during the teaching evaluation, can they reach the high efficiency of autonomous learning (Yan, 2012).



### Conclusion

The survey revealed that students' learner autonomy was developed through the intervention of digital storytelling to some extent. Students could plan and manage their study time and places better and more freely after the intervention. Data from the students' diaries revealed that students of experimental group had more freedom to choose their learning materials and they were happier to practice speaking English than those of control group. Students in both groups made progress in English speaking to a certain extent. However, the students in the experimental made more progress and they tended to enjoy utilizing more autonomous activities in learning English after the experiment. And there was significant differences found between successful and less successful learners, as regards their opinions of learner

autonomy. We can conclude that success is related to autonomy. Autonomy therefore means success. Success is created by autonomy or vice versa. If you are more autonomous then you become more successful, and when you are more successful, you become more autonomous. What came first? Success or autonomy? It's a chicken and egg situation.

In order to facilitate such further research, the researchers should be exposed to a variety of other contexts. For the purpose of refining the research findings, the researchers need to further investigate Chinese EFL learners' language competencies, perceptions of autonomy, and their relationships, and eventually discuss the results and implications in broader contexts.

### © Qiwei Wei, Peerasak Siriyothin & Andrew Lian

**Qiwei Wei** is a PhD student in English Language Studies in the School of Foreign Languages at Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand. Currently he is Director of Center for International Affairs and Professor of English Language and Literature at Qiannan Normal University for Nationalities. His research interests include Chinese Ethnic Minority Languages Studies and Learner Autonomy.

**Peerasak Siriyothin** is a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages at Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand. In 1987, he got his B.Ed. (English) from Srinakharinwirot University (Prasarnmitr), Thailand. In 1994, he earned his M.A. (Teaching English as a Second Language) from Pennsylvania State University, USA. In 1999, he received his Ph.D. (Educational Studies) from Ohio State University, U.S.A.

**Andrew Lian** specialises in the methodology of teaching foreign/second languages and has had a special interest in the uses of modern technology to enhance learning since the late 1970s. He is one of the pioneers of Technology-Enhanced Language-Learning in Australia. His current research interests are in the area of self-adjusting and self-organizing (language/culture-) learning environments based on rhizomatic approaches to (language/culture-) learning and the generation of personal learning environments within a 21st century perspective.

### References

- Benson, P. (2013). *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning*. Routledge.
- Dryden, J. (2010). Autonomy. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Güven, Z.Z. (2014). Project Based Learning: A Constructive Way toward Learner Autonomy. *International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching*, December / 2014
- Han, L. (2014). Teacher's role in developing learner autonomy: A literature review. *International Journal of English Language Teaching*, 1(2), 21.
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press
- Jacobs, G. M., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2001). Paradigm shift: Understanding and implementing change in second language education. *TESL-EJ*, 5, 1.
- Joshi, K. R. (2011). Learner perceptions and teacher beliefs about learner autonomy in language learning. *Journal of NELTA*, 16(1-2), 12-29.
- Kim, S. (2014). Developing autonomous learning for oral proficiency using digital storytelling. *Language Learning and Technology*, 18(2), 20-35.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (1993). Maximizing Learning Potential in the Communicative Classroom. *ELT Journal*, Vol.47, No.1, P12-21.
- Lian, A. -P. (2014). On-Demand Generation of Individualized Language Learning Lessons. *Journal of Science*, 9(1), 25-38.
- Lian, A.-P. (2004). Technology-enhanced language learning environments: A rhizomatic approach. *Computer-assisted language learning: Concepts, contexts and practices*, 1-20.
- Lian, A. -P., & Sangarun, P. (2017). Precision Language Education: A Glimpse Into a Possible Future. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, 17(4).
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Littlewood, W. (1996) 'Autonomy: an anatomy and a framework'. *System*, 24:4, 427-435.
- Lowes, R., & Target, F. (1998). *Helping students to learn: a guide to learner autonomy; [full of practical ideas, photocopyable activities, development tasks; jargon free]*. Richmond.
- Lowhorn, G. L. (2007). Qualitative and quantitative research: How to choose the best design. In *Academic Business World International Conference*. Nashville, Tennessee.
- Miller, J., & Kim, S. (2015). Digital Storytelling as an Integrated Approach to Second Language Learning and Teaching. *Language and Communication*, 4(3-4), 41-55.
- Park, H. (2014). Collaborative digital storytelling through sharing tool in second life. *Journal of Education and Human Development*, 3(2), 511-525.
- Palfreyman, D., & Smith, R. C. (2003). *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives*. Macmillan.
- Pedersen, S., & Liu, M. (2002). The transfer of problem-solving skills from a problem-based learning environment: The effect of modeling an expert's cognitive processes. *Journal of Research on Computing in Education*, 35(2), 303-320.
- Pemberson, R., Li, E. S.L., W.W.F., & Pierson, H.D. (Eds.). (1996). *Taking control: Autonomy in language*

- learning*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Pritchard, A. (2004). Introducing new students to ICT: Giving a purpose to it all. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 5(3), 248–262.
- Rattanathavorn, I. (2014). *Fostering ESL young learner autonomy through CALL and PBL*. Retrieved from: <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:c8uqsiKIC6AJ:www.siu.ac.th/research/20150807-02%2520SOLA-MTEIL-2014-05%2520Ittichai%2520Rattanathavorn.pdf+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=th>
- Reinders, H., & Lázaro, N. (2007). Current Approaches to Assessment in Self-Access Language Learning. *TESL-EJ*, 11(3), n3.
- Serra, S. O. (2000). Integrating a self-access system in a language learning institution. *Links & Letters*, (7), 095-109.
- Shih, J. L., Chuang, C. W., & Hwang, G. J. (2010). An inquiry-based mobile learning approach to enhancing social science learning effectiveness. *Educational Technology & Society*, 13(4), 50-62.
- Thomas, J. W. (2000). *A review of research on project-based learning*. San Rafael, California: The Autodesk Foundation.
- Yan, S. (2012). Teachers' roles in autonomous learning. *Journal of Sociological Research*, 3(2), 557-562.
- Zhang, L., & Li, X. (2004). A comparative study on learner autonomy between Chinese students and West European students. *Foreign Language World*, 24(4), 15-23.