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English Self-Efficacy and English Autonomous Learning Ability of Chinese College Students

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Abstract: English self-efficacy and English autonomous learning ability are two important influential factors on college English learning in China. This study aims to explore the English self-efficacy and autonomous learning ability of 386 undergraduate students in an application-oriented university in China and to reveal the relationship between them. It was found that students experienced a medium level of English self-efficacy but they did not sense they had the ability to complete tasks in English learning, that they reported a medium level of English autonomous learning ability but their abilities of using effective learning strategies and monitoring and applying the acquired knowledge have much space to be improved, and that there was a substantial association between the surveyed students' English self-efficacy and their English autonomous learning ability and students' English autonomous learning ability increases with improvement of their English self-efficacy. This article is intended to provide some insights on developing Chinese college students' English self-efficacy and autonomous learning ability so as to promote their English learning.

Keywords: College English Learning; English Self-Efficacy; English Autonomous Learning Ability.

1. Introduction

English as a world language is an important communication tool for human beings in the modern society. In China, English is a required course for students from primary school to college as cultivation of talents who can use English to accomplish job-related tasks, to broaden horizons, and to tell Chinese stories to the outside world is one of important objectives of education. However, the reality is that many students in Chinese colleges and universities are still not fully motivated to learn English. They lack confidence and strategies in learning English. Furthermore, they cannot learn English independently and effectively, and their English autonomous learning ability needs to be improved. Therefore, to facilitate college English learning in China, it is important to explore how to motivate students and improve their English autonomous learning effectiveness and efficiency. However, the study concerning the English self-efficacy and English autonomous learning ability of Chinese college students is insufficient, which leaves a research gap for the present study.

This study first explored the English self-efficacy and English autonomous learning ability of 386 Chinese undergraduate students from one application-oriented university in China by modifying the existing questionnaires and using a four-point Likert scale for measurement. It then revealed the relationship between students' English self-efficacy and English autonomous learning ability, followed by some suggestions to facilitate college English learning in China.

2. English Self-Efficacy and English Autonomous Learning Ability of Chinese College Students

This part discusses the current situation of English self-efficacy and English autonomous learning ability of Chinese college students based on the data from questionnaire survey. It also presents the relationship between English self-efficacy and English autonomous learning ability.

2.1. English Self-Efficacy of Chinese College Students

Self-efficacy is known as people's belief that they can perform certain tasks at certain levels of performance, which affects how learners choose their assignments, how much effort they put into them, and how persistent they are in completing them [1, 2]. Researchers have reported that learners' perception about self-efficacy on English language learning is essential to language learning, that self-efficacy in all aspects of language learning exerts positive influence on the overall success of EFL learners' English learning, and that the development of one aspect of self-efficacy might contribute to the overall of English learning [3, 4]. Based on Zhang's (2021) classification of English self-efficacy, this study investigated the English self-efficacy of Chinese college students from four scales: sense of ability to complete English tasks, confidence in achieving English learning goals, sense of competence in facing frustration in English learning, and perceived ability to overcome English difficulties [5].

It can be seen from Table 1 that students displayed a medium level of English self-efficacy as the composite mean of students' assessment on all indicators is 2.66, which is interpreted as agreement. Among them, confidence in achieving goals got the highest weighted mean of 2.89. The result is in consistency with the findings by Zhang and Yu (2010) whose study indicated that confidence in achieving goals in English language learning scored highest in the surveyed high school students' English self-efficacy [6]. Perceived ability to overcome difficulties ranked 2, with the weighted mean score of 2.66. Ranking 3 is sense of competence in facing frustration, with the weighted mean score of 2.62. All these three indicators were interpreted as agreement.

However, students did not sense they had the ability to complete tasks in English learning such as to answer difficult

questions and get high scores, as the weighted mean is 2.46. Possible reasons may include students' language deficit, insufficient motivation in learning English, lack of learning strategies, etc. Hence, it is necessary to increase students' sense of ability to complete tasks in English learning so that they can be more confident and competent in English study.

Table 1. English Self-Efficacy of Chinese College Students

Number	Indicators	Weighted Mean
1	Sense of ability to complete English tasks	2.46
2	Confidence in achieving goals	2.89
3	Sense of competence in facing frustration	2.66
4	Perceived ability to overcome difficulties	2.62
Composite Mean		**2.66**

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

2.2. English Autonomous Learning Ability of Chinese College Students

Autonomous learning ability, as the ability to be responsible for one's own learning, is of great significance to be developed in students [7, 8]. As to the language learning, EFL learners must spare a lot of time and energy by studying themselves because the time for English learning in class is very limited. For example, the general period for non-English majors who take up the vast majority of students in Chinese colleges and universities consist of four terms, which is inadequate for students to acquire fluent English to communicate freely with English speakers. In the context where English is an important communication tool in one's work or life, where there is a high demand on one's English proficiency, where class time for college English learning is very limited, and where students are both facilitated and distracted by the internet and modern technologies, it is important to study how to improve students' English autonomous learning ability so that they can construct knowledge and promote their learning by themselves.

Table 2. English Autonomous Learning Ability of Chinese College Students

Number	Indicators	Weighted Mean
1	The ability to understand teaching aims, intentions, and requirements	3.10
2	The ability to formulate learning goals and plans	2.94
3	The ability to make use of effective learning strategies	2.87
4	The ability to monitor the use of learning strategies	2.89
5	The ability to monitor and apply the acquired knowledge	2.87
6	The ability to monitor and evaluate the English learning process	2.91
Composite Mean		**2.93**

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Adopting Liu's (2015) measurement of English autonomous learning ability, six aspects of English autonomous learning ability had been examined in this study, including the ability to understand teaching aims, intentions, and requirements, the ability to formulate learning goals and plans, the ability to make use of effective learning strategies, the ability to monitor the use of learning strategies, the ability to monitor and apply the acquired knowledge, and the ability to monitor and evaluate the English learning process [9].

The composite mean of 2.93 in Table 2 indicates a medium-level agreement of the respondents on their English autonomous learning ability. Among them, understanding teaching aims, intentions and requirements got the highest weighted mean of 3.10. Ranking at the bottom are the ability to make use of effective learning strategies and the ability to monitor and apply the acquired knowledge, with the weighted mean score of 2.87. All these indicators were interpreted as agreement. It can be seen that the respondents' abilities of using effective learning strategies as well as monitoring and applying acquired knowledge have more room to be improved.

Specifically, in terms of using English learning strategies, students gave lower assessment on using speaking and writing strategies. With respect to monitoring and applying the acquired knowledge, students gave lower assessment on creatively applying the learned vocabulary, grammatical structure, fixed expression, and sentence patterns in oral or written expression, and identifying the causes of language errors and correcting them independently.

2.3. The Relationship between English Self-Efficacy and English Autonomous Learning Ability

Table 3 displays the connection between English self-efficacy and English autonomous learning ability. The calculated r-values showed a moderate direct connection, and the p-values that were produced were below the alpha level except on perceived ability to overcome difficulties in English learning. This suggests that there is a substantial association and that the capacity for English autonomous learning increases with English self-efficacy.

The findings can be supported by the following studies. The study of Tilfarlioglu and Ciftci (2011) to 250 preparatory level EFL students in five universities in Turkey revealed that there was a favorable correlation between learner autonomy and self-efficacy, and these factors had a beneficial impact on academic success [10]. Using approaches from positive psychology, Macaskill and Denovan (2013) found that the increase of self-efficacy and self-esteem contribute to students' autonomous learning and intended to help first-year university students gain confidence to facilitate autonomous learning [11]. Mirzawati, Neviyarni and Rusdinal (2020) discovered that there was a positive and significant correlation between self-efficacy and the learning environment together with directed learning. The higher efficacy and learning environment, the higher is directed learning [12].

Though significant relationship exists between English self-efficacy and English autonomous learning ability on the whole, Table 3 indicates that students' perceived ability to overcome difficulties does not exert significant influence on their English autonomous learning ability except on the ability to understand teaching aims, intentions, and requirements.

Table 3. The Relationship Between English Self-Efficacy and English Autonomous Learning Ability

Sense of ability to complete English tasks	r-value	p-value
The ability to understand teaching aims, intentions and requirements	.410**	0.000
The ability to formulate learning goals and plans	.478**	0.000
The ability to make use of effective learning strategies	.528**	0.000
The ability to monitor the use of learning strategies	.536**	0.000
The ability to monitor and apply the acquired knowledge	.547**	0.000
The ability to monitor and evaluate the English learning process	.537**	0.000
Confidence in achieving goals		
The ability to understand teaching aims, intentions and requirements	.479**	0.000
The ability to formulate learning goals and plans	.449**	0.000
The ability to make use of effective learning strategies	.464**	0.000
The ability to monitor the use of learning strategies	.476**	0.000
The ability to monitor and apply the acquired knowledge	.473**	0.000
The ability to monitor and evaluate the English learning process	.506**	0.000
Sense of competence in facing frustration		
The ability to understand teaching aims, intentions and requirements	.498**	0.000
The ability to formulate learning goals and plans	.530**	0.000
The ability to make use of effective learning strategies	.558**	0.000
The ability to monitor the use of learning strategies	.581**	0.000
The ability to monitor and apply the acquired knowledge	.612**	0.000
The ability to monitor and evaluate the English learning process	.614**	0.000
Perceived ability to overcome difficulties		
The ability to understand teaching aims, intentions, and requirements	.100*	0.049
The ability to formulate learning goals and plans	0.062	0.224
The ability to make use of effective learning strategies	0.041	0.421
The ability to monitor the use of learning strategies	0.060	0.242
The ability to monitor and apply the acquired knowledge	0.061	0.235
The ability to monitor and evaluate the English learning process	0.073	0.153

Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.01

3. Suggestions on Improving College English Learning in China

As English self-efficacy and English autonomous learning ability, the two interconnected factors, are important to English learning, it is necessary and significant to improve Chinese college students' English self-efficacy and English autonomous learning ability so as to yield more fruitful learning outcomes. To this end, five suggestions are put forward in this article.

3.1. Make Students Fully Motivated

Motivation is critical in English learning [13]. To increase students' sensed ability to complete English tasks, teachers may use various strategies and methods to motivate students, such as creating authentic learning context, breaking down complex tasks, grouping students effectively, and making reward on students' participation and progress. They should emphasize the importance of English in workplace, daily life, and self-improvement to their students and analyze the benefits of learning English well. Besides, they may provide as much emotional support as possible by listening to students' feedbacks and devoting time and efforts to address them. This is because teacher emotional support can motivate students, influencing their engagement and performance [14].

3.2. Provide Sufficient Teacher Support

English teachers may provide sufficient teacher support to students in addition to the emotional support. For example, they may establish teacher-student interactions by implementing more peer evaluation tasks and providing guidance both in and after class, make their lectures infectious by adopting more interactive teaching approaches, applying modern technologies, designing interesting activities, and rehearsing their instruction before class, make their classroom expression fully understood by pronouncing English words clearly, speaking at a moderate speed, using simple spoken English, and constantly checking students' reaction, and improve the usefulness of tests by ensuring their validity, reliability, and so on. It is suggested that teachers who teach the same course in college work together to decide on how to test students and make in-depth analysis on the test result after testing, thus, increasing the usefulness and effectiveness of tests and promoting teaching and learning.

3.3. Instruct English Learning Strategies and Modern Technologies

Language learning strategies are important to the success of language learning. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), learning strategies can be classified into cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and socio-affective strategies [15]. College English teachers may instruct students how to effectively use learning strategies by designing various learning activities, exercises, tests, etc. They should emphasize the teaching of speaking and writing strategies as many Chinese college students are poor in English speaking and writing. They may also instruct modern technologies to students because language teaching and learning can be greatly facilitated by modern IT devices and various applications, digitalization, and mobile technologies [16].

3.4. Help Students to Monitor and Apply the Acquired Knowledge

It is vital for teachers to improve students' language proficiency and strengthen their awareness and ability in monitoring and correcting language mistakes or errors they have made in the process of English learning. College English teachers may design various authentic English learning tasks to help students to creatively use the learned vocabulary, grammatical structure, fixed expression, sentence pattern, and others. They may guide students on how to find opportunities to learn and practice English after class. For example, they can encourage students to notice and learn English of public

signs in streets or on busses. In addition, they may give timely feedback to students' performance in the completion of tasks. What is more, they may teach students learn to reflect on their English study so as to reduce or avoid language errors or mistakes.

3.5. Be More Confident and Engaged in English Learning

Students should fully realize the importance of English in their future work and life. They should be more confident in English learning, put more efforts on English learning, and be more cooperative in participating course activities and completing course assignments. Besides, it is advised that they check and reflect on their English autonomous learning ability on a regular basis from the six dimensions of English autonomous learning ability in this article, and seek for help if they find they have some learning confusions and difficulties. Only by this can their English autonomous learning ability and English language proficiency be developed.

4. Conclusion

College English learning is greatly facilitated by students' English self-efficacy and their English autonomous learning ability. Therefore, to promote English learning in Chinese higher education, it is important to improve students' English self-efficacy especially their sensed ability in completing English tasks, which necessitates both teacher support and students' confidence. Besides, it is equally significant to develop students' English autonomous learning ability by increasing instruction on using learning strategies and helping students to apply the acquired knowledge. Future studies may enlarge the sample scope to include more application-oriented undergraduate universities in China.

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