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How Can I Help My Students Promote Learner-Autonomy in English Language Learning?

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Abstract

This report involves the story of how I help my students as an English language teacher to develop learner autonomy in English language-learning. Over two months I help them define their goals, draw up plans, and work towards them. Students keep a journal on how they performed in their learning once a week. Meanwhile I show how I help to promote learner autonomy in the classroom by such processes as encouragement, persuasion and independent learning-observations. I show how I, with my colleagues' support and cooperation, collect data through classroom observations, my own journal, reading the students' journals, and talking to them, to find the evidence to help in the development of their learning autonomy. I choose three students as particular subjects in the research and show in detail how I help them to recognize their methodological and linguistic weaknesses, and how I help to improve their attitudes to learning, and to accomplish their own goals by using some effective learning strategies.

Keywords: Learner- autonomy; English-language Learning; Learning journal.

Introduction

Traditionally in China, learning is widely accepted as a long process of knowledge accumulation which takes great diligence and prolonged effort, and students are encouraged to gain knowledge prominently by reading printed work or listening to their teachers (Zhang & Wu, 2004, p. 73). As a Confucian slogan for young men goes, “He who excels in study can follow an official career”, young students are expected to perform well in their school lessons, usually to attend a prominent university so as to give glory to his family (Zhang & Wu, 2004, p.74; Qu, 2001, p. 196). Thus, young kids are persuaded to give up their playing on the yard by their parents or teachers to work hard on their school lessons so as to achieve high scores or grades. Those who are doing well in textbook reading or examinations will be admired by neighbors and then set as models to their own children by saying, “Look, Xiaoming has gained the highest score of his class in this examination once again. You should learn from him and work hard on your lessons. How I wish you could do as well as he often does!”

In the classroom, learning is completely controlled by teachers. Many teachers believe that their duty is mainly to transmit knowledge to young generations (Zhang, 2006, p. 385). Therefore, they lecture and speak during most of the class time whilst students are expected to give their ear to them and busy taking notes and then memorizing what they have taken down after class (Zhang, *ibid*, p. 385) rather than developing thoughts by talking to their fellow students or asking questions although now and then they are nominated to answer a few questions (Qi, 2005, p. 89). Generally, teachers are “higher in the platform”, and they told their students what is right and what is wrong. For the students’ part, it is quite natural to be obedient and accept what is from their teachers (Qi, *ibid*, p. 88). After class, they are given lots of homework and examination-exercise paper which occupy nearly all of their spare time. They have to squeeze themselves by giving up outdoor or social activities to cope with piles of homework or exercise-papers (Xi, 2008). From the first day they attend school, they will have to pass a series of examinations and try to get high grades so as to enroll in the university and then get a satisfactory job. I lived such a life in my school-days.

I was born and raised in a farmer-family in the 1970s. When I was young, farmers sweated and toiled in the fields all year round while suffering great hunger and poverty. My parents were always saying to me, “Work hard with your lessons, and you can live a better life.” In their eyes – in fact, in the eyes of most people in my village – only if someone does well in school and goes to college, can s/he have the opportunity to leave the village and become a “townie”. At that time, about 80% of China’s population consisted of farmers. They admired those who had a job in a factory, in a government office, in a hospital, or in a school. I believed they were right. Only in that way could I fulfill the promise of my own future as well as my parents’ secure life in their old age¹ because I love them.

Therefore, I always tried hard in my schoolwork. When I was young, I often got up very early, sometimes with stars or moons shining in the sky, and went to school and waited

¹ In China parents bring up their children and in return expect to be supported and looked after by their children when they are old.

at the school gate for the school to open because I was not sure of the time as we didn't have a clock. Then I started my school-days with the morning reading² – reading textbooks, reviewing notes and memorizing Chinese characters. I listened carefully and answered questions actively in class and finished my homework in time. With the heavier burden in high school, I, together with my fellow students, had to give up relaxation on the weekends and devoted myself into my lessons and sit up to continue my reading for about an hour after the evening reading³ by the candlelight. At that time the earnest goal of my life is to go to college. Hence, I managed to seize each opportunity to prepare for the College Entrance Examination. At last, I succeeded.

In 1994, I was admitted by Baoji College of Arts and Science, a teacher-training college in Baoji, which is in [Shaanxi Province](#) in the northwest of China. I was trained to be an English-language teacher. There life went as usual: attending classes, reading books and preparing for a series of examinations. I hadn't doubted anything about such a life until the day when I graduated from college. When I was packing my luggage for leaving, I felt a little disappointed and I couldn't help asking myself, "Does my school-learning end in this way?" I couldn't find much impress me because most of my teachers were far away from me, and what I managed to memorize for my examinations had gone far away with the wind, too. I had been trained as a perspective English-language teacher, but it seemed that I didn't have much confidence.

Directly after graduation, I worked as an English-language teacher in a high school in Baoji. I happened to share a corner of the office room with Ms. Zhang Fengxian, a very skillful teacher. As a novice, I went to observe her classroom. When I entered her classroom for the first time, her teaching impressed me a lot. I observed that she had the power to attract her students by using gestures and various visual aids: blackboard drawings, pictures, cards. She used very little Chinese in the classroom though it was a beginner-class. She moved around the classroom rather than standing on the platform, which is the traditional way. She made a lot of eye-contact with the class in order to encourage a shy student to speak or to attract the attention of an absent-minded one back to language learning. As for the students, they seemed highly-motivated for their learning: they would actively respond to questions or move around to find their partners and participate in activities (usually making a dialogue) energetically when tasks were assigned. I could feel their enjoyment of their learning from their cheerful and bright smiles. It was the first time for me to sense what happiness is in learning and teaching.

Then I decided to improve my teaching as I valued positive affection like happiness and motivation in learning. I opened my teaching to her and invited her to my classroom and

² Generally speaking, there is a tradition of doing morning reading, reading the texts and vocabulary aloud, for Chinese students to pursue their language acquisition. The morning reading often occurs before the first morning class starts (8:00 o'clock) and lasts for about half an hour. There is a requirement for elementary school students to do the morning reading while it not for college students. They can take charge of it on their own.

³ The evening reading usually goes from 7:30 p.m to 9: 30 p.m for secondary school students to review what they have learned today or preview what they are going to learning tomorrow. School authorities arrange teachers to offer help to students if necessary.

asked for her feedback and suggestions. From her, I learned how to motivate and interest my students by using visual aids or gestures. I managed to get them engaged in their learning with some group work such as making a dialogue or role playing. Additionally, I loved them and tried my best to help them with their troubles. In the classroom, when I observed they were frowning, I knew I needed to repeat what I said or put it in an easier way; when some of them averted their eyes from the blackboard now and then, I knew they had lost their interest and I needed to revise my teaching ways; when they were engaging themselves in the language learning, I would feel more confident in my teaching. I usually talked to them in a friendly way, so they became used to having pleasant chats with me after class—They talked to me about issues ranging from their troubles in learning English to their favorite movie stars and pop singers. In short, I enjoyed my work and I gained more confidence day by day.

In 2003, I furthered my studies by doing a Master's Degree in Shaanxi Normal University. There I met Professor Zhang Lichang, my supervisor. He loved his students. He often showed his care for us. With his help, I read a lot on pedagogy – about Comenius, Rousseau, Herbart, and about John Dewey. It was Professor Zhang who opened up the whole notion of critical thinking to me by encouraging me to challenge his opinions or ideas in the books. He introduced me to [China's New Curriculum](#) and invited me to visit some experimental schools with him for several times. There, I learnt that the New Curriculum values something more than knowledge such as students' critical thinking, individual learning potentials, learner autonomy, attitude, confidence and interest as all these were absent from China's school education for a long time. Moreover, I discovered that it was rather difficult for teachers to adopt new methods to change their teaching styles and improve their teaching practice, although there were some good ways such as doing school-based educational research, keeping a teaching journal and reflecting on their teaching, and also doing Action Research on their practice.

Three years later (till now), I started working at the Department of Foreign Languages in [Shangluo University](#). Shangluo, lying in the southeast of Shaanxi province, is a highly mountainous area. Most of the local people are engaged in farming. For several decades after China's Liberation⁴, there was only one highway passing here and connecting it with the outside world. As [Jia Pingwa](#) (2006), one of the most famous Chinese writers, who was born and raised in a village in Shangluo, described in his work *Shangzhou* that his hometown was so rocky that his village was surrounded by rolls of mountains and hills. When he was young, his great pleasure and wish was to travel around and learn about different traditions and customs in the villages. Yet he couldn't fulfill his dream for he found when he arrived a new village he saw another mountain standing in front of him. However, he felt lucky that the highway near his house brought him great pleasure. There he could see all kinds of passengers, whom he thought were well-traveled, passing by on the bus. He admired them so much that he wanted to chat with them when the bus stopped. When the bus left, he dreamed of being on it with them, leaving for the capital city. For the villagers, mountain-

4 Since the first Opium War (1839-1842), China had been a semi-feudal and semi-colonial country for about 100 years, but it has been changed since People's Republic of China was founded on October 1st, 1949 after Chinese people's 28-year-struggle for liberation under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party since it was founded in 1921.

ranges and rivers were their world then. Their lifelong dream was to go to the city beyond the mountains. And now things have changed a lot as China has carried out the policy of [developing the West](#). A railway has been built which introduced more products, information and new things. In 2008, the government constructed an express-way to help the local people travel in and out.

The college is the only one in this region. It was established as a teacher-training college in 1976, when China's Cultural Revolution⁵ came to an end. According to Mr. Liu, a retired teacher who had worked here since it was founded, there were, at its beginning, only two departments, four classes, about 150 students and 20 staff in total, with simple, crude classrooms and office-rooms and miserable necessities for teaching. Then a three-storied building was set up for classrooms in 1984. At that time, its tenet, as well as the National Education Policy, is to train socialist constructors and successors with firm beliefs of Marxism and Socialism so as to serve China's socialist construction and Chinese people. For more than 10 years, graduates were sent back to where they came from to work for local people (Li, Interview notes, Sept. 25th). However, with China's policy of reform and developing the West, it has developed very fast these years. Since 2006, it has been designated as moving towards university-status. Several new buildings have been set up for classrooms, library and students' accommodation and lodging. Now there are more than 6,000 students from a massive area – about nineteen provinces across China – studying here. About 1,500 students graduate every year. Of course, now they can go wherever they wish and do whatever they like after graduation. More and more employees with a Master's Degree, some even with a Ph.D. are now working as teachers here. A new library has been built to supply more books for students and teachers. Professors and scholars are invited to give lectures regularly. For English learners, there is an English Film Club, an English Library and an English Corner⁶ organized at the respective time once a week. These activities expose the learners to authentic English language and culture. Furthermore, a new linguistic laboratory has been opened since November 2008, which offers the students more opportunities to learn English language autonomously.

⁵ The Cultural Revolution, also the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a period of widespread social and political upheaval in China between 1966 and 1976, resulting in nation-wide chaos and economic disarray. It was launched by Mao Zedong, the chairman of the Communist Party of China, on May 16, 1966, who alleged that "liberal bourgeois" elements were permeating the party and society at large and that they wanted to restore Capitalism (Wikipedia, 2009). During this period, those knowledgeable or well-educated, who were believed to have thoughts of "liberal bourgeois", were treated badly by suspending from their position and sending to do some rough work such as farm work or cleaning the street so as to refine their thoughts. Thus, schools were closed while students were encouraged to work on farm land so as to strengthen their sense of socialism and class struggle by experiencing hardship (Tian, 1996, p. 1155). Since 1977, schools began to re-open and young people were recalled to school to continue their learning (Zhao, 1998, p. 222). (See more in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_Revolution)

⁶ English Corner is a very popular activity on college and university campus across China which is organized for English language learners or amateurs to get together to talk to one another freely in English and thus develop their proficiency in speaking. It is often held once a week at a fixed place and a fixed time. In our college, English Corner takes place at 7:30-9:00 every Monday evening in the Hall of the Teaching Building.



Figure 1. An English Corner

Once again, I work as an English language teacher here. But it is rather a new area to me. The students are not teenagers but young adults. In their college years, students are experiencing struggles to become independent (Hartman, 1998). In academic learning, they develop new ways, which are quite different from those they learnt in high school, “to organize and use knowledge”, that is, they are faced with “the challenges of academic life which not only introduce them to new knowledge but force them to evaluate how they gather, process and apply knowledge in their lives” (Hartman, 1998, p. 23). This may be a painful experience but will benefit them in the future (Hartman, 1998). For language learners, “Learning a language effectively is a long process and one that includes hypothesis-formation, hypothesis-revision, and many errors along the way” (Rubin & Thompson, 2004, p. 11). Some learners will “feel so frustrated that they may want to give up” because “they are impatient with the length of time it takes to learn how to do this” (Rubin & Thompson, *ibid*, p. 10). Thus they will inevitably encounter lots of difficulties in handling their learning during this process. Indeed my students are not exceptional ones. They had encountered troubles and failures in their language learning and sometimes they turned to me for help.

When Dr. Vadna Murrell-Abery⁷ presented it to me again, Action Research attracted me a lot for I knew it to be, “a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives” (Stringer, 2007, p. 1). Different from empirical researches in which researchers study on others. Action Research is “an enquiry conducted by the self into the self” through self-reflection to pursue development with an open end (McNiff, 2002). It is “a living educational theory” by inquiring questions of the kind, “How can I help you to improve your learning” (Whitehead, 1989). The living theory methodology is distinguished at least in the following aspects: firstly it relates to methodological inventiveness, action reflection cycles, narrative enquiry and personal and

⁷ Dr. Vadna Murrell-Abery, a VSO volunteer from England, worked as a teacher-training advisor in Shangluo University for two years.

social validation in propositional perspective; secondly it involves a dialectical perspective. The “I” exists as a living contradiction that holds together values and their denial together in “my” practice which generates impossibilities to improve practice and then development into action reflection cycles; thirdly, it is living, from an inclusive perspective, in life-affirming energy and values in explanation of educational influence (Whitehead, 2008).

With Vadna’s encouragement and support, I took up my own Action Research project. I chose a Grade-Two-English-major class. It was a big class with 55 students in it. I taught them *Contemporary College English*, an intensive reading course but designed as a combination to strengthen the training of English listening, speaking, reading and writing. We often had classes in Room 406. It was a typical Chinese classroom, with desks and chairs fixed on the floor in rows, and some great scientists and philosophers and their wise sayings on learning on the sidewalls which were used to inspire the students. On the front wall, just above the blackboard were pictures of the Chinese and international Marxist leaders to intensify a sense of patriotism from education (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A Picture of Our Classroom. Pictures. From the left: [Carl Marx](#), [Friedrich Engels](#), [Vladimir Lenin](#) and [Mao Zedong](#)

My Action Research Project lasted about two months, from late September to the end of November in 2008. During the process, I made attempts to live my values in my practice by assisting my students becoming autonomous, effective and enjoyable in their language-learning; I made use of my action research cycle to develop my thoughts and skills in improving my teaching; and in this report I managed to present you how I improve my teaching by narration and explanation by using my teaching journals as personal validation and my students’ journals and my colleagues’ comments as social validation.



Figure 3. Another Picture of Our Reading Classroom

What did I want to improve?

I value what the New Curriculum values rather than transmission of knowledge in teaching: to teach students how to learn; to build their learning skills and strategies; and to encourage them to discover something meaningful in their learning (Outline for China's Elementary Education Reform, 2001, as cited in Zhong, 2001, p. 3). Meanwhile, I have a strong belief that learning is a student's responsibility because "students ultimately become independent of teachers and teaching and become able to pursue learning projects autonomously" (Dickinson, 1994, p. 2). As a teacher, I value freedom, democracy, critical thinking, individual potential ability and it is vital for teachers to "*bring them about, to discover the most effective means*" (Dickinson, *ibid*, p. 3).

On the evening before the new school day⁸, I received messages on the internet sent by one of my students, Zheng, a 22-year-old young man. He was depressed because of failing his examination again the previous term. He raised the question:

Zheng: How should I handle my language learning?

Li: Have you tried hard?

Zheng: Yes.

Li: How hard?

Zheng: I listened carefully in the classroom.

Li: What else?

⁸ It was on 31 Aug. 2008. In China, the autumn semester starts around September 1st.

Zheng: I am sorry I did little for I couldn't persevere in my learning because there are so many new words to memorize and so lots of exercises to do. When I managed to keep those words in my mind, I would forget even most of them the next day. I don't know what I can do. (Li, Research journal, August 31, 2008)

Obviously, he was accustomed to listening to teachers in classroom and waited to be told what to do with his learning as they used to do in high school. In fact, I have been asked such painful questions on many other occasions when many of my students suffered from their failure to learn to a sufficiently high level. I felt, at that time, it necessary to arouse their awareness of learning being one's own responsibility. They needed to learn to take charge of their own learning, to make all necessary decisions concerning all aspects of the learning—that is, to develop learner autonomy (Holec, 1981, as cited in Little, 2006). As for me, I would like to challenge myself to be a facilitator rather than a knowledge distributor. I would like to offer a helping hand to them. I developed my role in this way because I believed developing learner autonomy “is likely to be teacher directed initially” (Dickinson, 1994, p. 3) and “learner-training” seems to “be the key to autonomy” (Dickinson, *ibid*, p. 5).

Why was I concerned?

I) Learner autonomy plays an important role in language learning

As I mentioned above, students will ultimately become independent from teachers and teaching and thus in education, “*the development of autonomy and self-sufficiency may be desirable ends*” (Dickinson, 1994, p. 3). The communicative language teaching methodology tends to develop learner autonomy. In the communicative language teaching, language learners are expected to “*take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning*” (Richards, 2006, p. 5) while teachers work as facilitators helping learners to develop their own purposes in learning and giving them greater choice over their own learning, which involves the content and processes of learning, self-assessment and their use and awareness of learning-strategies (Richards, *ibid*, pp. 24-25). The idea is that if learners have developed their own autonomy, they will then take the necessary responsibility for their own learning and become intrinsically motivated and engage themselves in their learning initiatively and actively (Little, 2006). What's more, autonomous learners can apply the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom to situations outside the classroom (Little, 2006).

II) Learner autonomy is advocated by the New Curriculum of China

If a state is to develop and flourish as a democracy, it must take educational measures to develop the capacity of its citizens “to think and act as free and self-determining individuals” (Holec, 1981, as cited in Little, 1994, p. 81). To meet the challenges of this rapidly changing world, Jacques Delors (1996) expressed his idea of Life Throughout Education in his report to [UNESCO](#) of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century which, “*is based upon four pillars: learning to know, learning to do,*

learning to live together and learning to be". The Chinese government has taken actions—implementing the New Curriculum—as a response to reform its educational system since 2001. One target of the New Curriculum is to develop learner autonomy. In the New English Curriculum standards (2003), it stated that changes of students are expected in many ways – their interest, motivation, attitudes and learning strategies in English language learning to promote autonomous learning (p. 2).

Specifically in the New Curriculum there is a great shift in school teaching and learning – the shift from “*teacher-centered*” to “*student-centered*” methods in the classroom teaching and learning. “[*The New Curriculum*] *advocates process-oriented teaching and learning*” (Laidlaw, 2005) and aims to help the students “*move from competence to performance*”, that is from “*what the students know in their minds, their theoretical knowledge*” to “*what it is that the students can do with that theoretical knowledge*” (Chen, 2002, as cited in Laidlaw, 2005, p. 5). It suggests “*a [task-based approach](#) to language teaching and learning,*” in which more opportunities will be provided for students to take much of their initiative “*to use the knowledge they gain*” in the situation which can resemble real life rather than just “*remaining as knowledge in their mind*” (ibid., p. 5). Students are encouraged to experience and learn the language by self-discovery and participate actively and positively in discussion and negotiation activities rather than just receive the information passively from teachers (ibid, p. 5). During the process of English language learning, students are expected to develop their interest, motivation, confidence as well as learning strategies and cultural awareness along together with their language knowledge and skills (Laidlaw, ibid, p. 5). Thus in such a creative learning atmosphere, it is quite necessary for the students to develop learner autonomy.

How did I improve it? What claims am I making in this paper?

Last term I aimed to build the students’ confidence in their English language learning for I knew attitude and motivation would affect the results of their learning. It also works the other way. I believed if students have achieved academically in their learning, they will be more motivated and desire to achieve more goals.

1) I claim that I helped the students make decisions to achieve more in their learning.

I felt my first job was to get them to know what they’d gained and what they lost during the past year by reflection and then learned to make decisions on their own.

Two weeks after the first school-day, I had a discussion with them about what and how they learned in the past. Then I discovered they focused mostly on the reading of their textbooks whilst ignoring any listening and speaking components except for some unavoidable activities in class. They were able to recognize these aspects but it was difficult for them to carry out these aspects because Chinese students do seem to be shy and afraid of making mistakes in their speaking. Before they spoke in English, some of the students

tended to seek a less vulnerable way by writing it down on paper first. When they recognized a mistake, they would blush and correct the mistake immediately. In addition when reading, they would read out what they had written word by painful word rather than using more effective strategies. Furthermore, they didn't tend to spend much time in their academic studies after class – about 8-10 hours a week which approximated to 35-40% of their spare time, because they seemed to lack the ability to handle their own learning-agenda as they were used to having their learning controlled by their teachers in high school.

Next, I asked them why they were here to study English to help them realize the purpose of their language learning. Most of them responded that they wanted to make a career in it. Although it was not intrinsic, I nodded to them to show my understanding of having such a motivation for learning English in China. Then I stressed the significance of listening and speaking in language learning and their later professional development and the necessity of broadening their reading to read English literary works, magazines and newspapers.

As I knew clearly that Chinese students were likely to listen to their teachers, I gave them some suggestions on what they could do next. I proposed they reflect on their learning in the past college-year again after class and try to set a realistic goal for learning a comparatively short period. I also encouraged them to work out a feasible plan for it in which I advised them to practice listening and speaking regularly (see Appendix). The classroom was quiet and no one said anything. I knew they accept it as an assignment as usual, but I was not sure how much they were willingly to accept it.

II) I asked the students to keep their learning journals once a week.

A week later, after they had drawn up their plans, they began to carry them out. I advised them to keep a journal every week to check how they got along with them. As far as I am aware my students did as I suggested and I kept records of this in my data archive. I felt a little excited when I read about their reflection on what they had done and also what they hadn't in their journals. They did the work better than I had expected. They could fulfill their plan actually. Take the following as example:

Everything went on well this week. I carried out my plan strictly— I previewed my lessons, and completed assignments independently. I did the morning reading and listening practice for half an hour every day. I went to English corner on Monday evening... (Meng, Learning journal, Week 7)

Of course, I could read, now and then, something they'd lost and their disappointment and then their reflections on what to be improved: *"I felt very disappointed this week for I acquired little. I simply memorized some words. I need to work harder on something else next week"* (Yang, Learning journal, and Week 9). What excited me more was that I could read something new in her next week journal: *"I did much better than last week. Apart from doing with my course-lessons, I talked to some new friends in the English Corner happily and went to the English Library and did one hour reading there on Wednesday"*

afternoon. *I was feeling pleasant this week*". It seemed that sometimes they had the initiative to improve their learning practice. This was beyond my imagination.

Sometimes, they wrote down what they were still puzzled by and hoped that I could help solve the problems. I discovered the following in a student's journal-book: "Dear Ms. Li, I feel confused with pronunciation of some sounds in words. For example, *thousand* and *thought*; *wind* and *wing*; *said* and *sad*. Could you show me how to pronounce these words?" (Zhang, Note, October 17, 2008)

When I got to know their puzzles, I would help them solve their problems as soon as possible. Take the above for example, I spoke to her about her concern the next day after class, I pronounced her chosen words very slowly and asked her to observe and notice differences between the sounds. I also added some necessary explanation about pronunciation so that she would be clearer. After that, she did the pronunciation until I was satisfied with it. Then I suggested she borrow a book on phonetics and asked someone who is good at pronunciation and that would be able to help her. She said she would and left, apparently cheerfully. In other words, I responded to the learning-need of my student, rather than assuming I knew what their learning needs were, which is often the case in a Chinese classroom in my experience.

III) I acknowledged their achievement and thus encouraged them to move on.

As the students started putting their plans into practice, I began to collect and read their journals regularly. I could only read and respond to each journal about once every three weeks. After reading carefully, I would record my thoughts about their learning in the past few weeks. The first time I read their journals through, I found most of my students were not content with their performance even though I could see they had done lots of work. I believed this was because Chinese students are often too humble to admit that they have done well in their work. Trying to change that cultural behavior was, of course, very difficult, but necessary if I was going to help them to achieve their potentials.

Yang, an industrious (female) student, wrote down as her journal entry from the 9th week, "*I spent a lot of my time and energy in my learning but acquired little.*" I could see she was working as hard in the classroom as she described. She listened carefully, took notes, asked and answered questions and finished assignments independently. How much did she acquire? Did she acquire very little in spite of her hard work? I was not sure. However, what she did the next day impressed me. With five other girls, instead of giving a usual speech for her duty report, she acted out a short play, an adaptation of an episode of the movie *The Titanic*. The class reacted very enthusiastically. After class, she told me that although she enjoyed the process when she began to put this fantastic idea into practice –adapting the story, selecting the actors, rehearsing the play and acting it out, she wasn't satisfied with the language-constructions because she said she had only used very simple words and structures. I told her: "It is excellent! You've done something no one else has done." It was important to praise what she had achieved.

As a result of what I learned from Yang's creativity, I decided to express my appreciation even if they had made only slight progress. Everyone has the need for

recognition to hear themselves being praised at what they have achieved (Li, 1995, p. 578). In this way students could become highly-motivated and encouraged and then gain self-confidence in accomplishing their goals.

Gong, 21 years old, liked sports and social activities very much. He told me that he enjoyed spending several hours in the basketball field, but admitted to a lack of motivation when he concentrated on language learning. However, this seemed to be changing a little when he began to engage himself in his learning plan to accomplish his goal. The following comes from his journal:

I went to English corner every Monday evening and I found talking in English with foreign teachers was not as difficult as I had thought. I was more interested in speaking English. However, I feel it a little difficult to complete other tasks on my list. Next week, I will do my best. (Gong, Learning journal, Week 9)

As for my feedback, I underlined the part “talking in English with foreign teachers was not as difficult as I had thought” and “was more interested in speaking English” with my comments “Excellent” in the margin showing my appreciation at his progress which was designed to promote his self-confidence in language-learning. I also wrote down “I believe you” to emphasize my respect for him and what he had accomplished. Again, this kind of relationship with a student in China is still relatively unusual, at least from my experience and what I have read. Teachers are seen as the distributors of knowledge, rather than having anything to learn from students about their learning-needs.

Then in the next few days, I discovered he engaged more in the classroom activities. He moved his seat from the back row to the front and listened more carefully. When I asked “Do you have any questions for this part”, sometimes he would raise questions like, “*Sorry, Ms. Li. I cannot understand the first sentence. It is too long and has a complicated structure.*” It seemed that he was at least beginning to become curious about something he didn’t know and then try to find solutions. It was a different approach to his learning.

IV) I did something in the classroom to promote the students’ autonomous learning.

Autonomous learning is not isolated from teachers and classrooms (Little, 1994, p. 81; Dickinson, 1994, p. 3). On the contrary, teachers have to take great responsibility for developing learner-autonomy in the classroom. I had been a “helping hand” in their autonomous learning. I did the following things to further help my students develop their learning autonomy.

a. I tried to find chances in the classroom to monitor and promote their independent learning.

A few days after the first school day, as texts and exercises in *Book 3 of Contemporary College English* were much more difficult, I noticed that many of my students, even some of the more proficient ones, were depending too much on their reference books.

When they had difficulties in understanding the text, they would turn to translation. Some may even have been copying the answers because they were not able to respond to my further inquiries. However, I thought more challenging lessons and exercises would be necessary to them as they were developing in their language-knowledge and skills. Then I had the idea to let them know that learning didn't mean finding a predetermined answer but giving them strategies to solve their own problems. Thus I tried to find ways of asking them to give further explanations about the idioms, paraphrase the sentences they were studying, and even give reasons for why they chose those particular words as the answer.

The following is an extract from my journal:

Today I found some of the students hadn't completed the assignment carefully and independently. Take one of the Gap-filling exercises for example, "*When I look at the _____ face of the children, I said to myself, 'I can't leave them to their own devices. They need me'.*" When we tried to cope with it, one of the students answered "eager" as the reference provided. I didn't let it go at that for I knew "*can't leave them to their own devices*" is critical to understand the whole sentence. So I questioned him on it. He remained silent, with his head lowered. Then I invited suggestions in class, but no one responded to me. I asked them, "What do you think of your learning in such a way—just get the direct answer?" The class was completely in silence. I realized they had understood my question, and then I continued, "I am sure you're clearer about what has happened than me. I hope you can do more exploitation in your learning. If you can do so, I think it will benefit you". (Li, Teaching journal, September 10, 2008)

To my delight, what happened in the classroom in the next week seemed to show that they had a positive attitude to their learning. The following is an extract from my journal:

Today I found surprisingly that the students changed a lot. They performed very well in class when they did the language exercises. For example, they created some meaningful sentences:

Wang: *He credited his success to the fact that he was given a good education in that country.*

Yan: *He credited his success to the fact that his friend helped him a lot.*

Hu: *He credited his success to the fact that he worked hard.*

I knew this could, to some extent, prove they had changed their attitude more positively toward language learning. They might have completed the task independently ahead of the class time. At least, it could show that they had drawn their attention to the language learning and thought about it actively and carefully in class. (Li, Teaching journal, September 16, 2008)

b. I dictated the new words and short paragraphs regularly in the classroom.

The development of vocabulary is one of the critical areas of second language learning. A gradual and close study of vocabulary can provide consistent development and growth to increasing knowledge of words (Anderson, 2004, p. 21). However, my students

often expected to remember all of the words even if they'd only met them once. Of course the result was often just the opposite. Many of them told me they had trouble in developing their vocabulary-range. Thus I decided to use very prominently myself in the words they were learning as I considered this one way to help them check how they were getting on with their retention of the vocabulary, as well as calling on their persistent efforts in vocabulary-learning when I, for example, dictated some short paragraphs. I believed these might promote their skills of listening and taking notes. With these, my students valued vocabulary learning much more than before. In the morning when I went into the classroom, I noticed many of them were reading aloud the glossary for texts. I also found some of them borrowed books on the lexicon from the library. They extended their learning-time to more than two and a half hours a day and 15 -18 hours outside the classroom a week. They spent about one hour on average in previewing and reviewing the texts, and studying new words. To my surprise, Zheng, the student who talked to me about his trouble with language-learning on the evening before the new school day, made much progress in his dictation on October 28. He only missed two words out of the ten and two phrases in the paragraph-dictation⁹. I gave him a big "A" with my congratulations.

c. I was constantly persuading them to take risks in developing their language skills.

Chinese people are "characteristically timid and docile", "but while deficient in active courage and daring" compared with Europeans they "have great powers of physical endurance, as well as great persistency and obstinacy" (Nevius, 1882, p. 278). My students seemed diligent, studious and hard working but less brave or adventurous in their language learning. They listened carefully and painstakingly took down notes but were likely to keep silent in the classroom. When I asked a question, very few students were ready to respond to me verbally. Let me offer the following as an example.

One day just before we were to read the story *Discovery of a Father*, I prepared some questions related to the topic *Father* to warm up the atmosphere and arouse their interest in the story: *What is your father like? Does your father have any expectations for you? What about you?* I believed they would have a lot to say as I believe the concept of father is a very significant one to us all. However, most of them kept silent when I asked them to talk with their friends and classmates. I had no alternative but to repeat my instructions to them. Then they began to talk to each other a little. Whilst they were talking, I noticed that some students still weren't opening their mouths. Instead they were writing down the words. I reminded them of the speaking-time again. They said they were preparing for the speech. Later I discovered some of the students just read what they wrote down to their group members instead of speaking. My job then was to let them see the difference between

⁹ I often selected ten of the newly-learnt words at random and a short paragraph from the text which often consisted of five or six sentences for dictation. When the students missed fewer than two words and two parts of paragraph sentences, they would get an "A" while if missed about three or four words and three or four parts, they would get a "B". If more than four words and four parts, they would get a "C".

speaking and reading something aloud and the significance of speaking. I encouraged them to speak by telling them that errors are quite a natural part in language-learning (Rubin & Thompson, 2004, p. 10). So, when some of them made progress in speaking, I would praise them and give them encouragement.

To my delight, it seemed much improved the next week. When I assigned the task of discussing the topic *Happiness* to them, they, particularly the ones who had been quiet before, moved around and, talked more actively and contributed their ideas to the group. For example, as I walked round I happened to hear Wang, a very quiet student whom I'd never heard speak English publicly in class, say to his group that he thought *happiness was to share what he has and offer help to those in trouble*. Although he didn't speak fluently, he was trying hard to express and share his thoughts with his group members. This, to me, seemed a great breakthrough. He was learning, I believe, the courage to take risks with his learning.

Who helped me and how?

I) Dr. Vadna Murrell-Abery

Vadna is a skillful and experienced profession trainer. She has worked as a Management and Leadership trainer at the Police Staff College at Bramshill in Hampshire, a Government funded institution which offers residential training courses to senior and middle ranking police officers in leadership and management. She has also been the Academic Course Director of the International Faculty which provided a similar form of training to senior police officers coming from different countries all over the world.

As a professional Action Researcher, she won our admiration by her sophisticated skills and sharp insights. During her stay in Shangluo University, she did lots of work to facilitate Action Research. First, she got us to know about Action Research by presenting a series of papers. Then she helped us define the problems in our teaching by talking to us individually. Next she placed us in groups to form Action Learning Sets based on our interests. Later she guided us to carry out our Action Research plans with the five typical questions (McNiff, 1992). She organized the Action Research Meetings every Wednesday afternoon and encouraged us to share what we had done and observed and also to discuss and reflect on what were our areas of concern within the classroom.

During my Action Research project I talked to her a lot. Once, I invited her to observe my teaching and she gave me constructive feedback that, I believe, helped me to improve my teaching. Here are some extracts from her feedback:

1. It was an inquisitive lesson in which students were questioned a lot and it is quite reasonable to give students some time to think before they answer the question. The students seemed engaged in their reading and responded to you actively.
2. You moved around the classroom instead of only standing in front of the classroom...
6. Maybe the result of discussion would be better if you had grouped the students in four or five rather than through the whole class. The reason was that for such a big question to

describe the characters in the story, the students would feel more comfortable to negotiate their ideas in small groups. (Murrel-Abery, Classroom Observation Notes, March 19, 2008)

No matter when I turned to her for help, she would always give help. When I had difficulty in understanding how to develop a case study, and she spent two hours one evening explaining how to choose cases and collect the data. With her help and encouragement, I completed my first spiral of Action Research. Later she instructed me in how to draft the report, particularly in drafting the introduction. She told me, *“Please visualize the readers first by describing your background, the background of the community, the learning environment as well as the students whom you chose for the case study”*. The main points here she noted was that the readers would want to have a whole picture of what the researcher had done in order to understand fully the context of the research-process. She also helped me to improve my report by defining the problem of claims and finding the evidence to justify them. For instance, in my case study I once described the student Yang thus: *He was not confident in his writing as his scores were not satisfying*, and she challenged me, *“Are you sure he was not confident? How do you know? You said his scores were not satisfying? What were his scores?”* After I answered her questions, I found I started to become more critical in thinking and more sensitive in observation. I am very grateful that she was constantly showing her great concern to my Action Research project. In fact, she had contributed a great deal to my professional development. She was doing with me what it was I learned to do with my own students.

II) My students

I was lucky to have such friendly, warm-hearted, and empathetic students to work with. They were my best partners in my Action Research. They seemed to be enthusiastic with their learning in the classroom. They were willing to listen carefully, take notes and ready to answer questions. Most of the time, they responded to me actively and gave me feedback in time so that I could re-plan my lessons or change my methods. They often made full use of the questioning time. Now and then they asked for more than what was expected from them. They were inclined to engage themselves in language learning after class. Sometimes when I happened to stay in the classroom during the 10-minute-breaks, I discovered some of my students were discussing what they learnt in small groups. They made painstaking efforts to keep their journals once a week for two months and handed them in at the time when I required. They appeared to concentrate themselves on their own goals. They were inclined to invite new learning strategies to improve their learning. With their kind cooperation, the Action Research project was conducted smoothly. I believe they co-operated so fully because they were gaining educational benefit from my learning about their learning.

III) My colleagues

Ever since Vadna had been addressing the importance of collaboration with colleagues and helped us form the Action Learning Sets, I had been including some of my

colleagues in my Action Research. We had our Action Research meetings on Wednesday afternoons. At the meetings, I was developing my thoughts by sharing what I had achieved with other members and discussed any problems that troubled us together such as my troubles—*how can I start my case study* and *how can I motivate my student speak actively in class*. When I reported to them what had happened recently in the classroom and what troubled me. My group members gave me some suggestions and proposals such as “*Give the students some smaller topics for discussion*”, and “*Don’t impose much pressure on them. Encourage them to speak anything they like*”. Some of those suggestions were feasible. For example, once I was troubled for quite a long time with the whispered conversations among the students in the classroom when I did some writing on the blackboard. Then one of my group members advised me to shorten the time of writing and talk more with them, and another one agreed that students might feel a little boring during this period, so they would like to find something to do. I thought they might be right. I should make them fulfill this period of time. I re-planned my lesson. The next day I did as they suggested, extending my talking while just writing down some key words or the parts they were puzzled about. Furthermore, I assigned them some tasks such as reading when the long writing on the blackboard could not be avoided. I discovered things changed a lot when I noticed that their whispering talks reduced a lot. They seemed to pay more attention to what I talked about as I could see they nodded which seemed to show their agreement.

Moreover, I once invited five of my colleagues to observe my teaching. Later they gave me a formal feedback after discussion about it. The following is an excerpt from their feedback:

This was a nice lesson. The students concentrated on their learning. They performed actively in answering questions. You looked very kind as you were smiling throughout the lesson which promoted your interaction between you and your students... however, we kindly suggest that you should introduce the students to more cultural background of English language because in the classroom we heard some students whisper to each other what was a “highland fling”. (Colleague’s Classroom Observation, October 22, 2008)

I thought they were right, for I believe that language conveys thoughts and its culture, so I took their comments seriously. From then on, I focused on introducing cultural background relating to their reading in my lesson planning. I often went on websites¹⁰ to find as many sources as we needed.

In addition, I sometimes looked for ways of helping myself to develop my methodological skills in the 10-minute breaks between lessons, by discussing my problems with some of my colleagues who were familiar with my students. I would ask them for suggestions. For example, on one occasion I felt a little annoyed with some of my students because they were late handing in their assignments. One of my colleagues suggested that I

¹⁰ Here are some websites urls on English Culture for readers who might be interested:
<http://www.britainexpress.com/History/english-culture.htm>
<http://www.woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk/customs/questions/>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
http://www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/History_Culture.shtml

talk to them kindly and ask what excuses they had for being unreliable. I thought she might mean that I should get the students to know my close attention to their learning so as to urge their further reaction to it. Then I followed her suggestion and talked to them privately to avoid their feeling of disgrace and asked what the trouble was with their assignments. Then I got to know that it was mainly because the assignment was a little difficult for them. They asked for permission to do some easier work, and I allowed them to choose something they could do or they were interested in. Later I found their work in the pile of assignment work. What I learnt from them was that students are individual are in proficiency of learning and thus they had different needs to develop themselves. Therefore, I gave them more chances to have choices in performing tasks by giving them more topics as the assignments.

With my thoughts developed by all those of my colleagues' aids, I felt more confident in employing new methods to promote my students' awareness, attitude and confidence in language learning.

How do I know it has improved?

After nearly two months' hard work, I could sense the changes that my students had made although these changes were in varying degrees of course.

I) What I observed in the classroom

a. I found they were working more diligently in the classroom

Most of my students listened carefully, answered questions willingly and took down notes carefully, which I could read in their exercise books. What impressed me most was that since the fifth week (in the middle of October) I found they were coming to the classroom at least half an hour earlier than their 8 o'clock start to do morning reading. This was new.

b. They became more active in the classroom activities

Compared with before, they seemed to be thinking more actively in the classroom. They interrupted when they wanted to add something to what I was saying. Even the "quiet" ones sometimes whispered something amongst themselves. When I noticed, I would give them chances to express their ideas. Take the following for example:

Today we read an article about *Time*. In class I expressed my ideas of time such as "Time waits for no man. We need to arrange our time very carefully, or it will slip through our fingers very easily..." Suddenly I heard one of my students, who sat in the third row near the window, uttering something in a low voice. Then I invited her to make a speech. She said that *time looked like something you'd lost. It could be yesterday, the happiest childhood, or the enjoyable moment you stayed with your old friends, while sometimes time looked like what you'd gained. It may be your high marks in your school lessons, or (your) parents' satisfactory*

smiles at you. What she said surprised me. Her performance helped me discovered a student in deep thought. It seems quite reasonable for me to give chance to them in class. (Li, Teaching journal, October 18, 2008)

Additionally, they were more likely to raise questions. Look at another extract from my journal:

These days I have kept promoting students' awareness of asking questions. I would like to ask, "Do you have any questions about this part?" and I would be ready to help them solve any problems. Gradually, I found more and more students are willing to question, either in the class time or after class. They would stop you anywhere at any time. Today I was very delighted that Jin asked me a question on grammar and Hu asked one on phonetics. I explained their questions in details until they nodded with smiles. (Li, Teaching journal, October 9, 2008)

c. They were able to complete their assignments independently

As I mentioned above, my students depended too much on their reference books at the beginning of the new semester. Later I found it changed for I saw them using the dictionary a lot in the classroom. As it was an intensive reading course, using the dictionary was necessary for a thorough understanding. Sometimes they were able to explain the new words by themselves. The following episode is from my teaching journal:

The usage of synonyms is quite difficult for students for sometimes the difference among these words are quite slight or subtle. Traditionally, they relied on me to distinguish these words first and show examples to them and then they could learn to use the words properly. But I thought they needed to become independent from me and do the work autonomously if they could look up the words and try to distinguish them by themselves. So the other day I told them to try this part on their own. How had they done the work? I moved around the classroom with my wondering. Then I found some of them had done the work. They wrote down what they found in the dictionary on a piece of paper. I gave them a chance individually to do the exercises and asked them to give the reasons. The result was that they used the words quite properly and correctly. I praised them highly. It was the very moment to set them as models for other students to encourage learner autonomy. (Li, Teaching journal, October 15, 2008)

II) What I read in their journals

I appreciated that my students kept their learning journals in which I could discover more about their learning after class. From them I was able to read how my students took charge of their learning outside the classroom, in ways that were difficult to observe in the classroom. From their notes I could also detect whether my students had taken another step in their own independent learning.

a. They recorded and evaluated their learning based on their initial plan.

As I mentioned above, my students focused on their learning in their journals. Apart from recording what they had and hadn't done according to their plan, they reflected on what needed to be improved the next weeks. They could recognize what they acquired and what they missed. For example, Gong wrote down in his journal:

This article is about my study during last week. Firstly, I listened to some English songs, but I seldom did listening practice for 20 minutes. I will work hard on it next week. Secondly, I feel a little satisfied with me at speaking. I talked a lot with Vadna. Thirdly, I got up early and did morning reading every day, but I read little in the evening. Fourthly, I didn't write something. It seems that I need to work harder next week. Yes, I need to and I will. (Gong, Learning journal, October 6, 2008)

Although he had reflective thought on his learning and could recognize his deficiency, changes seemed a little hard to occur to him. For the next several weeks, I didn't read anything encouraging but something like *I do my best next week* until four weeks later.

I did best last week since my plan started. I kept listening to English every evening although I couldn't understand fully. I visited Film Club on Wednesday afternoon. I find it is really helpful to improve my listening. What's more I visited library for several times and read *the 21st century* and *the weekend...* when you've gained something from your hard work, you may have some pleasant feelings. At this moment I had a kind of such feeling. (Gong, Learning journal, November 2, 2008)

Nevertheless, I could feel that they were making efforts to improve their learning by achieving what they had missed and what they wanted to although changes seemed a bit difficult for them.

b. They made use of some resources and facilities to expand their language-learning.

Over time it became possible for me to read something more than mere prevision and revision of the texts, memorizing vocabulary and completing the assignments. Many of my students extended their language-learning by using the available resources or facilities on campus. As I stated previously, it was not easy for my students to carry out their listening and speaking programs after class. However, later they were constantly visiting English Corner, English Library, or the newly-opened linguistic laboratory to fulfill their learning plans. Some students even created opportunities by themselves to promote their language-learning. An was a newcomer in May, 2008. She had originally studied Political Science and later changed her major to English language. She seemed to have some trouble in pronunciation and speaking. I had encouraged her to speak by telling her not to pay too much attention to mistakes she'd made. She nodded to me and was seemingly determined to improve it. Once she attended the English Speaking Contest to challenge herself. Besides, she was developing some other new ways. Here is an excerpt from her journals:

These days I kept visiting English corner on Monday evenings and English library on Thursday afternoon to find chances to express myself in English. Furthermore I kept the habit to talk to my friend Zhu in English on the way back to my dormitory after Evening Reading. I feel I am not as nervous as before when I speak. (An, Learning journal, Week 12)

c. They tried to use some effective learning strategies

As their learning was progressing, my students reacted actively to difficulties in their learning. They didn't wait to see as before but began to employ some strategies to improve their learning.

Wang had been greatly troubled with his writing. I had tried to correct some structure-problems of his sentence writing in his homework and helped him to develop his writing skills. At one time, he seemed to give up by telling me that he didn't know what to do. However, one day I was pleased to read something encouraging in his journals:

Writing is very difficult for me. Sometimes I even didn't know how to start. I had no choice but to read some model essays and then I follow the writing patterns. To my surprise, it was a rather efficient way to improve my writing... (Wang, Learning journal, Week 13)

III) Feedback from my colleagues

During my Action Research, I had asked one of my colleagues, Ms. Zhang, an advanced teacher with 16 years' experience in teaching, to come to my classroom for observation in the 16th week. She was very skillful in teaching reading and often sent to inspect and observe teaching in our department. After class, she gave me a formal feedback which read as follows:

Generally speaking, it was quite a pleasant class. You had done much to interact with the students. The students engaged themselves completely in the classroom activities both in the reading and discussion. What impressed me most was that they were so interested in the learning. I was moved by their sympathy and understanding for others who were stunned with what to say next... In short, I like the classroom atmosphere. (Zhang, Classroom Observation Notes, December 20, 2008)

I felt more confident with her encouraging comments for I felt that she was engaged as much in the teaching as the students in the learning.

Case studies

Now you may have got some idea about what I did and how my students were developing their learning autonomy in my Action Research Project. In order to help you to get a clearer picture of how they were developing, I've chosen three of my students to write about in more detail.

Yang, at 22, seemed determined and highly-motivated in his learning. He listened carefully, asked and answered questions voluntarily in the classroom. He was trying to look for possible ways and opportunities to develop his language-proficiency, especially in listening and speaking. For example, he liked to spend time with foreign teachers and attend English activities like visiting English Corner and the English Library. Thus he looked very confident in speaking by his long speeches in class.

Jin was 21 from Henan Province, which lies on the east of Shangluo. Like most of my students, she appeared to work hard by listening carefully and taking notes in class. She looked quiet but thoughtful in class. She could understand what was expected to and she often raised some questions on grammar and vocabulary like *How can I use "chance" and "opportunity" properly*.

Fang, at 22, was such a shy and taciturn girl that she needed courage to say hello to a teacher. When she talked to you, she would lower her eyes for the most time and blushed slightly. What's worse, she suffered greater pains from too much examination when in high school and hence developed a feeling of hatred of language learning.

Individuals are characteristically different from each other. As you can read above, these three students were quite different in character, background, learning style, attitude and motivation in language learning. Of course they had different difficulties in their learning. Their development, as I will show you, may give you something of a picture of how individual students gained greater learner-autonomy in this Action Research Project.

I) Yang

Yang¹¹ didn't seem confident in his writing. Once he said that he felt little confidence in his English language learning because his examination score¹² was not high due to his not very good writing. He had expressed hopes to achieve more in his writing. Thus, during this Action Research project, he was one of the very few students who managed to keep his journals in English. He cherished my feedback so much that he stuck them on the margins of his journal book. I would like to take some excerpts from his journals to show how he managed his learning outside the classroom.

I have done most of things I wrote in my plan. I did some dictation about one hour everyday ... I went to English Corner on Monday evening ... I went to the English Library and discussed the topics about the next Monday evening with Vadna. I also did reading (here he referred to "reading aloud") in my spare time because it is good for me to pronounce every word properly ...

¹¹ It is customary to refer to someone by their surname in China, and this in no way represents a lack of respect as it might in some English-speaking countries.

¹² In China ninety marks out of a hundred is considered excellent; above 80 is considered good; between 60-70 is reasonable; while below 60 is a failure. Yang often scored in the 60-70 region in the course I taught him.

I have not done the writing much. Maybe the reason is that I prefer listening and speaking; ... on the whole, I think I did my best to do it according to my learning plan. (Yang, Learning journal, week 5)

Like many students he recorded what he had done and what he had failed to do in accordance with his learning plan during the first few weeks. From his account, we can see he was a little reluctant to do writing. Maybe he didn't have much confidence in it.

How times flies! It is the 8th week. ... Suddenly, I found life is too short to waste. Looking back what I did this week, I feel proud of myself ... first, I did dictation and reading every evening as usual. The more I listen, the more progress I make. Second, I went to English corner... I developed my confidence greatly... Finally, I tried to keep a balance among the four skills in learning English and I began to focus on improving my writing skill. I borrowed a book named "College English Writing". It is very useful and thoughtful for me to learn something from it. On the whole, I still have a long way to go in learning English... but I won't give up until I get it ... I want to create a bright future by myself. I believe in myself. (Yang, Learning journal, Week 8)

After several weeks' effort, it seemed that his self-confidence was, to some degree, improved as he was willing to take up writing. In addition, I found his writing was not as bad as he thought. As I mentioned above, it was mainly because Chinese students were humble to admit themselves. In fact, his narration went quite smoothly and clearly although he used many simple sentence structures. Then I gave him my following feedback:

To be honest, it is a pleasure for me to read your learning journal. Firstly, your narration goes so smoothly that no one in the class can compete with you; secondly, I can read your confidence, your attitude to your learning. You're very determined to learn English well. I would like to say the same word again, "excellent!" (Li, Notes, October 28, 2008)

It seemed that he was greatly encouraged by my comment in the next few weeks as on a cold but pleasant Monday morning, he handed me his journal book surprisingly (without being nominated to). Then I read something special. Here I would like to present it to you:

It was an interesting and unforgettable week for me because I discovered something about myself and the place where I live. ... Looking back what I did last week, I think I have a lot to say. Firstly, I did dictation and reading as much as I could. I could sense my listening and reading skills are improving every day. Secondly I know exactly my writing is poorer than other skills, so I spent much more time in writing last week. Hopefully, I can improve as quickly as I expect.

Finally, I want to say something to my dear teacher (Ms. Li). In the first place, you are a wonderful teacher. You are responsible and professional to your job and students. I admire you. At the same time, I like you very much. I hope you can be my teacher until I graduate. In the second place, thank you very much for your encouragement last time. It gave me more confidence about English learning and I will keep doing it... (Yang, Learning journal, Week 11)

From his journal, we can read that he stepped further to meet his difficulties, spending much time in doing his writing. I felt more pleased that he was so highly motivated by my encouragement that he was really making constant efforts on his writing. More

important, what I did in the class won his recognition which increased my confidence in improving my teaching. Then I wrote back to show my determination to help him with his language learning: *"I am really happy to read that you're making progress in your learning these days. I hope you can achieve more. And I will try my best to offer a hand in your learning if you need"*. (Li, Notes, November 20, 2008)

When the College English Test-Band 4(CET-4), was approaching, he was busy traveling between the classroom and the library to work as hard as his fellow students. The following comprised part of his journal in Week 13:

It was a special week for me personally. I gained something that I never expected this week. To my surprise, I found that I am more useful in some aspects. Life is getting better and better for me... looking back what I did this week, I suppose that I spent most time in doing CET-4. I am preparing for it. I really want to pass it because it is a good way for me to test my English. At present, nothing is more important than to pass that exam... I will try my best to do it. Once I pass it, it will give me more confidence. (Yang, Learning journal, Week 13)

As we can read, he showed he valued the examination very much for if he could succeed in it, it would give him more confidence in language-learning.

II) Jin

Jin had admitted truthfully that she had wasted a lot of time in Grade One, so she was determined to make full use of her time to achieve something that was to pass the College English Test-Band 4 in this semester. Then she worked out a full and busy schedule which involved in listening, speaking, reading and writing. She worked diligently towards it during those two months. Here is an excerpt from her journal:

Generally speaking, I am satisfied with what I did this week. I went to library to read some books about English language. What I need to improve is that I should last my learning and improving the effect of learning. I will work harder. (Jin, Learning journal, October 7, 2008)

At the beginning, she recorded simply what she had done in a particular week. She also reflected on her ideas and discovered what it was she wanted to improve for next week. I read her journal for the first time on Oct. 9th with the encouragement of the word *"work hard"* as my feedback.

I have kept a book on CET-4 exercises for a long time. Now it is the time that I should return it but I haven't read it at all. I find there was no time to memorize the words in it because every morning when I finished reading the glossary in the textbook, it was time for class. I did carry out my plan for CET-4. What bothered me most was listening. It was too difficult for me to understand. What should I do to improve my listening? (Jin, Learning journal, Week 7)

Judging from her journal, she had some difficulty in handling her learning affairs and was troubled with listening. Thinking she might need my help and encouragement, I suggested some listening strategies:

Listening is a skill rather than knowledge. Thus you must be patient as it is rather difficult to improve. What you need to do is that you must practice it regularly and massively. So first putting on your earphones whenever possible may be useful to you. Next you could browse the title, vocabulary and even the content of exercise work and predicted what the text was mainly about before listening and then try to verify what you predict in the listening. And then you can predict the sequence of the information that will be presented. For example, in a news story, it may be in such sequence: who- what- when- where while in an airport announcement, it may be: who- flight number-arriving/ departure time-gate number. (Li, Notes, October 29, 2008)

It seemed she was likely to employ learning strategies in her learning as I found something new about her learning in her journal of the next week:

This week, I did a lot of listening practice. I felt very pleased that your suggested strategies worked very well, especially browsing the content of the tasks and predicting what it was mainly about. In this way, I found it easier for me to comprehend the listening text and complete the task. Now I feel more enjoyable in listening. Thank you, my dear teacher. (Jin, Learning journal, Week 8)

Moreover, she was quickly encouraged in her learning in the classroom. The day after the first short play was presented in class she demonstrated a short dialogue with one of her roommates which was in fact a combination of narration, conversation, singing and acting. Once again, the class was enthusiastic and called out their appreciation. They enjoyed it very much, it seemed, and so did I.

With the opening of the new linguistic laboratory, Jin became a frequent visitor as she said she enjoyed those pleasant learning programs. Here are some excerpts from her journal:

I kept the habit to get up early in the morning and go to the classroom to do morning reading. I like to visit room 408 (the new language lab) very much for I can practice and improve my listening. What's more, I've seen some wonderful movies in it which can broaden my vision and enlarge the knowledge of English culture and language. In my spare time, I went to library to read something I am interested. I felt I did the work fine. (Jin, Learning journal, Week 9)

Sometimes I could sense she was not content to be bound to a textbook. She desired to know about other fields beyond grammar and vocabulary and she tried to broaden her vision. If she failed in doing so, she felt a little disappointed. Take the following for example:

How time flies! These days I felt I achieved little. I would like to read the books in other field but I found little time because it took me a lot of time to read the textbook and to do the grammatical exercises. I was disappointed with myself.... (Jin, Learning journal, Week 10)

When the College Test was approaching, she concentrated her attention completely on it as most of her fellow students did although sometimes she was able to recognize the imbalances in her learning as she recounted in her journal:

I was loyal to my schedule. I felt content with myself for I persisted in everything on the list. However, I was worried about my speaking as it had not improved much. I lost my interest in English Corner because it didn't help much developing my speaking. I have never had real

communication with others in English these days. I know it was not good to my language learning. I need to mend my ways... (Jin, Learning journal, Week 12)

At last, here came the College English Test- Band 4, and she wrote down her thoughts and feeling, seemingly a little painful, after the examination in her journals:

We took the CET-4 exam yesterday. I don't want to think of the result. What I needed most was to have a good rest to relax myself psychologically. So I went on an outing with my roommates to enjoy the sunshine. It was the first time for us to experience the tense since the college Entrance Examination. We felt very nervous for fear that we could not finish the exam paper. Some of my fellow students even said that their hands were shaking for there was very little time left. How I want a good rest and a long holiday! However, we could do nothing because we have to prepare for the coming final examination. How tired we are! (Jin, Learning journal, Week 16)

As most Chinese college students, she valued the examination-grades and gaining certification. This would vindicate her proficiency in English language learning although she felt sick of it because this, it seemed was all the school authority, the employers, even the whole society seemed to valued. This was one of the reasons, I believe, why China has taken action to reform its education system.

III) Fang

Fang was so shy and quiet that it was easy not to pay much attention to her for a long time. It was last September when she gave her duty report that I began to get know her properly. When she stood in front of the class, she asked me for permission to speak Chinese. I refused because I was simply sticking to the principle that everyone should speak English in an English classroom. With tears in her eyes she started to tell her story in Chinese anyway.

From her story I learned something of her background, her family and her growing-up. She was such an obedient child that she had never said *no* to her parents for fear that they would be unhappy. She was sensitive to the fact of her parents' hard work for many years and that they had paid a lot for bringing her up and for her education. She knew that she should work hard and get high grades in her school lessons to please her family. However, she had suffered a lot from so many years' stress of preparing for examinations, in particular for the College Entrance Examination. She had had so many sleepless nights and suffered heavy headaches while she had to pretend to be able to attend classes, read books and do the examination exercises. She had to keep everything to herself for she didn't know who she could turn for help because everyone else was busy with their futures as well. Gradually, she became silent, timid, and ineffective in her daily life. On a later occasion she told me she didn't in fact like English and it was her brother who made the decision for her, because these days there were more opportunities for English majors to look for a job. She was a little isolated from her fellow students because she didn't know how to communicate with them although they were friendly and kind to her.

I felt very sympathy for what she had suffered whilst a little ashamed of my arbitrary denial to her which may add something to her depression. It was her who reminded me that individuals have more needs rather than developing language skills in learning. It was obvious that she was suffering psychological depressions and was too eager to get herself to be known and understood by others. With such thoughts, I decided to make attempts to help her out of her trouble.

As for her language-learning, she said she had made a plan and kept her learning journals every week, but she said little about them. Mostly, she expressed much of what she longed for: understanding, compassion, tolerance and considerateness. She also expressed her wish to handle her life in her own way and to do what she liked. Meanwhile, she betrayed a little of her antipathy to school lessons. Even so, she had still performed her obligations as a student. When she had learned something, she would be happy and confident, though and here is an excerpt from her journal:

I found my plan was infeasible, so I changed some parts of it. Every day I tried to do something. When I succeeded, I would be steady and sure and often have a sound sleep at night. (Fang, Learning journal, Week 8)

Sometimes she showed her interest in learning, especially through those programs that she enjoyed. For example:

I don't think I did the work well this week mainly because I was a little idle and lazy, but I managed to see English movies. I enjoyed myself in those humorous episodes. Meanwhile I exposed myself in the language and its culture. I like this way of learning. (Fang, Learning journal, Week 9)

I didn't impose any pressure on her for I knew she needed time to recover. What she needed most was others' understanding and consideration. Therefore, I encouraged her to become independent from her family. For instance, she could make her own decisions such as choosing the clothes she liked or make suggestions to her friends, etc. She nodded quietly to me. I told her I would like to be her friend and to listen to her if she was willing to speak to me.

On November 17th, she handed me a journal with her thoughts in it and told me that it had taken her five hours that weekend to compose. She wrote a very long story (eight pages in Chinese, about 120 lines) about her childhood, her parents' love and expectation for her and her terrible suffering from the examinations. She also expressed her philosophy of life, her dreams of an ideal life and desire for friendship.

I read it very carefully in order to experience what she experienced, and then pondered on what I could do for her. On November 23rd, I wrote a letter to express my empathy and concern for her, my views on life and the nature of learning, hoping that she could read something special which is different from traditional idea on learning and my recognition of what she had done which can encourage a cheerful feeling in her life. Here is an extract from the letter:

I can feel what you were suffering from being your parents' "obedient" child. Then one day when you couldn't stand it any more, you began to betray them and search for the meaning and value of the existence of life to support your own position. And then you were absorbed

in philosophy, psychology, religion and ethics. It seemed that you were lucky that you had found what you wanted. However, when you looked backward in your real life, you felt as frustrated as you discovered that sometimes kindness, beauty, and truth were so far away from you. Here I need to remind you that kindness, beauty and truth are things that cost us to pursue all life long. Thus we need to work hard to go ahead of ourselves constantly.

I can understand your dislike of “learning”. However, what do you mean by learning? Does it simply involve textbook reading or getting a high grade in the examination? If so, you had a misunderstanding of learning. In my opinion, you were doing the real learning when you were thinking about the meaning and the value of life and trying to read some literatures. You were doing the work better than others. I admire you... (Li, personal correspondence November 23, 2008)

As time went on, Fang continued to struggle against those negative thoughts of learning and managed her learning normally. These two completely opposed thoughts came across in her learning journals. However, on December 2nd I got up early to get ready for the morning class and happened to see her pass by my window hurriedly to the classroom. The next day I mentioned the event to her. She smiled at me shyly and said that with the College English Test - Band 4 examination drawing near, she would like to cope with it as her classmates did. When I asked about her dislike of English language learning, she replied that she didn't hate learning so much after all. She could concentrate on it sometimes in fact.

What she said surprised me a little. Had she changed her attitude to learning? I wondered. A week before the final examination, all of the students had come to the Christmas party and enjoyed their play *Cinderella* very much – except her. One of her roommates told me that she had gone to the library as she was not accustomed to noisy and social occasions. The girl added that she had changed a lot during that time, that she appeared happier and more cheerful than before and that she even went surfing on the internet with friends.

In my opinion, happiness, understanding, empathy and consideration are more important than the course-learning and its score. What pleased me was that she had become happier and more cheerful than before. What's more, she had changed her attitude a little to learning. She had a tendency to engage herself more fully in language learning.

Conclusion

After two months' work, I can draw the conclusion that those three students as described in the short case studies have progressed a lot in their own ways. They took the responsibility for making decisions to set their goals, draw up plans and worked hard toward them by thinking critically and exploring new learning strategies. More importantly they've developed something of self-confidence, a positive attitude and even an enjoyment of learning. Yang could recognize he was poor in writing, but then gain a positive attitude to working hard on it. As he progressed, he gained some self-confidence in accomplishing his goal. Jin knew quite clearly that she had not devoted herself sufficiently in her learning. She then was able to work on a plan and carry it out to achieve her goal. She developed some learning strategies in coping with problems in language learning. Most important of all, she was more creative than before. As for Fang, she made efforts to fight against her negative

thoughts about learning, and gradually she developed a cheerful attitude and seemed to enjoy her learning and life a little more than before.

For learners, self-confidence, positive attitude, learning strategies, thinking critically and enjoyment in learning can drive and enable them achieve more in the future. Everyone likes to do what they enjoy. I believe when one enjoys something, s/he will make every attempt to learn more about it. I have found through this project how important it is to help students learn to help themselves, an insight fully in keeping with the New Curriculum. However, all of these ideas and values have been missing, I believe, in teaching and learning in China. That is why the New Curriculum values them very much and seeks to encourage them in our education system.

Regarding the whole class, although I have not been able to assess each student's level of learning, I have felt a more positive classroom atmosphere and a readiness to learn. I regard this change as helpful and important as I am now able to present my lessons in an atmosphere that I believe is conducive to learning. I am delighted with this small but significant step.

However, I should confess to the fact that the students continued to concentrate on a range of examinations that constitute the requirement to obtain their degrees as school authorities, parents and the society value these very much although sometimes the students are sick and tired of them.

This Action Research Project has enabled me to describe a journey in which my professional development as a teacher has been an enabling experience. I have been challenging myself to facilitate my students to learn to take charge of learning affairs by employing new methods which might be developed either in my reflection on what happened in the classroom or in the contribution of my Action Research Set. During the whole process, I've been keeping a more critical eye on my teaching which helped me become more sensitive to the teaching environment. With such a critical eye, I've discovered something new and different from the traditional perspective, that is, students could be more creative in learning than you expect them to if they have a chance to show and manage themselves. What's more, each student has individual interests, needs, learning styles and skills in learning and they will work in their own way to learn. They cannot acquire the same thing on the same level at the same time. Thus it is more important to offer them opportunities and help to facilitate them to develop at an individual pace than to require them a standard knowledge acquisition by testing which may bring greater mental pressure. All these new discoveries enabled me think, re-plan and act again in my teaching. Apart from this aspect, the small changes I've made in this project helped me build my confidence in continuing to improve my practice.

Now, it is very important to develop another Action Research Project over a longer period. In addition, I want to be able to collaborate with my colleagues and help them commence their Action Research Projects in the near future. This will give me the opportunity to share my learning, offer advice and support and learn from them too. Such interaction would be a very powerful and powerful way for us teachers, within our rapidly expanding department to continue to look at our practice for change, development and growth.

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Appendix

Gong's Learning Plan

I've made up my mind to work hard on my lessons at the beginning of the new semester. I will do my best to win the scholarship. To achieve this, I will do my English language learning as follows:

Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I will get up earlier in the morning and do morning reading for at least 20 minutes.• In the evening I will read a piece of English writing.
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Every evening I will listening to English about half an hour before I go to bed.• I will listen to English songs as I enjoy them very much.
Speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I will try my best to answer questions voluntarily in the classroom.• I will visit English Corner every Monday evening.• I will try to speak to my friends and classmates in English as often as possible.
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I will finish teachers' assignments in time independently.• I will keep my learning journal once a week.

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And last but not least I am thankful as well to my students for their willingness to improve their learning by using new learning strategies. It is hoped that they will continue to develop these skills in learning as they continue their studies towards their degrees over the next two years.