Walking like a toddler: Students' autonomy development in English during cross-border transitions

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A B S T R A C T

The language-related challenges affecting international university students' adaptation to a new host environment have been extensively explored in English-speaking countries. However, few studies have been performed in non English-speaking countries or regions, and even fewer have investigated these challenges from the perspective of learner autonomy. Adopting a process-oriented approach, the present qualitative, multiple case study examines how nine first-year mainland Chinese university students developed their autonomy in adapting to English-medium-instruction (EMI) in a university in Hong Kong, a multilingual context. The findings reveal that, via a three-stage process, the participants developed autonomy by changing their strategies for both learning and using English during their first year of study. The participants' development of autonomy for learning and using English was also mediated by the local multilingual context. These findings help to deepen our understanding of the dynamics and complexity of students' long-term autonomy development in an era of increasing internationalization in higher education.

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1. Introduction

Adjusting to a new medium of instruction has been reported as one of the biggest obstacles for international students when transitioning to university, whether the transition is to English or non-English speaking countries or regions (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999; Zhang & Mi, 2010). Research has also shown that successful transition to new linguistic environments by international students can be attributed mostly to the students' own autonomous coping skills, rather than the help provided by academic staff (Evans & Morrison, 2011). Although numerous studies have investigated the academic, socio-cultural, and psychological transitions of international students (Guan & Jones, 2011; Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010), few studies have explored the process of developing language learning autonomy over a lengthy period of time from the learners' perspective.

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The majority of studies on language autonomy have been confined to EFL classroom settings, reporting outcomes of "single, short-term intervention[s] in the learning process" (Benson, 2002, p.10). However, little is known about how learners motivate themselves during autonomy development in language learning, or about the social and affective strategies they apply to deal with anxiety, and modify their beliefs about language learning over time (Benson, 2011, p. 206; Littlewood, 1996). This paucity is underscored by Huang (2009), who performed one of the few longitudinal studies investigating the autonomy development of a group of EFL learners. His call for more research to better understand how learners develop autonomy over a long period of time still resonates, especially in light of the lack of studies in cross-border contexts.

Increasing numbers of tertiary students are traveling to universities outside of their home country. UNESCO statistics (2014) show that from 2000 to 2012, the number of students going abroad to study increased from two to four million; China was the largest source, while the United States was by far the biggest recipient. In 2012, for example, over 200,000 Chinese students were studying in the United States, while about one-tenth this number were studying in Hong Kong, the context for the present study. Hong Kong, similar to the U.S., uses English as the medium of instruction in universities. These increasingly large numbers reveal a need to better understand the process that learners experience as they enter a new language environment.

Given the growing number of mainland Chinese students (hereinafter "mainland students") pursuing their first degree in Hong Kong universities in recent years (6315 undergraduates in the 2012–2013 academic year) (Central Policy Unit, HKSAR 2014), and the lack of research on this set of students compared with mainland students in English-speaking countries (Central Policy Unit, HKSAR 2014; Cheung, 2013), this study investigates the experience of mainland students as they commenced their EMI experience in their first year of university in Hong Kong.

2. Literature review

2.1. Autonomy in English learning

International students transitioning to university life experience language difficulties in several skill areas: listening (understanding lectures and tutorials) (Wu, 2015); speaking (expressing opinions and presenting) (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004); reading (reading textbooks) (Guan & Jones, 2011) and writing (writing papers) (Ramsay et al., 1999); and these tend to negatively affect their academic performance (Andrade, 2006; Zhang & Mi, 2010). Because of these difficulties, international students often struggle in lectures due to their limited vocabulary and the fast pace of speaking from their instructors (Ramsay et al., 1999), which can lead to students' high level of anxiety and lack of confidence (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000). Although many universities have established centers for remedial language support, they are usually focused on practical issues such as academic writing, while largely ignoring the cognitive management of students' learning including the development of individual autonomy.

Autonomy in language learning is defined as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (Benson, 2011, p. 58) and can be displayed in many ways. Candy (1991, p.459), for example, identified more than 100 ways to demonstrate autonomy in learning, e.g., being disciplined (planning learning ahead of time, making effective use of time and establishing personal priorities); developing information-seeking skills (being able to choose relevant resources); developing criteria for evaluating (being able to evaluate data) and self-regulating. The acquisition of autonomy is a long, developmental process (Nunan, 1997) involving "psychological de-conditioning" (Holec, 1985) while learners gradually gain control over their learning and reduce their reliance on teachers and become more proactive (Littlewood, 1999). Becoming autonomous largely means becoming independent, but it does not mean isolation from others. As social creatures, people develop independence within the limits of their interdependence on each other (Little, 1995). They constantly seek help from and collaborate with each other in the process of developing their autonomy; thus, autonomy implies interdependence, with social networks being essential in people's autonomy development (Gao, 2012; Palfreyman, 2011).

Learner autonomy is individualized and contextualized. Its development is the result of different educational processes and should be studied in various settings, unrestricted to classroom settings, and from the perspective of the students (Benson, 2011; Holliday, 2005; Kalaja, Barcelos, & Menezes, 2008).

With regard to autonomy development in language learning, Benson (2010, p.80) has proposed a multi-dimensional model of control in which there are "three poles of attraction in regard to control over learning: student control, other control and no control," and these extend over different dimensions of learning, such as planning, attention, and learning activities etc. (see Fig. 1). The third pole (no control) indicates that a dimension under no control is possible. "Planning for learning," for example, can be either a result of the combination of control from the student and others (e.g., teachers and parents), or a result of being controlled solely by the student or not controlled by anyone, in which case no planning for learning exists. No uniform dimension exists for different individuals, and even for the same individual, the dimensions vary in different contexts.

Benson's model, however, remains theoretical with little empirical evidence. Thus, the present study, using qualitative data from mainland students in a cross-border, transitional-year context attempts to better understand how they take control of their English learning in an EMI context within the frame of this model.