Fostering Autonomy: A Perception Study on Self-Directed English Listening Activities among Chinese EFL Undergraduate Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of self-directed English listening activities on the autonomy of Chinese EFL undergraduates. The research is guided by four main questions: (1) How do self-directed listening activities contribute to autonomy? (2) Which self-directed listening activities do undergraduates prefer and find most impactful? (3) What challenges emerge during these activities? (4) How can strategies address these challenges and optimise autonomy in English listening learning? The study involves English major undergraduates and employs mixed methods to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Surveys and interviews are utilized for data collection, with surveys gauging preferences, effectiveness, and challenges and interviews providing deeper insights. Quantitative analysis, using descriptive statistics, identifies trends in the data, while qualitative thematic analysis uncovers patterns within the interview responses. The findings of this study aim to inform educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers, offering practical implications to enhance English listening teaching by assessing the efficacy of self-directed English listening activities in promoting autonomy. Empowering EFL students to take control of their language learning journey is crucial, and this research contributes valuable insights to achieve this goal. By examining the preferences, impacts, and challenges associated with self-directed listening activities, the study provides practical guidance for educators to optimise autonomy in English learning environments. Ultimately, the research contributes to the ongoing efforts to improve English language education for Chinese EFL undergraduates.

Keywords: autonomy, EFL undergraduates, empowerment, English language learning, self-directed listening activities

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT), the concept of learner autonomy has become transformative, signifying a fundamental shift towards empowering students to guide their learning journeys. This shift is particularly crucial in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, where nurturing learner autonomy can significantly enhance language acquisition and proficiency. At the core of learner autonomy lies the potential to equip learners with the skills, strategies, and motivation essential for becoming self-directed language learners capable of independent language acquisition, preparing them for real-world language usage.

Chinese undergraduate learners, a substantial and diverse group in the EFL landscape, face distinctive challenges and opportunities in their pursuit of English language proficiency. These learners often grapple with limited exposure to the authentic English language, hindering their development of robust listening and comprehension skills. Responding to these challenges, educators and researchers have begun exploring innovative pedagogical approaches that leverage self-directed learning to augment listening proficiency.

This paper embarks on an academic exploration of self-directed English listening activities among Chinese EFL undergraduate learners, delving into the theoretical foundations of learner autonomy and its effective integration into English listening pedagogy. Through a comprehensive literature review and synthesis of pertinent studies, the paper aims to elucidate the role of self-directed learning activities in elevating English listening skills among Chinese EFL undergraduate students. It seeks to pursue two key purposes:

1. Examine the theoretical underpinnings of learner autonomy in ELT and related fields.
2. Investigate the practical application of self-directed listening activities in enhancing English listening skills among Chinese EFL undergraduate learners.

Therefore, this research is significant for various reasons. Firstly, it adds to the ongoing discourse about learner autonomy in ELT, providing insights into its practical implications in English listening pedagogy. Secondly, it offers educators valuable insights into effective pedagogical techniques for improving English listening abilities among Chinese EFL undergraduate learners. Thirdly, the study addresses the unique obstacles faced by Chinese EFL undergraduate students, providing context-specific advice to enhance their language competence.

In pursuit of these purposes, the study addresses four research questions:

1. How do self-directed listening activities contribute to autonomy?
2. Which self-directed listening activities do undergraduates prefer and find most impactful?
3. What challenges emerge during these activities?
4. How can strategies address these challenges and optimise autonomy in English listening learning?

By addressing these research questions, this paper aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge, offering valuable insights into the practical application of self-directed learning in the context of English listening skill development for Chinese EFL undergraduate learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of learner autonomy has increasingly become a focal point in English Language Teaching (ELT), especially within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

education. This literature review critically examines the evolving understanding of learner autonomy, integrating both theoretical insights and practical applications relevant to self-directed English listening activities among Chinese EFL undergraduate learners. Table 1 presents diverse studies contributing to the understanding of learner autonomy across various themes. It offers a straightforward tabular presentation of research publications, highlighting the study's topic and techniques, and provides a comprehensive review of the numerous themes that support learner autonomy in ELT.

Table 1

The understanding of learner autonomy across various themes

Themes	Author(s)	Study Focus	Methodology
Learner Autonomy in ELT	Javid (2018)	Perceptions of English teachers in Saudi universities	Survey, Interviews
	Ramadhiyah and Lengkanawati (2019)	Case study on teachers' and students' perceptions of learner autonomy	Interviews, Observations, Questionnaires
Self-Directed Learning in Language Education	Chen (2020)	Language learning strategies of online Chinese learners	Literature Review, Case Study
	Hu and Wu (2020)	Application of activity theory in EMI contexts in China	Activity Theory
	Lan (2020)	Effects of virtual immersion on language learning, focusing on motivation and autonomy	Virtual Immersion, Surveys
Language Proficiency and Learner Autonomy	Melvina and Julia (2021)	Relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency among Indonesian EFL learners	Surveys, Interviews
	Aalinezhad et al. (2021)	Impact of blended learning on Iranian EFL learners' autonomy, self-esteem, and vocabulary achievement	Mixed-Methods, Surveys
Varied Academic Domains	Stephen et al. (2019)	Use of exam wrappers in a self-directed first-year learning strategies course	Exam Wrappers
	Jiang and Dewaele (2019)	Exploration of enjoyment and anxiety in foreign language classrooms among Chinese EFL learners	Surveys, Comparative Analysis
	Casal (2019)	Influence of social media participation on academic performance	Data Analysis, Surveys
	Altas and Mede (2020)	Impact of the flipped classroom approach on pre-service English teachers' writing achievement	Quasi-Experimental Design
	Kesseler and Rayman (2020)	Undergraduate student-faculty collaborative research on caregiving	Collaborative Research Initiative
	Wang et al. (2021)	Importance of skill development and internal motivation in improving online performance among college students	Surveys, Interviews
Self-Directed Listening Practices	Zhang (2021)	Effects of self-directed intensive listening practice via VOA recordings on listening proficiency among	Experimental Design, Learning Strategy Theory

	English major undergraduates	
Tunagür et al. (2021)	Effect of student-centered listening-speaking activities on Turkish listening and speaking skills of bilingual Arabian students	Experimental Design, Activities Development

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

Learner autonomy is based on learners' ability to manage their learning process. This includes not just the acquisition of skills and methods, but also the development of internal motivation and a sense of control over one's learning path. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) are theoretical frameworks that help us understand how to develop autonomy in educational environments. Chen (2020) and Hu and Wu (2020) study the importance of self-directed learning strategies and the function of activity theory in promoting learner autonomy, emphasising the necessity for educators to address cultural and socioeconomic issues that may influence autonomy.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Self-directed learning activities, particularly listening, are critical in developing autonomy in EFL learners. Innovative educational approaches that use technology, such as virtual immersion (Lan, 2020) and exam wrappers (Stephen et al., 2019), provide essential information on balancing structured support with learner autonomy. The concept of exam wrappers, as explored by Stephen et al. (2019), involves structured reflective exercises designed to enhance students' metacognitive skills and self-regulated learning following an examination. They attempt to improve metacognitive skills by helping students analyse their study habits, preparation efficacy, and exam faults. This technology thus solves the limitations provided by limited exposure to authentic English while also encouraging active engagement and understanding abilities required for real-world language application.

METHODOLOGICAL DIVERSITY AND INSIGHTS INTO LEARNER AUTONOMY

The variety of approaches used in the literature, ranging from surveys and interviews to experimental designs, emphasises the complexities of examining learner autonomy. Javid (2018) and Ramadhiyah & Lengkanawati (2019) investigate perceptions of autonomy from the perspectives of both teachers and students, providing a comprehensive understanding of the problems and opportunities associated with cultivating autonomy. Furthermore, the integration of affective aspects and external influences, as investigated by Jiang and Dewaele (2019) and Casal (2019), exposes the complex interactions of emotions, social media, and autonomy.

In summary, this fundamental review reveals the varied nature of learner autonomy, emphasising the role of methodological diversity, theoretical frameworks, affective dimensions, and external influences in generating autonomy. Each study provides distinct insights, stimulating critical reflection and demanding more investigation into the complex dynamics of autonomy in various educational settings.

RESEARCH GAPS

The current body of literature on self-directed English listening activities among Chinese EFL undergraduate learners reveals a notable deficiency in context-specific recommendations, posing a significant research gap. While existing scholarly works offer general guidelines to foster learner autonomy, they consistently overlook the distinctive challenges and requirements of this particular learner group. This research endeavors to delve into and address this void by investigating and implementing tailored strategies and approaches that squarely align with the context of Chinese EFL undergraduate learners. The overarching aim is to present practical insights that can benefit both educators and students in navigating the intricacies of self-directed English listening activities in this specific academic setting.

One key observation drawn from the prior literature is the pervasive absence of recommendations precisely tailored to the needs and challenges faced by Chinese EFL undergraduates. While general principles of fostering learner autonomy exist, their application to this specific group is often unclear or insufficient. This gap raises concerns about the practicality and effectiveness of implementing autonomy-promoting strategies without due consideration for the unique sociocultural and educational context in which these learners operate. As a result, there is an urgent need to investigate and execute strategies that provide detailed solutions while taking into account the unique characteristics of Chinese EFL undergraduate students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In attempting to bridge this critical research gap, this study finds inspiration in two theories: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986). Both these theories are chosen for their potential to offer comprehensive insights into the motivational and cognitive dimensions of self-directed English listening activities among Chinese EFL undergraduate learners.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), with its emphasis on intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence, provides a lens through which to explore the motivational aspects of learners in the context of English listening activities. Understanding what motivates Chinese EFL undergraduates in the realm of self-directed listening can inform the development of strategies that resonate with their inherent drives and needs. SDT's focus on autonomy aligns particularly well with the goal of promoting learner self-direction, a crucial aspect of effective self-directed English listening activities.
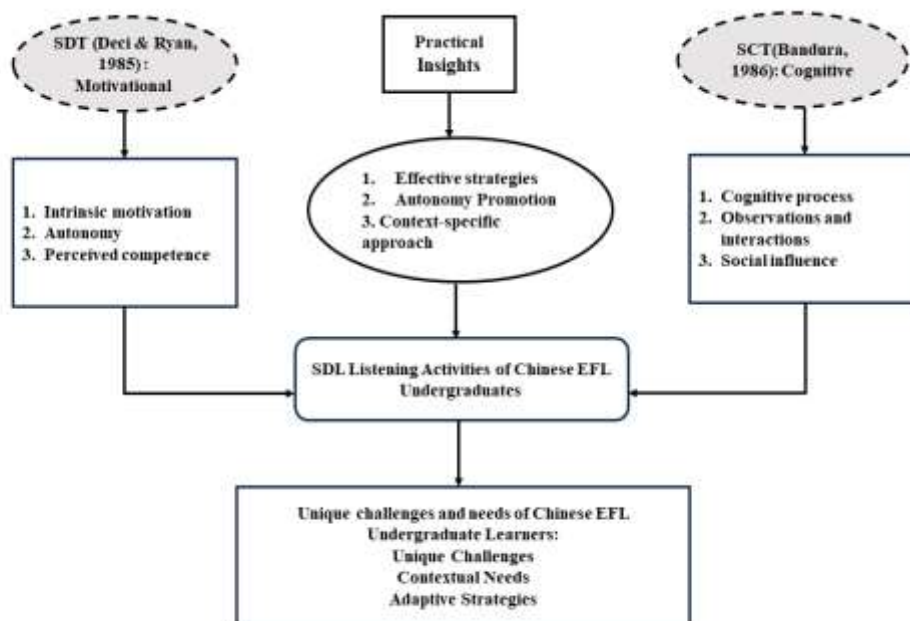
Complementing this, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) contributes insights into the cognitive processes and social influences at play in the learning environment. By examining how Chinese EFL undergraduate learners perceive and model their behaviors based on observations and interactions, SCT offers an in-depth understanding of the socio-cognitive factors shaping their engagement with self-directed English listening activities. This dual theoretical framework enables a holistic exploration that goes beyond merely motivating learners, delving into the cognitive and social dimensions that play pivotal roles in shaping effective self-directed learning strategies.

By incorporating SDT and SCT into our research framework, we aim to offer a more detailed and context-specific approach to self-directed English listening activities for Chinese EFL undergraduate learners. Through an exploration of motivational and cognitive dimensions, this research aspires to identify strategies that not only foster autonomy but also resonate with the unique challenges and needs of this specific learner group. In doing so, it anticipates contributing valuable practical insights that can guide educators and students alike

in navigating the landscape of self-directed English listening activities within the context of Chinese EFL undergraduate education.

Figure 1

Theoretical framework

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research utilised a mixed method to conduct the research. Before the questionnaire distribution, informed consent was given to participants, ensuring they understood the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits of the study and ensuring participants' confidentiality and anonymising their responses in the reporting of findings. This research used multiple sources (questionnaire, focus groups' discussion, document analysis) to validate and enhance the credibility of findings.

Firstly, a questionnaire was distributed online to participants who are in a listening course of one university in southwest China. A qualitative focus group interview was then used to explore the experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of Chinese EFL undergraduate learners in self-directed English listening activities. It used purposive sampling to select participants who have experience with self-directed English listening activities.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The questionnaire used in this study has three distinct sections. The first section consists of three items dedicated to capturing important demographic information from participants, ensuring a thorough understanding of the sample characteristics. In the second section, the authors used an adapted questionnaire from a previous study (Cheng et al., 2010) to assess undergraduate students' self-directed learning (SDL) levels in English listening practice.

Given its proven effectiveness in similar situations, the inclusion of a previously validated instrument adds to the section's reliability.

For the third section, the scale used to assess learner engagement (LE) is a composite derived from known scales in the area, with inspiration from Deng et al. (2020) and Reeve and Tseng (2011). The authors hoped to create a strong and dependable tool to assess participants' levels of learning engagement by incorporating and adapting aspects from various credible sources. This technique ensures a thorough evaluation of the multiple aspects of learning engagement.

Additionally, to gain a more detailed understanding, a focus group interview method was used, allowing participants to freely voice their experiences and viewpoints. The use of open-ended questions during the interview process improved the qualitative part of the study. To ensure integrity in the qualitative analysis, a detailed coding scheme for analysing interview transcripts and focus group discussions was carefully created. This systematic technique improves the reliability and validity of qualitative data, offering a more complete picture of participants' experiences and enriching the overall study.

It should be admitted that, in the current investigation, we used a previously verified research instrument to assure the reliability of our measurements. However, due to limitations in the research timetable and resources, we did not run a pilot test with our unique sample. While this decision was made with the goal of focusing on the study's major objectives, it is acknowledged that pilot testing may have offered useful information about the instrument's applicability to our specific set of participants.

DATA COLLECTION

In order to provide thorough insights into the experiences of Chinese EFL undergraduate learners participating in self-directed English listening activities, this study used a mixed method. To gather quantitative data and give a general picture of participants' participation in self-directed English listening activities, a structured questionnaire was given out online.

Chinese EFL undergraduate students who were part of a purposive sample were interviewed in-depth. These in-depth interviews focused on the unique experiences of the participants, illuminating the particular tactics used and difficulties faced throughout self-directed English listening activities.

A focus group discussion was arranged to promote cooperative reflections and group interactions. The forum enabled participants to have in-depth discussions and explore common experiences and viewpoints around self-directed learning.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, the data analysis process involved the utilisation of two distinct methods: SPSS for examining the questionnaire results and thematic analysis for scrutinising the transcripts of interviews and focus groups. The use of SPSS allowed for a quantitative examination of the data gathered through the questionnaires, providing statistical insights into the trends and patterns observed in the participants' responses.

Thematic analysis, on the other hand, was employed to delve into the qualitative aspects present in the transcripts of interviews and focus groups. This method involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and categories related to learner autonomy, techniques, motivations, and problems in self-directed listening activities. Through this process, the

personal narratives, feelings, and insights shared by participants regarding their experiences with self-directed listening activities were meticulously examined. This comprehensive exploration facilitated a deeper understanding of the factors influencing autonomy development among the participants.

The qualitative aspect of the thematic analysis allowed for a rich examination of the participants' perspectives. Their individual stories and reflections were documented, providing a nuanced view of the challenges and motivations surrounding self-directed English listening activities. By capturing the essence of participants' experiences, this approach added a qualitative layer to the research, complementing the quantitative insights gained through the SPSS analysis of the questionnaires.

The themes identified through thematic analysis, such as learner autonomy, techniques, motivations, and problems, collectively contributed to a holistic understanding of the self-directed listening activities undertaken by the participants. This mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analyses, offered a comprehensive investigation into the effectiveness of self-directed English listening activities in promoting learner autonomy among undergraduate students.

The potential implications of the study's findings are noteworthy for various stakeholders, including English language teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers. The results have the potential to inform teaching practices by shedding light on the aspects that significantly influence learner autonomy in the context of self-directed English listening activities. Curriculum designers can benefit from insights into effective techniques and strategies that support autonomy development. Policymakers may find valuable information for shaping educational policies that enhance the autonomy of undergraduate students in English language learning.

In conclusion, the mixed-methods approach employed in this study, combining SPSS for quantitative analysis and thematic analysis for qualitative exploration, facilitated a thorough investigation into the multifaceted nature of self-directed English listening activities among undergraduate students. The resulting insights hold the promise of contributing valuable knowledge to the broader field of English language education, offering practical implications for those involved in shaping language learning experiences.

FINDINGS

In this study, quantitative findings were collected using a questionnaire that assessed students' self-directed learning (SDL) and learning engagement (LE) across multiple dimensions. The questionnaire, which contained 40 items, was distributed to a sample of 29 individuals, who responded on a Likert scale. The questionnaire's reliability, as determined by Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, was high at 0.945, indicating exceptional internal consistency (Paterson et al., 1988). This shows that the questionnaire items consistently assess the same underlying constructs of SDL and LE. The questionnaire's strong internal consistency increases its credibility and reliability in capturing students' impressions of self-directed learning and engagement.

Key findings are classified into two parts: quantitative and qualitative. Table 2 presents the demographic information of all respondents.

Table 2

Demographic information

Demographic	Percentage
Gender	
Male	3.45%
Female	96.55%
Age group	
17-21	100%
English score	
70-90	3.45%
91-110	24.14%
111-120	44.83%
>120	27.59%
<70	0%

The next table presents descriptive statistics in details.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics

Item	Mean	Median	SD	Mode
4. I know what I need to learn	3.59	4.0	0.91	4.0
5. Regardless of the results or effectiveness of my learning, I still like learning.	3.79	4.0	0.73	4.0
6. I strongly hope to constantly improve and excel in my learning.	4.48	4.0	0.51	4.0
7. My successes and failures inspire me to continue learning.	4.03	4.0	0.50	4.0
8. I enjoy finding answers to questions	3.90	4.0	0.67	4.0
9. I will not give up learning because I face some difficulties.	4.07	4.0	0.59	4.0
10. I can pro-actively establish my learning goals.	3.55	3.0	0.63	4.0
11. I know what learning strategies are appropriate for me in reaching my learning goals.	3.41	3.0	0.78	4.0
12. I set the priorities of my learning.	3.72	4.0	0.70	4.0
13. Whether in the classroom or on my own, I am able to follow my own plan of learning.	3.21	3.0	0.82	4.0
14. I am good at arranging and controlling my learning time.	3.14	3.0	0.79	4.0
15. I know how to find resources for my learning.	3.59	4.0	0.68	4.0
16. I can connect new knowledge with my own personal experiences.	3.69	4.0	0.71	4.0
17. I understand the strengths and weakness of my learning.	4.07	4.0	0.75	4.0
18. I can monitor my learning progress	3.45	3.0	0.63	4.0
19. I can evaluate on my own my learning outcomes.	3.59	4.0	0.68	4.0
20. My interaction with others helps me plan for further learning.	4.14	4.0	0.64	4.0
21. I would like to learn the language and culture of those whom I frequently interact with.	4.21	4.0	0.56	4.0
22. I am able to express messages effectively in oral presentations.	3.24	3.0	0.87	4.0
23. I am able to communicate messages effectively in listening and speaking.	3.21	3.0	0.90	4.0
24. I will listen carefully.	3.72	4.0	0.70	4.0
25. I will preview what the teacher is going to say.	3.55	4.0	0.69	4.0
26. I actively participate in various classroom teaching activities.	3.28	3.0	0.84	4.0
27. I actively complete various after-school assignments or tasks assigned by the teacher.	3.66	4.0	0.77	4.0
28. I will link the course learning content with my other language skills practice.	3.66	4.0	0.86	4.0
29. During the study of this course, I will connect what I have learned with the knowledge and skills I have previously mastered.	3.66	4.0	0.81	4.0
30. I will summarise my own problems in the study of English listening skills.	3.62	4.0	0.82	4.0
31. During the study of this course, I actively participated in the group cooperative learning tasks.	3.79	4.0	0.68	4.0
32. I will communicate with my classmates on the relevant matters	3.52	3.0	0.87	4.0

learned in this course.

33. I will share materials or information related to the study of this course with my classmates.	3.52	3.0	0.78	4.0
34. I will provide the teacher with some materials and relevant information about our professional direction.	2.90	3.0	0.94	4.0
35. I give suggestions or feedback to teachers on how to improve teaching.	2.34	2.0	0.67	4.0
36. I will communicate with the teacher about what I have learned in this course.	2.66	2.0	1.01	4.0
37. I found the learning experience of this course very rewarding.	3.79	4.0	0.68	4.0
38.I enjoyed the learning process of this course.	3.90	4.0	0.77	4.0
39. The knowledge/skills acquired in this course make me happy.	3.86	4.0	0.74	4.0
40. Studying this course doesn't make much sense to me.	1.83	2.0	0.85	4.0

Table 3 presents an analysis of the descriptive statistics derived from a questionnaire aimed at assessing various dimensions of student learning and engagement. The questionnaire comprised 40 items, with responses gathered on a Likert scale. The statistical measures analysed include mean, median, standard deviation (STD), and mode for each item. The following provides a summary of the analysis, highlighting key findings relevant to the research objectives.

For starters, questionnaire results show that students have generally positive attitudes to self-directed learning, resourcefulness, and engagement. The predominance of a mode of 4 across several items indicates a high degree of agreement with statements about positive learning attitudes and practices. It is noted that items reflecting students' motivation and resilience, such as their continuous improvement desire (Item 6) and perseverance in the face of difficulties (Item 9), showed high mean scores and low standard deviations. This indicates a strong consensus among participants regarding their motivation to excel and resilience against learning challenges. Moreover, responses to items on resource utilization and goal-setting (Items 10 and 15) reveal a confident perception among students regarding their ability to identify and use learning resources and set their learning objectives. However, the variability in responses, as indicated by the standard deviations, suggests some differences in individual experiences and perceptions.

In addition, high mean scores on items related to collaborative learning and cultural exchange (Items 20 and 21) highlight the importance students place on interaction and communication within their learning environment. These findings underscore the role of social engagement in enriching the learning experience. Inevitably, there are areas for improvement. For instance, lower mean scores on items regarding student-teacher engagement (Items 34 and 35) indicates necessities for enhancing communication and feedback mechanisms between students and educators.

Overall, the analysis suggests a broadly positive disposition among students toward their learning experiences, characterised by a strong internal motivation, a capacity for resilience, and a high value placed on collaborative learning. Nonetheless, the findings also highlight significant areas for improvement, particularly in enhancing course relevance and fostering more effective student-teacher interactions. Addressing these areas could further enhance the quality and impact of the learning experience for students.

Furthermore, the following table provides a summary of the responses. It categorises and summarises the questionnaire items into six major themes based on the factor analysis, offering a clear and structured overview of the findings from the study, ensuring aspects of motivation, resilience, and initial self-awareness steps are appropriately recognised alongside other critical dimensions of SDL and LE.

Table 4

A summary of the responses

Group No.	Theme Title	Items	Analysis
1	Motivation and Resilience	4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9	Underlines intrinsic motivation and the resilience necessary for overcoming learning challenges.
2	Self-awareness & Goal-setting	10, 11, 12, 13, 14	Highlights participant confidence in setting goals, selecting tactics, and managing time, with a focus on self-awareness in SDL.
3	Resource Utilization	15, 16, 17, 18, 19	Reflects efficient resource usage, integration of new knowledge, and ability to assess learning outcomes, emphasising resourcefulness in SDL.
4	Social Interaction & Communication	20-23, 31-36	Values collaborative environments for enhancing SDL and LE, highlighting the role of social interactions in learning.
5	Active Participation and Integration	24-30	Captures active participation in learning activities, effective listening, and the integration of learning content with personal experiences and skill development.
6	Emotional & Psychological Engagement	37, 38, 39, 40	Notes positive emotional responses to learning, highlighting the importance of emotional engagement in learning motivation.

This analysis is based on thematic grouping of questionnaire answers, provides a more comprehensive understanding of the elements that influence participants' self-directed learning and engagement. The varied character of SDL and LE was discovered via exploring each item, suggesting potential areas for educational interventions to support and improve learner autonomy.

To summarise, the questionnaire-based approach employed in this study, boasting a high level of internal consistency as evidenced by the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, proves to be a reliable and robust method for gathering quantitative insights into students' self-directed learning and learning engagement. The extensive array of items and the substantial number of participant responses contribute to the richness and comprehensiveness of the findings, establishing a solid foundation for a thorough analysis of the factors influencing self-directed learning and learning engagement among the study participants.

While the results indicate an overall positive inclination towards self-directed learning and a strong motivation among the participants, the observed variations emphasise the importance of detailed insights into individual preferences and challenges associated with promoting learner autonomy. Further exploration and targeted interventions could prove valuable in refining and optimising the effectiveness of self-directed English listening activities for undergraduate students.

The qualitative inquiry, which is based on thematic analysis of focus group discussions, reveals students' preferences and perceptions of listening activities and self-directed learning in English. The highlighted in-class and out-of-class activities are critical for increasing engagement and autonomy, and they correspond with educational practices that emphasise active and immersive learning experiences (Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018).

Table 5

Listening activities welcomed by students based on thematic analysis

In-class activities	Out-class activities
Classroom quizzes and dictation	Watching English movies

Role-playing	Listening to TED Talks
Role-dubbing	Using mobile apps
Note-taking and blank-filling	Group discussion
Story-retelling	Listening to CET-4 listening section

Table 5 reflects the diverse range of listening activities that resonate with students, both within and outside of the classroom. The findings emphasise the importance of incorporating interactive and real-world elements into language learning to foster engagement and autonomy among students.

First of all, classroom quizzes, role-playing, note-taking, and story-retelling not only support linguistic comprehension but also enhance critical thinking and creative expression. These activities, grounded in interactive learning, are instrumental in engaging students actively in their language acquisition journey (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In addition, Engagement with English movies, TED Talks, mobile apps, and group discussions extends learning beyond the classroom, offering real-world language exposure and fostering a sense of community among learners (Godwin-Jones, 2017).

These activities emphasise the necessity of integrating diverse and practical learning experiences, resonating with the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language learning (TBLL), which prioritize real-life communication and learner autonomy (Nunan, 2015).

Furthermore, based on the thematic analysis, there are more findings related to specific research questions. Please see Table 6.

Table 6

Findings related to research questions

Research questions	Question statement	Findings
1	How do self-directed listening activities contribute to autonomy?	In the exploration of self-directed listening activities, participants demonstrated a heightened sense of personal responsibility and self-discipline. The study underscored the advocacy for independent and self-disciplined learning, emphasising students' recognition of the pivotal role autonomy plays in managing their learning activities.
2	Which self-directed listening activities do undergraduates prefer and find most impactful?	Analysis of preferred activities revealed a rich landscape, encompassing diverse in-class exercises, particularly practical ones like role-playing. Mobile apps emerged as favored resources, with a variety of platforms such as Fluent English Speaking, Fun Dubbing, Daily English Listening, Duolingo, TikTok, and Bilibili gaining prominence. Additionally, undergraduates exhibited a preference for varied self-directed methods, including engaging with CET-4 materials, role-playing, role-dubbing, and watching English movies.
3	What challenges emerge during these activities?	The examination of challenges associated with self-directed learning on mobile devices highlighted concerns such as a lack of guidance, variability in content quality, device dependency, and potential distractions. Participants emphasised the importance of cultivating self-restraint and effective time management as essential strategies to overcome these challenges.
4	How can strategies address these challenges and optimize autonomy in English listening learning?	Strategies to optimise autonomy in English listening learning were explored. Recommendations included emphasizing interactive features and feedback in mobile apps, incorporating diverse in-class activities for exposure to different accents and structures, and promoting self-restraint and effective time management to address challenges.

The qualitative findings of this study offer profound insights into the dynamics of self-directed listening activities and their impact on learner autonomy, preferences, challenges, and strategies to optimise learning. Firstly, it underlines a clear link between the engagement in self-directed listening activities and an enhancement in learner autonomy, as demonstrated by participants' dedication to personal growth, reinforcing the critical role of autonomy in language learning as articulated by Benson (2013).

Moreover, the analysis brings to light an array of preferred activities, from in-class role-playing to engaging with mobile apps. This diversity in preferences emphasises the divers and multidimensional nature of language learning tools, suggesting that offering students various engagement pathways can significantly contribute to their language mastery, a perspective supported by Rosell-Aguilar (2018). Such findings advocate for a multimodal approach in language education that accommodates different learning styles and enhances the learning experience.

However, this study also identifies emergent challenges inherent in technology-assisted learning, notably content variability and device dependency. These challenges highlight the complexities surrounding digital tools in educational contexts, requiring a balanced approach that navigates both the opportunities and limitations presented by such technologies (Stockwell, 2013).

To address these challenges and further optimise autonomy in English listening learning, the study suggests emphasising interactive features in apps and incorporating a variety of in-class activities. These strategies are in line with contemporary pedagogical models that favor personalised learning experiences and the cultivation of self-regulated learning skills, aligning with Zimmerman's (2002) advocacy for developing such skills.

In conclusion, this study not only maps out the varied listening activities favored by English learners but also examines the complex relationship between autonomy, preferences, challenges, and optimisation strategies in the context of English listening learning. By combining theoretical insights with practical observations, the research contributes to the ongoing discourse on enhancing language learning through self-directed activities. It emphasises the critical importance of adaptability, diversity, and learner autonomy in educational settings, thus offering valuable perspectives for both language educators and learners alike.

DISCUSSIONS

The study's findings, as indicated by the high Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.945, highlight the questionnaire's reliability in measuring self-directed learning (SDL) and learning engagement (LE) among Chinese EFL undergraduate students (Paterson et al., 1988). This high level of internal consistency not only confirms the instrument's reliability but also demonstrates the questionnaire items' coherence in capturing the essence of SDL and LE. The questionnaire's strong internal consistency demonstrates its usefulness in delivering a trustworthy and complete assessment of students' self-directed learning behaviors, as well as their general participation in the learning process.

Despite the relatively small sample size of 29 participants, the mixed-methods approach employed in this study serves to enhance the depth and richness of the data. The qualitative insights, derived from open-ended responses and focus group interviews, complement the quantitative data by offering nuanced perspectives on students' experiences with self-directed learning. This methodological triangulation allows for a more comprehensive understanding

of the factors that influence learner autonomy and engagement, particularly in the context of English listening activities (Deng et al., 2020).

The findings reveal a general positive inclination towards self-directed learning, with students demonstrating a strong motivation to excel and a recognition of the importance of learning from both successes and failures (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). The comprehensive 40-item questionnaire, which spans multiple dimensions of SDL and LE, provides a detailed picture of students' attitudes and perceptions. The breadth of the questionnaire ensures that a wide range of experiences and viewpoints are captured, contributing to a more in-depth understanding of the complexities involved in self-directed learning.

However, the variability in responses, particularly regarding item 40, suggests that while students generally perceive the course as meaningful, there are underlying concerns that require further exploration. This variability highlights the importance of considering individual preferences and challenges in the design and implementation of self-directed learning activities. It suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective in fostering learner autonomy and that tailored strategies may be necessary to address the diverse needs of students (Aalinezhad et al., 2021).

The preferred activities, such as role-playing, mobile app usage, and watching English movies, reflect a desire for practical and immersive learning experiences that go beyond traditional classroom settings (Chen, 2020). The qualitative findings, as outlined in Table 5 and Table 6, further enrich the discussion by providing specific examples of in-class and out-class activities that students find favorable. These findings highlight the value of incorporating interactive and real-world elements into language learning, which can significantly enhance student engagement and autonomy.

The strategies proposed, such as emphasising interactive features in mobile apps and promoting self-control, offer practical solutions to these challenges and can help optimise autonomy in English listening learning (Hu & Wu, 2020). The challenges identified in the study, such as the lack of guidance and potential distractions, point to the need for structured support systems and the development of self-regulatory skills among students.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the field of English language education by providing empirical evidence on the impact of self-directed listening activities on learner autonomy. The findings have practical implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers, offering insights into how to enhance English listening teaching by fostering learner autonomy. By understanding the preferences, challenges, and strategies associated with self-directed learning, educators can create more effective learning environments that empower students to take control of their language learning journey (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

However, one of the limitations of this study is the absence of a pilot test as it is mentioned before. Although the research instrument has been validated in previous research, the unique characteristics of our cohort might have required adjustments to the instrument or the administration process. The lack of pilot testing means that we cannot fully account for any potential issues regarding the instrument's fit within our specific context. Future research is encouraged to include a pilot phase to address this limitation and to enhance the understanding of the instrument's performance with different cohorts.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provides useful insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers, which offers practical implications for improving English language teaching approaches by examining the efficacy of self-directed English listening activities in fostering learner

autonomy, thereby empowering EFL students to take more active ownership of their language learning journey.

The implications of this research extend to educational practice, curriculum design, and policy development. This research will offer insights into how educators can leverage self-directed listening activities to enhance autonomy in English language learning. This may involve the incorporation of these activities into curricula or the development of guidance materials for students and teachers.

Furthermore, the study's findings may inspire further research into the design and implementation of self-directed learning activities, not only in English language education but also across various disciplines. The empowering of EFL students to take control of their language learning journey is a step towards more independent, confident, and successful learners. It has the potential to shape the future of language education by fostering autonomous learners who are better equipped to navigate the challenges of language acquisition and effective communication in a global context.

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