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Comparación entre estudiantes universitarios de inglés chinos y colombianos con respecto a su autonomía como aprendices

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This research seeks to gain deeper understanding of learner autonomy in English as a Foreign Language students from different cultures through the identification and analysis of similarities and differences between Chinese and Colombian students from two public universities: Tianjin Foreign Studies University in China and Universidad Surcolombiana in Colombia. Data were gathered using questionnaires and interviews for comparative research. The participants' responses were analyzed using quantitative methods such as independent samples t-test and qualitative methods such as data codification and triangulation were also used. The results indicate a significant difference between the two groups of learners regarding their autonomy. Complementarily, their autonomy-enhancement difficulties were diagnosed.

Key words: Comparative research, learner autonomy, similarities and differences.

Esta investigación busca obtener un mejor entendimiento acerca de la autonomía de los aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera provenientes de diferentes culturas, mediante la identificación y el análisis de las diferencias y similitudes entre estudiantes chinos y colombianos pertenecientes a dos universidades públicas: Universidad de Estudios Extranjeros de Tianjin en China y la Universidad Surcolombiana de Colombia. Los datos se recolectaron usando cuestionarios y entrevistas para una investigación de tipo comparativo. Las respuestas de los participantes se analizaron utilizando métodos cuantitativos tales como prueba т para muestras independientes; al igual que métodos cualitativos como codificación y triangulación. Los resultados indicaron que hay una diferencia significativa en la autonomía de los dos grupos de aprendices. Además, se diagnosticaron las dificultades que ellos presentan en el mejoramiento de su autonomía.

Palabras clave: autonomía del aprendiz, diferencias y similitudes, investigación comparativa.

Introduction

As a postgraduate student in China, I once read a speech given by Woodrow Wilson, Princeton University's 13ᵗʰ president, who said eloquently, "What we should seek to impart in our colleges is not so much learning itself as the spirit of learning" (1909, p. D18). Although these wise words have taken on more life with the rise of learner autonomy in the educational world, both eastern and western educational systems are still struggling with lifelong learning enhancement.

Although different cultures are using their own ways and methods to promote learner autonomy in their classrooms, the results seem to be the same in all contexts: students lacking learner autonomy and having low English proficiency. Several comparisons between eastern and western approaches to the development of autonomy have been made, and Chinese students have been branded as not autonomous learners (Honggang, 2008; Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002; Xu, 2009) and as at a disadvantage when compared with European students. Conversely, Western students have been found to have greater levels of autonomy (Littlewood, 2001; Zhang & Li, 2004).

However, students do not automatically become autonomous learners simply by being exposed to Western education methods. On the contrary, from my experience as a teacher and student, Colombian learners also face many difficulties when trying to develop their autonomy (Ariza, 2008; Cabrales, Cáceres, & Feria, 2010; Fandiño, 2008). Thanasoulas (2000) said that "learner autonomy mainly consists of becoming aware of and identifying one's strategies, needs, and goals as a learner and having the opportunity to reconsider and refashion approaches and procedures for optimal learning" (p. 40). Given this, Colombian and Chinese students should first get to know themselves better as autonomous language learners and then, by becoming aware of their weaknesses and strengths, they will be better equipped to continue developing their autonomy.

Consequently, taking into account that cross-cultural comparisons have been proved to be useful when gaining insights into how students from different cultures address the same issues, the main purpose of this study was to investigate the similarities and differences between Chinese and Colombian university students of English as a foreign language (EFL). The hope is that the findings will encourage teachers and students to start working together on aspects that are hindering the development of learner autonomy in these countries.

Literature Review

I will explore here the issues regarding the panorama of learner autonomy in Colombia and China, as well as some crucial aspects concerning this research.

Although there is no single or universal concept of learner autonomy, Benson (2001) complemented Holec (1985) and Little's (1991) considerations by defining autonomy as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning in every potential aspect of control over learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content" (p. 45). Benson reminds us that since these three levels do not represent a specific method of learning, students can display them in different ways and develop their autonomy in different degrees according to their unique characteristics as learners and their learning situation. Likewise, the idea of power distribution promoted by the third level, that is, control over learning content, can be, to some extent, supported by other researchers' viewpoints that highlight the value of negotiation with the teacher and of confrontation with the authority. For example, La Ganza (2004) comments that the learner is not only expected to hold back from the teacher's influence, but s/he also must develop a capacity for persistence in using the teacher as a resource.

Previous research findings into autonomous learning have been consistent with the conclusion that Colombian students are still very dependent on their teacher (Ariza & Viáfara, 2009; Cabrales et al., 2010; Luna & Sánchez, 2005). Similarly, Spratt et al. (2002) found that Chinese students usually keep a clear view of the teacher's duty and a less clear one of their own. Zhang (2004) also identified reflection and self-assessment as the two major difficulties that Chinese students encounter when developing their learner autonomy. He attributed this phenomenon to students' excessive dependence on their teacher's evaluation.

Other views concerning the nature of learner autonomy in language learning emphasize the importance of providing learners with the strategies and techniques for learning a language (Cohen, Weaver, & Li, 1995; Oxford, 1990). Others suggest that it is about providing learners with the conditions and opportunities for exercising a degree of independence, for example, activities in class in which learners make choices or decisions about their learning, or participate in out-of-class learner directed project work.

Finally, Macaro (2008) mentions the autonomy of choice, which involves learners taking control of the goal and the purpose of their learning. Locke (1996) clarifies that for those "goals to be effective motivators for action, they must be: (a) established through the free choice and commitment of the individual, (b) specific and explicit, and (c) appear attainable" (p. 56). Macaro claims that vague goals, or specific but easy goals, do not lead to higher achievement. Xu's survey study (2009) and Honggang (2008) found that Chinese learners are usually unable to have any definite objectives and also have instrumental goals that, in their absence, may cause learners to perform less autonomously than before.

Bearing the previous considerations in mind, individual differences were also considered a crucial factor when trying to compare language learners' autonomy and get a deeper understanding with regard to how, how much, and how fast they learn the target language. For the purposes of this research, the following factors were considered relevant enough to be described here: learners' beliefs about language learning, personality factors, learning styles, and learning strategies.

The variety of beliefs that language learners bring to the classroom is decisive because this is what determines their approach to learning and the learning strategies they choose to use. Besides, Wenden (1986) states that "different views about language learning result in different kinds of success" (p. 5).

Additionally, success or failure in language learning is undoubtedly determined by personality factors. There are different aspects in a learner's personality worthy of being mentioned here e.g., "extroversion/introversion, risk-taking, tolerance of ambiguity, empathy, self-esteem, and inhibition" (Ellis, 1997, p. 518). Scharle and Szabó (2008) clarify that "personality traits, preferred learning styles, and cultural attitudes set limits to the development of autonomy" (p. 4). For example, if the communities students come from

> have a strong aversion to individualism and a preference for collectivism, students might be unwilling to take personal initiative. Some students may find it difficult to handle uncertainty, and do everything they can to avoid it, so they may find it alarming to work without the constant supervision of the teacher. (Scharle & Szabó, 2008, p. 5)

Some other students may perceive the teacher as a figure of authority who is always there to tell them what to do.

Simultaneously, learning styles together with learning strategies are significant elements regarding autonomy-enhancement. Ellis (1997) defines learning styles as the characteristic ways in which individuals orientate to problem-solving. Benson, Chik, and Lim

(2003) assert that "the Asian learner is an individual whose learning styles and preferences are largely conditioned by values of collectivism, conformity, and respect for authority inculcated through early experiences at school and in the family" (p. 26). This is why they suggest that more and more "proposals for approaches to autonomy based on the idea of autonomous interdependence" (p. 28) should be conducted.

The better control students have over their learning strategies, the more autonomous they will become as language learners. It is necessary to help students explore the wide variety of existing learning strategies so that they can identify which ones work better for them and how and when they can use them. Scharle and Szabó (2008) suggest that "learning strategies serve as tools to improve one's language competence, and learners can really only be held responsible for their competence if they are aware of these tools" (p. 53). Cabrales et al. (2010) found that the most used strategies by Colombian students are note-taking, repetition, and translation. This finding implies then that most students are still learning under the patterns of a traditional learning approach.

Even though age was not a factor this research emphasized, Benson (2007) points out that students' autonomy and their potential for it varies according to their age. Piaget (as cited in Brown, 2007) asserts that at puberty a person becomes capable of abstraction, of formal thinking, and reaches direct perception. However, Tudor (1999) brings out that younger learners might find it difficult to handle some strategies for they which they are not prepared cognitively. Likewise, Iowes and Target (as cited in Tudor, 1999) highlight that age could determine the degree of responsibility learners are used to and that is why giving them choices is a change that needs to be made gradually.

Finally, a survey of attitudes toward classroom English learning among 2,656 students from 11 different countries (eight in Asia, three in Europe) conducted by Littlewood (2001) reached different conclusions. His findings call us to become aware that even though students' views on language learning are apparently similar, there may still be significant differences in the way those beliefs and ideas are being fulfilled or put into practice. He enlightens us on how students from different countries understand or grasp the same concepts in different ways. Therefore, the understanding of how students with different cultural backgrounds are perceiving learner autonomy and how they are actually following through on those concepts and beliefs might be a good starting point to identify how autonomous learning works in different contexts, and what can be done to continue fostering it according to the unique characteristics of different learning communities.

In the specific context of Tianjin (China) and Neiva (Colombia) where this research was carried out, only a few investigations with regard to learner autonomy have been conducted. As a result of a lack of understanding of how English language learners from two public universities in Tianjin and Neiva are trying to develop their learner autonomy, I consider these two public educational institutions to be in urgent need of more data on what the weaknesses and strengths of their students regarding learner autonomy are. By comparing students with different cultural backgrounds, it is expected that they get a better picture of what kind of cultural limitations they have and how they can enrich their autonomy practices from other students' learning experiences.

Methodology

According to the social comparison theory proposed by Festinger (1954), we see that "we need to compare ourselves to figure out our strengths and weaknesses, in order to have an accurate view of ourselves" (p. 8). This is why for years comparisons have been used for the study of society and all its

institutions. Hantrais (2007) asserts that cross-cultural comparisons have been invaluable tools to demonstrate whether or not shared phenomena can be explained by the same causes.

As a result, cross-cultural comparisons have yielded a well-earned reputation as a good means of arriving at a more profound understanding of how different societies work. Ilesanmi (2009) defines cross-cultural research as a method "which focuses on systematic comparisons that compares culture to culture and explicitly aims to answer questions about the incidence, distributions, and causes of cultural variation and complex problems across a wide domain" (p. 82). Hence, since the purpose of this study is to compare Chinese and Colombian English language learners in terms of their learner autonomy, comparative research design was adopted by using a qualitative approach with a comparative scope. Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and were supported by quantitative information collected through questionnaires.

Sample

Convenience sampling was used to select both the universities and the students. Since the number of Chinese students (2,132) was much larger than that of the Colombian students (200), a probabilistic sampling was used to determine how many subjects would be considered a representative sample of the population. In this way, 314 Chinese and 200 Colombian students were the subjects selected. Since the purpose of the interviews was to collect qualitative data, a smaller sample was required to facilitate the process of triangulation and analysis of the information. Therefore, 6% of the total of the subjects already selected for the questionnaires was considered appropriate. In general, the subjects from both contexts had different financial backgrounds and their age ranged from 16 to 23.

Instruments

Questionnaire

This research adopted the questionnaire designed by Xu, Wu, and Peng (2004) to measure the degree of learner autonomy in Chinese students learning English. The questionnaire has been also adapted to the needs of several other research studies to measure learner autonomy (e.g., Honggang, 2008; Xu, 2009) and has been found reliable. This instrument was originally written in Chinese, but since Colombian students do not speak or read Chinese, it was translated into English (see Appendix) by a native English speaker with high Chinese language proficiency. The English version was subsequently checked by a Chinese professor with high English language proficiency to corroborate the accuracy of the translation.

Interview

An in-depth semi-structured interview was used to allow the students to express their feelings and opinions freely. The interview was designed by the researcher and its questions were based on the questionnaire items and other aspects that the researcher considered important in the field of learner autonomy.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected from the questionnaires were entered into SPSS 16.0[1] for the normality test. After ensuring that all sets of data were normally distributed, the independent samples t-test was conducted to find out whether there was a significant difference in learner autonomy between the two. The results were considered statistically significant when the *p* value was < .05. The results were given based on the five categories that comprised the questionnaire.

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1 SPSS 16.0 stands for statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 16. It is general statistical software tailored to the needs of the general public and is good for organizing and analyzing data.

The qualitative data collected through the interviews were codified numerically and then subjected to content analysis. Similarly, frequencies of existence of ideas were counted and recurring responses of different students were indicated. The classification of learning strategies proposed by Oxford (1990) was used to analyse the questions related to learning strategies. Triangulation was also needed to combine the results from the two types of data collected: quantitative and qualitative.

Results

A description and analysis of the results are provided to determine if there is a significant difference between the way Chinese and Colombian students perceive their learner autonomy regarding the five aspects from the questionnaire.

Based on the questionnaire administered, an independent samples t-test comparing the mean scores of the Chinese students with those of the Colombian students located a significant difference between the means of the two groups, $t(-6.375)$, $p < .05$. The mean of the Colombian group ($m = 116.63$, $sd = 16.771$) was higher than the mean of the Chinese group ($m = 107.96$, $sd = 13.828$). Table 1 shows how the Colombian group always had a higher mean in all the five aspects of learner autonomy studied through the questionnaire (see Appendix), relating to their autonomy: Total 1—Evaluation of Teacher's Aims and Requirements—measures students' understanding of their English teacher's goals; Total 2—Evaluation of Establishing Studying Goals and Plans—refers to students' practical goals and study plans. Total 3—Evaluation of the Learning Strategy's Implementation—deals with the effective employment of strategies. Total 4—Evaluation of Ability to Monitor the Usage of Learning Strategies—highlights monitoring strategies during practice. Finally, Total 5 shows the results of the evaluation of the English learning process.

However, Table 2 makes it more evident that Chinese and Colombian students were found to be significantly different in those five aspects evaluated through the questionnaire described above, because as shown in the table when comparing both groups, the Sig (2-tailed) value was less than 0.05 ($p < .05$). This leads to the conclusion that Colombian learners are likely to be more autonomous than Chinese students when learning English as a foreign language.

Table 1. Means Between the Two Groups

	Grouping	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total 1	1.00	314	17.61	2.935	.166
	2.00	200	19.54	2.933	.207
Total 2	1.00	314	16.68	3.090	.174
	2.00	200	17.66	3.469	.245
Total 3	1.00	314	16.16	2.901	.164
	2.00	200	18.61	3.349	.237
Total 4	1.00	314	23.57	3.427	.193
	2.00	200	25.33	4.440	.314
Total 5	1.00	314	34.04	4.666	.263
	2.00	200	35.49	6.036	.427
Final Total	1.00	314	107.96	13.828	.780
	2.00	200	116.63	16.771	1.186

Note. Grouping 1.00 = Chinese Group; Grouping 2.00 = Colombian Group

Table 2. Independent Samples t-test Results

| | Levene's Test for Equality Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
| | F | Sig. | t | Df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
								Lower	Upper
Total 1	1.291	.256	-7.278	424.164	.000	-1.932	.265	-2.453	-1.410
Total 2	5.165	.023	-3.357	512	.001	-.985	.293	-1.561	-.408
Total 3	7.550	.006	-8.788	512	.000	-2.451	.279	-2.999	-1.903
Total 4	16.578	.000	-5.059	512	.000	-1.763	.348	-2.448	-1.078
Total 5	12.688	.000	-3.055	512	.002	-1.449	.474	-2.380	-.517
Final Total	10.696	.001	-6.375	512	.000	-8.675	1.361	-11.348	-6.001

Note. Total 1= Evaluation of Teacher's Aims and Requirements; Total 2 = Evaluation of Establishing Study Goals and Plans; Total 3 =Evaluation of the Learning Strategy's Implementation; Total 4 = Evaluation of Ability to Monitor the Usage of Learning Strategies; Total 5 = Evaluation of English Learning Process.

These results together with the ones obtained from the interviews are shown in the following categories:

Evaluation of Teacher's Aims and Requirements

According to the results, Chinese students are less autonomous than Colombian students. The main difference between these two groups of learners seems to reside in the fact that the Chinese have less understanding than Colombians of the reasons why their teacher's goals are not clear to them and what they are expected to do with the goals. Thus, in the case of Colombian students, they claimed that the underlying reasons why they lacked clarity of their English teacher's goals was because their teachers usually put more emphasis on the topics to be studied than the specific learning goals to be reached. One Colombian student said in the interview, "the topics are always discussed, but we never talk about goals for the semester . . . we didn't really talk much about it" (CoS 5).[2]

In contrast, the Chinese students said that if their teacher's goals were not always clear to them it was not really important; they needed no justification for their English teachers' actions in class since they simply have to do whatever the teacher says. A Chinese student expressed the following, for instance:

They didn't tell us the purpose of the course. They just do it. I think it's like a habit because we are being students for many years. So, we know the rules; they teach, we learn. (ChS 2)

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2   Codes: CoS = Colombian student, ChS = Chinese student.

Finally, Colombian students (40%) and Chinese students (44%) expressed that the goals set by the teacher are often not reached because of a lack of time. Chinese students added that teacher's inadequate methodology is another main cause of this failure.

The fact that just one Colombian student admitted that it was his lack of hard work that led to failure in reaching his teacher's goals ("I need to focus more on English and devote more time to English outside the class," CoS 4), proves that students from the two cultures are not quite conscious of what their roles and responsibilities as students are, forgetting then that although their English teacher is in the classroom to help and guide them, it also depends on them to become successful learners. Limitations such as time should be definitely overcome by more individual work outside the classroom on the part of the students.

Based on the responses given to the questions related to this first category, it might be inferred that there was a general agreement among the Colombian and Chinese students that it is usually clear to them what their English teacher's aims are. However, Colombian students particularly placed higher value on their English classes and expressed how hard they try to get the most out of their teacher's classes. They want to understand all that is going on in the classroom and benefit from it as much as possible. Chinese students, on the other hand, even when knowing what their teacher's goals are, seem to do certain activities or attend classes just because it is their duty as learners. But they are not really reflecting on what is going on in the classroom and what they are supposed to do with those teacher's goals.

The fact that Chinese students do not reflect on some events that happen in the classroom such as the achievement of teacher's goals could be attributed to a lack of reflection, corroborating Zhang's (2004) idea that reflection is one of the major difficulties of Chinese students. Since Benson (2001) presents reflection as a key element to gain control over cognitive processes because it leads to action and change, weak reflective skills can be considered an area worthy of attention.

Although it can be implied from the previous considerations that Colombian students have a higher degree of readiness for learner autonomy in the classroom than Chinese students, the results also showed that both groups of students need to work harder outside the classroom to reach teacher's goals, as well as becoming more aware of their roles as students. Not surprisingly, these findings confirmed that Colombian students' lack of discipline and poor time management might negatively affect that individual work time outside of class, and consequently hinder their learner autonomy, as found by Ariza (2008) and Cabrales et al. (2010).

Evaluation of Establishing Study Goals and Plans

The questionnaires showed that there is a significant difference between the two groups in establishing study goals and plans, finding Colombian students at a higher degree of readiness, $t(-3.357)$, $p < .05$, towards learner autonomy than Chinese students. The findings revealed that a higher number of Colombian students (48%) expressed that they have a clear plan for studying, compared to 27% of the Chinese students who said so.

Another big difference between the two groups of learners is that Colombian undergraduates are better at establishing their own goals and making efforts to reach them. When Chinese students were asked about their own goals, they gave the following type of answer:

> I don't care about that. I just do what the teacher asks me to do it. (ChS 1)

> I'm not very clear why the goals are important. I don't know how to set a goal. (ChS 2)

Moreover, Colombians definitely have more difficulty than Chinese in setting specific schedules for carrying out their study plans. Chinese students tend to be more disciplined in terms of schedules. They usually define days and specific hours for their English study. Surprisingly, most Colombian and Chinese students were usually unable to mention specific goals because they focus more on general goals that do not really help them to take action on their learning process.

In summary, there is a certain degree of learner autonomy in both groups of students. However, Colombian learners seem to have more readiness for learner autonomy when mentioning their own goals and study plans. The fact that a higher number of Chinese students do not set their own goals or do not have their own study plans could be interpreted as a lack of control over their learning management, which Benson (2001) defines as the first level of control in learner autonomy. According to Benson, if students do not exercise this control, they will not be able to manage the planning and organisation of their learning. Besides, this phenomenon could also be attributed to the Chinese learners' dependence on their teachers' decisions and instructions.

On the other hand, both groups of learners showed difficulty in setting specific goals. This can be analysed as a lack of autonomy of choice that according to Macaro (2008) refers to control over the learning goals, which is only possible when students have specific and explicit goals that can work as effective motivators for action. In this way, lack of knowledge about how to set effective goals might be hindering the development of learning autonomy in both educational settings.

Finally, even though Chinese students are more disciplined than Colombian students (which can be regarded as strength), they might not be exploiting this strong point as they could if they do not have their own clear study goals.

Evaluation of the Learning Strategy's Implementation

The independent samples t-test revealed that there is a significant difference in learning strategy's implementation between the two groups. When comparing these results to the ones gotten from the interviews, it was found that students from the two cultures have more similarities when it comes to speaking, grammar, vocabulary, listening and reading comprehension strategies. For receptive skills such as listening and reading, both Chinese and Colombian students always use cognitive strategies (defined as strategies for understanding and producing language) such as watching a TV series or movies with or without English subtitles. Similarly, Colombian and Chinese students appeared to use the same strategies to improve their grammar: social (understood as learning with others e.g., asking others for grammar explanations) and cognitive strategies (Colombians 80%, Chinese 66.7%) such as doing grammar exercises.

Both Colombian and Chinese students felt that they could improve their vocabulary strategies by using cognitive (Colombian 53.3%, Chinese 55.6%), memory (understood as remembering and retrieving new information), and social strategies. They both use the same vocabulary strategies except that Colombian students pointed out the importance of memory strategies such as contextualizing words and grouping them, whereas Chinese students highlighted the usefulness of cognitive strategies such as reading the same passages several times.

Regarding speaking, both groups of learners mentioned one compensation strategy (understood as using the language despite knowledge) that was to express meanings in their own words to make the ideas

simpler. Moreover, Chinese students also referred to affective strategies (understood as the regulation of emotions) such as speaking to themselves in front of the mirror in order to feel more confident.

The main differences between the two groups of learners reside in writing. Students' views on this skill suggest that writing in English is a totally different experience for Colombian and Chinese students. On the one hand, it seems that writing is not a skill that Colombian students have much difficulty with. They claimed they use cognitive strategies such as reading.

On the other hand, Chinese students expressed how difficult it was for them to understand Western logic and therefore being good at writing represents a challenge for them. They use cognitive strategies such as reading, trying to read Western writing models, and memorizing lines from movies. Others use meta-cognitive strategies (understood as the strategies for coordinating the learning process) such as reading about how to write. Surprisingly, none of the students mentioned that they actually write in order to improve their writing.

The conclusion from this category would seem to be that both groups of students are making excessive use of cognitive strategies, compared with the frequency with which they use other essential strategies for the development of learner autonomy, such as meta-cognitive and social strategies. Based on the findings, the ranking ordering of learning strategy usage is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Rank Ordering of Language Learning Strategy Usage

6 (Most frequent)	Cognitive
5	Social
4	Memory
3	Metacognitive
2	Compensation
1 (Least frequent)	Affective

Table 3 reveals that students are using meta-cognitive, compensation, and affective strategies the least. That is to say that Colombian and Chinese students are using more direct strategies (dealing with the new language) during their language learning process than indirect strategies (general management of learning). This can be considered a negative finding because as Posada (2006) points out, a learner should use direct and indirect strategies to support each other for the development of autonomy. In other words, Colombian and Chinese students are not exploiting indirect strategies as expected, which may pose an obstacle in their process of becoming more autonomous.

On the other hand, one difference between the two groups of learners resides in their beliefs about learning a language. The fact that even when Chinese students expressed that writing represents a big challenge for them—they do not actually write in English in order to develop this skill—might be attributed to their beliefs about language learning. Wenden (as cited in Ellis, 1997) states that when students put more emphasis on learning about the language, they tend to focus more on grammar and vocabulary, being then less likely to pay attention to the use of that language. Chinese students might not be aware that the use of the language is essential, and that the same applies to all the skills, including writing.

Evaluation of Ability to Monitor the Usage of Learning Strategies

The results reported that although there are a lot of similarities between the two groups of learners with regard to the strategies they usually monitor, the major difference between Chinese and Colombian students in this category was related to their ability to find and solve problems in their method of studying. Of the Colombian students, 83% claimed that every time they found any difficulty in their learning

process, they were able to find solutions for it. Context and speaking problems seem to represent the two most common obstacles among Colombian students. Of Chinese students, on the contrary, 45% asserted that they do not know how to overcome several obstacles that they found throughout their learning process. Students particularly mentioned that they had difficulty in finding a good study method in terms of speaking and writing.

The findings showed that Chinese students are less autonomous than Colombian learners when unable to solve learning problems by themselves. Benson (2001) mentions that one of the elements necessary to exercise control over learning is the evaluation of learning. This means that monitoring the usage of learning strategies should help Chinese students identify problems with their study method, but if afterwards they are not able to find new effective methods, then there will be no changes and consequently no progress will be made.

Evaluation
of English Learning Process

Of the Colombian students, 86% expressed their willingness to take risks and get the most out of the opportunities they have to practice their English. Chinese students (76%) said that it is very difficult for them to overcome emotional issues such as public speaking, embarrassment when making mistakes, and lack of self-confidence. They feel this prevents them from taking advantage of English practice opportunities. A Chinese student said: "I was too shy to speak English because my oral English is so bad. I was very intimidated" (ChS 8).

Additionally, the interview results revealed that both Colombian and Chinese students make good use of the available learning resources. The percentages demonstrate that Chinese students make extensive use of the teacher as a human resource (41%). This can be interpreted as something positive in the sense that

students see their teacher as somebody who can help them throughout their learning process. However, since students from all levels particularly mentioned that their teachers are a very good learning resource, it can also mean that Chinese students are more dependent on their teachers than they should be. For example, one student said: "Without the teachers I cannot learn the knowledge" (ChS 9).

The conclusion from this category is the fact that Chinese students are less willing to take risks in order to get the most out of English practice opportunities. Such hesitancy might be related to their difficulty in overcoming their emotional issues. If Chinese learners do not succeed at overcoming issues such as shyness or lack of self-confidence, they will be less likely to be unafraid of making mistakes, or to become more extroverted. Thus, a verification of Scharle and Szabó's statement (2008) that "personality traits set limits to the development of autonomy" (p. 65). This totally applies to the case of Chinese students' autonomy which seems to be inhibited by their introversion, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of self-confidence. This latter is not a surprising result since Zhang and Li (2004) also reported that Chinese learners show less confidence than Western students.

Moreover, if Chinese learners see their teachers as the main source of knowledge, they can be at risk of thinking that they cannot learn, improve, or find effective methods by themselves. This could make them more reliant on their teacher as the only person who possesses the needed knowledge or solutions and consequently has more authority.

Self-Assessment

Self-assessment was an emerging category from the interview. Even though neither Colombian nor Chinese students were familiar with the term "self-assessment," they still practice it. Colombian students (71%) seem to self-assess more often than Chinese students (63%). Both groups of students expressed that

self-assessment is very important because it allows them to keep track of their progress and identify their weaknesses and strengths as learners.

The students' views on self-assessment led to the identification of different ways in which students evaluate themselves as learners (Table 4).

Table 4. Types of Self-Assessment

Type of Self-Assessment	Colombian Students	Chinese Students
Comparing themselves to others	61%	25%
Based on exams and grades	31%	50%
Based on other people's opinions	8%	25%

Colombian students (61%) said that they are very competitive, not wanting to fall behind or be worse than others, whereas most Chinese students prefer to evaluate themselves based on their exams and grades, as expressed in interviews: "I do that quite often. Especially, when I finish my examination. I go back my home. And think about what I still don't know" (ChS 6).

There was a general agreement between Colombian and Chinese students that their English teachers do not promote self-assessment practices. Students said:

> I don't think our teachers always do that. Our teachers just busy themselves and didn't care us. Just silence, silence…and we just sit here and listen and listen. And she does nothing else. (ChS 5)
> There are teachers who just give the class and they aren't thinking about motivating us to do that. (CoS 2)

This statement suggests that teachers are failing in helping students gain knowledge of the reasons

why self-assessment practices are important and how students can evaluate themselves as learners. Cram (as cited in Benson, 2001) argues those students' willingness and ability to engage in self-assessment practices increase with teachers' support and training. In other words, the role the teacher plays relating to the success of self-assessment practices seems to be very important to students from both cultural contexts.

Besides, the fact that Chinese students based their self-assessment practices on exams suggests that they might be attaching more importance to external assessments of their proficiency rather than engaging more in internal assessments closely related to reflection on their goals and effectiveness of learning activities. Benson (2001) asserts that the process of self-assessment itself is more important than students' accurate assessments of their proficiency. Holec (as cited in Benson, 2001) explains that assessment is valuable because the learner needs to know at all times whether his performances correspond to his/her aims, and also whether s/he has made any progress towards their chosen objective. In other words, the predominance of language-proficiency-based assessments might be hindering students from engaging in other types of assessments that strengthen their reflective skills and help them critically evaluate their objectives and their action plans to achieve them.

Moreover, exams and grades are just an example of an official assessment that intends to keep actual records of students' learning gains by requiring them to do assignments within a certain amount of time. This type of external assessment does not necessarily lead the students to choose a learning method, take personal initiative, or become more autonomous as learners.

Acknowledging that self-assessment is based on the perceptions of the students, but does not necessarily reflect evidence of learning gains, this, apart from being a limitation of the current study,

opens up a new avenue for researchers wanting to investigate the link between autonomy and learning gains; fine grained research on this aspect is not only needed but welcome.

Conclusions

Differences Between Colombian and Chinese Students

In terms of English teacher's aims and requirements, it is clear that the major discrepancy between Chinese and Colombian students can occur when, even though Chinese students claim to know their teachers' goals for the course, they seem to fail in understanding that the goals for their English courses are not for the teacher but for them, having then implications in their roles as students. Meanwhile, Colombian students' awareness of the importance of classes and of the benefits from working cooperatively with teachers in reaching their goals enhances their autonomy as learners by evidencing more reflection related to the way they react to their teachers' aims and requirements.

With respect to setting goals and having study plans, the difference between Colombian and Chinese undergraduates resides in the fact that Chinese students might be more reliant on their teachers than Colombian students, having then less control over their learning management and less awareness that teacher's goals and action plans might not fulfil all their learning needs, so they need to have their own. Moreover, outside the classroom, Colombian students have difficulty in allocating time for their English study, putting the achievement of their own learning goals at risk. Thus, Colombian students might lose some control over learning management when failing at successfully organising their learning.

Similarly, Colombian and Chinese students' beliefs about how to develop their writing skills differ considerably. Chinese learners' beliefs are more focused on learning about the language, whereas Colombians pay more attention to the use of the language. Clearly, this discrepancy in language learning beliefs has led both groups of learners to choose different writing strategies. Therefore, the failure of Chinese students in developing their writing skills successfully might be due to the lack of language-use based strategies.

Similarities Between Chinese and Colombian Students

Both groups of students attribute the failure in reaching teacher's goals for the English course to the teacher or external factors such as time. This shows that Chinese and Colombian learners are clearer about teachers' responsibilities than they are about their own duties, roles as students, and the efforts they are expected to put into their English learning process.

Another conclusion is that Colombian and Chinese students lack knowledge about how to set learning goals. They both showed a weakness when setting specific and explicit goals that would lead them to take action and promote changes. Goal setting is a crucial factor in the development of learner autonomy and the process of becoming successful language learners.

Cognitive learning strategies are the most used among Colombian and Chinese undergraduates. On the one hand, this can be seen as a strong point that students are using direct strategies in order to manipulate or transform the target language (Oxford, 1990); consequently, they become more proficient English learners. On the other hand, they are taking almost no notice of the importance of indirect strategies. This imbalance between the usage of direct and indirect strategies can be hindering the development of their learner autonomy since it is the interaction between these two that helps them gain control over learning and cognitive processes.

To conclude, Colombian and Chinese students have more differences than things in common when it comes to their English learning process. However, both groups of students have their own strengths and weaknesses. Even though Colombian students appear to have a higher degree of readiness for autonomy compared with Chinese students, they proved, as autonomous learners, to have a lot of weaknesses that need to be minimized.

Implications for Practice

The first recommendation to be made is that Chinese students should be given more spaces to discuss their teachers' aims and requirements, as well as be encouraged to reflect on those objectives and what impact the achievement of those goals can have in their own English learning process. From this, Chinese undergraduates can benefit in a number of ways: first, students will be more likely to improve their performances in class if they are aware that they have to cooperate with the teacher to achieve the goals for the course; second, by reflecting on the impact of those aims on their English learning, they can realize whether or not they need to set other goals that suit them best and, consequently, help them improve their proficiency; finally, reflection is a crucial factor in the enhancement of learner autonomy and is essential for self-assessment practices.

It is practically certain that without a fundamental shift of pedagogical strategy by the teachers themselves, students will not be given those discussion and reflection spaces. Teachers should be required, then, to reflect on their own roles and start behaving more as facilitators able to raise awareness in learners and help them plan their independent learning.

It is recommended that on the one hand, Colombian students need to become aware that their lack of discipline might be influenced by cultural aspects. Therefore, they need to reflect on this issue and find ways in which they can become more disciplined learners who do not let their culture set limitations on the development of their learner autonomy. On the other hand, Chinese students should strengthen this positive point by having specific learning goals for those study schedules that they easily stick to. Undoubtedly, by being disciplined learners and having specific goals for their study schedules, students should see improved English proficiency as the result of harder work. They will also become better at managing their learning in terms of planning and organising it.

Chinese students should gain more knowledge about how learning strategies aimed at using the target language in natural or communicative ways can make more contributions to the successful development of their writing skills, rather than just using strategies that focus on aspects of the language itself. Students' English proficiency can be definitely improved by using strategies that go beyond grammar, vocabulary, or memorized phrases.

Self-assessment and reflective practices should be encouraged in both groups of students. Even though Chinese students appear to be in more urgent need of developing skills that allow them to become more reflective leaners who are able to evaluate their learning process and come up with solutions to possible problems, Colombian students also need to improve their self-assessment practices. Giving them more opportunities to promote self-assessment and reflective practices will help students gain more control over their learning and cognitive processes. Besides, the better learners become at monitoring their learning process and overcoming learning obstacles, the more success they will achieve as high proficiency students.

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Appendix: English Version of Questionnaire on Learner Autonomy (Adapted from Xu et al., 2004)

A. Evaluation of English teacher's aims and requirements

	Strongly agree				Strongly disagree
1. I clearly understand the teacher's aims.	1	2	3	4	5
2. It is easy for me to make the teacher's goals into my own goals.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I clearly understand the importance of making the teacher's goals my own, as well as studying hard to achieve those goals.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I clearly understand the teacher's intention during in class learning activities.	1	2	3	4	5
5. In class, it is easy for me to keep up with the teacher's pace.	1	2	3	4	5

B. Evaluation of establishing study goals and plans.

	Strongly agree				Strongly disagree
1. Outside of assignments given by the teacher, I have a clear plan for studying on my own.	1	2	3	4	5
2. When studying English, I establish practical goals for myself based on my true English level.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am good at adjusting my study plans based on my progress.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I am good at creating a practical study schedule for myself.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I am good at establishing study goals based on the requirements outlined by the class.	1	2	3	4	5

C. Evaluation of the learning strategy's implementation.

	Strongly agree				Strongly disagree
1. I have a complete understanding of the learning strategy.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I can consciously employ effective strategies to improve my listening comprehension.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I can consciously employ effective strategies to improve my spoken English.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I can consciously employ effective strategies to improve my reading comprehension.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I can consciously employ effective strategies to improve my written English.	1	2	3	4	5

D. Evaluation of ability to monitor the usage of learning strategies.

	Strongly agree				Strongly disagree
1. I can consciously monitor the usage of listening strategies during practice.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I can consciously monitor the usage of speaking strategies during practice.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I can consciously monitor the usage of reading strategies during practice.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I can consciously monitor the usage of writing strategies during practice.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I am able to find and solve problems in my method of studying.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am conscious of whether or not my method of study is practical.	1	2	3	4	5
7. If I realize that my method of study is impractical, I quickly find a more suitable one.	1	2	3	4	5

E. Evaluation of English learning process.

	Strongly agree				Strongly disagree
1. Outside of class, I take advantage of various opportunities to practice my English. (e.g., using English to talk to classmates about daily life, participating in English speaking activities, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
2. I make an effort to overcome emotional issues that may hinder my English studies, such as shyness, anxiety, and inhibition.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I use available learning resources such as the library, internet, dictionaries, etc., to improve my English.	1	2	3	4	5
4. It is easy for me to put newly learned English into practice.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I often study with other people, such as practicing with a language partner or practicing and reviewing materials with classmates.	1	2	3	4	5
6. While practicing English, I am able to realize my own mistakes and correct them.	1	2	3	4	5
7. When I discover my mistakes, I understand the underlying reason for making them (e.g., interference from my mother tongue or a lack of familiarity with grammar rules, etc.).	1	2	3	4	5
8. I select effective methods to become a better language student (such as speaking with successful English students about their experiences, keeping a journal of my own progress, reading English newspapers, magazines, novels, etc.).	1	2	3	4	5
9. During the process of completing a certain English learning task, I keep in line with my predetermined plan.	1	2	3	4	5
10. During the process of completing a certain English learning task, I often check and correct my comprehension of previously studied material.	1	2	3	4	5