A Study on Autonomous Learning Competence in University English

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Abstract: With the advancement of globalisation and the reform of higher education, the cultivation of autonomous learning competence in University English has become a core direction for educational transformation. Centred on pure theoretical analysis, this study systematically conducts a theoretical deconstruction of autonomous learning competence in University English based on core frameworks such as autonomous learning theory and metacognitive theory. Following a literature review to clarify the research entry point, the study precisely defines the connotation of University English autonomous learning competence alongside its core attributes of autonomy and pertinence. It constructs a four-dimensional system of constitutive elements comprising metacognitive regulation, cognitive learning, resource integration, and affective drive. Furthermore, it reveals the influencing factors and their mechanisms across three major dimensions: the individual learner, the teaching environment, and the socio-cultural context. The findings enrich the pure theoretical research in the field of University English autonomous learning, advance the indigenisation of theoretical construction, and provide theoretical underpinnings for pedagogical reform and subsequent research.

Keywords: University English; Autonomous Learning Competence; Theoretical Deconstruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

As globalisation progresses, the application scenarios for English as a lingua franca have become increasingly extensive, and its status in higher education has become ever more prominent. Consequently, the core objective of University English education has shifted from traditional knowledge transmission to competence cultivation, with a particular focus on shaping students' autonomous learning competence. In an era where the concept of lifelong learning is deeply ingrained, autonomous learning competence serves not only as a crucial guarantee for the effectiveness of University English learning but also as a core literacy for individuals to adapt to social development and achieve sustainable growth. The traditional teacher-centred model has restricted the exercise of students' learning initiative and creativity, making it difficult to meet the demands of personalised and lifelong learning. In recent years, as teaching reforms in Chinese higher education have continued to advance, University English teaching faces a comprehensive transformation from instructional models to evaluation systems, with the cultivation of autonomous learning competence emerging as a central direction of reform. In this context, an in-depth exploration of theoretical issues related to University English autonomous learning competence possesses significant practical implications and theoretical value for enriching the University English pedagogical theory system and guiding practical reforms.

Based on the research necessity identified above, the significance of this study unfolds across two dimensions: theoretical and practical. The theoretical dimension is the core focal point, while the practical dimension serves as the extension and grounding of the theoretical research. Theoretically, by systematically reviewing theories related to autonomous learning and deeply analysing the connotation, constitutive elements, and influencing factors of University English autonomous learning competence, this study further enriches research findings in applied linguistics and educational psychology within the language learning domain. It perfects the theoretical system of University English autonomous learning and fills the

current void in pure theoretical research that combines specific disciplinary characteristics with the learning context of Chinese university students, thereby providing a beneficial reference for subsequent theoretical inquiries. Practically, the theoretical findings of this study offer scientific guidance for University English teaching reforms. By clarifying the cultivation goals and core elements of autonomous learning competence, this study provides a basis for teachers to optimise instructional models and innovate teaching methods, assisting them in better guiding students to undertake autonomous learning and enhancing teaching effectiveness. Simultaneously, it offers theoretical support for university students' autonomous English learning, helping them clarify learning directions and methods, improve their autonomous learning competence, and lay a foundation for lifelong learning. Based on this background and significance, this study takes pure theoretical analysis as its core, following the research trajectory of "theoretical review—core deconstruction—mechanism analysis—conclusion summary". The research is systematically conducted around a pre-set four-chapter framework, with each chapter progressing logically to form a complete research system.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The conduct of theoretical research relies upon the systematic review and appropriation of existing relevant achievements; the literature review is the core link in realising this objective. This chapter focuses on autonomous learning theory and research related to University English autonomous learning. It first traces the origins and developmental trajectory of autonomous learning theory to clarify its theoretical foundations and core evolutionary direction. Subsequently, it systematically reviews and critiques domestic and international research findings in the field of University English autonomous learning, thereby providing a solid bibliographic foundation and a clear research entry point for the subsequent core theoretical deconstruction.

2.1 The Origin and Development of Autonomous Learning Theory

As the foundation of theoretical research, the core task of a literature review is to systematically organise theoretical achievements and research literature related to the research theme. As the core theoretical basis of this study, the review of the origin and development of autonomous learning theory is a prerequisite for subsequent research, offering a theoretical provenance for deeply understanding the connotation and essence of University English autonomous learning competence.

The origin of autonomous learning theory can be traced back to the Western education sector in the 1960s; its emergence is closely related to the rise of the lifelong education concept and the development of cognitive psychology. The concept of lifelong education emphasises that individuals need to learn continuously throughout their lives, which necessitates that individuals must possess the capacity for autonomous learning, thus providing the ideological basis for the theory's emergence. The development of cognitive psychology provided psychological support for autonomous learning theory. Cognitive psychologists emphasise the core role of individual subjective initiative in the learning process, arguing that learning is a process wherein the individual actively constructs knowledge rather than passively accepting it (Bruner, 1966).

From the 1970s to the 1980s, autonomous learning theory gradually took shape and developed rapidly. Research during this period mainly focused on the definition of autonomy and the construction of theoretical frameworks. In his seminal work *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, Holec (1979) first introduced the concept of autonomy into the field of language learning, defining it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" and proposing the core elements of autonomous learning, which laid the foundation for research into language learner autonomy. Subsequently, numerous scholars perfected and developed autonomous learning theory from different perspectives, forming various theoretical schools, such as social constructivist autonomous learning theory and autonomous learning theory from the perspective of metacognitive theory.

Since the 1990s, autonomous learning theory has entered a stage of mature development, with the scope of research continuously expanding and the depth of inquiry increasing. With the development of globalisation and informatisation, the integration of autonomous learning theory with information technology has become a new research trend. Concurrently, applied research of autonomous learning theory across different disciplines has increased, with research in the language learning domain being particularly prominent. Domestic research on autonomous learning theory in China began in the 1990s. With the advancement of China's educational reforms, autonomous learning theory has gradually received widespread attention from the domestic educational and linguistic communities. Numerous scholars began to introduce Western theories of autonomous learning and conduct relevant research combined with the reality of Chinese education, promoting the indigenisation of autonomous learning theory in China (Xu, 2004).

2.2 Review of Domestic and International Research on University English Autonomous Learning

Based on the systematic review of the origins and development of autonomous learning theory, this section further focuses on the specific research domain of University English autonomous learning. It systematically organises and summarises domestic and international research findings to clarify the current status, core consensus, and existing controversies, thereby identifying the entry point and establishing a bibliographic foundation for the core theoretical deconstruction of this study. Research on University English autonomous learning in the international academic community began relatively early. Through long-term theoretical exploration and practical verification, a rich system of research results has been formed. The focus primarily revolves around three core issues: the core connotation and constitutive dimensions, influencing factors, and cultivation pathways of University English autonomous learning competence. Regarding the connotation and constitution, the framework of core elements for language autonomous learning proposed by Holec (1979) provided a significant theoretical cornerstone for subsequent research. Scholars such as Little (1991) further expanded upon this, emphasising the critical value of learners' psychological factors within the constitution of autonomous learning competence. They argued that this competence comprises not only the ability to utilise learning strategies but must also include core dimensions such as the learner's self-cognition and emotional regulation. In the field of influencing factors, international scholars have approached the subject from the dual perspectives of the individual learner and the teaching environment. At the individual level, the focus is on core variables such as learning motivation, learning strategies, and self-efficacy, positing that learning motivation is the core power driving autonomous learning behaviours, while self-efficacy is directly correlated with the enthusiasm and sustainability of the learner's autonomous learning (Bandura, 1997). At the teaching environment level, discussions centre on the impact of teacher role transformation, pedagogical innovation, and the supply of teaching resources, suggesting that teachers must shift from traditional knowledge transmitters to guides and facilitators, creating a supportive environment for autonomous learning (Benson, 2001). regarding cultivation strategies, international scholars have formed a diversified strategic system combined with teaching practice. Strategies such as task-based learning, cooperative learning, and the construction of autonomous learning platforms based on information technology all centre on the learner, focusing on stimulating initiative and creativity to empower the enhancement of autonomous learning competence through diverse teaching activities.

Domestic research on University English autonomous learning began in the 1990s. Accompanying the continuous advancement of University English teaching reform in China, relevant research has gradually deepened, and content has been enriched, forming a research landscape characterised by both indigenisation and practical orientation. Core research topics are mainly concentrated on the localisation of Western theories, the diagnosis of the status quo of autonomous learning competence, and the innovation of cultivation models. In terms of the localisation of Western theory, domestic scholars, while introducing core Western theories of autonomous learning, have reconstructed the connotation and constitutive elements of autonomous learning to suit the specific characteristics of Chinese university students' English learning and the educational context (Wen, 1996). Some scholars explicitly propose that for Chinese university students, English autonomous learning competence should encompass not only self-management of the learning process but also localised dimensions such as the ability to integrate learning resources and self-assess learning outcomes. In the field of status quo diagnosis, the domestic academic community frequently employs empirical survey methods. Results indicate that the English autonomous learning competence of Chinese university students is generally at a moderate level, with common issues such as insufficient learning motivation, unskilled use of learning strategies, and self-management abilities requiring improvement (Wang, 2002). These conclusions provide solid empirical grounds for subsequent University English teaching reforms and competence cultivation. Regarding the innovation of cultivation models, domestic scholars have explored and formed diversified models based on higher education English teaching practices. Typical representatives include autonomous learning models based on network platforms and "teacher-guided, student-led" classroom teaching models. Simultaneously, the academic community has focused on the construction of autonomous learning evaluation systems, proposing the establishment of diversified evaluation mechanisms to achieve a comprehensive assessment of the learner's autonomous learning process and outcomes.

Through the systematic review of domestic and international research on University English autonomous learning, it is evident that existing research has achieved substantial results, providing a solid theoretical foundation and beneficial references for this study. Existing studies have explored the connotation, constitutive elements, influencing factors, and cultivation strategies from various angles, preliminarily constructing a theoretical framework for University English autonomous learning and offering certain guidance for teaching practice.

3. THEORETICAL DECONSTRUCTION OF UNIVERSITY ENGLISH AUTONOMOUS LEARNING COMPETENCE

The literature review has identified the deficiencies in existing research regarding pure theoretical analysis and the indigenisation of University English autonomous learning, pointing the direction for the core research of this chapter. This chapter focuses on a deep deconstruction of the core theoretical issues of University English autonomous learning competence. A precise definition of its connotation serves as the logical starting point for the subsequent analysis of constitutive elements and the clarification of influencing mechanisms; therefore, the analysis commences with the definition of the connotation to lay the foundation for the entire theoretical deconstruction system.

3.1 Defining the Connotation of University English Autonomous Learning Competence

The gaps revealed in the literature review—specifically the weakness in pure theoretical analysis and insufficient indigenisation in the field of University English autonomous learning—constitute the core entry point of this study. Precisely defining the connotation of University English autonomous learning competence is the logical prerequisite and foundation for conducting subsequent theoretical deconstruction. Only by clarifying its core essence can a solid theoretical anchor be provided for the breakdown of constitutive elements and the analysis of influencing mechanisms. Combining the core kernel of autonomous learning theory with the uniqueness of the University English discipline, this study defines University English autonomous learning competence as: **the comprehensive ability of university students within the English learning context to autonomously complete the formulation of learning plans, the selection of learning content and methods, and the regulation of the learning process, and to conduct self-assessment and reflection on learning outcomes, based on their own learning needs and goal orientation.** This definition aligns with the common characteristics of autonomous learning while highlighting the disciplinary specificity of University English learning.

In terms of core attributes, **autonomy** is the essential kernel of University English autonomous learning competence. Its core meaning lies in the learner shedding excessive dependence on the teacher and achieving active control over the learning process. This autonomy permeates the entire chain of links, including goal setting, plan formulation, method selection, and process regulation. It requires learners to fully exercise subjective initiative, establish a dominant position in the learning process, and transform from passive knowledge recipients to active learning constructors. Simultaneously, **pertinence** (or targetedness) serves as the disciplinary identifier of University English autonomous learning competence, distinguishing it from general autonomous learning capabilities. University English learning encompasses multiple objectives, including language knowledge acquisition, skills training in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, and the enhancement of intercultural communicative competence. This dictates that University English autonomous learning competence requires learners to conduct targeted autonomous learning practices in combination with the learning laws and characteristics of the English discipline, achieving an organic adaptation between general autonomous learning competence and discipline-specific learning needs.

Regarding essential characteristics and developmental attributes, **comprehensiveness** constitutes a core trait. This competence is not a representation of a single dimension but a multi-dimensional synthesis encompassing cognitive, metacognitive, and affective attitude levels. The cognitive level includes core abilities such as strategy use and knowledge construction; the metacognitive level involves key elements like self-cognition, process regulation, and self-assessment; the affective attitude level encompasses the stimulation and maintenance of learning motivation and the enhancement of self-efficacy. These levels are interconnected and interpenetrating, forming an organically unified competence system. Furthermore, **developmental nature** is a key attribute, determining that this competence is not an innate, static trait but a procedural ability that evolves dynamically with the accumulation of learning experience, changes in the learning environment, and iterations of learning goals. Its development follows a gradual progression, requiring learners to continuously explore, reflect, and perfect their practice over the long term of University English study, ultimately achieving a stepwise elevation in competence levels.

3.2 Constitutive Elements of University English Autonomous Learning Competence

The clear definition of the connotation provides the theoretical basis for deconstructing its constitutive elements. The element analysis must align with core attributes such as comprehensiveness and pertinence. Relying on core frameworks like metacognitive theory and combining them with University English disciplinary characteristics, this study deconstructs

the competence into four interconnected core dimensions: **metacognitive regulation, cognitive learning, resource integration, and affective drive**, which respectively assume the functions of core leadership, foundational support, contemporary extension, and motive guarantee.

Metacognitive regulation competence is the key to distinguishing autonomous from passive learning. Its core lies in the planning, monitoring, assessment, and reflection of the entire English learning process (Flavell, 2024). Specifically, it includes critical steps such as formulating scientific learning plans, real-time regulation of the learning process, objective assessment of learning outcomes, and deep retrospective reflection, which directly determine learning effectiveness.

Cognitive learning competence is the foundational support for autonomous learning, manifested as the comprehensive ability to use cognitive strategies to acquire English knowledge and train language skills. It directly influences the depth of knowledge mastery and proficiency in skills, covering three core levels: knowledge acquisition, language skill application, and learning strategy adaptation. It requires the completion of autonomous knowledge construction through multiple channels to realise the transformation of language knowledge into skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation) and the flexible selection of learning strategies according to task characteristics.

Resource integration competence is a significant extension in the information age. Its core lies in the identification, screening, acquisition, and integrated application of diverse English learning resources. It necessitates avoiding resource wastage and information overload by precisely matching high-quality resources to learning needs, efficiently acquiring resources through multiple channels, and constructing a personalised resource system to adapt to specific learning tasks, thereby maximising the supportive value of resources.

Affective drive competence provides the power guarantee for autonomous learning, focusing on three core areas: the stimulation and maintenance of learning motivation, emotional regulation, and the cultivation of self-efficacy. A positive affective state plays a critical supporting role in the effectiveness of autonomous learning. The stimulation and stable maintenance of intrinsic learning motivation are central, requiring the setting of phased goals combined with interests and needs to accumulate successful experiences. Emotional regulation competence requires learners to precisely perceive and alleviate negative emotions caused by learning setbacks to maintain a positive mindset. The cultivation of self-efficacy requires reinforcing learning confidence through the accumulation of successful experiences and positive self-feedback (Bandura, 1997). These four elements synergistically support the development of University English autonomous learning competence, and their cultivation must be targeted by combining disciplinary characteristics with individual differences.

3.3 Influencing Factors and Mechanisms of University English Autonomous Learning Competence

Learner individual factors are the core endogenous variables influencing the formation and development of University English autonomous learning competence. Their effects permeate all constitutive dimensions of autonomous learning, characterised by directness and fundamentality. Key elements include learning motivation, self-cognition, learning habits, and learning strategy reserves. **Learning motivation**, as the core driving force within the individual factor system, plays a decisive role. Intrinsic motivation effectively activates the learner's subjective initiative, driving them to actively engage in autonomous behaviours such as plan formulation and process regulation, thereby systematically enhancing core elements like metacognitive regulation and cognitive learning competence. Conversely, learners dominated by extrinsic motivation rely more on external rewards or pressure; their initiative and sustainability are weaker, hindering effective competence development. The intensity and stability of motivation also directly affect the developmental process; strong and stable motivation helps learners effectively cope with difficulties, achieving a stepwise elevation of competence through continuous experience accumulation. **Self-cognition** acts on development through precise regulation and dynamic optimisation of the learning process. A clear perception of one's English foundation, abilities, interests, and needs is a prerequisite for formulating scientifically feasible plans. Only by precisely grasping one's strengths and weaknesses can learners select targeted content and methods. Furthermore, clear self-cognition aids in the objective assessment of outcomes and the timely identification of problems for reflection and improvement. **Learning habits and strategy reserves** provide crucial support. Good habits, such as regular autonomous study and active reflection, help build stable behavioural patterns. Rich strategy reserves directly influence the efficiency of cognitive learning and resource integration, enabling learners to flexibly adapt methods and resources to tasks, improving both efficiency and effectiveness.

Teaching environment factors serve as important external variables, primarily empowering learners indirectly through systematic support and guidance. They are characterised by their guiding and supportive nature. Key dimensions include the teacher's role, teaching methods, resource supply, and teacher-student interaction patterns. **Teacher role transformation** is the core lever; the traditional teacher-centred model suppresses learner autonomy. In an autonomy-oriented context, teachers must transform into guides, facilitators, and resource providers. By guiding learning goals and methods and helping to overcome obstacles, they reduce the blindness of autonomous learning and accelerate competence enhancement. **Innovation in teaching methods** is a significant driving force. Traditional instillation-based teaching fails to stimulate initiative. Learner-centred methods, such as task-driven and cooperative learning, match disciplinary characteristics and cognitive laws. By setting practical tasks to guide autonomous inquiry and cooperation, these methods achieve a synergistic enhancement of metacognitive, cognitive, and resource integration capabilities. Additionally, the supply of **high-quality teaching resources** broadens learning channels, while **positive teacher-student interaction**—characterised by equal feedback and personalised guidance—builds a positive learning ecosystem, enhancing learner confidence and self-efficacy.

Socio-cultural factors are macro-environmental variables influencing development. Their mechanism is characterised by macroscopic and indirect effects, acting on the process by shaping learning conceptions, guiding needs, and regulating behaviours. Core dimensions include social demand for English proficiency, educational cultural traditions, and the intercultural communication environment. **Social demand** constitutes a vital external drive. In the context of deep globalisation, the instrumental value of English in employment, further education, and academic exchange is rising. This high demand prompts learners to clearly recognise the practical significance of learning, stimulating intrinsic motivation to engage in autonomous practice. It also precisely influences goal setting and content selection, pushing learners towards practical skills and ensuring alignment with social needs. **Educational cultural traditions** have a profound and lasting impact. Traditional Chinese educational culture emphasises teacher authority and unidirectional knowledge transmission, which may foster passivity and constrain the awakening of autonomy. However, with the deepening of higher education reform, concepts of lifelong learning and quality education are taking root, and traditional culture is undergoing a positive transformation. This creates a favourable atmosphere. Furthermore, the deep integration of Eastern and Western educational cultures offers diverse pathways for absorbing advanced autonomous learning concepts. Finally, the **intercultural communication environment** significantly promotes development. As international exchange becomes frequent, opportunities to contact English-speaking cultures expand. The realistic need for communication stimulates interest and drives learners to study knowledge and refine skills. Encountering language barriers and cultural differences during communication prompts active reflection and dynamic adjustment of strategies, leading to an iterative upgrade of autonomous learning competence through problem-solving.

4. CONCLUSION

Centred on pure theoretical analysis, this study has conducted a systematic inquiry into University English autonomous learning competence. Through a literature review, the research entry point was clarified, followed by a deep theoretical deconstruction to complete the core research tasks, ultimately forming a series of core findings. Specifically, the study first **precisely defined the connotation** of University English autonomous learning competence. Combining core viewpoints of autonomous learning theory with University English disciplinary characteristics, it was defined as a comprehensive ability involving autonomous planning, selection, regulation, and assessment based on individual needs and goals, characterised by autonomy, pertinence, comprehensiveness, and developmental nature. Secondly, the study **constructed a complete system of constitutive elements**, deconstructing the competence into four dimensions: metacognitive regulation (core leader), cognitive learning (foundational support), resource integration (era-specific extension), and affective drive (motive guarantee), clarifying their organic interrelations. Finally, the study **revealed the influencing factors and their mechanisms**, categorising them into individual learner factors (core endogenous), teaching environment factors (important external), and socio-cultural factors (macro-environmental), and analysed their direct or indirect pathways of action.

Based on these core findings, this study offers three significant theoretical contributions alongside certain limitations. Theoretically: (1) It enriches pure theoretical research in the field, addressing the imbalance between abundant empirical studies and weak theoretical analysis by deeply dissecting the connotation, elements, and mechanisms, thus perfecting the theoretical system. (2) It advances the indigenisation of University English autonomous learning theory. By interpreting the

concept within the specific context of Chinese university students, it avoids the simple transposition of Western theory, making the findings more relevant to Chinese teaching realities. (3) It clarifies the internal logical relationships of the constitutive elements, providing a unified theoretical framework that resolves previous ambiguities. regarding limitations: (1) The research perspective is relatively singular, relying mainly on applied linguistics and educational psychology without incorporating sociological or cultural studies perspectives. (2) The breadth of content requires expansion, as the focus on theoretical deconstruction left practical strategies and evaluation systems unaddressed. (3) There is a lack of empirical verification; as a pure theoretical study, the validity of the constructed system awaits confirmation through subsequent surveys or experiments.

Combining the findings, limitations, and trends in reform and development, future research should expand in four areas: First, broaden research perspectives by integrating multidisciplinary approaches to enrich comprehensiveness. Second, deepen research content by focusing on cultivation strategies and evaluation systems based on these theoretical findings, exploring technology-empowered models. Third, conduct empirical research to verify and perfect the theoretical system, potentially using longitudinal studies to analyse developmental laws. Fourth, strengthen cross-contextual comparative research to analyse differences across universities and majors, providing a theoretical basis for precise cultivation.

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