

Balancing Authenticity and Learner Autonomy in Vocational Business English Education: A Production-Oriented Perspective

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.102100188>

Received: 09 August 2026; Accepted: 14 August 2026; Published: 07 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Vocational Business English education is expected to prepare learners for communication in professional settings while also developing their capacity to manage learning beyond the classroom. These two expectations bring authenticity and learner autonomy into close relationship, yet they can also create a pedagogical tension: highly authentic workplace tasks may demand a level of linguistic, strategic, and self-regulatory readiness that many vocational learners have not yet developed. This concept paper examines how authenticity and learner autonomy can be integrated through the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) in Chinese vocational Business English education. Drawing on established accounts of authenticity, learner autonomy, and POA, the paper argues that authenticity should not be treated as a simple increase in task realism, nor autonomy as a reduction of teacher involvement. Instead, the two need to be calibrated through staged task design, selective input, collaborative rehearsal, formative assessment, and gradual transfer of learning responsibility. A POA-informed framework is proposed across the motivating, enabling, and assessing phases. The discussion highlights learner readiness, cognitive load, assessment literacy, and teacher facilitation as key conditions for sustainable integration. The paper concludes that authentic vocational tasks are most autonomy-supportive when they are accompanied by structured scaffolding and repeated opportunities for learner decision-making, reflection, and revision.

Keywords: Authenticity; Learner autonomy; Production-Oriented Approach; Vocational Business English; China

INTRODUCTION

Vocational English education occupies a distinctive position between language learning and preparation for professional participation. Learners are not only expected to acquire linguistic knowledge but also to use English for workplace-related purposes such as client interaction, product presentation, negotiation, and cross-cultural communication. In this setting, classroom learning has value only when students can transfer what they learn to communicative situations that resemble the demands of future employment. This makes authenticity a central concern in vocational English language teaching (ELT).

At the same time, vocational education also requires learners to become increasingly responsible for their own learning. Workplace communication is variable and cannot be fully anticipated by a fixed syllabus. Learners therefore need to identify gaps, select resources, practise strategically, monitor performance, and continue learning beyond formal lessons. These abilities are closely connected to learner autonomy, commonly understood as the capacity to take charge of or exercise control over one's own learning (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2011).

Authenticity and autonomy therefore appear to be mutually supportive. Authentic tasks can provide meaningful reasons for learners to make decisions and use English purposefully, while autonomy can help learners engage with such tasks as active participants rather than passive recipients. Yet the relationship is not automatic. Learners who have experienced teacher-centred and examination-oriented instruction may find open-ended workplace tasks difficult to manage. Tasks that are highly realistic can also involve specialised vocabulary, multimodal information, unfamiliar professional roles, and multiple communicative decisions. Without sufficient support, realism may increase cognitive demands rather than meaningful learner control.

This tension is particularly relevant in Chinese vocational Business English classrooms, where learners often differ widely in English proficiency, educational background, and prior experience of self-directed learning. Large classes and uneven readiness further complicate attempts to combine professional realism with learner responsibility. The pedagogical question is therefore not whether authenticity or autonomy should be promoted, but how both can be integrated in ways that are achievable for vocational learners.

This concept paper addresses that question through the Production-Oriented Approach (POA), which organises teaching through the phases of motivating, enabling, and assessing (Wen, 2015, 2017, 2018). Rather than presenting POA as a separate theory of autonomy, the paper uses its staged instructional logic as a bridge between authentic communicative demands and scaffolded learner responsibility. The central argument is that authentic vocational tasks are most likely to support learner autonomy when realism is calibrated to learner readiness and when responsibility is transferred progressively through goal awareness, selective learning, guided practice, feedback, self-assessment, and revision.

The paper first reviews the conceptual relationship between authenticity and learner autonomy in vocational ELT. It then explains how POA can organise their integration across the three instructional phases. The discussion subsequently considers the conditions that make such integration sustainable, with particular attention to learner readiness, cognitive load, assessment literacy, digital support, and the changing role of the teacher.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner autonomy in ELT

Learner autonomy has been a central concept in language education since Holec (1981) defined it as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. This definition foregrounds learner responsibility for decisions that are otherwise frequently made by teachers or institutions. Later work expanded the concept by emphasising control, reflection, and participation. Benson (2011), for example, conceptualised autonomy in terms of learners' capacity to exercise control over learning, while Little (1991) and Little et al. (2017) emphasised reflective engagement, learner involvement, and purposeful use of the target language.

In practical terms, autonomy in ELT can involve setting goals, making decisions about materials and learning pathways, monitoring progress, evaluating outcomes, and reflecting on future action (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Benson, 2011). Autonomy should therefore not be equated with studying alone or with the absence of teacher support. A learner may work independently without making meaningful learning decisions, while another may exercise substantial control within a structured and collaborative learning environment.

This distinction is important in vocational education. Learners need support because professional communication may be unfamiliar, but they also need opportunities to assume increasing responsibility. Autonomy is thus better viewed as a context-sensitive capacity that can be cultivated through repeated opportunities to plan, act, evaluate, and revise in relation to meaningful learning purposes.

Authenticity in vocational ELT

Authenticity in ELT has often been associated with real-life texts and materials, but the concept extends beyond the origin of input. Gilmore (2007) and Mishan (2005) highlight the importance of purpose, context,

interaction, and the relationship between learners and the language they use. Guariento and Morley (2001) similarly draw attention to task authenticity, suggesting that authenticity depends not only on whether materials are drawn from real life but also on whether learners use language for meaningful communicative purposes.

In vocational Business English education, authenticity can therefore be created through tasks that resemble professional communication: responding to client enquiries, delivering product pitches, participating in negotiations, handling complaints, or discussing cross-border trade cases. Authenticity may also be strengthened through workplace-informed assessment criteria, realistic roles, multimodal professional materials, and scenarios connected to learners' anticipated careers.

Such tasks can help bridge classroom learning and participation in real-world events (Wilkins, 1976). They make the purpose of language use more visible and can position English as a tool for professional action rather than simply a subject for examination. However, authenticity is not inherently beneficial. The more a task resembles professional practice, the more it may require specialised vocabulary, discourse knowledge, strategic interaction, cultural awareness, and role familiarity. For learners with limited experience, these demands require careful mediation.

Authenticity and Learner Autonomy

Authenticity and learner autonomy are often discussed separately, yet they share an important pedagogical concern: both reposition learners as purposeful users of language. Authenticity creates communicative situations in which choices matter, while autonomy concerns learners' capacity to make and evaluate those choices. When learners select resources, plan how to complete a workplace task, monitor their language, respond to feedback, and revise an output for a particular audience, authenticity and autonomy operate together.

Nevertheless, the relationship should not be understood as linear. Authenticity does not automatically produce autonomy. Learners can complete realistic tasks through imitation, teacher direction, or dependence on digital tools without developing stronger control over learning. Conversely, giving learners complete freedom before they are ready may reduce the quality of participation and increase uncertainty. What matters is the design of the learning environment: authentic demands need to be paired with appropriate scaffolding and gradually expanding opportunities for learner decision-making.

This paper therefore treats authenticity and autonomy as complementary but conditional. The pedagogical goal is not to maximise either one in isolation. It is to balance meaningful professional relevance with the level of support required for learners to participate successfully and progressively assume greater responsibility.

POA as a Pedagogical Bridge

The Production-Oriented Approach provides a useful structure for this balancing process. POA integrates learning and use through the recurring phases of motivating, enabling, and assessing (Wen, 2015, 2017, 2018). In the motivating phase, learners encounter an output task before full instruction, allowing them to recognise communicative needs and gaps. In the enabling phase, teachers provide selective input and support closely related to the target output. In the assessing phase, learners refine performance through teacher-student collaborative evaluation and assessment for learning.

These phases can be aligned with the development of learner responsibility. The motivating phase can create goal awareness and prompt initial planning; the enabling phase can support strategy selection, collaborative problem-solving, and guided control over resources; and the assessing phase can encourage monitoring, self-assessment, reflection, and revision. At the same time, the output tasks can retain a strong degree of vocational authenticity by being organised around workplace scenarios and professional communication standards.

POA is therefore useful not because it removes teacher control, but because it provides a staged mechanism through which support and responsibility can coexist. The teacher remains an active designer and facilitator

while learners are given progressively greater space to make decisions about how they understand, practise, and improve their performance.

Positioning POA Within Broader Pedagogical Models

POA is not the only pedagogical model capable of connecting authentic communication with learner responsibility. Task-based language teaching likewise organises learning around meaningful communicative tasks and has long emphasised the pedagogical value of using language to achieve purposeful outcomes (Ellis, 2003). Blended learning models can also extend learner choice, access, and interaction across classroom and digital environments (Graham, 2006). These perspectives are complementary rather than competing. The reason for foregrounding POA in the present framework is its explicit sequencing of output-driven need, selective enabling support, and assessment for learning. This staged logic is particularly useful in vocational classrooms where learners may need strong guidance at the beginning of a task but progressively greater responsibility as they prepare, rehearse, evaluate, and revise professional communication. POA is therefore treated here as one contextually useful organising framework rather than as the sole route to balancing authenticity and autonomy.

DISCUSSION

The proposed framework conceptualises the integration of authenticity and learner autonomy as a process of calibrated task design. Each POA phase combines a particular form of authenticity with a corresponding autonomy opportunity and a level of scaffolding. The purpose is not to withdraw support rapidly, but to ensure that learners encounter meaningful professional demands while retaining enough structure to participate, learn, and gradually assume greater control.

Table 1 A POA-informed mapping of authenticity, learner autonomy, and scaffolding

POA phase	Authenticity focus	Autonomy opportunity	Scaffolding emphasis
Motivating	Workplace scenario and genuine communicative need	Recognising gaps, goal awareness, initial planning	Scenario preview, structured prompts, clarification of task purpose
Enabling	Authentic multimodal input and professional discourse practice	Selecting strategies/resources, collaborative planning, personalised rehearsal	Modelling, selective input, peer support, teacher mediation
Assessing	Workplace-informed outputs and performance criteria	Self-monitoring, self-assessment, reflection, revision	Multi-source feedback, transparent rubrics, guided reflection

Motivating: creating authentic demand without abandoning structure

The motivating phase begins with a communicative situation that makes the purpose of learning visible. In vocational Business English, this might involve introducing a new product to an overseas client, responding to an enquiry, or preparing for a trade negotiation. Presenting the task before detailed instruction allows learners to encounter the limits of their current resources and recognise what they need to learn.

From an autonomy perspective, the key value of this phase lies in goal awareness rather than unrestricted choice. Learners can identify what they can already do, what they cannot yet do, and what information or language may be required. This corresponds to early forms of taking stock and planning described by Little et al. (2017). However, learners with limited prior experience of self-directed learning may need structured prompts to notice these gaps. Scenario previews, guiding questions, short pre-task activities, and digital course platforms can make the communicative problem concrete without solving it for learners.

The balance is therefore deliberate: the task should be authentic enough to create a genuine communicative need, but the initial learning environment should remain structured enough to prevent confusion. In this phase,

teacher guidance does not contradict autonomy; it creates the conditions under which learners can begin to exercise it.

Enabling: Using Scaffolding to Support Strategic Participation

The enabling phase is where the tension between authenticity and learner readiness becomes most visible. Authentic professional tasks may require specialised vocabulary, discourse strategies, pragmatic choices, and multimodal resources that vocational learners cannot yet manage independently. The purpose of enabling is therefore not to simplify the task until its professional relevance disappears, but to provide selective support that allows learners to participate in it meaningfully.

Input can include product demonstration videos, trade negotiation transcripts, model emails, cross-border e-commerce cases, or other materials closely connected to the target output. Activities such as collaborative planning, scaffolded role-play, peer-supported rehearsal, and repeated practice allow learners to apply language immediately. Digital and AI-assisted tools can also support self-paced rehearsal and feedback, provided that they are used as learning resources rather than substitutes for learner judgement.

Autonomy in this phase is expressed through strategic engagement. Learners can decide which input is most useful, how to divide responsibilities, how to rehearse, which expressions to adapt, and when further support is needed. The teacher remains involved by modelling difficult processes, selecting enabling materials, prompting reflection, and helping learners interpret feedback. Responsibility therefore shifts gradually rather than abruptly.

This staged transfer is especially important for heterogeneous vocational classes. Learners may differ not only in English proficiency but also in educational background, prior workplace exposure, motivation, digital confidence, and readiness for self-directed learning. Differentiated scaffolding is therefore needed. Learners with weaker English foundations or limited confidence may benefit from modelling, sentence frames, guided resource lists, smaller decision sets, and more frequent teacher checkpoints. Learners with stronger proficiency or greater autonomy can be given broader control over resource selection, task roles, language choices, and self-evaluation. Motivation also matters: career-oriented learners may respond readily to workplace scenarios, whereas learners with weaker professional identification may need clearer explanation of task relevance and more attainable intermediate goals. Calibrating support across these dimensions allows the same authentic task to remain accessible without assuming a uniform learner profile or reducing all learners to an identical pathway.

Assessing: Turning Performance into Reflection and Ownership

Authenticity in assessment concerns whether evaluation reflects the purposes and standards of professional communication. In vocational Business English, outputs may include a product pitch, simulated client meeting, response to a trade enquiry, or other performance-based task. Criteria can attend not only to linguistic accuracy but also to communicative effectiveness, appropriateness, audience awareness, and task completion.

For assessment to support autonomy, however, criteria need to be understandable and usable by learners. Workplace-informed rubrics can initially appear unfamiliar compared with conventional test scores. Assessment literacy therefore becomes part of autonomy development. Learners need opportunities to interpret criteria, compare examples, assess their own work, receive feedback, and decide what to revise.

Multi-source feedback can support this process. Teacher comments, peer suggestions, self-assessment checklists, and AI-generated feedback may provide different perspectives on performance. Their value lies not simply in increasing the quantity of feedback, but in requiring learners to interpret, prioritise, and act on information. Revision then becomes a site of learner control: students decide how to improve an output in relation to communicative purpose rather than merely correcting isolated errors.

Role-based or enterprise-informed assessment systems can further strengthen professional relevance when used carefully. For example, simulated workplace roles can help learners connect communication quality with

professional responsibility. Such devices should remain pedagogical rather than competitive ends in themselves; their purpose is to make progression visible and support reflection on future learning goals.

Conditions for Sustainable Integration

The proposed framework depends on several conditions. First, learner readiness must be treated as a starting point rather than assumed. Students who are accustomed to teacher-centred learning may require explicit modelling of planning, monitoring, self-assessment, and resource use before they can exercise these processes independently. Autonomy develops through supported practice, not through the sudden withdrawal of guidance.

Second, authenticity needs to be calibrated to cognitive load. A task can be professionally realistic yet pedagogically unmanageable if it requires too many unfamiliar linguistic, technical, and social decisions at once. Scaffolding can reduce unnecessary difficulty through staged input, role allocation, rehearsal, modelling, and adaptive task design while preserving the communicative purpose of the task.

Third, assessment criteria should be transparent. Real-world standards may increase relevance, but they can also create uncertainty if learners do not understand what counts as effective performance. Teaching learners how to use rubrics, interpret feedback, and compare performance against communicative purposes is therefore central to the development of reflective autonomy.

Fourth, digital technologies and AI should be integrated into the framework as mediating resources rather than treated as peripheral add-ons or substitutes for learner thinking. Their pedagogical role can differ across the POA cycle. In the motivating phase, digital platforms can provide scenario previews, multimedia workplace input, and prompt-based exploration that help learners recognise communicative gaps. In the enabling phase, AI-assisted tools can support self-paced rehearsal, pronunciation or language feedback, alternative phrasing, and access to supplementary examples. In the assessing phase, digital tools can support recording, comparison across drafts, self-assessment, and multi-source formative feedback. However, these affordances become autonomy-supportive only when learners are required to interpret, verify, select, and act on feedback rather than simply accept generated suggestions. The relevant design principle is therefore not greater technology use in itself, but purposeful integration that extends opportunities for learner decision-making while preserving critical judgement and responsibility.

Finally, teacher facilitation remains essential. In an autonomy-supportive vocational classroom, the teacher's role shifts from primarily delivering language knowledge to designing tasks, selecting enabling resources, modelling strategies, mediating feedback, and gradually transferring responsibility. Structured guidance and autonomy are therefore not opposites. Well-designed structure can make meaningful learner control possible.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR EMPIRICAL VALIDATION

As a concept paper, the proposed framework is theoretical and practice-informed rather than empirically validated. The classroom examples used in the discussion are illustrative of how authenticity, autonomy, and scaffolding may be connected; they should not be interpreted as evidence of causal effectiveness. This limitation is important because the relationship between authentic task design and learner autonomy may vary across institutions, proficiency levels, majors, and patterns of technology use. Future research should therefore examine the framework through pilot implementations and classroom-based empirical studies. Mixed-method designs could combine learner autonomy measures, task-performance evidence, learner reflections, interviews, and classroom observations to investigate how responsibility is actually negotiated across the motivating, enabling, and assessing phases. Comparative studies could also examine POA alongside task-based or blended models to identify which design features are most effective for different vocational learner profiles.

Pedagogical Implications for Vocational Business English

Three implications follow from this framework. First, authenticity should be designed around communicative purpose rather than surface realism. A task is pedagogically valuable when learners understand why the communication matters and how language choices contribute to its success. Simply using real-world materials does not guarantee meaningful engagement.

Second, autonomy should be planned as a progression of responsibility. Early tasks can include stronger guidance in goal setting, resource use, and evaluation, followed by increasing learner choice as familiarity and confidence develop. This phased approach is more appropriate for vocational learners than either highly controlled instruction or immediate full independence.

Third, curriculum, technology, and assessment should reinforce the same learning logic. Workplace scenarios, selective input, digital rehearsal, peer collaboration, formative feedback, and self-assessment are most effective when they lead towards the same communicative output and encourage learners to reflect on how they achieved it. Alignment across these elements helps authenticity and autonomy function as an integrated pedagogical design rather than as separate add-ons.

CONCLUSION

Authenticity and learner autonomy are both important goals in vocational Business English education, but neither should be pursued as an absolute. Authentic tasks can connect classroom learning with professional communication, yet they may also create excessive demands for learners who have limited language proficiency or experience of self-directed learning. Learner autonomy can encourage responsibility and reflection, yet it does not emerge simply because teachers provide less guidance.

A POA-informed perspective offers a practical way to balance these demands. The motivating phase can create authentic communicative need and goal awareness; the enabling phase can combine professional input with scaffolded strategy use and rehearsal; and the assessing phase can connect workplace-informed performance with feedback, self-assessment, and revision. Across these phases, responsibility is transferred progressively rather than abruptly.

The central implication is that authentic vocational tasks become autonomy-supportive when they are accompanied by structured opportunities for learners to make, evaluate, and revise learning decisions. The productive integration of authenticity and autonomy therefore depends on calibration: task realism must be matched with learner readiness, differentiated support must respond to diverse proficiency and motivational profiles, and digital or AI-assisted resources must enable rather than replace learner judgement. In this sense, the goal of vocational ELT is not simply to reproduce the workplace in the classroom, but to prepare learners to participate in professional communication as increasingly reflective, strategic, and responsible users of English. Because the framework remains conceptual, its claims should be tested through future classroom-based and comparative empirical research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was supported by the Hunan Provincial Social Science Achievement Evaluation Committee Project, Research on a “Foreign Language + Business” Intercultural Talent Cultivation Model Empowered by AIGC for the Development of the China–Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation Pilot Zone (Grant No. XSP26YBC471).

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