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Developing learner autonomy in higher education

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Annotation. This article examines the concept of learner autonomy by tracing its theoretical origins and development to contemporary educational practice. It reviews key theoretical definitions proposed by Holec, Little, Dickinson, and Benson, highlighting the complex and evolving nature of learner autonomy. The study explores the role of autonomy in second-language learning and addresses the limited scope of empirical research on autonomous learning materials. Historical and philosophical foundations, including the ideas of Montessori, Waldorf, Dewey, Galileo, and Rousseau, are analyzed to demonstrate the long-standing relevance of autonomous learning principles. Modern interpretations, such as Kolb's experiential learning model and digital educational innovations, are discussed to show how learner autonomy fosters metacognitive awareness, intrinsic motivation, and lifelong learning skills. The article also analyzes a Facebook-based tandem language-learning project as a practical example of autonomous learning in action. It concludes that learner autonomy is essential for preparing learners for the demands of a digital and AI-driven educational environment and remains a key component of contemporary and future higher education.

Key words: Learner autonomy, self-directed learning, higher education, second-language learning, experiential learning, metacognition, intrinsic motivation, tandem learning, digital education, lifelong learning.

Introduction. The concept of learner autonomy was first introduced by Henry Holec (1981), who defined it as the learner's ability to take responsibility for their own learning. Since its introduction, learner autonomy has become a central concept in educational theory, particularly in higher education and second-language learning. As educational systems increasingly emphasize student-centered approaches, autonomy has gained renewed importance as a means of developing independent, motivated, and adaptable learners. In the context of rapid technological advancement and the growing influence of artificial intelligence, traditional teacher-centered models are often insufficient to prepare learners for complex and unpredictable future challenges. Higher education institutions are therefore expected to cultivate learners who are capable of self-regulation, critical thinking, and continuous learning. This article aims to explore learner autonomy from theoretical, historical, and practical perspectives, with particular attention to its role in language education and digital learning environments.





Literature Review. Learner autonomy has been defined and interpreted in various ways by educational scholars. Holec (1981) conceptualizes autonomy as the learner's capacity to take charge of their learning process, including setting objectives, selecting methods, and evaluating outcomes. Little (1991) expands this definition by emphasizing the psychological dimension of autonomy, arguing that it involves learners' active engagement with both the learning process and its content. Dickinson (1987) views autonomy as a learning situation in which students independently make and implement decisions related to their studies, while Benson (1997, 2011) highlights learners' rights and the sociopolitical dimensions of autonomy within educational systems. Despite extensive theoretical discussion, defining learner autonomy remains challenging due to its broad and multidimensional nature. Some researchers describe autonomy *ex negativo*, explaining what it is not, such as isolation or the absence of teacher guidance (Little, 1991). Others attempt to categorize different forms of autonomy to make the concept more operational and applicable in educational practice (Benson, 2011).

Historically, the principles of learner autonomy can be traced to influential educational thinkers. Galileo emphasized that true learning originates from internal intellectual engagement rather than passive reception. Rousseau advocated for independent discovery and learning through experience and error. Similarly, Montessori, Waldorf, and Dewey promoted learner-centered education, experiential learning, and personal responsibility as fundamental pedagogical principles. A modern theoretical framework supporting learner autonomy is Kolb's experiential learning model, which describes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This model places learners at the center of knowledge construction and reinforces the importance of reflection and self-directed learning.

Research Methodology. This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, combining theoretical analysis with a case-study method. The primary empirical example examined is a six-week Facebook-based tandem language-learning project conducted between an Australian university and a Japanese university. The project aimed to promote authentic communication and learner autonomy through peer interaction in a digital environment. Participants included 44 Japanese-language learners in Australia (CEFR B1+) and 44 English-language learners in Japan (CEFR A2–B1). Data were collected through observation of online interactions, project documentation, and learner participation patterns. Students were organized into interest-based Facebook groups and encouraged to manage their learning independently, while teachers provided minimal guidance. This methodology allowed for an examination of how autonomy functions in practice within a technology-mediated learning context.





Conclusion. The findings of this study demonstrate that learner autonomy is not merely an individual trait but a pedagogical approach that can be systematically fostered through appropriate educational design. The theoretical review confirms that autonomy is a multifaceted and evolving concept rooted in long-standing educational traditions. The analysis of the Facebook-based tandem project illustrates how digital platforms can effectively support autonomous learning, collaboration, and authentic language use.

In an era characterized by digital transformation and artificial intelligence, learner autonomy plays a crucial role in developing essential human competencies such as critical thinking, toggle creativity, collaboration, and emotional intelligence. By promoting self-direction, metacognitive awareness, and intrinsic motivation, autonomy prepares learners for lifelong learning and continuous adaptation. Therefore, fostering learner autonomy should be considered a central objective of higher education and a key strategy for addressing the challenges of contemporary and future learning environments.

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