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DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Amonlikova Nodira Khimmatovna
Senior Lecturer, Navoi State University, Faculty of Languages, English Linguistics Department

ABSTRACT
Learner autonomy has become a cornerstone in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, especially at the university level, where students must increasingly manage their own learning processes. This article explores the theoretical underpinnings of learner autonomy, examines practical strategies for its promotion in EFL university contexts, and addresses key challenges and pedagogical implications. Grounded in foundational works by scholars such as Holec (1981), Benson (2011), Little (1991), and Littlewood (1999), autonomy is understood as learners' capacity to take responsibility for their learning decisions and actions. In university EFL settings, fostering autonomy requires moving from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogies through reflective practices, strategy training, goal-setting, project-based activities, and technology integration. Challenges include cultural preferences for teacher authority, student unfamiliarity with independent learning, and institutional constraints. The discussion highlights the role of teachers as facilitators and the long-term benefits of autonomy for motivation, engagement, and sustained language development. Pedagogical implications advocate gradual, scaffolded implementation to cultivate lifelong learning skills essential for academic and professional success in English.

KEYWORDS: *Learner Autonomy, Efl University Students, English As A Foreign Language, Self-Directed Learning, Metacognition, Strategy Training, Reflective Practices, Goal-Setting, Project-Based Learning, Technology Integration, Teacher Facilitation, Scaffolding, Cultural Influences, Reactive Autonomy, Proactive Autonomy, Motivation, Engagement, Lifelong Learning, Learner-Centered Pedagogy, Self-Assessment*

INTRODUCTION
The concept of learner autonomy has gained considerable attention in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning over recent decades, particularly in higher education contexts where students are expected to develop greater independence (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981). Holec (1981) first introduced autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning," emphasizing learners' responsibility for setting objectives, selecting methods and materials, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes. This foundational definition positioned autonomy as a key goal for adult language learners, shifting the focus from teacher-directed instruction to learner self-management.

Building on Holec's work, Little (1991) added a psychological perspective, describing autonomy as involving detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. Little argued that truly autonomous learners exhibit a willingness to take risks and engage deeply with the language learning process. Benson (2011) further refined the concept by distinguishing three interrelated versions: technical (skills for self-instruction), psychological (internal capacities such as motivation and confidence), and political (control over learning content and processes to challenge institutional power structures). These multidimensional views underscore that autonomy is not merely the absence of teacher guidance but an active, reflective capacity that can be nurtured.

In East Asian and other collectivist EFL contexts, Littlewood (1999) proposed a useful distinction between proactive autonomy—where learners independently regulate their own learning—and reactive autonomy, where learners organize resources and direct their efforts once a framework has been provided by the teacher. This framework acknowledges cultural influences on autonomy development, suggesting that many university students may initially thrive under reactive forms before progressing to greater proactivity.

The relevance of learner autonomy in university EFL programs cannot be overstated. University students often transition from secondary education systems characterized by teacher dependency and exam-oriented learning to environments requiring self-directed study, critical thinking, and extensive reading in English (Dam, 1995). In many EFL countries, limited classroom hours and minimal naturalistic exposure to English outside the institution make independent learning essential for meaningful progress. Moreover, globalization demands that graduates use English autonomously in professional and academic settings beyond formal instruction.

Promoting autonomy addresses these needs by empowering students to become active agents in their language development. Autonomous learners demonstrate higher motivation, deeper engagement, and better long-term retention as they tailor strategies to their individual needs and contexts (Benson, 2011; Littlewood, 1999). By developing metacognitive awareness, students learn to plan, monitor, and evaluate their progress, skills that extend far beyond language proficiency to lifelong learning.Being autonomous learner is not only to organise activities individually ,but also the students who can work in small group works effectively and can show leadership skills.At the same time they should be able to assess themselves.

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This article examines strategies for developing learner autonomy among EFL university students. It reviews theoretical foundations, explores practical classroom and out-of-class approaches, identifies common challenges, and discusses implications for pedagogy. The overarching argument is that autonomy is a developable capacity requiring deliberate, scaffolded support from educators who transition from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of learning (Little, 1991; Dam, 1995).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical developments since Holec's (1981) seminal work have enriched understanding of learner autonomy. Little (1991) emphasized its cognitive and affective dimensions, while Benson (2011) integrated technical, psychological, and political perspectives. Littlewood (1999, 1996) highlighted cultural variations, particularly the prevalence of reactive autonomy in collectivist societies.

Connections to broader theories include self-determination theory, which links autonomy to intrinsic motivation through satisfaction of psychological needs, and sociocultural theory, which views autonomy as emerging through social interaction and scaffolding (Dam, 1995).

In EFL university contexts, autonomy manifests through behavioral actions (e.g., strategy use), cognitive processes (e.g., reflection), and affective attitudes (e.g., confidence). Common promotion mechanisms include strategy instruction, self-assessment, reflective journaling, goal-setting, cooperative learning, project work, and technology-supported self-access.

Challenges frequently noted involve prior educational experiences fostering dependency, cultural norms prioritizing conformity, teacher reluctance to relinquish control, and institutional emphasis on standardized testing.Overall, the literature portrays autonomy as a dynamic, context-sensitive capacity that enhances engagement and proficiency when systematically cultivated.

METHODS

This article employs a conceptual and synthetic approach, drawing on an extensive review of established theoretical and pedagogical literature on learner autonomy in EFL higher education. Key works by foundational scholars (Holec, Benson, Little, Littlewood, Dam) and related syntheses were analyzed to identify core definitions, frameworks, strategies, and challenges.

Themes were derived through conceptual categorization rather than original data collection. Strategies and challenges were grouped based on recurring patterns across diverse EFL contexts. Implications were developed deductively by linking theory to practical application.This methodology provides a comprehensive theoretical overview suitable for guiding pedagogical practice without reliance on empirical datasets.

RESULTS

Synthesis of the literature reveals that learner autonomy in EFL university students develops through multifaceted interventions. Core components include metacognitive training, reflective practices, and opportunities for choice and responsibility.

Effective strategies encompass teacher modeling of autonomy-supportive behaviors, explicit strategy instruction, goal-setting activities, learning journals, peer collaboration, project-based tasks, and integration of digital tools for self-directed practice.

Barriers commonly identified include student unfamiliarity with independent learning, cultural preferences for teacher authority, inadequate teacher preparation for facilitative roles, and curricular constraints favoring exam preparation.Successful autonomy promotion correlates with increased learner motivation, engagement, and extension of language practice beyond the classroom.Gradual, scaffolded approaches tailored to contextual realities emerge as most promising for transitioning students toward greater independence.

DISCUSSION

The reviewed frameworks and strategies affirm learner autonomy's potential to transform EFL university education. Multidimensional models (Benson, 2011; Littlewood, 1999) accommodate cultural diversity, suggesting reactive autonomy as a viable starting point in many EFL settings.

Pedagogically, scaffolding through choice provision, rationale explanation, and reflective tools addresses both cognitive and motivational needs. Technology extends opportunities for authentic, self-paced engagement.

Challenges highlight the necessity for systemic change: professional development for teachers, flexible assessment practices, and institutional support for autonomy-oriented resources.Implications point to redefined teacher-learner relationships emphasizing collaboration and gradual release of responsibility. By cultivating autonomy, EFL programs better equip students for sustained language development in academic, professional, and personal domains.

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