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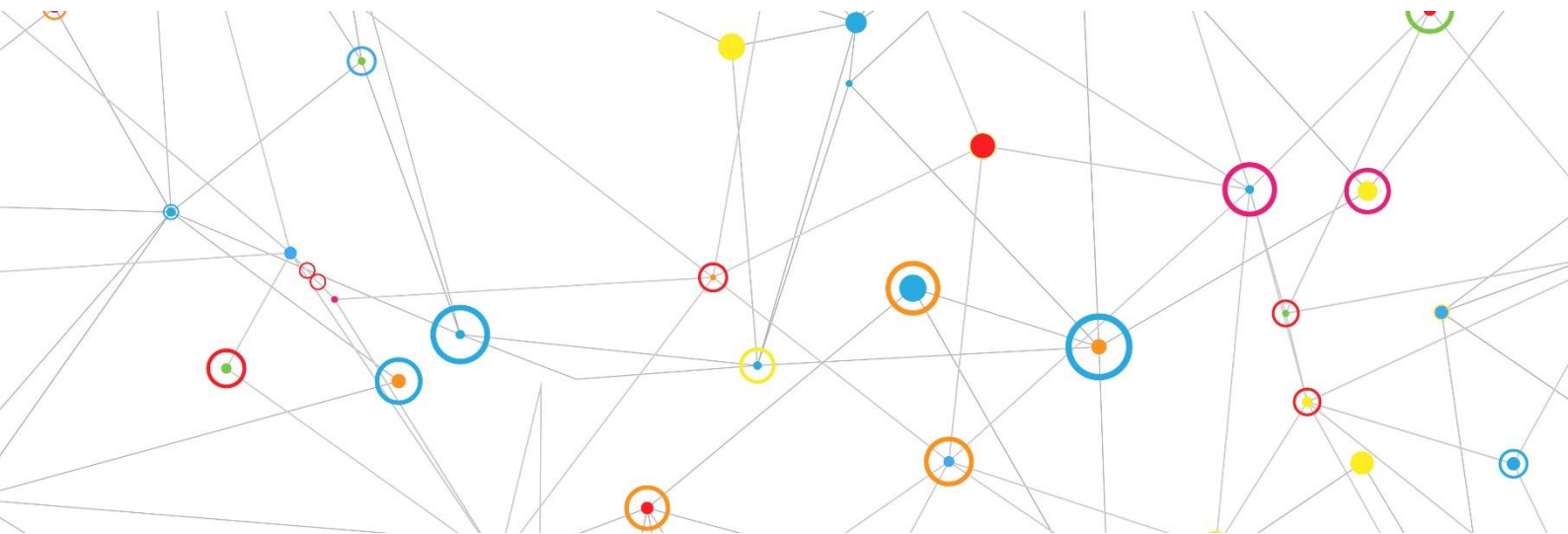
USAGE DES PLATEFORMES D'APPRENTISSAGE DES LANGUES EN CONTEXTE UNIVERSITAIRE

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Students' Online Autonomous Learning: A Case of Higher Education


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ABSTRACT

Online autonomous learning has been a desirable goal for various educational systems around the globe mainly since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Consequently, some learning platforms have been suggested and financed. The rise of online learning and emphasis on learner autonomy (LA) raise the debatable issue about online autonomous learning and teacher-less learning. To investigate this central issue, the study employs a meta-analysis research method to answer the five research questions: What are learners' attitudes towards online learning? Does online learning develop students' autonomous learning? Is autonomous online learning synonymous with teacher-less learning? What are the teachers' roles in online learning? What are the learners' roles in online learning? By analysing twenty recent studies and literature review papers, the current study argues that although online learning seeks and fosters LA, it is not merely self-dependence-learning, nor is it necessarily learning without a teacher. However, while teachers' roles transform due to the digitalization of learning, their involvement remains crucial. Moreover, this study not only clarifies the nature of online autonomy but also proposes new paradigms for teacher-learner interactions in digital language learning environments.

KEYWORDS: Digital autonomous learning, Language learning, Teacher roles, Student roles

Introduction

In the 21st century, endorsing digitalization for higher education and developing autonomous learning are becoming increasingly necessary and recommended. This shift in education is driven by several incentives; namely globalization, technological breakthroughs and the growing population of "digital native" (learners who are comfortable with technology and eager to use it in their education). In addition, the outbreak of the recent COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this trend since many countries were compelled to resort to online learning platforms as the exclusive alternative to face-to-face classrooms. This digitalized turn in education has substantially changed the teaching-learning processes, allowing more learning outside classrooms, and abdicating the teacher's centredness in favour of learners' autonomy. A key goal of any educational system is to foster autonomous, life-long learners who can independently and collaboratively construct knowledge (Hargreaves, 2003). These learners develop skills to effectively adapt to changing markets and compete in a challenging global environment. In turn, by embracing online learning and promoting autonomous learning, higher education institutions can better prepare students for success in the digital age.

Many watertight and evidence-based arguments are in favour of developing learners' autonomy. Being "a life-long endeavour" (Thomson, 1996, p. 78) translates the paramount

aspect and role of education. Fostering LA should, therefore, be regarded as an endeavour teachers pursue and a “tool” to equip learners. True education seeks “to teach students how to acquire knowledge and how to maintain enthusiasm about learning” (Yan, 2012, p. 558). In language learning specifically, Palfreyman and Smiths (2003) highlight the significance of developing learners’ autonomy; autonomy is not just beneficial but a human right which leads to more effective learning compared to other approaches and allows learners to take charge of their learning and take advantage of available resources, mainly outside the classroom (2003, p. 1). Another factor in favour of improving autonomy is fostering the shift in language pedagogy from teacher-centred to student-centred (Mahmud, 2018).

Recent research highlights the positive correlation between digitalization and the promotion of autonomous learning and their positive impact on learning in general (Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023, p. 1). The plenitude of digital resources like applications, websites, videos, online lectures, e-books, etc. empowers learners to engage in independent learning outside the classroom (Ahmed, Qasem & Pawar, 2020; Ubaedillah & Pratiwi, 2021). Also, the source and nature of online instruction reinforce autonomous learning. Online learning offers a learner-centred approach, caters to diverse learning styles, allows for nonlinear learning, provides varied input sources (visual, audio, video), and integrates exercises with assessment methods (Fanany, 2005). Learners are assuming responsibility for their learning, taking an active role in the learning context and methods, and evaluating their progress. Nevertheless, strengthening LA does not abdicate the teacher’s significance who are still playing vital roles in cultivating learners’ autonomy through using these digital tools (Ling et al., 2020 & Sadaghian; Marandi, 2021). Roles which could be recapitulated as facilitators, scaffolders, resource designers, etc. Still, these technology tools act (and are acting) powerfully to transform teachers’ roles.

This paper investigates autonomous online learning in higher education and its pedagogical implications for the roles of teachers and learners. It claims that while LA, involves the ability to take ownership of one’s learning journey (e.g., setting one’s learning goals, independent use of technology-based learning resources, and monitoring one’s progress), it does not equate to teacherless learning. It addresses five key research questions: What are learners’ attitudes towards online learning? Does online learning develop students’ autonomous learning? Is autonomous online learning synonymous with teacher-less learning? What are the teachers’ roles in online learning? What are the learners’ roles in online learning? It also aims to 1) define autonomous online learning, 2) debunk misconceptions about learner online autonomy, 3) explore factors fostering learners’ online autonomy, and 4) map out the evolving roles of both teachers and learners in online learning environments. Through a meta-analysis, this paper will discuss these issues and offer insights for teachers and learners seeking to promote effective online learning practices.

Literature Review

A necessary foundation for the concept of autonomy necessitates delving into its etymology and incorporating some dictionary definitions. The word autonomy originates in ancient Greece, signifying “self-governance” (autos = self, nomos = law). The denotation of "agency," as found in English dictionaries (e.g., Collins Dictionary, n.d.; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.; Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.), encompasses concepts such as freedom, right and ability to act, independence, self-governance, self-direction, and self-control. What is more, the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy offered a more in-depth definition of personal autonomy, highlighting “the capacity to be one’s own person, to live one’s life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one’s own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces.” (2020) However, although it correlates

autonomous agents to self-governing agents, questioning the nature of a self-governing agent remains a topic of debate as it does not guarantee the range of options provided and the ability to distinguish the difference between right and wrong (2018). In the context of education, while complete autonomy may seem ideal, some level of external guidance may be necessary to ensure that learners are on the right track and have access to the resources they need.

Although some educational theorists encroach deeper, most definitions of LA fall within the broader concept of 'self-governance'. Interestingly, it can be viewed as a social process suggesting a shift in power dynamics towards knowledge co-construction between the participants in the learning process (Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012, p. 836). However, this redistribution of power is misconnected to dethroning teachers' roles. For instance, Confessore's (1991) four-dimensional model of autonomous learning highlights the learner's desire to learn and change, resourcefulness, initiative, and persistence which are in turn crucial qualities for self-directed learners. Moore's (1984) definition might also be interpreted as entirely neglecting the teacher's role. He defined learner autonomy as "the extent to which in the teaching-learning relationship, it is the learner rather than the teacher who determines the goals, the learning procedures and resources, and the evaluation decisions of the learning program" (Moore, 1984, p. 85). Other types of dimensions of LA indicating learners moving away from teacher-dependence are set by The CIEL Handbook (2000) which emphasized "- Tak[ing] responsibility for their own learning and learn[ing] to learn; - Involv[ing] themselves in an interactive process in which they set short and long term learning objectives, reflect[ing] on and evaluat[ing] progress" (p.5). Similarly, Genc (2015) emphasized learner agency in determining learning objectives, defining content, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the acquisition procedure, and evaluating progress and learning.

Consequently, the misconception about learning autonomy dwells in the assumption that it leads to the redundancy of the teaching staff owing to the learners' new rights and abilities (Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023: 2). Exploring contemporary perspectives on LA reveals insights into the evolving roles of teachers and learners. Even though there has been a major shift from teacher-centredness to learner-centredness, online learning has further accelerated and strengthened learners' independence and autonomy. Sufficient literature on autonomous learning emphasized the referential teachers' roles and strategies. Little (1991) defined what autonomy is NOT: (1) is not synonymous with learners' self-instruction; (2) does not abdicate the teacher's responsibility; (3) is not another teaching method; (4) is not a single, easily described behaviour; and (5) is not a steady state achieved by learners. Again, while fostering learning autonomy empowers students and equips them for lifelong learning, it is paramount to consider the teachers' roles to effectively scaffold, facilitate and guide this process (1991). "By creating autonomous learners, teachers will help [students] think critically about their learning and understand what they need to do to improve" (Melvina, Lengkanawati & Wirza, 2020, p. 316). Regarding the role of facilitator, a teacher "maintains the learning environment by providing curriculum, various materials, and tools, giving unlimited access to the resources, and continuously monitoring students' progress" (Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012, p. 837).

Despite these roles which are associated with face-to-face classrooms, investigating teachers' roles in online learning remains paramount.

Research Design

Given the research topic and objectives, meta-analysis research design is chosen. It is "a quantitative, formal ... study design used to systematically assess the results of previous

research to derive conclusions about that body of research” (Haidich, 2010, p 30). It includes a systematic review of the literature and synthesis of the findings from various previous relevant studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic compared to a single study. The referential value of this research design is to help “the cumulation of knowledge from the results of many studies” (Hunter et al. 1982, p. 10). The study conducted a comprehensive search across multiple scholarly databases using germane search terms encompassing online learning, autonomous learning, and teachers' and students' roles. Accordingly, this search ensured the inclusion of several studies from various educational contexts and regions. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria based on research topic, design, region and sample, a total of twenty studies were selected for analysis, along with relevant literature reviews and books. This research method sought to accumulating knowledge not only through writing a synopsis of a research question but also by providing a synthesis through which the researcher compares and contrasts ideas from several studies and papers evaluates the quality and significance of these sources of data, and interprets the main ideas regarding the research questions and main topic. However, one of the limitations confronting the selection process is that not all data sources addressed all four research questions at once. However, including these studies can still enrich the current study by providing extra relevant information.

Research Finding and Discussion

RQ 1: What are learners’ attitudes towards online learning?

Regarding the first research question, it is revealed that learners’ attitudes towards online learning is influenced by diverse factors and one key factor appears to be a preference for traditional learning structures. A study by Serdyukova and Serdyukov (2013) examined this by investigating factors affecting online learning in postgraduate teacher education programs. They surveyed 65 students in a 2012 program and found that a majority (62%) favoured traditional classroom learning. Only a smaller portion (34.9%) expressed a desire for independent online learning, and very few (3.1%) felt comfortable in either format. the results suggest that working adult students -the group studied here- may be less enthusiastic about self-directed online learning.

Based on the conception that learners' attitudes towards online learning can vary, recent research has explored the specific motivations of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mansour, Fatmi and Jelloul (2021, p. 82) carried on this study in the context of English language learners at Mohammed 1st University. Their survey-based study which covered 153 students revealed that there is a dynamic interplay between online learning frequency and motivation. On the one hand, participants with higher education levels tended to exhibit stronger intrinsic motivation, which is driven by personal interest, self-fulfilment, and enjoyment of learning English. On the other hand, participants with lower education levels were more extrinsically motivated; usually to seek external rewards or avoid punishment. However, most students demonstrated a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, but with varying degrees in their relative dominance. While some students tend to learn online owing to the inherent appeal of learning the topic, others were primarily incited by external factors like academic success or avoiding consequences. Although this qualitative study provides insights, complementing the research with a quantitative approach could potentially expand the understanding of other relevant student-specific variables.

RQ 2: Does online learning develop learner’s autonomous learning?

Various studies highlight the significance of online learning and digital tools in promoting students’ autonomy (Ling et al., 2020; Sadaghian & Marandi, 2021). A focus

group study by Melvina, Lengkanawati, and Wirza (2020) reinforced this notion, demonstrating that using technology to learn promotes LA. However, the participants admitted that there were some technological barriers for both students and teachers. While they acknowledged the promise of technology in promoting autonomy, teacher participants emphasized the importance of using these technologies (software and hardware) purposefully. They identified specific tools like Grammarly and English Central as particularly important for strengthening independent learning in writing and speaking, respectively. Mentimeter is a "fun application" that facilitates learning through gamification. Also, Quizlet proved beneficial for vocabulary review and pre-class preparation (Melvina, Lengkanawati & Wirza, 2020, p. 317).

Despite the promise of technology in fostering learning autonomy, tools may fail. Pratiwi and Waluyo's (2023) quasi-experimental research investigated this disconnect between technology and autonomous learning in online university English classrooms. They compared two groups: one using traditional methods and printed materials, the other utilizing digital tools like Google Forms, Socrative, Kahoot!, and Quizizz. Both groups took pre- and post-tests to assess learning outcomes. The study revealed that not all online learners exhibit the characteristics of autonomous learners. One third of the participants who utilized digital tools were classified as non-autonomous. The study argued that, in the Indonesian context, these tools can be distracting, increase plagiarism, and induce students to cheat during examinations. It is evidence that online learning which should empower learners to take the reins of their autonomy in the target language, is hindered. Interestingly, it also found varying levels of LA across different aspects. This variation was observed in relation to the content, activities, and skills practiced. For example, students showed greater autonomy in listening and grammar compared to reading skills.

In exploring significant differences in the learning outcomes of students in traditional and online learning classes, the Pratiwi and Waluyo's (2023) study found that students' learning outcomes in online EFL classrooms employing the autonomous learning concept demonstrated improved learning outcomes. However, it identified various impediments hindering the use of ICT tools to foster autonomous learning. The external factors included slow internet connection, technical difficulties, limited ICT training and workshop availability, the school's technology infrastructure, paid websites, and inappropriate materials (Goh, 2019; Ubaedillah et al., 2021). The internal factors encompassed lack of students and teachers' motivation, the difficulty in selecting the correct material, and time-consuming (Loan, 2019 & Sulaiman et al., 2020). These findings were corroborated by another study conducted in a Korean university context. Choi and Lee (2020) identified similar factors affecting students' autonomous learning in online English as a foreign language classes utilizing digital technologies: student interest, motivation, perceived value of the tools, comfort level, confidence in using them, and satisfaction with the technology.

RQ 3: Is autonomous online learning synonymous with teacher-less learning?

A study by Chen (2021, p. 1) entitled "Using Scaffolding Materials to Facilitate Autonomous Online Chinese as a Foreign Language Learning: A Study During the COVID-19 Pandemic" sheds light on the role of embedded scaffolding materials in empowering students to study Chinese online. It highlights several key points:

- Embedded scaffolding materials are valuable tools for online Chinese language learning. These materials provide structured support and feedback which help promoting independent learning for students.

- The path to autonomy is not linear, but a gradual process which entails time and commitment from both students and teachers.
- Scaffolding materials may not be the answer for everything. Cultural learning, for instance, seems to benefit more from in presence teacher assistance and guidance. This is because cultural aspects of language require a deeper explanation than what scaffolding materials alone can provide.
- The teacher's role remains crucial. While digital resources can offer valuable support, students still find teacher guidance to be a vital reference point, particularly for cultural understanding and problem-solving.

In addition, Strake (2007) accentuated the importance of teacher presence in online hybrid language courses. Her research (p. 57) identified a key reason students drop these courses: a perceived lack of teacher support and a disconnect between the in-person and online components. Consequently, A major part of the difficulty in fostering learners' autonomy is the loss of the teacher's control that may accompany increased LA in traditional classrooms.

Remarkably, a study conducted by Serdyukova and Serdyukov (2013) found another disconnect between students' preferences and actual learning behaviours. Despite students' inclination towards face-to-face classes, a larger portion of participants (76.9%) preferred to study individually. Collaboration between participants was significantly less popular. Only 18.5% of the participants expressed their willingness to work with peers, and a mere 4.6% enjoyed both independent and collaborative learning. Students' reluctance to work in pairs or groups stems from their perceived difficulties with teamwork. As the study noted, students find teamwork "fraught with difficulty in organizing and managing and characterized by distraction and uncertainty" (Serdyukova & Serdyukov, 2013, p. 231). They may also lack confidence in their potential partners and feel uncomfortable relying on unfamiliar classmates. Consequently, they tend to rely on the instructor and college for guidance and support. In addition, it identified key challenges students face in achieving success. Students value clear course structure and organization, reasonable, meaningful and well-defined course requirements and expectations, and effective teaching methods with a personalized teaching style (Serdyukova & Serdyukov, 2013, pp. 231-232). Alongside these instructor-related factors, students acknowledge their limitations, including attention issues, poor time management skills, low motivation, and a lack of confidence and independent learning skills.

RQs 4 and 5: What are the teachers' and learners' roles in online learning?

It has been a quite long process of shifting roles and responsibilities from teachers to learners. Historically, there is a transformation in roles and responsibilities from teacher-centredness where teachers are sole deliverers of knowledge to learner-centredness which emphasizes active learning and student engagement. This long and evolving journey is moving ahead towards the reinforcement of the autonomous online learner. Also, the source and nature of instruction is changing.

In face-to-face classrooms, a teacher is a complex agent who wears many hats. He is not only an instructor who posits the centre of the teaching-learning processes but a multifaceted performer who orchestrates, actively participates in, and organizes the learning process. Being a teacher indicates acting as a model, a lesson planner, a provider and controller of the learning activities (deciding when, what and how learners ought to learn) and learner practice and an assessor of learner's performance (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

The student-centred approach emphasizes student active participation. According to Fanany (2005, p. 38), "it is students, rather than the instructor, who are the most active

participants in the educational process." In this approach, students are often empowered to choose what, when, and how they learn (Kearsley, 2000). The teacher, then, assumes various roles to support student learning. These roles are motivator, prompter, coach, scriptwriter, audience, actor, manager, resource provider, guide, evaluator, organizer, facilitator, counsellor, and scaffolder (835 & Rodgers, 1986; Ehrman & Dornyei, 1998, pp. 222-223; Wright, 1991, p. 51). The teacher sets the floor for a healthy learning environment and imparts knowledge espousing diverse methods (Wright, 1991, p. 51). This autonomy represents a significant advancement in online learning, as self-directed learning is a core principle (Kearsley, 2000).

In online learning, there is growing concern about how teachers can foster student autonomy. Since autonomy entails students to take charge of their learning, it's not an innate skill and needs to be nurtured. As Masouleh and Jooneghani (2012) pointed out, "if being autonomous is to take some charges on the part of students... there would be much need for guidance" (p. 835). Their statement highlights the teacher's role as a scaffolder, who provides various strategies to assist students to develop their independent learning. The teacher's responsibility is further emphasized by Melvina, Lengkanawati, and Wirza (2020) who aptly stated that "teachers should have the braveness to shift their teaching practice" (p. 316). Also, Yan (2012) explicitly accentuated the teachers' roles, arguing that "although learner autonomy would help shift the learning/teaching responsibilities... teachers' responsibility should be reinforced rather than reduced... autonomous learning is not necessarily learning alone" (p. 559). However, teacher guidance is just one piece of the puzzle. A supportive online learning environment is also crucial and teachers are conscious of the role of technology in promoting learning autonomy (Melvina et al. 2020, p. 315). Godwin-Jones (2011) challenges the misconception of autonomous learning happening in isolation: "The development of effective learning autonomy is a peer network. Contrary to what the term might evoke in popular usage, learning autonomy does not involve secluding oneself in a cork-lined room with a mountain of learning materials" (p. 6).

Conclusion

Developing learners' online autonomous learning is a life-long endeavour and process which takes time, patience and support. (Yan, 2012, p. 562). Although learners play a crucial role in developing this skill, yet teachers are paramount in fostering this development. They guide students on their journey to becoming lifelong learners. Online learning is quite a new trend in education; therefore, online autonomous learning requires the understanding of new roles between teachers and learners. While online learning environments/technologies promote autonomy, they are not synonymous with teacherless learning. The roles of both teachers and learners are transformed, requiring a shift towards embracing these technologies and revising/developing their roles in order to adapt themselves to the requirement of online autonomous language learning. By understanding their distinct yet interconnected roles, teachers and learners can work together to achieve the full potential of online autonomous learning.

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