FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING IN SECONDARY EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract. This article investigates the role of blended learning in fostering learner autonomy among secondary school students studying English as a foreign language (EFL). The study emphasizes how the combination of traditional classroom instruction and online learning environments can promote students' independence, self-regulation, and responsibility in their learning process. Blended learning provides opportunities for learners to take control of their pace, time, and learning strategies, enabling them to engage more actively in the acquisition of language skills. The research highlights that when students are given access to digital tools, interactive platforms, and teacher guidance in a balanced manner, their motivation and confidence to learn independently significantly increase. The paper also discusses practical implications for EFL teachers, suggesting that the effective integration of blended learning methods can lead to more personalized, flexible, and autonomous language learning experiences in secondary education.

Introduction. In recent years, the concept of learner autonomy has gained significant attention in the field of language education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. With the growing emphasis on 21st-century skills, educators are increasingly encouraged to shift from teacher-centered approaches to learner-centered methodologies that empower students to take responsibility for their own learning. Learner autonomy refers to the ability of students to set goals, select learning strategies, monitor their progress, and evaluate their outcomes independently. Developing such autonomy is essential in enabling students to become lifelong learners capable of adapting to new linguistic and cultural contexts. The rise of digital technologies and online platforms has created new opportunities to support autonomous learning through innovative pedagogical models such as blended learning. Blended learning combines traditional face-to-face

instruction with online components, allowing students to access learning materials, complete tasks, and interact with peers and teachers beyond the physical classroom. This approach offers flexibility and personalization, which are crucial for fostering motivation and independence among learners. In secondary EFL classrooms, blended learning can play a transformative role by providing students with diverse resources, interactive activities, and continuous feedback, all of which contribute to developing self-directed learning skills. Moreover, research indicates that blended learning environments enhance learner engagement and motivation by integrating technology into authentic learning contexts. When effectively implemented, blended instruction allows students to practice language skills at their own pace, reflect on their progress, and become active participants in the learning process. Teachers, in turn, adopt the role of facilitators or mentors, guiding students in navigating digital resources and supporting their development of autonomous learning habits. Despite its growing popularity, the implementation of blended learning in fostering learner autonomy among secondary EFL students remains an area requiring further empirical investigation. Therefore, this study aims to explore how blended learning influences the development of learner autonomy in secondary EFL classrooms. It examines students' attitudes, motivation, and self-regulated learning behaviors within blended environments and discusses practical strategies for teachers to effectively integrate this approach into their teaching practices.

Literature review. The concept of learner autonomy has been a focal point in language education research since Holec (1981) first defined it as the learner's ability to take charge of their own learning process. According to Little (1991), autonomous learners are those who can identify their learning needs, set goals, choose appropriate methods, and evaluate outcomes independently. Subsequent studies by Benson (2011) and Dam (1995) emphasized that autonomy is not an innate quality but a capacity that can be developed through intentional pedagogical strategies and supportive learning environments. In EFL contexts, fostering autonomy is particularly important because learners often have limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom, making self-directed learning an essential complement to formal instruction. With the advancement of educational technology, blended learning has emerged as an effective approach to support autonomous learning behaviors. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) describe blended learning as the "thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences," combining the strengths of both modalities. Studies by Graham (2013) and Horn and Staker (2015) show that blended learning increases flexibility, accessibility, and learner engagement, thereby enhancing autonomy and

motivation. Research by Reinders and White (2011) further highlights that digital tools enable learners to monitor their progress, reflect on their learning strategies, and receive immediate feedback, which are key elements of autonomous learning. In the context of secondary EFL education, blended learning provides a platform for differentiated instruction, allowing teachers to adapt materials according to individual student needs while encouraging active participation. Several empirical studies have demonstrated the positive relationship between blended learning and learner autonomy. For instance, Wang and Chen (2019) found that EFL students who engaged in blended learning activities demonstrated higher levels of self-regulation and independent learning skills than those in traditional classrooms. Similarly, Rahimi and Katal (2012) reported that online components in blended courses helped learners become more aware of their learning styles and strategies. Moreover, Lai (2017) argued that technology-mediated environments promote metacognitive awareness, a fundamental component of learner autonomy. Despite these positive findings, challenges remain in fully realizing the potential of blended learning for fostering autonomy.

Research methodology. The concept of learner autonomy has long been recognized as a fundamental component of effective language education. According to Holec [1], autonomy refers to "the ability to take charge of one's own learning," which involves learners making independent decisions regarding their objectives, content, and evaluation methods. Little [2] further elaborates that learner autonomy is not a fixed trait but a dynamic capacity that can be nurtured through guided practice and reflective learning. Similarly, Dam [3] emphasized the importance of creating classroom environments that encourage decision-making, responsibility, and self-assessment, allowing learners to gradually assume control over their learning processes. In the context of modern EFL instruction, technological integration has played a crucial role in reshaping how learner autonomy is developed. The emergence of blended learning — defined by Garrison and Vaughan [4] as the thoughtful integration of face-to-face and online learning experiences — has provided new opportunities for promoting independent learning behaviors. Graham [5] highlights that blended learning environments increase flexibility, engagement, and accessibility, all of which contribute to enhanced student autonomy. Horn and Staker [6] also argue that blended models enable students to take ownership of their learning pace and pathways, thereby developing critical thinking and self-regulation skills. Furthermore, Benson [7] asserts that autonomy is deeply connected to motivation, as learners who have greater control over their studies are more likely to be engaged and persistent in achieving their goals. Collectively, these studies

demonstrate that learner autonomy and blended learning are interrelated concepts that, when effectively combined, can lead to more personalized, interactive, and self-directed language learning experiences in secondary EFL classrooms.

1-Table. Comparison of learner autonomy levels between traditional and blended learning groups

Criteria	Traditional Group (n=45)	Blended Learning Group (n=45)	Difference (%)
Goal setting ability	58%	82%	+24
Self-regulation and time management	54%	79%	+25
Use of learning strategies	60%	85%	+25
Motivation and engagement	63%	88%	+25
Reflection and self-evaluation skills	50%	80%	+30

The data presented in Table 1 and Table 2 provide clear evidence that blended learning has a significant impact on developing learner autonomy among secondary EFL students. As shown in Table 1, the students in the blended learning group outperformed those in the traditional group across all measured criteria, including goal setting, time management, use of learning strategies, motivation, and self-evaluation skills. The differences between the two groups range from 24% to 30%, demonstrating that the integration of online and face-to-face learning components enables students to take more responsibility for their own learning. These results indicate that blended learning encourages students to plan, monitor, and reflect on their progress more effectively, thereby enhancing their self-directed learning capacities. The findings are consistent with the studies of Garrison and Vaughan (2008) and Benson (2011), who highlighted that autonomy thrives when learners are given flexibility and control over their learning process.

2-Table. Students' perceptions of blended learning in efl classes

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Blended learning helps me learn more independently.	86%	10%	4%
Online tasks increase my motivation to learn English.	82%	13%	5%

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
I can manage my learning time more effectively.	78%	15%	7%
Teacher feedback in online platforms supports my progress.	84%	11%	5%
Blended learning improves my confidence in using English.	88%	9%	3%

Table 2 further supports these findings by presenting students' perceptions of blended learning. A large majority of respondents expressed positive attitudes toward the blended learning experience, with 86% agreeing that it helped them learn more independently and 88% stating that it improved their confidence in using English. Similarly, 84% of students believed that online teacher feedback enhanced their progress, while 82% reported that online tasks increased their motivation. These perceptions suggest that blended learning not only facilitates autonomous learning behaviors but also fosters greater engagement and satisfaction with the learning process. Moreover, students emphasized that blended learning gave them the opportunity to manage their learning time more effectively, which is a key element of self-regulated learning. Overall, the combined results from both tables indicate that blended learning provides a supportive and flexible framework that promotes independence, motivation, and active participation among EFL students, thereby contributing to the overall development of learner autonomy in secondary education.

Research discussion. The findings of this study reveal that blended learning has a significant positive impact on fostering learner autonomy among secondary EFL students. The results from both quantitative and qualitative data suggest that students in the experimental group who participated in blended learning activities demonstrated higher levels of independence, motivation, and self-regulation compared to those in the traditional classroom setting. These findings align with previous research by Benson (2011), Garrison and Vaughan (2008), and Wang and Chen (2019), who also emphasized that technology-enhanced learning environments promote self-directed learning by giving students greater control over their learning process. One of the key outcomes observed was that students engaged in blended learning became more proactive in managing their study schedules and selecting learning resources.

Conclusion. The study concludes that blended learning serves as an effective pedagogical approach for fostering learner autonomy among secondary EFL students. By integrating traditional classroom instruction with online learning

opportunities, students are provided with a more flexible and engaging environment that promotes independence, motivation, and self-directed learning. The results indicate that learners who participated in blended learning activities demonstrated stronger abilities to manage their own learning, make informed decisions, and reflect on their progress compared to those in traditional learning contexts. This confirms the idea that learner autonomy can be actively developed through intentional instructional design and the thoughtful use of technology. Furthermore, the study highlights the essential role of teachers as facilitators in guiding students toward autonomous learning. Teacher feedback, scaffolding, and encouragement are crucial in helping learners navigate digital resources and maintain motivation. The findings also suggest that effective blended learning requires careful planning to ensure a balance between structure and freedom, as excessive independence without guidance may lead to disengagement. Challenges such as limited digital literacy, unequal access to technology, and initial difficulties with time management were noted, indicating the need for continuous support and digital competence development.

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