

Designing a University Freshman Course to Promote Learner Autonomy

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Learner autonomy refers to the ability of learners to regulate their learning and take responsibility for the learning process (Benson, 2013), and the development of learner autonomy is essential for successful foreign language acquisition, particularly in EFL contexts. Thus, learners need opportunities to engage actively in learning both inside and outside the classroom. Meanwhile, teachers are required to implement pedagogical practices that promote learner agency and self-directed learning. Based on theories of learner autonomy, self-determination theory, advising in language learning, and reflection, this paper proposes a course design for first-year university EFL students. The course aims to develop foundational academic skills while providing opportunities for learners to reconsider their language learning challenges and strategies through advising tools and structured reflection. In addition, insights gained from the implementation of the course are organized, and issues for future improvement are discussed.

学習者オートノミーとは、学習を自身で調整し、責任を持って学習に取り組む能力である (Benson, 2013)。EFL環境下での外国語習得においては、学習者はこれを身につけることが極めて重要であり、そのためには授業内外で主体的に言語学習に取り組む経験が必要となる。また、教師には学習者の自律性を養い、学習の自己調整を促進するような授業実践が求められる。本稿では、学習者オートノミー、自己決定理論、言語学習アドバイジング、およびフレキシビリティの理論を基盤とし、大学1年生を対象としたコースデザインを提案する。本コースは、大学生に不可欠なアカデミックスキルの基礎の獲得を目指すとともに、アドバイジング・ツールや自己内省活動を授業内に組み込むことで、学習者が自らの課題や学習戦略を再考する機会を提供するものである。また、実践を通じて得られた知見を整理し、今後の改善に向けた課題についても考察する。

First-year university EFL students often experience confusion at the start of their studies, particularly in developing foundational academic skills and learning English effectively. This reflects the gap between high school and university, especially in terms of course requirements and academic performance (Harada et al., 2018). At this stage, students need to develop essential skills, including academic writing and presentation.

In foreign language learning, it is important for learners to manage their own learning. This is particularly true in EFL contexts such as Japan, where limited opportunities to use the target language make language acquisition more challenging. Accordingly, fostering learners' proactive and autonomous attitudes is essential, which can be achieved by providing opportunities for them to take control of their learning.

In this paper, the author outlines a course design to promote autonomous language learning in a required course for first-year university students. The course integrates the development of fundamental academic knowledge and skills—particularly presentation skills and report writing—with language learning. The paper begins with a discussion of relevant literature on learner autonomy and self-directed language, self-determination theory, advising in language learning, and reflection. Based on insights from the literature, the author presents a course design to develop learners' ability to regulate their learning and foster proactive attitudes toward language learning. The paper concludes with a reflection on the author's practice and implications for further development.

Selective Literature Review

Learner Autonomy and Self-Directed Learning

Learner autonomy is commonly defined as learners' capacity to take control of their learning (Benson, 2013). This includes self-monitoring, self-management, and self-awareness, which enable learners to understand their learning processes, regulate their study activities, and evaluate their progress. Importantly, learner autonomy is now widely conceptualized as a developmental capacity that can be fostered through appropriate

pedagogical support, rather than as an inherent personal trait (Benson, 2013; Kato & Mynard, 2016).

A substantial body of research has emphasized the importance of autonomy-supportive pedagogy in promoting this development. Studies grounded in this perspective demonstrate significant positive effects on learners' "performance, adjustment, and morale" (Deci & Flaste, 1996, p. 143). Learners in such contexts tend to display greater curiosity, stronger mastery orientation, and higher self-esteem (Deci & Flaste, 1996). However, while the benefits of autonomy-supportive learning are well established, these studies often focus primarily on psychological outcomes and provide limited guidance on how such principles can be systematically implemented in classroom practice, particularly in EFL contexts.

Self-directed learning has been widely identified as a key mechanism through which learner autonomy develops (Benson, 2013; Gardner & Miller, 1999). Through processes such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning, learners gradually assume greater responsibility. More recent research further indicates that the effectiveness of self-directed learning is enhanced when combined with structured reflective practices that encourage learners to examine their beliefs, strategies, and outcomes (Pemberton & Mynard, 2023). These findings suggest that learner autonomy develops through an iterative process that integrates self-directed action with reflection.

Nevertheless, existing research reveals several limitations. While learner decision-making is recognized as central to autonomy, relatively few studies provide concrete course models for scaffolding these processes in classroom contexts. Similarly, although reflection is widely emphasized, its systematic integration with self-directed learning remains insufficiently developed. Thus, there is a need for pedagogical designs that explicitly connect these elements within coherent instructional frameworks.

These issues are particularly significant in the Japanese context. According to the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (2024), Japan ranked 34th out of 37 OECD countries in self-directed learning and self-efficacy among 15-year-olds in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2022. This suggests that many learners have limited experience in managing their learning and tend to rely heavily on teacher direction. Furthermore, restricted opportunities to use English outside the classroom may constrain learners' autonomous learning practices. These contextual factors highlight the need for instructional approaches that explicitly support learners in developing self-directed learning skills. To address these gaps, this paper proposes a course design, situated in the Japanese EFL context, that integrates self-directed learning, structured reflection, and scaffolded decision-making within an autonomy-supportive

framework. This design aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice in learner autonomy.

Self-determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2017) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how autonomy-supportive teaching facilitates the development of learner autonomy and self-directed learning. According to SDT, learning environments that provide meaningful choices and decision-making opportunities support self-determined motivation.

Within this framework, Ryan and Deci (2017) identify three Basic Psychological Needs (BPNs)—competence, relatedness, and autonomy—which are essential for "growth, integrity, and well-being" (p.82). Competence refers to "the feeling of efficacy," which energizes the learning process, particularly when driven by "self-initiation and self-regulation" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 95). Relatedness refers to "the feeling of belonging" (p. 96), which supports learners' sense of connection with others. Autonomy, conceptualized as self-regulation, plays a particularly influential role as its fulfillment often facilitates the satisfaction of the other two needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When BPNs are adequately supported, intrinsic motivation is enhanced, leading to deeper engagement and higher-quality learning outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In educational contexts, autonomy support is commonly operationalized through practices that encourage learners to take initiative and make decisions about their learning (Ryan & Deci, 2017). These practices, including offering meaningful choices, acknowledging learners' perspectives, and providing positive, informational feedback, not only sustain intrinsic motivation but also enhance learners' sense of ownership, engagement, and responsibility for learning (Deci & Flaste, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2017). In particular, positive feedback supports learners' perceptions of competence and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

Meaningful decision-making about content, methods, and evaluation is a defining feature of self-directed learning (Benson, 2013; Deci & Flaste, 1996; Gardner & Miller, 1999). Moreover, the decision-making process can be understood as a skill that develops over time (Deci & Flaste, 1996). In this sense, learner autonomy is facilitated not only by opportunities to decide what to do, but also by support for developing how such decisions are made (Deci & Flaste, 1996). Because learners differ in their needs, backgrounds, and motivational profiles, personalized decision-making opportunities may support motivation and the development of learner autonomy (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2021).

Despite strong theoretical support for autonomy-supportive practices, opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful decision-making in the Japanese context appear limited (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2024). This indicates that self-directed learning skills may be insufficiently developed prior to tertiary education. Accordingly, learning environments should provide learners with opportunities to select their own learning materials and strategies (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2024). This gap highlights the need for instructional designs that systematically scaffold decision-making. This course design integrates structured decision-making within an autonomy-supportive framework.

Advising in Language Learning

Advising in language learning (ALL) represents a pedagogical approach that promotes learner autonomy while accommodating individual learner differences. Mynard and Carson (2012) define ALL as “the process and practice of helping students to direct their own paths so as to become more effective and more autonomous learners” (p. 4). Within this framework, autonomy development is primarily facilitated through “intentional reflective dialogue” (IRD) (Kato & Mynard, 2016), typically conducted in one-on-one advising sessions. During sessions, advisors use strategies such as restating, summarizing, and asking powerful questions to deepen learners’ reflection. These interactions encourage learners to analyze their experiences, consider alternative perspectives, identify challenges, and explore strategies for improvement (Kato & Mynard, 2016).

In addition to dialogic interaction, advising tools play a key role in facilitating reflection and learner development. Kato and Mynard (2016) classify these tools as cognitive, theoretical, and practical, as well as dialogue itself. Through their strategic use, learners are supported in making informed decisions about goal setting, content selection, and learning strategies, thereby fostering the development of learner autonomy.

Despite its pedagogical benefits, the implementation of one-on-one advising sessions poses challenges. Individual sessions are time-intensive, typically requiring substantial time outside regular class hours, and depend on careful scheduling. Consequently, although formal advising systems exist in some institutions, advising remains difficult to be implemented systematically in many educational contexts.

In response to these constraints, classroom-based advising has been proposed as a more feasible alternative. Research suggests that integrating ALL into regular classroom instruction can produce positive learning outcomes (Sakata & Fukuda, 2019), while also

reducing learner anxiety and aligning more closely with sociocultural expectations in certain contexts (Carson, 2012). Recent studies further indicate that the use of advising tools in classroom settings is perceived as both beneficial and enjoyable by Japanese university EFL students, and that interactive reflection supported by such tools fosters self-awareness and reflective engagement (Polczynska, et al., 2023).

Reflection

Reflection, widely recognized as a central component of language learning (Gardner & Miller, 1999), plays a crucial role in enabling learners to regulate their learning. It involves cognitive, affective, and evaluative engagement (Benson, 2013), through which learners interpret their learning experiences and adjust their learning approaches. Reflective practices have also been shown to strengthen self-directed learning skills, thereby contributing to the development of learner autonomy (Pemberton & Mynard, 2023). Mynard (2023) defines reflection as “the intentional examination of experience, thoughts, and actions in order to learn about oneself and inform change or personal growth” (pp. 23–24). Through this process, learners develop greater awareness of their learning and enhance their capacity to regulate it, thereby exercising greater control over the learning process (Benson, 2013).

Research suggests that the effectiveness of reflection depends not only on opportunities for reflection but also on the degree of structure and pedagogical support provided. For example, structured reflective support—such as guided tasks and instructor feedback—has been shown to enhance learners’ metacognitive awareness and enable them to gain deeper insights into their learning processes and preferences (Gardner & Miller, 1999). Journal writing has also been identified as an effective reflective practice, as it externalizes learners’ thinking and facilitates the critical examination of their learning processes, strategies, and emotions (Gardner & Miller, 1999; Mynard, 2023). However, many studies focus on individual reflective practices, giving limited attention to how reflection may be integrated with collaborative or socially mediated learning processes.

Recent research has addressed this limitation by emphasizing the role of socially mediated reflection. Kato and Mynard (2016) argue that IRD promotes greater awareness and the development of metalanguage, underscoring the interactive nature of reflection. Similarly, Pemberton and Mynard (2023) demonstrate that learners who combine self-directed learning with both individual and collaborative reflection exhibit deeper and more sustained reflective engagement. Within the Japanese EFL context, Polczynska et al. (2023) further show that collaborative, discussion-based reflection supported

by advising tools such as the Wheel of Language Learning and the Motivation Graph enhances learners' metacognitive awareness and reflective depth.

While these studies highlight the potential of integrating reflection with social interaction, they offer limited guidance on how to systematically connect reflection, peer interaction, instructional support, and self-directed learning in practice. To address this gap, this study proposes a course design that integrates structured self- and peer-based reflection with advising tools to support learner autonomy.

Pedagogical Course Design for a Freshman Seminar Course

Aims of the Course

This required first-term seminar for first-year university students, which consists of 15 lessons, each lasting 90 minutes, has two main aims. The primary aim is to help students develop the fundamental academic knowledge and skills necessary for university-level study. Because there is often a significant gap between learning experiences in high school and those at university, the course functions as a bridge to support students' transition into higher education. Accordingly, the course includes several core components commonly associated with first-year academic literacy development, such as presentation skills, library guidance provided by university librarians, email writing in both Japanese and English, effective use of the learning management system (LMS), and an introduction to plagiarism and academic integrity in report writing. The course is also required to include internal quality assurance activities, such as feedback sessions on the General-purpose Skill Test and the EQ test.

The second aim focuses on promoting learner autonomy and self-directed language learning. Learner autonomy is a key element in foreign language learning (Benson, 2013; Kato & Mynard, 2016), and the early stages of university provide an important opportunity for students to take greater responsibility for their learning. As discussed earlier, fostering autonomy at this stage can support long-term motivation, engagement, and learning effectiveness. Accordingly, the course design emphasizes the development of learner autonomy and self-directed learning among first-year students while integrating these aims into the core academic content of the seminar.

Course Overview

This seminar course is structured into four sequential phases, each intentionally designed to support the gradual development of learner autonomy through systematic pedagogical scaffolding (Table 1). Drawing on learner autonomy and SDT, the course

offers learners repeated opportunities to exercise choice, self-regulation, and reflective decision-making.

The culminating task of the course is a final paper entitled *The Language Learning Issue Paper*. In this assignment, students identify their challenges in English learning, describe the learning processes they engaged in during the semester, and critically reflect on their experiences. The paper consists of three sections and a reference list following APA conventions, and through this process, they develop foundational academic writing skills in English. The paper is closely linked to two English presentations, each corresponding to a specific section (Figure 1). This staged alignment enables learners to draft each section gradually and systematically. To ensure transparency and support students' self-regulation, the rubrics for both the presentations and the final paper are shared with students in advance via the course syllabus (see Table 2 for the rubric of the final paper).

In addition, advising tools are systematically embedded in each phase to promote deeper reflection on students' learning and learning processes. Phases 2 and 3 are implemented in parallel to allow learners to engage repeatedly in a cyclical self-directed learning process—such as goal setting, strategy selection, monitoring, and reflection—within the limited timeframe of a single semester. Phase 2, which focuses on locating academic references, is designed primarily as an out-of-class activity, thereby encouraging learners to exercise autonomy over learning time, resources, and strategies. Details of each phase's structure and pedagogical aims are provided in the following sections.

Table 1
The Timeline for The Course

Phase	Week	Content	Advising Tools
Phase 1	1 ~ 7	Introduction / General purpose skill Test / Writing emails / Library Guidance / EQ Test Feedback	“Goal Setting Pyramid,” Vision board”
		Sharing Sample Final Paper	
		Presentation 1: Goal Setting & Focus area Writing the first section of the final paper	

Phase	Week	Content	Advising Tools
Phase 2	8 ~ 11	Reference Finding & Sharing APA citation style / Plagiarism Writing the second section of the final paper / Reference list	“Mapping out of the Year and Months”
Phase 3		Making weekly plans Self-directed learning Reflection	“Weekly schedules,” “The Wheel of Language Learning”
Phase 4	12 ~ 15	Presentation 2: Reflection Writing the third section of the final paper Final Paper Submission	“Letter to Future Self”

Figure 1
The Course Overview

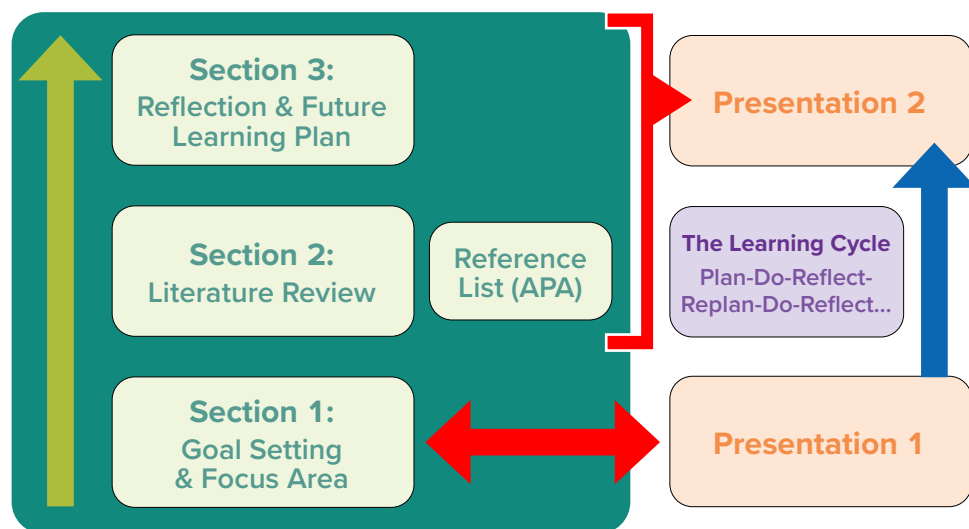


Table 2
The Rubric of the Final Paper

	Complete	Extensive	Moderate	Limited	Absent
Section 1: Learning Issues					
The language learning issues (and/or goals) are clearly identified and defined. (with reasons)	4	3	2	1	0
Section 2: Relevant Literature					
The literature selected is relevant to the issue(s) You need to find some resources or materials.	4	3	2	1	0
Section 3: Reflection & Analysis					
Thoughtful reflections and analysis on what you did according to your language learning plan are elaborated.	4	3	2	1	0
Your future vision or action plan is identified and clearly described.	4	3	2	1	0
References (APA style)					
Formatting and mechanics (grammar, spelling, etc.) are appropriate.	2		1		0
The reference list and in-text citations are properly formatted.	2		1		0

Phase 1: Goal Setting and Presentation 1

The first phase focuses on goal setting and the identification of individualized focus areas in English learning for the semester. To scaffold this process, *the goal-setting*

pyramid (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 40) and *the vision board* (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 49) are employed as tools. The goal-setting pyramid supports learners in breaking down a broad, long-term goal into achievable short-term goals. Through this structured reflection, learners identify their language learning issues and determine specific areas of focus for the semester. Importantly, they independently select the aspects of English they wish to improve, thereby exercising control over their learning goals. Building on the goal-setting pyramid, learners then create a vision board, which is a collage of images, words, and affirmations that visually represents their learning goals (Kato & Mynard, 2016). This activity further scaffolds goal clarification by helping learners externalize and concretize their goals, making them more tangible and personally meaningful.

Students also deliver a presentation on their learning goals and focus areas they have decided, using their vision boards as visual support. This presentation serves as an opportunity for them to articulate their goals publicly and take responsibility for their learning plans. To scaffold the task, presentation guidelines are shared in advance, and a sample presentation is demonstrated by the instructor. Furthermore, the assessment criteria are explicitly explained so that students understand the required components of the presentation.

Following the presentations, students engage in reflective writing from two perspectives: as presenters and listeners. This activity encourages learners to evaluate both their own goals and presentation and those of their peers, further promoting metacognitive awareness. In addition, they begin writing the first section of the final paper, which focuses on their learning goals, selected focus areas, and the rationale for these choices. The draft is submitted via LMS, allowing them to practice managing their learning through digital tools. After submission, some written feedback is provided online individually, and students revise their drafts accordingly to produce a finalized version. This iterative drafting and feedback cycle is intended not only to improve the quality and accuracy of students' writing, but also to promote reflective engagement, thereby fostering learners' capacity for self-monitoring, key components of self-directed learning and learner autonomy.

Phase 2: Reference Finding Phase for Self-directed Learning

At the beginning of Phase 2, a four-year mapping sheet—adapted from the advising tool “*Mapping out the year and month*” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 67)—is introduced. By completing this sheet, learners adopt a long-term perspective on their goals throughout their university studies. The activity also incorporates backcasting, enabling students

to plan their English learning by working backward from long-term goals to identify specific and achievable steps.

This phase focuses on locating and engaging with references related to the focus areas identified in the previous phase. Students independently select and read relevant materials, such as books, websites, and articles, aligned with their chosen topics, primarily outside the classroom to promote autonomous management of time and resources. Building on the library guidance in Phase 1, students identify at least two relevant references. Additional scaffolding is provided through the introduction of sample books in class, followed by peer sharing of selected materials, which fosters collaborative learning and the exchange of learning strategies.

APA citation style is introduced to support the development of the second section of the final paper—the literature review—as well as the compilation of the reference list. Issues related to plagiarism are also explicitly addressed. Sample texts are provided as further scaffolding to guide students in academic writing. Based on their selected literature, students write about effective learning strategies associated with their focus areas. As in Phase 1, a draft is submitted via the LMS, and written feedback is provided. This iterative drafting and feedback process further supports students' revision and reflective engagement with their writing.

Phase 3: Weekly-Plan & Self-reflection Phase

Phase 3 involves a cyclical process of weekly planning, implementation, and reflection, adapted from the advising tool *Weekly Schedules* (Yamashita & Kato, 2012, pp. 164-169; Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 43). Learners determine what to focus on within their identified areas, how the learning is conducted, and when and where it takes place. They are also encouraged to incorporate learning strategies identified in their selected literature into their learning. During the planning stage, students share their weekly learning plans with peers, while reflections on the week's activities are exchanged in class upon completion. This sharing of both plans and reflections enables learners to draw on peer perspectives, which may broaden their understanding of effective learning approaches.

Based on their individual reflections and insights from peer interaction, students revise their plans for the following week. This cyclical process continues over several weeks, enabling sustained engagement in self-directed learning. Through this process, learners develop key aspects of autonomy, including goal setting, strategic planning, monitoring, and reflective evaluation.

At the end of Phase 3, students complete the *Wheel of Language Learning* (Kato & Mynard, 2016, pp. 41–42; Yamashita & Kato, 2012, pp.164–169), which is designed to help them clarify their levels of satisfaction with their learning across six categories: goal setting, motivation, time management, learning strategies, enjoyment of learning, and learning materials. Students rate their satisfaction on a scale from 0 to 10 and explain their ratings in writing, encouraging them to synthesize their experiences and reflect on their learning. (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Worksheet of The Wheel of Language Learning (developed by Yamashita & Kato,2012).

My Wheel of Language Learning

Student No. ()
Name. ()

What did you find out about your WLL?

Yamashita, H. & Kato, H. (2012). The Wheel of Language Learning: A tool to facilitate learner awareness, reflection and action. In J. Mynard & L. Carson (Eds). *Advancing in Language Learning: Dialogue, tools and context* (pp. 164-169). Harlow, UK. Longman.

Phases 4: Reflection and Presentation 2

In this phase, students reflect on and synthesize their English learning over the semester. They present their learning processes and outcomes in an in-class presentation while evaluating their development; articulate future learning goals and plans; and complete the final section of the course paper.

In the presentation, students revisit their initial learning goals and focus areas, explain their learning plans and how they were implemented, and draw on the references they consulted. They also reflect on their learning processes and present future goals and action plans for English learning. This task enables students to consolidate their learning, articulate their development, and connect past experiences with future learning. Following the presentation, students complete individual written reflections on Presentation 2 from both presenter and audience perspectives. As in Phases 1 and 2, they submit a draft of the final section via the LMS, after which written feedback is provided to guide revision.

As the outcome of the course, students submit a completed paper. Since each section and the reference list have been developed in earlier phases, they compile all components into a single document. The paper is submitted both electronically via email and as a printed copy to the instructor. As noted earlier, it is assessed using an analytic rubric (Table 3).

In the final session, students write a *Letter to their Future Selves* one year ahead, adapted from Kato and Mynard (2016, pp. 49–50). Through this activity, they are encouraged to envision their future selves and connect their present learning to future goals by considering what they hope to achieve in one year. The letters are retained by the instructor and returned after one year. This activity functions as a form of self-advising and encourages continued reflection beyond the course.

Pedagogical Implications for Further Development

The course was implemented over two academic years, and overall feedback from students was positive, indicating increased focus on English learning, greater awareness of reflection, and higher motivation through peer interaction. Student feedback was collected voluntarily and used in an anonymized manner for course evaluation purposes. It is suggested that the course may have supported engagement with learning and the initial development of learner autonomy to some extent.

However, the course design also presents several limitations that warrant further refinement and systematic investigation. The instructional design could benefit from a

more structured and collaborative approach with clearer scaffoldings at both the lesson and course levels. Although pair and group work were incorporated throughout the course, more explicit strategies for peer advising and group advising could be developed and systematically integrated. Such approaches have the potential not only to enrich collaborative learning but also foster learners' self-advising skills, which have been identified as central to the development of learner autonomy (Kato & Mynard, 2016).

Furthermore, the course would benefit from more carefully sequenced scaffolding, particularly during cognitively demanding stages such as locating academic references and composing each section of the final paper. This need is especially salient given the wide range of English proficiency levels among learners. Without sufficient support, lower-proficiency learners may struggle to engage meaningfully with self-directed tasks, potentially limiting the intended impact of autonomy-supportive practices. Additionally, greater consideration should be paid to identifying which advising tools are most appropriate for the given cohort of students and to determining the optimal timing and manner of their use to support the development of learner autonomy.

Finally, an important challenge for future research concerns the assessment of learner autonomy development. Further exploration is needed to determine how students' growth as autonomous EFL learners can be systematically measured, as well as how participation in this course influences their subsequent engagement in language learning. Addressing these issues will be essential for rigorously examining the relationship between course design, advising-oriented pedagogy, and the sustained development of learner autonomy.

Conclusion

In recognition of the importance of fostering learner autonomy in post-secondary EFL contexts, this paper presented the design of a seminar course for first-year university students. The course integrates fundamental academic knowledge and skills required in the university context with elements of self-directed learning, decision-making processes, advising tools, and systematic reflection, all of which are intended to promote learner autonomy. Although the implementation suggests that learners became more aware of their own learning and learning processes to some extent, the course design remains developmental and open to further refinement. By engaging with advising tools and participating in ongoing reflective practices within a self-directed learning framework, this course is expected to have a positive and lasting impact on EFL learners' future studies, contributing to the continued development of learner autonomy.

Bio Data

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