

Enforcing L2 Learner Autonomy in Higher Education: The Top 50 Cited Articles

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Learner autonomy as both a pre-condition of self-efficacy and higher achievements in learning and an essential learning outcome has been in the highlight in the higher education domain for many years. This review aims to single out the most influential publications (with 10 citations or more) on foreign language and L2 learner autonomy in tertiary education in the highly reputed journals indexed with the Scopus database, with the publication period limited to the last ten years (2011-2020). The key findings show that the top 50 cited articles on learner autonomy broadly cover conceptual development; self-efficacy and motivation within the learner autonomy concept; educational technologies and web-based activities in fostering learner autonomy; country-specific issues of learner autonomy as the prevailing directions of study in the field of learner autonomy.

Keywords: learner autonomy, higher education, L2, language learning, self-efficacy, motivation, self-regulated learning

Introduction

Learner Autonomy in Learning Languages

In the recent years, several concepts have become or developed into the backbone constructs in higher education. In the 1980s-1990s, learner autonomy came into the limelight. Then it led to greater focus on self-regulation, self-efficacy, learning strategies, learner-centered education, and self-regulated learning. Every five or ten years the mainstream research takes a bend or faces new challenges.

In modern higher education, knowledge building has shifted from “the ready-made knowledge” transferred by the teacher to the knowledge acquisition by the learner on their own. Learning follows the needs of the societies that are transforming (Reigeluth & Joseph, 2002). The superfluous information settings with shorter life cycles for the new knowledge demand that the learner manage to build it independently. “Education has laid great stress on individual acquiring knowledge” (Lin & Reigeluth, 2019). Thus, the learner autonomy concept has turned into the essential outcome of higher education. National curricula in many countries even identify learner autonomy as one of the key learning outcomes (Pu, 2020). Education at large aims to support students in thriving in the digital age and providing them with a more individualised and customised learning experience (Ozer & Yukselir, 2021).

When it comes to foreign language learning, learner autonomy is still among the top themes for researchers and academics. The concept of learner autonomy (LA) was first defined in 1981 by Henri Holec. Though he coined the name of the concept in his book “Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning” (Holec, 1981), its gist and importance were previously discussed by the EU institutions in their major projects in modern languages in the period between 1964 and 1974 as language learning was considered a crucial factor in the successful promotion of European integration.

Table 1*Learner Autonomy and Autonomous Learner Definitions and Attributes*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Researcher(s)</i>	<i>Definition or Attributes</i>
1981	Holec, H.	the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981)
1991	Candy, P.C.	knowledge is ... built by the learner (Candy, 1991)
1997	Nunan, D.	fully autonomous learning exists only as an ideal concept; most beginner EFL learners are not autonomous (Nunan, 1997)
2007	Little, D.	LA involves critical reflection, decision-making and independent action (Little, 2007, p.30)
2010	Benson, P.	"a testable construct in foreign language education contexts" (Benson, 2010, p.95)
2021	Khaerudin, T. & Chik, A.	a "fully autonomous language learner can manage their learning in the absence of the classroom, teacher, or textbooks"; "LA is not synonymous with learning without teachers" (Khaerudin & Chik, 2021, p.39)

Self-Regulated Learning and Other Concepts

Self-regulation occupies an important niche in education. This construct, affecting academic achievements at all levels of education, was consequently translated into self-regulated learning. Boekaerts, Maes & Karoly (2005) describe self-regulation as multi-component, iterative, self-steering processes in the service of one's own goals. The salient trait of self-regulated learning is attributed to self-control. Adaptive strategies of learners who are engaged into this kind of learning are multiple and include cognitive, meta-cognitive, motivation and other strategies.

In their systematic review of self-regulated learning strategies, Broadbent & Poon's combined taxonomy encompasses metacognition, time management, effort regulation, peer learning, elaboration, rehearsal, organization, critical thinking (Broadbent & Poon, 2015).

Boekarts & Cascallar outline that the students involved in this learning should be "aware of the motivation, volition, and coping strategies" (Boekarts & Cascallar, 2006, p. 201). Zimmerman (1990) describes self-regulated learners as approaching "tasks with confidence, diligence, and resourcefulness" (Zimmerman, 1990, p. 4). They assume greater responsibility for their educational outcomes.

All learners are self-regulated to a degree. But to distinguish self-regulated learners, Zimmerman also features their awareness of relations between regulatory process and learning outcomes and their use of strategies in learning (Zimmerman, 1990).

Self-regulated learning and closely related concepts of self-directed learning and independent learning, all in all, do with fostering learner autonomy. The basic difference lies in the focus of the activities. With self-regulation as the psychological backbone of autonomy, self-directed learning and independent learning have become paths for learners to greater autonomy and educational achievements.

In considering the self-regulation structure, researchers map various subprocesses, including motivation and self-efficacy along with task analysis, self-control, self-observation, self-evaluation and others. In studying learner autonomy, those processes and features are also tackled. On its own, motivation forms an educational field of study, helping to facilitate self-acquisition of knowledge.

To map the most essential themes and directions of research on language learner autonomy, we are to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the trend-setters in the field of language learner autonomy?
2. How influential are the relevant concepts (motivation; self-efficacy; self-regulated learning) in the top-cited research on language learner autonomy?

Methodology

Search Strategy

As the Scopus database encompasses the most reputed peer-reviewed journals in the education domain, the search strategy was focussed primarily on the sources indexed there. The initial search was conducted for all the documents relating to “learner autonomy”. Then, the search results were refined and limited to the criteria of years (2016-2021); subject area (Social Sciences): document type (article, review), and keywords (higher education; independent learning; teacher autonomy; self-efficacy; foreign language learning; self-regulated learning; autonomous learner).

The period covers ten years that is wide enough to detect the new directions and shifts in the learner autonomy research.

As educational research is part of Social Sciences, the latter were singled out as the primary inclusion criterion. Many peer-reviewed journals focus on several closely related areas. Thus, their publications may be considered as attributed to more than one subject area. Anyway, it presumably agrees with the chosen subject area criterion.

Then, all the results were listed based on their citation scores (from the highest to the lowest).

Based on our questionnaire conducted among 20 experts (educators; academics; researchers) from three Russian universities (MGIMO University; RUDN University; Moscow State University of Food Production), we singled out the following extra keywords relevant to the learner autonomy phenomenon: higher education; independent learning; teacher autonomy; self-efficacy; foreign language learning; self-regulated learning; autonomous learner.

Questionnaire on Learner Autonomy in Higher Education

To reach more objectivity in selecting the literature for our review on learner autonomy, we turned to twenty experts in the domain with a short questionnaire.

The participants included five university professors of linguistics, and education; five researchers; ten faculty members and lecturers of foreign languages.

The questionnaire encompassed the following questions:

Question 1. Enumerate up to five keywords relevant to learner autonomy in higher education.

Question 2. What are the most essential concepts closely connected with learner autonomy?

Based on Question 1, the prevailing answers formed the extra keyword pool that we used in limiting our search (See Table 2).

As for Question 2, the most popular answers included self-efficacy (11 participants); motivation (10 participants); self-regulated learning (8 participants); teacher autonomy (7 participants); web-based learning (4 participants); self-directed learning (4 participants); independent learning (4 participants); computer-assisted learning – CALL (3 participants); mobile learning (2 participants); computer-mediated learning (1 participant). These concepts were partially covered in the introduction to the review to show the interrelations within the field.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 2

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

<i>Criterion Aspect</i>	<i>Inclusion Criteria</i>	<i>Exclusion Criteria</i>
Period	2011 – 2021 ¹	Before 2011; 2022 (in press publications 2022)
Subject Areas	Social Sciences	Other Areas if the publications are not simultaneously attributed to Social Sciences
Types of Publications	Article Review	All publications beyond the inclusion criterion
Keywords	Learner autonomy (the initial keyword for the search) Extra keywords: higher education; independent learning; teacher autonomy; self-efficacy; foreign language learning; self-regulated learning; autonomous learner	All publications beyond the inclusion criterion
Citations of the documents	10 and more citations	Fewer than 10 citations
Level of education	Higher (tertiary) education	Elementary education; secondary education; corporate and business education; further education; additional education
Disciplines	Foreign language/ L2	All other disciplines

Scope of the Review

The review was limited to 50 publications, with the citation scores starting with 10. When we got down to our review, we agreed that we would include only the publications with citations of 10 and higher. Influential publications in different subject areas may score various numbers of citations. For Social Sciences (Education) as well as Arts & Humanities (Language and Linguistics) reviews tend to single out documents starting approximately with 10 citations.

Supporting Publications

To support the understanding and give a broader conceptual view of the topical clusters based on the autonomy-related concepts, we selected the documents, relevant to LA and the concepts outlined in the questionnaire from the top journals (mainly highly cited Scopus-indexed articles and reviews). The time span for the extra sources was not limited as some of them were published when the concept of learner autonomy was worded (1981) or a little later.

Though having served as a theoretical basis for the review, the associated extra sources did not enter the Top 50 Most Cited Publications.

Procedure

The initial search with “learner autonomy” in the category covering document titles, abstracts, and keywords brought 1,131 results, including 869 documents indexed between 2016 and 2021. Out of 869 results, 589 publications were attributed to Social Sciences. Limitation to the extra keywords boiled down the results to 335.

¹ The 2021 data are incomplete. But the review does not include any publications for 2021, as so far they have been cited fewer than 10 times.

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The results were sorted on the citation (from the highest to the lowest). The highest citation score hit 345. Then, each author was to select the 50 top cited results in compliance with the inclusion criteria. There were only a few (three) documents which caused doubt. General nature of research was combined with some miscompliance with the inclusion criteria (e.g. McMillan, & Rivers, 2011). Having discussed the final list, we singled out 50 articles and reviews (See Appendix 1) out of the first 65 selected documents.

While filtering the search results through the inclusion criteria, upon mutual agreement, we excluded 15 documents being beyond compliance. The excluded publications are given in Table 3 below with our reasoning for their elimination explained.

Table 3

The Excluded Documents: Rationales

<i>Nos</i>	<i>Document</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
1	Al Nashash, H., & Gunn, C. (2013). Lecture capture in engineering classes: Bridging gaps and enhancing learning.	The article does not relate to foreign language learning. Learner autonomy is considered in capturing lectures in engineering.
2	Burner, T. (2014). The potential formative benefits of portfolio assessment in second and foreign language writing contexts: A review of the literature.	Portfolio assessment in secondary education.
3	Chik, A., & Ho, J. (2017). Learn a language for free: Recreational learning among adults.	Recreational learning among adults. Informal education.
4	Hornstra, L., Mansfield, C., van der Veen, I., Peetsma, T., & Volman, M. (2015). Motivational teacher strategies: The role of beliefs and contextual factors.	Motivation in language learning in secondary school.
5	Kuchah, K., & Smith, R. (2011). Pedagogy of autonomy for difficult circumstances: From practice to principles. <i>Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching</i> , 5(2), 119-140. doi:10.1080/17501229.2011.577529	Learner autonomy in secondary school setting.
6	Lengkanawati, N. S. (2017). Learner autonomy in the Indonesian EFL settings.	Learner autonomy in secondary school setting.
7	Liakin, D., Cardoso, W., & Liakina, N. (2015). Learning L2 pronunciation with a mobile speech recognizer: French/y/. <i>CALICO Journal</i> , 32(1), 1-25. doi:10.1558/cj.v32i1.25962	Mobile-assisted foreign language learning in elementary school.
8	Nielsen, P. L., Bean, N. W., & Larsen, R. A. A. (2018). The impact of a flipped classroom model of learning on a large undergraduate statistics class.	Flipped classroom in statistics class at university.
9	Rose, H., & Harbon, L. (2013). Self-regulation in second language learning: An investigation of the kanji-learning task.	Language learner autonomy in secondary school (kanji-learning task; kanji, the name for Japanese written characters).
10	Scott, G. W., Furnell, J., Murphy, C. M., & Goulder, R. (2015). Teacher and student perceptions of the development of learner autonomy; a case study in the biological sciences.	Learner autonomy in the biological sciences.
11	Socket, G., & Toffoli, D. (2012). Beyond learner autonomy: A dynamic systems view of the informal learning of English in virtual online communities.	Web-based informal foreign language learning of adults in their spare time.
12	Ting, Y. (2015). Tapping into students' digital literacy and designing negotiated learning to promote learner autonomy.	Web-based activities in secondary school.
13	Tsuda, A., & Nakata, Y. (2013). Exploring self-regulation in language learning: A study of Japanese high school EFL students.	Self-regulation in language learning in secondary school.
14	Yasmin, M., Sarkar, M., & Sohail, A. (2016). Exploring English language needs in the hotel industry in Pakistan: An evaluation of existing teaching material.	Language learning in the workplace.
15	Yeh, Y., & Lan, Y. (2018). Fostering student autonomy in English learning through creations in a 3D virtual world.	Self-assessment of learner autonomy in English language learning in secondary school.

The top 50 most cited documents were broken down into thematic clusters. Each author labelled the documents, then, the breakdowns were checked for consistency. On the whole, no contradictions in the rationales were found.

Before the content analysis, the following six clusters were hypothesized: learner autonomy: theory and conceptualization; self-efficacy and motivation in the LA concept; self-regulated learning; educational technologies and LA; web-based activities in fostering LA; country-specific issues of LA development.

Results and Discussion

The top 50 publications range from the highest 345 citations (Kop, 2011) to the lowest of 12 citations (Gardner & Miller, 2011; Lenkaitis, 2020; Phan & Hamid, 2017).

The analysis of the review results showed that there is a slight trend toward fewer highly cited publications on LA, with 14 publications in 2011; 6 in 2012; 9 in 2013; 3 in 2014 and 2015 each; 5 in 2016; 3 in 2017; 4 in 2018; 2 in 2019; 1 in 2020. If the lower numbers for the recent 3-5 years can be caused by the insufficient time for citation, the previous years might have other reasoning.

The review publications were distributed among 27 journals, with the leading position and 11 publications in the *Language Learning and Technology*; 6 publications in the *Computer Assisted Language Learning*; 3 publications in the *System*. Another six journals published by two articles; 18 journals had one publication each.

Geographically, the leading affiliations belonged to the USA (10 publications); Australia (6 publications); Japan (6 publications); Hong Kong (5 publications); the UK (5 publications). The top affiliations included the University of Hong Kong (3); City University of Hong Kong (3); National Research Council Canada (2); University System of New Hampshire (2); and the University of Queensland (2).

By the type of publication (the review was limited to articles and reviews), there were 47 articles, and 3 reviews.

All the documents on the top 50 list belonged to the Social Sciences Domain. But at the same time, some of them were also marked as Arts & Humanities (37 documents); Computer Science (23 documents); and Business, Management and Accounting (1 document).

Four researchers (Kop, R.; Lee, L.; Miller, L.; Rivers, D.J.) authored two publications each. The remaining 73 authors participated in one publication. On average, each publication had 1.54 authors.

Thematic Clusters

The thematic clusters essentially proved the above hypothesis and totalled five. We failed to find stand-alone publications on self-regulated learning in the search for "LA". The ultimate clusters were as follows: learner autonomy: theory and conceptualization; self-efficacy and motivation within the LA concept; educational technologies and LA; web-based activities in fostering LA; country-specific issues of LA development (See Table 4).

The top 50 cited publications were distributed among the clusters with some overlappings. Essential part of publications entered two or more clusters due to the complex nature of the research.

Table 4*Thematic Clusters on Foreign Language Learner Autonomy*

<i>Thematic Clusters</i>	<i>Number of Publications out of Top 50</i>	<i>Brief Cluster Description</i>
Language Learner Autonomy: Theory and Conceptualization	12	The cluster focuses on the learner autonomy theory development. There are articles on perception of the phenomenon and some insights into the general understanding of the field.
Self-Efficacy and Motivation within the LA Concept	9	The theoretical and empirical publications relating to the concepts of self-efficacy and motivation.
Educational Technologies and LA	16	Educational technologies cover publications on MOOC; online learning; task-based instruction; strategy-based instruction; CALL; flipped classroom; blended learning.
Web-Based Activities in Fostering LA	12	The activities embrace collaborative writing; wikis; blogging; gaming; storytelling; virtual communities; videoconferencing; Web 2.0. tools, etc.
Country-Specific Issues of LA Development	18	The publications in this cluster give a glimpse of country-related experiences in learner autonomy practice in the tertiary education.

Language Learner Autonomy: Theory and Conceptualization

This cluster ranges from theoretical aspects of LA to the LA perceptions of the educational process participants (teachers and students). Fuchs, Hauck, & Müller-Hartmann (2012) found that learner autonomy was promoted through awareness as a result of implemented models as well as multiliteracy skills development based on social networking tools. Awareness was also found the key factor in fostering teachers' autonomy. Gao, 2013 analyzed and proved a crucial link between reflexive and reflective thinking and autonomy (Gao, 2013).

LA is thoroughly analyzed in various contexts, including the technologies in current use by L2 learners (Steel & Levy, 2013) and the technologies outside the classroom (Lai, Yeung & Hu, 2016); the self-directed learning (Navarro & Thornton, 2011);

Reinders & White (2016) outlined LA as “an assumed goal of language education” throughout the world. The focused on the close relationship between Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and LA, informing each other.

We found that there were some theoretical research that gave insights into the role constructivism played in L2 learner autonomy (Wang, 2011) and self-determination theory as a theoretical rationale for learner autonomy (Hu & Zhang, 2017).

Self-Efficacy and Motivation

Self-efficacy as an integral part of LA has taken its stake in the research on LA for years. In the review, a few highly cited articles dealt with various aspects of self-efficacy. Tilfarlioglu & Ciftci (2011) conducted their case-study research to determine the links between self-efficacy and LA, and find the relationship between self-efficacy and academic success.

The articles on motivation in language learning gives a glimpse of its relationships with LA (Ueki & Takeuchi, 2013; Chartrand, 2012; Terhune, 2016).

Educational Technologies

Interrelations between autonomy and technology have been studied since the term “learner autonomy” became an integral part of the educational discourse. Reinders & White (2016) gave an overview of 20 years of the field development. Though five years have passed ever since, many issues they outlined are still high on the agenda,

with some new swathes of topics coming into the highlight. More to this end, Steel & Levy (2013) charted the evolution of technologies prevailing in language learning.

One of the most highly cited sub-topics in the cluster (the first three publications on the list) deals with MOOCs, including learning experiences and challenges (Kop, 2011); issues of participant support (Kop, Fournier & Mak, 2011); massiveness, openness, and design of MOOCs (Baggaley, 2013).

Other themes cover autonomous learning through task-based instruction (Lee, 2016); multiliteracy skills development. There were publications on LA in L2 university students' writing and automated evaluation technologies (Wang, Shang & Briody, 2013); LA in blended learning; computer-assisted language learning (CALL); collaborative learning; Skype-based computer mediated communication; interaction in distance education; mobile assisted language learning; flipped classroom; and videoconferencing.

Web-Based Activities

Web-based activities developing LA included in this cluster feature web-based projects (Kessler, Bikowski & Boggs, 2012); blogging (Lee, 2011); digital gaming (Chik, 2014); corpus-building and concordancing; digital storytelling (Kim, 2014); Web 2.0 tools, including social networking (Chartrand, 2012); wikis (Pellet, 2012), and some others.

Country-Specific Issues

The cluster encompasses research conducted in Hong Kong – a digital video project in English for science (Hafner & Miller, 2011); technologies in autonomous language learning outside the classroom (Lai, Yeung, & Hu, 2016); managing self-access language learning; in Vietnam – strategy-based instruction on the promotion of LA (Nguyen & Gu, 2013); LA in foreign language policies; in Australia – the technologies in use by L2 learners (Steel & Levy, 2013); learning support in flipped classroom (Wang & Qi, 2018); in Thailand; in Turkey; in Japan – motivational self-system; blended learning in a CALL environment, etc.; in Saudi Arabia – perceptions of LA; the impact of mobile assisted language learning on LA; in Pakistan – socio-cultural barriers in LA (Yasmin & Sohail, 2018); and in China.

The research in international settings (Germany, Poland, the UK, and the USA) helped to receive empirical findings relating to LA in a task-based telecollaborative learning format (Fuchs, Hauck & Müller-Hartmann, 2012).

Conclusion

Research Question One

The review did not find any strikingly new and unexpected directions of study. The trend-setters met the hypothesis and included country-specific issues of LA development (18 publications); educational technologies and LA (16 publications); theory and conceptualization of learner autonomy (12 publications); web-based activities in fostering LA (12 publications); self-efficacy and motivation within the LA concept (9 publications).

Research Question Two

The relevant concepts of motivation; self-efficacy; and self-regulated learning are influential, but to a degree. The relationships between LA and motivation; LA and self-efficacy were studied in nine publications out of 50. Self-regulated and self-directed learning as a stand-alone direction was not the case with only one publication in the review.

The limitations of the review are connected with the search strategy applied. Other databases might be sought to double-check the findings of the present study. More sources and publications are certain to refine or adjust the results.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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Appendix 1

The Top 50 Cited Articles on Learner Autonomy (2011-2020)

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