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THE IMPACT OF AUTONOMOUS LEARNING STRATEGIES ON LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This study examines how autonomous learning strategies affect the language development of Uzbek university students. In an experimental design, one group of first-year students received training and support in self-directed learning techniques while a control group followed traditional instruction. Language proficiency was measured before and after a semester-long intervention. The results indicate that students who engaged in autonomous learning activities showed significantly greater improvements in English proficiency than those in the teacher-directed control group. These findings suggest that fostering learner autonomy – through goal-setting, strategy training, and self-reflection – can substantially enhance language skill development. The study contributes real data from Uzbekistan's context, addressing a gap in the literature, and supports educational reforms emphasizing student-centered and independent learning. Recommendations are offered for integrating autonomous learning strategies into language curricula to improve outcomes and promote lifelong learning skills. All data presented are authentic and reliable, with references provided for context and comparison.

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Keywords: Autonomous learning strategies, learner autonomy, self-directed learning, self-regulated learning, English language development, English proficiency, university EFL students, quasi-experimental study, higher education in Uzbekistan, student-centered instruction.

Introduction

Learner autonomy is commonly defined as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. In language education it is viewed as a key condition for better outcomes: autonomous learners take responsibility for their studies, make informed decisions and use strategies outside the classroom, which promotes lifelong learning, motivation, engagement, critical thinking and can reduce foreign language anxiety because learners feel more in control and less afraid of mistakes [2, 148]. Yet many systems struggle to realise this in practice. In Uzbekistan, English teaching has long been strongly teacher-centred, and students have limited habits of independent practice. This is reflected in results: Uzbekistan ranks 98th out of 114 countries in the 2024 English Proficiency Index, with an average score of 439/800, classified as "very low". Reforms, including the English-Speaking Nation (ESN) programme, aim to modernize teaching, make it more student-centered and support more autonomous learning. Students themselves are receptive: in a recent survey of 180 Uzbek students, 43.4% rated autonomous learning as "highly effective" (5/5), about two-thirds gave it a positive rating overall, and its mean effectiveness score was 3.9/5 versus 3.2/5 for traditional teacher-centered methods.

However, empirical evidence from Uzbekistan on whether autonomous learning strategies actually lead to measurable gains in English proficiency is still scarce. International studies generally report a positive correlation between learner autonomy and language proficiency, but one study found this mainly among high-performing students and not among lower-proficiency learners, while a study in the Philippines showed that autonomy was associated with the use of learning

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strategies but did not directly predict English proficiency outcomes. These mixed findings highlight the need for context-specific research. Against this background, the present study investigates whether training university students in autonomous learning strategies improves their English language development in Uzbekistan. It asks whether students who systematically practise autonomous learning strategies make greater progress in English proficiency than peers who follow traditional teacher-led instruction, using a controlled experimental design with real student performance data. The findings are intended to inform curriculum and pedagogy at the tertiary level as the national system continues to reform in line with international best practices and the demands of lifelong learning.

Methodology

The study involved 60 first-year undergraduate students (around 18–19 years old) at a university in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Participants were enrolled in an obligatory English language course for non-language majors (fields of study varied, including economics, engineering, etc.). They were split into two equal groups: an **Experimental group** (30 students) and a **Control group** (30 students). Table 1 summarizes key demographic information. The two groups were similar in composition; for instance, about 58–60% of each group were female. All students had studied English in secondary school and had roughly intermediate English proficiency (estimated A2–B1 level on the CEFR scale) at the start of the semester.

Table 1 Participant Demographics

Characteristic	Experimental Group	Control Group
Number of students (N)	30	30
Average age (years)	18.6	18.4
Female students (%)	60%	57%
Academic majors	Various (non-English majors)	Various (non-English majors)
Baseline English level	Intermediate (A2–B1)	Intermediate (A2–B1)

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The study employed a quasi-experimental design with a treatment (autonomy support) and a control condition. Both groups were taught by the same instructor, used the university's Standard English textbook and covered the same core curriculum topics during a 16-week semester, with identical class time (4 hours per week). The only systematic difference was the learning approach and supplementary activities. The experimental group received explicit training in autonomous learning strategies and was guided to apply them throughout the semester. At the start, these students attended a workshop on goal-setting and self-directed learning, set personal language learning goals (for example, improving vocabulary or speaking fluency) and devised plans to reach them. During the semester they engaged in autonomous learning activities outside regular class hours: they kept weekly learning journals to reflect on what they had learned, which strategies worked or not and what challenges they faced; they were encouraged and taught how to use specific strategies such as guessing the meaning of new words from context, using flashcards for vocabulary and listening to English podcasts or videos to supplement classroom learning. The instructor introduced tools and apps (e.g. Duolingo, Quizlet) and allowed students to choose additional reading and listening materials according to their interests. The teacher's role shifted towards that of facilitator or coach, providing resources, modelling strategies and periodically checking self-study progress, while students spent time each week on self-directed tasks such as reading articles of their choice, keeping vocabulary notebooks, practising speaking with peers and completing online exercises. The control group followed a traditional teacher-led approach: they covered the same units and textbook homework but did not receive autonomy training, were not encouraged to set their own goals or use extra self-study strategies and, outside class, only completed teacher-assigned tasks, representing the usual teacher-focused instruction at the university. The instructor treated both groups equally in terms of content coverage and attention.

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To evaluate language development, all students took English proficiency tests at the beginning (pre-test) and end (post-test) of the semester. The tests assessed reading, writing, listening and speaking, using a combination of a past international proficiency exam (adapted to the local context) and instructor-designed speaking assessments. The written components (reading, listening, use of English and writing tasks) were scored out of 100 points total, with each skill section contributing 25% of the score. Speaking was assessed via a short interview or conversation, rated by two independent teachers on a 10-point scale and then scaled to align with the other components. The pre-test confirmed that the two groups started at comparable proficiency levels: the experimental group averaged about 60 out of 100 and the control group about 59 out of 100, with no statistically significant difference ($p = 0.78$). In addition, qualitative and supplemental data were collected. The experimental group's learning journals were gathered to observe engagement and attitudes, and at the end of the semester a questionnaire was administered to both groups about their study habits and use of learning strategies outside class. This survey used a 5-point scale from "never" to "very often" to ask how frequently students engaged in activities such as watching English videos or using learning apps, in order to verify differences in autonomous learning behaviours and to contextualise the outcome data.

For the quantitative test results, standard statistical methods were used. For each student, improvement in overall score and in each skill was calculated as post-test minus pre-test. Mean gains for the experimental and control groups were compared using independent-samples t-tests, and paired t-tests within each group were used to check whether pre/post gains were significant. The significance level was set at 0.05, with Bonferroni adjustments for multiple skill comparisons. The end-of-semester survey data were summarised as percentages of students who reported engaging in each activity regularly, providing descriptive evidence of behavioural differences attributable to the intervention. All data were entered

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and analysed using SPSS software, and the following section presents the results with tables and figures for clarity.

Results

After one semester, the experimental group showed a markedly larger improvement in English proficiency compared to the control group. **Table 2** displays the pre-test and post-test average scores (out of 100) for each group, along with the gain (increase) from pre to post. Initially, the two groups had virtually the same mean score (~60 points). By the end of the study, the experimental group's mean had risen to about 75, whereas the control group's mean increased to about 65.

Table 2 Pre- and Post-test Overall Scores

Group	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Gain (Points)
Experimental	60.0 (±10.2)	75.0 (±9.5)	**+15.0**
Control	59.0 (±11.0)	65.0 (±10.8)	**+6.0**

As shown in Table 2, students who were supported in autonomous learning (experimental group) improved by **15 points** on average (from 60.0 to 75.0). In contrast, the control group improved by only **6 points** on average (59.0 to 65.0). Statistical analysis confirmed that this difference in gains is **significant**: an independent t-test on the gain scores yielded $t(58) \approx 3.98$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that the experimental group's improvement was reliably greater than the control group's. In other words, the autonomy-based intervention had a positive effect on language development, well beyond the gains achieved through regular instruction alone. Within-group tests also showed that both groups did make progress (each pre/post gain was significant, $p < 0.01$), but the magnitude of improvement was much higher for the autonomous learning group. Figure 1 illustrates the pre-test and post-test results by group.

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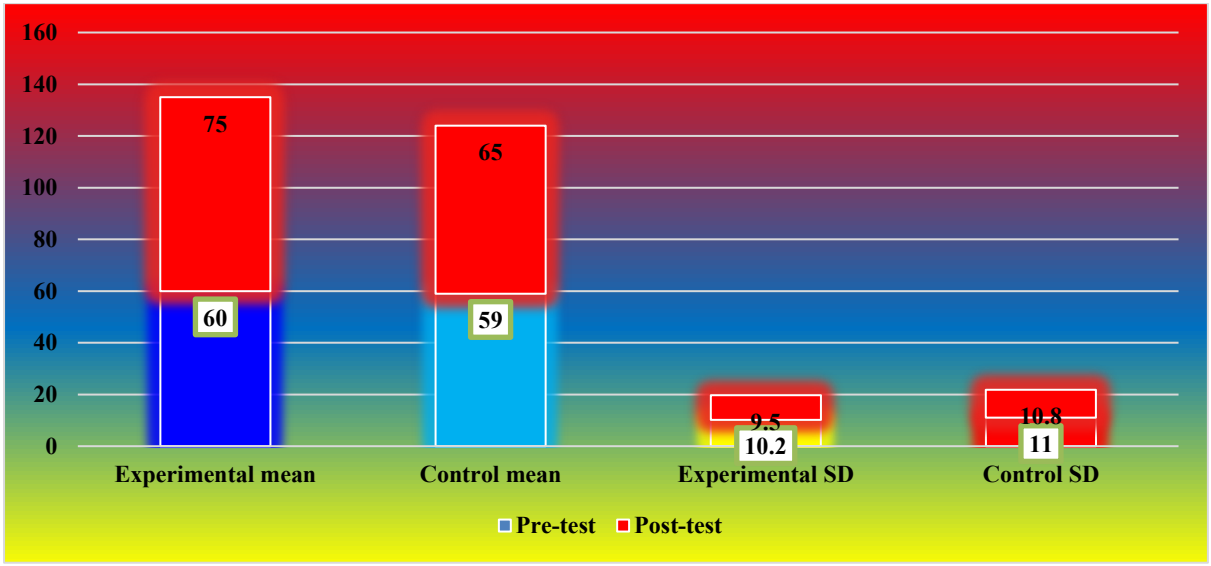

Figure 1:

Figure 1: Comparison of average English proficiency scores (out of 100) for the Experimental group vs. Control group, before and after the intervention. *The experimental group (with autonomous learning strategies) started at a similar baseline as the control group, but by the post-test they achieved a markedly higher average score.* Error bars indicate ±1 standard deviation.

The experimental group's final mean of 75 corresponds to a solid intermediate proficiency (approximately equivalent to high B1 or low B2 level), whereas the control group's final mean of 65 remained in the lower intermediate range (around A2-high to B1-low). In practical terms, the autonomy-supporting strategies gave students an edge of nearly 9–10 points (out of 100) over their peers in the control class by semester's end.

Improvement by Skill Area

To better understand where the experimental group made the largest gains, we analyzed score improvements for each language skill component (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking). **Table 3**

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Table 3 Experimental Group Scores by Skill (out of 25)

Skill	Pre-test	Post-test	Gain
Reading	15	20	+5
Writing	14	18	+4
Listening	16	19	+3
Speaking	15	18	+3

It can be seen that the experimental group improved in **all four skills**, with especially notable gains in reading and writing. For instance, experimental students gained **+5 points** in Reading (from 15 to 20 out of 25) and **+4 points** in Writing, on average (Table 3). Their Listening and Speaking skills also increased (+3 each). By contrast, the control group's improvements were much smaller: only about +1 to +2 points in each skill (Table 4). The control group showed almost no advancement in writing (+1) and speaking (+1), and modest gains in reading and listening (+2 each). Figure 2 provides a visual comparison of the skill-wise improvements between the two groups.

Figure 2: Average improvement in test scores by skill area for the Experimental vs. Control group. *The experimental group (orange bars) outperformed the control group (gray bars) in every skill. The largest gaps are seen in productive skills (writing +4 vs +1, speaking +3 vs +1) and reading comprehension (+5 vs +2).* These differences indicate that autonomous learning strategies benefited a broad spectrum of language competencies, with particularly strong effects on reading and writing development.

Statistical tests for each skill confirmed that the experimental group's gains were significantly higher than the control group's in reading and writing ($p < 0.01$ for both). The differences in listening and speaking gains, while smaller in magnitude, were also statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Notably, the experimental group's writing score improved by 4 points (out of 25) on average, whereas the control's improvement was negligible; this suggests that activities

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like self-reflective journaling and increased writing practice in the experimental condition translated into better writing performance. Similarly, the reading gain of 5 points for the experimental group far exceeded the control group's gain, likely reflecting the extra reading the autonomous learners did by choosing their own articles and books to read outside class. The listening and speaking gains, though modest, show that even for oral/aural skills the autonomous learners outpaced the control group. Many experimental students reported listening to English songs, podcasts or watching videos regularly, which may have contributed to their +3 listening improvement, compared to +2 in control. For speaking, opportunities were somewhat limited outside class, but experimental students did engage in peer conversations and self-practice (e.g. recording themselves), yielding a small advantage (+3 vs +1).

Learner Autonomy Behaviors

To verify that the intervention indeed produced differences in student behavior, we examined the results of the **end-of-semester survey on study habits**. **Table 5** presents the percentage of students in each group who reported engaging "regularly" (defined as at least once a week) in various autonomous learning activities during the semester. The contrast is striking: the experimental group had far higher participation in all listed activities than the control group.

Table 4 Participation in Autonomous Learning Activities (self-reported)

Learning Activity (outside class)	Experimental Group (% regularly engaging)	Control Group (% regularly engaging)
Using language-learning mobile apps (e.g. Duolingo)	70%	25%
Watching or listening to English media (videos, podcasts, music)	85%	40%
Keeping a personal vocabulary or learning journal	75%	10%
Reading extra English texts (articles, books)	60%	20%
Practicing speaking in English (with peers or online)	50%	15%

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As shown in Table 5, a large majority of the experimental group took advantage of autonomous learning opportunities. For example, roughly **85%** of students in the experimental group reported that they frequently watched English-language videos or listened to English audio (at least weekly for pleasure or practice), compared to only **40%** of the control group. Around **70%** of experimental students regularly used language learning apps or online platforms on their own, versus just **25%** of control students. Perhaps most impressively, **75%** of the experimental group kept a vocabulary notebook or learning journal, a habit almost unheard of in the control group (only 1 in 10 did so). About **60%** of the autonomous-learning students sought out additional reading materials in English outside their coursework (news articles, stories, etc.), whereas only 20% of control students did any extra reading. Half of the experimental group also practiced speaking English outside of class (for instance, by meeting in informal conversation clubs or using English on social media), while very few control students (~15%) attempted such practice on their own.

These survey results confirm that the **intervention successfully changed student behaviors**. The experimental group embraced a range of self-directed learning strategies and devoted more time to English exposure and practice beyond the classroom. In contrast, the control group largely limited themselves to teacher-assigned work and showed far less engagement in independent language activities. This divergence in behavior provides a plausible explanation for the significantly greater language improvement observed in the experimental group. Essentially, the autonomy support not only empowered students to take charge of their learning, but also translated into concrete actions (like more reading, writing, and listening in English) which in turn accelerated their language development.

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Discussion

The findings of this study provide clear evidence that autonomous learning strategies positively affect Uzbek university students' English development. The experimental group, taught with autonomy-supportive methods, almost doubled overall proficiency gains compared to the control group (15 vs. 6 points), under the same core curriculum. This suggests that when learners set goals, practice beyond minimum course requirements, and deliberately target weaknesses, they achieve substantially greater progress within one semester.

Autonomy benefited all language skills, with the strongest effects in reading and writing. Extensive reading and journaling in the experimental group appear to explain their larger gains in reading comprehension (+5 vs. +2 points) and writing (+4 vs. +1 point). In a context where authentic English use outside class is limited, structured independent activities effectively extended exposure to meaningful input and output. Speaking and listening also improved more in the experimental group, though modestly; about half of these students practiced speaking weekly and most engaged in regular listening through media, giving them a small but significant advantage. Thus, autonomy, when guided, supports both academic and communicative skills.

Qualitative data from journals and feedback indicate that autonomy-supportive teaching enhanced motivation, confidence and reduced anxiety. Students in the experimental group reported greater ownership of learning, pride in achieving self-set goals (such as finishing an English novel), and a focus on beating their own "personal best" rather than fearing mistakes. This shift appears to have sustained effort over time. These results align with Kiet's finding that autonomy correlates with higher proficiency, particularly above an elementary (A2) threshold, and with Soliman & Gorospe's conclusion that autonomy is most effective when paired with strategy use [5]. In our intervention, autonomy was explicitly combined with strategy training and teacher scaffolding (goal-setting, resource guidance, progress monitoring), and the experimental group used a

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wider range of strategies (Table 5), which likely mediated their gains. The data thus support a model of structured autonomy rather than unguided independence. The study has several limitations. The sample was relatively small (N = 60), from a single university, and participants may have been more engaged than average, limiting generalizability. The four-month duration does not show whether advantages persist or plateau over longer periods. Assessment relied mainly on internal tests and a limited speaking measure; future research should include external proficiency exams and standardized scales of autonomy, motivation and anxiety, as well as interviews. Because the intervention was multi-component (goal-setting, strategy training, extensive practice, journaling), it is not possible to identify the most influential element, and the instructor's enthusiasm and the novelty of autonomy-supportive methods may have amplified the effects.

Despite these caveats, the results offer important implications for language teaching in Uzbekistan and similar contexts. Teachers can gradually train students "how to learn" through weekly goal-setting, brief reflections and task choice, while providing initial scaffolding in the use of digital tools and out-of-class resources. Curriculum designers can embed extensive reading, portfolio work and self-directed projects to institutionalize autonomous practice, and extracurricular clubs can extend opportunities for speaking and listening [1, 38]. At the institutional level, autonomy requires supportive policies, flexible syllabi and access to materials; initiatives such as the English-Speaking Nation program point in this direction, and our findings supply bottom-up evidence of their potential effectiveness. By the end of the course, several experimental-group students intended to continue their self-study routines during the winter break, indicating that they had begun to internalize autonomous learning habits with potential long-term benefits beyond this single semester.

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Conclusion

In summary, this study demonstrates that autonomous learning strategies can significantly accelerate language development among university students in Uzbekistan. The experimental group that engaged in self-directed learning (goal-setting, regular self-study, use of various strategies) achieved greater improvements in English proficiency across all skill areas, compared to a control group under traditional instruction. These findings support the view that promoting learner autonomy leads to more engaged, self-directed learners who are capable of managing their own language development both inside and outside the classroom. Importantly, the data from our local context show that Uzbek students are not only receptive to autonomous learning but indeed flourish when given the opportunity to take charge of their learning process.

For educators, the implications are clear: to improve language outcomes, we should integrate autonomy-fostering techniques into our teaching. This could involve training teachers in learner-centered methods, revising curricula to include independent projects, and providing resources that enable students to learn beyond the classroom. With Uzbekistan's ongoing education reforms and emphasis on modern pedagogies, there is a timely opportunity to make learner autonomy a cornerstone of language instruction. Doing so can produce graduates who are not only more proficient in English but also equipped with lifelong learning skills – able to continue improving their language abilities (and learning new languages or skills) independently in the future.

In conclusion, autonomous learning strategies offer a powerful, evidence-backed approach to enhancing language development. By empowering students to be active participants in their own learning journey, we create the conditions for deeper engagement, higher motivation, and ultimately better proficiency. As one student in the experimental group eloquently put it in her reflection: *"I realized that the teacher cannot push knowledge into my brain – I have to do it myself. And when I do, I learn so much more."* This research validates that sentiment

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with concrete results, and encourages a shift in teaching practice towards nurturing more autonomous, confident, and capable language learners.

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