



Integrating Technology and Social Media to Foster Language Learner Autonomy: Students' Perception

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Abstract

The incorporation of technology and social networking sites (SNSs) is steadily gaining popularity among EFL students, due to the capacity to provide learners with opportunities to create profiles, interact in authentic ways with their peers, and forge relationships (Thorne, 2010). Thus, university students utilise diverse social media platforms and approaches which enhance and strengthen their learning through reflection and collaborative activities in virtual environments (Armstrong & Franklin, 2008). In fact, such SNSs can increase students' motivation, and promote the management of autonomous learning (Ushioda, 2006; Thorne, 2003; Ware, 2005). As language teachers play a pivotal role in improving learner autonomy and advancing learner responsibility for personal language learning, they must adopt the role of facilitator and create a suitable environment that helps learners to be responsible for their learning, rather than being mere authority figures.

Social media have various positive benefits for students' learning (Hwang, Kessler, & Francesco, 2004). In addition to ease of access, social media platforms foster improvements in student communications and language skills via multiple forms of interactive media which facilitate user interaction through the Internet.

As SNSs users increasingly availed of the advances and facilities that social media provide, the present study aims to evaluate learners' readiness and self-governance, and the extent to which social media tools promote learners' English language autonomy. In order to do so, a survey of 30 Subratah University in Libya participants was conducted to identify current student perceptions of learner autonomy and technology in language learning. The findings confirmed that Libyan university students place a high value on the significance of social media as a means to improve their English language skills and demonstrated a pronounced trend towards autonomous learning to learn English outside the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of autonomy has formed a primary interest in the context of foreign language teaching for several years. Indeed, learner autonomy in relation to learning English as a foreign language (EFL) has garnered considerable global research. While numerous studies have examined the various aspects of learner autonomy, resulting in many useful suggestions for language teachers to promote autonomous learning in their classrooms, the main emphasis has been the new style of learning which enables English language learners to best direct their own learning (Orawiwatnakul and Wichadee, 2017). For instance, Richards (2015) maintains that learners have the ability to utilize their learning independently of teachers. As such, learners who are actively involved in the process of learning may be said to be autonomous (Nunan, 2003). Moreover, student success is demonstrably enhanced by taking ownership of their own learning.

While autonomous learning was originally developed in the wake of WW II (Gremmo and Riley, 1995), interest in learning autonomy has recently re-emerged, and been promoted more widely than ever. Since the goal of language instruction is to improve independent abilities, the emphasis here is on student-centred education. Promoting learner autonomy in the field of language education inheres several benefits, which be classified and considered in three main areas (Little, 1991). Firstly, since learners are responsible for their decision-making process, it follows that “learning should be more focused and purposeful, and thus more effective both immediately and in the longer term” (Little, 1991, p. 8). Secondly, Littlewood (1997) emphasises the importance of learner-centred education and autonomy since “learner’s responsibility for their learning process, the constraints between learning and living that are often found in traditional teacher-centered educational structures should be minimized”. Thirdly, there is a strong belief that learners who are autonomous in their learning process will also be more responsible in other aspects of life and more valuable members of society at large (Little, 1991). In short, learners who assume responsibility for their educational progress, also mature in their thinking and behaviour (cf. Boud, 1988; Hammond and Collins, 1991). The concept of autonomy affords the opportunity to focus not only on these concerns, but also forges a bridge between language teaching and extensive educational settings. Thus, to support this educational method, it provides an interesting expansion in technology, and offers significant direction. For example, online resources, educational software, and network services all support autonomous learning, while the recent widespread dissemination of mobile technology and dramatic rise in social media use have ramped up the level of importance.

Due to the success of numerous autonomous projects in education, autonomy in learning has gained extensive traction and support from advocates as a target for education (Benson, 2011). Compared to traditional pedagogies,

autonomous learning offers flexible choices to learners by encouraging the learner to manage their time and their subject according to their needs. By adopting such approaches, autonomous learning helps learners to avoid potential ambiguities and cultivate a more valuable and meaningful learning process (Gremmo 1995, p. 152). While Benson (2009) purports autonomy as basically non-linguistic and unfamiliar to language education, it is integral to language learning and teaching fields from political philosophy and moral standpoints, and from the perspectives of educational theory and psychology.

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The fundamental aim of the current study is to determine the extent of learners' autonomy and how social media influence learners' English language performance by means of the following research questions:

1. What are Libyan university students' perception of social media as a tool to learner autonomy?
2. How can autonomous learning be fostered through social media?
3. What are learners' perception towards the implementation of technology and social media to promote learner autonomy?

LITERATURE REVIEW

To reiterate, learner autonomy in relation to learning English has attracted considerable research attention since its inception following WWII (Gremmo and Riley, 1995). More recently, and especially during the last decade, interest in learning autonomy has escalated and been promoted more widely than before; particularly in the context of student-centred education. Since learners now see learner autonomy is a vital goal of their learning, it is essential to integrate active learners. Nunan (2003) posits that learners who are actively involved in the learning process develop the ability to engage in the learning process and make their own choices and decisions. As such, learners both assume greater responsibility for their own learning and boost their chances of academic success (Benson, 2001). Skillful learners are seen to be autonomous since they are better equipped make informed decisions about each stage of their learning process.

Benson (2001) describes autonomy as a capacity since various activities can be involved in control over learning. Learner autonomy encourages learners to act independently of their teachers and totally responsible for their learning process and decision-making. Nunan (2003) claims that learning autonomy revokes teachers dominance within the learning environment and gives the students the chance to be creative and independent. Due to the success of many autonomous projects in education, the concept of autonomy in learning has spread extensively and gained huge support from advocates as a target for education (Benson, 2011). Compared to the traditional educative structures, autonomous learning offers flexible choices to learners. Many

language learners prefer to use methodologies and learning methods that support and enhance learning autonomy. Technology and social media offer rich atmosphere to achieve these goals. Once new technologies are incorporated together, they allow learners to attain knowledge autonomously.

Promoting Learner Autonomy in EFL Learning

It is essential to know exactly what fosters learner autonomy in EFL classrooms. Autonomous learning enhances learners' skills, develops a sense of responsibility, and encourages learners to take an active part in making decisions about their learning (Scharle and Szabo, 2000). In fact, Boudouaia (2022) claims that learner autonomy empowers learners to be more active with in the process of education. The critical promotion of learner autonomy comprises three dimensions: namely, i) psychological; ii) ideological; and iii) economic (Crabbe, 1993). The psychological argument maintains that since learners are responsible for their own learning, the learning will be more effective and useful, while the ideological argument prioritizes the learners' right to choose freely as independent individuals. Finally, the economic argument rests on a combination of fast-growing society and poor levels of personal instruction. Crabbe (1993) claims that "individuals must be able to provide for their own learning needs, either individually or cooperatively, if they are to acquire the knowledge and skill they want". In the context of the psychology of language education, this is axiomatic to pedagogies which aim to improve and enrich the process of second language learning and make learning more effective.

Benson (2001) asserts that autonomous learning is more significant than non-autonomous learning, and usually leads to more effective language learning, since motivation leads to effective learning and plays a significant role in the language learning. Likewise, Dickinson (1995, p. 165) claims that active learners are more highly motivated, and, accordingly, attain more valuable language learning. Indeed, Nunan (1997) purports that learners will not be active language users and successful learning will not happen without some degree of autonomy. This underscores the contention that "effective and worthwhile learning may actually depend on the extent to which learners achieve autonomy" (Little, 1991, p.14). In fact, commentators largely concur that autonomy can help learners to become more autonomous users of the target language. Consequently, this leads to the development of communicative autonomy and the binding of language learning and use: this is the primary rationale for the promotion of autonomy in language learning (Little, 1995, p. 176).

Ellis and Sinclair (1989) also focus on the importance of learning autonomy within the educative process, and claim that helping learners to be more responsible for their own learning can be beneficial for the following reasons:

- learning is more effective as learners are able to control and manage their own learning process through their readiness to learn;
- once learners have assumed the responsibility to learn, they can carry out learning outside the classroom;
- learners who comprehend the process of learning develop the ability to transfer such learning strategies to their other subjects.

All of the discussion above focused on the importance of autonomy for language learning. Thus, autonomy should be promoted both in the classroom and real life. Autonomy arguably prepares learners to achieve their aims and to use the target language confidently and successfully. This, in turn, leads to long-term learning across various subjects.

The Teacher's Role in fostering Learner Autonomy

While teachers clearly play a key role in fostering learner autonomy, the difficulty is choosing the best method to apply from the range of approaches teachers can adopt to foster a positive learning environment and raise student awareness.

Due to the recent spread of technology and social media, the role of teachers has evolved to that of learning facilitators (Warschauer and Healy, 1998). Since learners also contribute their knowledge and information, teachers are no longer regarded as the sole knowledge providers. As such, teachers can create an appropriate environment and structure which promote the learning and achievements that enables learners to be autonomous in the field of education. Since the learners' ability to be responsible for their own learning is not inherent (Holec, 1981), the relevant skills must be developed in school. Nunan (1997) contends that "encouraging learners to move towards autonomy is best done inside the language classroom" (p.201) and in order to practice autonomy, instructors must create a good learning environment for learners (Alibakhshi et al., 2015). Scholars now largely concur that teachers in an autonomous environment usually act as counsellor, helper, or facilitator to the learners; involving them in the learning processes of planning, implementation, and the monitoring and evaluation of learning. In this way, teachers motivate learners to study more, engage them in meaningful activities, and provide feedback regarding their learning progress (Saeed, 2021).

Thavenius (1999) defines an autonomous teacher as one "who reflects on her teacher role and who can change it, who can help her learners become autonomous, and who is independent enough to let her learners become independent" (p. 160). Teachers can foster autonomy in a variety of proven ways, including group work, negotiation, and by encouraging peers to

cooperate and interact with each other (Carter, 2001, Hozayen 2011). The majority of English language teachers hold that autonomy exerts a positive influence on language learning, and boosts engagement through enhanced learner “freedom and/or ability to make choices and decisions” (Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012, p. 286).

While some instructors are concerned that their classroom role may be weakened by student increased autonomy, teacher autonomy is actually intrinsic to enhanced learner autonomy. Indeed, Holec (1981) claims “the teacher will find his role becomes more varied rather than constrained, strengthened rather than weakened (not in terms of authority but in terms of competence) and much greater demands will be made on his creativity than on his highly developed knowledge of teaching techniques” (p. 25). Clearly, any role teachers play has a critical educative function.

Learner Training to be Autonomous

The rapid integration of technology and social media in the language teaching has led to a great changes and achievements. It makes language learning effective and successful as it is important to help learners learn how to learn (Brown, 2007). Smith (2003) claims that autonomy is a capacity that learners lack, but which can be developed when students are trained and prepared for it. Kumaravadivelu (2003) agrees that it is possible to make learners responsible for their own learning only when they are properly trained to use and apply the appropriate strategies. Actively encouraging learners to become responsible for their learning is usually known as ‘learner training’ or ‘learning to learn’ (Sinclair, 2000, p. 7). In this case, the main purpose of learner training is to “provide learners with the alternatives from which to make informed choices about what, how, why, when and where they learn”, as well as “to provide learners with the ability, that is strategies and confidence, to take on more responsibility for their own learning” (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989, pp. 2-3). In addition, learner training guides students towards achieving better performance and greater success by engaging learners in empirical and reflective activities (Jiménez Raya, 2008). Moreover, it gives rise to sound academic achievement, since learners can employ different styles and apply different strategies in their learning; it increases learner awareness of their own language learning process to manage their learning more effectively. The aim of learner training is to help learners become more active and independent in their learning (Dickinson, 1992).

All learners require training to hone the skills of autonomy. If autonomy is not innate, it is necessary to cultivate these abilities: if it is innate, autonomy can act to consolidate learner ability to improve autonomously, since “only by taking steps towards autonomy and exercising that autonomy will the learner be and become autonomous” (Ho and Crookall, 1995, p.242). In short, a degree of training arguably assists helps learners to improve their autonomy

and keep them on track. Conversely, the counter-argument advocates collaboration between learners and teachers, rather than equipping learners with numerous strategies which they may or may not utilize. Ellis and Sinclair (1989) argue that the ideal process of learner training should be partly learner-directed and partly teacher-directed. In this scenario, the role of the teacher is to provide students with information about language learning, act as a counsellor, and help learners by suggesting alternatives when they feel unable to proceed. As such, learner autonomy basically requires that the learners are able to plan, apply and assess their work individually and collaboratively (Little, 2022).

The Role of Technology and Social Media

Educational technology has a vital impact on developing learner autonomy (Kenning, 1996; Warschauer et al., 1996; Littlewood, 1997; Sheerin, 1997; Healy, 1999; Shield, 2002), and there is little doubt that technology affords many opportunities to foster autonomy since it provides an opportunity to self-directed learning. Information technologies can promote the development of learner autonomy in that they can stimulate, mediate, and extend the range and scope of the social and psychological interactions on which learning depends (Little, 1996). Although technology and social media play a vital role in language learning, Benson (2001) claims that it is not important for learners to be autonomous due to ongoing technological innovations: in mastering the relevant technologies, they develop good learner autonomy.

Dang and Robertson's (2010) study on the impact of computer technology on learner autonomy demonstrated a strong connection between online technology and learner autonomy. Another example of technology is the use of social media as a tool to foster autonomy. Joosten (2012) views social networking sites as a number of technological systems related to collaboration and community. Social media have many different forms and applications, such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Telegram, which are typically included in recent illustrations of social media (Barnes and Lescault, 2011; McEwan, 2012). Such platforms help users to make content, create personal profiles, and exchange messages between users in the system (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). A wide range of skills can be developed by using social media and technology as it helps learners able to make their own decisions and increase independence. It also enables language learners to interact with peers and other language users worldwide. Furthermore, technology afford the opportunity for learners to reinforce specific language skills and/or join a particular social learning community. Although many learners experience occasional difficulties with the use of technology, knowledgeable teachers should endeavour to give learners opportunities to make decisions and to study a second language as autonomously as possible (Ankan and Bakla, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This current research study took place in the English Department, Faculty of Languages at the Sabratha University, Libya. The sample size of 30 participants, consisted of five male participants and 25 female participants ranging from 19 to 22 years of age. A combination of quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) were used to investigate the connections between the integration of social media and autonomous language learning among university students. The questionnaire design focused on the main aspects of students' understanding of autonomy and students' view of learner autonomy, and their actions towards the implementation of social media and technology in promoting autonomy. Subsequent interviews were then conducted with students to elicit gain deeper and richer information and to clarify certain issues arising from the survey.

Data Collection

Twenty-five of the thirty students who received the questionnaire, completed and returned the survey. The 27 items in the questionnaire focused in various research aspects as follows: i) participants' personal information and details; ii) learners' responsibility for English language learning; iii) the use of technology and social media to learn English; and iv) learners' perception of their teachers' role in the classroom.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Participant profile

Thirty English learners were asked to complete the questionnaire. All participants were enrolled on a Bachelor of Arts programme and studying through the medium of the English language. A total of 83% of the respondents actually completed and returned the questionnaire. The majority of participants were females. This is attributed to the higher number of females enrolled in the university.



Figure 1: Profile of respondents based on gender

Commentators concur that five to 50 participants are adequate for interview (Dworkin, 2012). The researcher therefore selected six respondents for interview.

2. Learners' understanding and readiness of learner autonomy

Table 1: Learners' understanding of learner autonomy

No.	Statement	Percentage
1	I prefer to learn independently.	83
2	I know how to learn.	76
3	I enjoy making choices in learning.	80
4	I can search for information.	80

The table above confirms the majority of participants hold a positive attitude towards the concept of learner autonomy. In fact, 83% of participants agree that they prefer to learn independently, while 76% believe they know how to learn by themselves. More than half of the participants concur that they enjoy making choices while learning (80%), while 80% of learners confirm that they know how to search for information themselves. These results indicate that learners are ready for learner autonomy. Moreover, their interviewee comments convey a thorough understanding of the concept which they maintain helps them master the lesson independently. As one interviewee explained:

From my point of view, learner autonomy gives me the opportunity to master the lesson during and after the classroom. I can comprehend the material easily given by the teacher.

3. Learners' view on the integrating of technology and social media to promote learner autonomy

This discussion focuses learners' view of using technology and social media as a mean to promote learner autonomy.

Table 2: Learners' view of using technology and social media to promote learner autonomy

No.	Statement	Percentage
1	Social media for collaborative learning.	83
2	Online resources help finding learning materials easily..	83
3	ICT tools increase students' confidence and independence	80
4	Social media can increase learners' motivation.	76

5	Online resources help choosing topics of learning easily.	83
6	Finding some information related to your study.	80
7	World-wide access to news and related websites.	76

The results indicate that the majority of participants (more than 80%) agree that technology and different forms of social media can help learners to be autonomous in learning.

In addition, the interviewees' comments reinforce the survey results, indicating that the majority of learners use the ICT and social media to access information to achieve academic goals and to be more autonomous in learning. These findings support the contention that technology and social media provides wider access for students to enrich their learning resources:

I use Internet for academic purposes. I use it to search some articles and information related to my study. (Interviewee 3)

I use ICT to prepare for presentations in the classroom and to look up references.

(Interviewee 5)

Yes, I do use social media. I use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram. Actually, I use mainly Telegram for academic purposes, to get some information and to contact my teacher and colleagues. I use it for sharing and following lectures and news.

(Interviewee 2)

Interestingly, the comments above confirm the majority of students use technology and social media to achieve academic success and that the interviewees report a high level of motivation and confidence when using them.

4. Outside-classroom activities performed by participants

Table 3: Outside classroom activities performed by participants

No.	Statement	Percentage
1	To learn new English words.	76
2	To watch the news in English.	50
3	To watch English films on the internet.	73
4	To do assignments, which are not compulsory.	66
5	To speak to foreigners in English through social media.	70
6	To use the Internet in English for chatting and surfing.	80

7	To create your own blog, Facebook or Twitter account.	80
8	To look up references for my study (e.g. online dictionary, library resources).	70
9	For social networking (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, chatting).	83
10	To download podcasts or look at videos or photos files (e.g. using YouTube).	80
11	To create your own blog.	66
12	To create your own blog.	80

Table 3 above illustrates that the majority of participants in the survey reacted positively to all 12 items of this section, confirming they assume responsibility for their learning outside the classroom. It further reveals that students exploit the potential of technology and social media to learn English.

The interviewee comments support the survey results and show extensive use of all types of digital technologies. The activities undertaken on these devices were mostly basic engagement such as creating presentations, social media use, and Internet research. The interviews demonstrate an overall high level of self-perceived confidence and skill when using most of the digital technologies and social media to learn English:

I use internet to search for information related to my study on Google, and social media. (Interviewee 4)

I use Internet for academic purposes and to look up some articles and information related to my study. I use it to contact with my leagues and teachers. (Interviewee 5)

I use ICT to prepare for presentations, doing my homework and to look up references. (Interviewee 2)

The interviewee responses indicate that the majority of learners use internet and social media outside the classroom to access information, news, and to improve academic performance. By taking greater responsibility for their own learning outside the classroom, the utilization of relevant technology has a direct impact on their language learning.

5. Students' perceptions of their teachers' use of ICT the classroom

The next discussion concern the learners' views of the integration of technology and social media to promote learner autonomy by their teachers. Here the students were asked about their teachers' experience with technology and social media, as part of the curriculum, both within and outside the classroom. The table below presents the result of the questionnaire data:.

Table 4: Students' view of their teachers' use of ICT to promote learner autonomy

No.	Statement	Percentage
1	Teachers often use computers/Internet in classrooms.	80
2	Teachers provide online resources for choosing topics of learning.	83
3	Teachers use social media for collaborative learning.	84
4	Teachers provide learners with online assignments.	73

The table above confirms that each statement has a high percentage (more than 75%). This indicates that the vast majority of participants agree that technology and social media is being used to a good level by their teachers both within and outside the classroom; and in turn indicates that Libyan faculty members are both proficient and confident to use the Internet, technology, and social media, both within and outside the classroom. When questioned about their teachers' experience with technology and social media in the classroom, the students' also reported a good use of computers and technology in the classrooms by their teachers:

Yes, they use it. They use PowerPoint in the classroom and sometimes Google some references online.

(Interviewee 3)

Yes. My teachers use smart board and computers in the classroom. They use also social media for online lectures and to post online assignments.

(Interviewee 5)

Yes, my teachers use social media and technology inside and outside the classroom for collaboration together and searching for information. (Interviewee 3)

The results confirm a significant relationship between autonomous learning readiness and English language performance. Since the learners' ability to be responsible for their own learning is not inborn (Holec, 1981), teachers can create an appropriate environment and structure to promote learning and academic achievements which enable learners to be autonomous in the field of education.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study confirm the majority of the participants are aware of the significance of learner autonomy. Indeed, Libyan university students value independent work and have a tendency toward autonomy. Learners value independent learning and work with peers to improve their language. These findings align with Nunan's (1997) claim that learners will not be active

language users and that successful learning will not happen without some degree of autonomy.

The English learners report technology and social media as beneficial tools to promote learner autonomy since young people are particularly proficient and confident in using digital technology, and having grown up in an environment immersed in technological innovation do not require additional training in this regard. Scharle and Szabo (2000, p. 4) underscore the importance of learner autonomy, attesting that the “need to develop a sense of responsibility and also, encourage learners to take an active part in making decisions about their learning”.

The majority of participants are enthusiastic about the integration of technology and social media for academic purposes. Learners use social media for social collaborative learning with peers: a significant factor for students involved in learning English (Hughes et al., 2011). This would raise EFL teachers' cognition of students' readiness of learner autonomy and encourage greater creativity across educational pedagogies which promote autonomy. In short, teachers can create an appropriate environment and structure to promote learning and achievements which facilitate learner autonomy in the field of education. Since a learners' ability to be responsible for their own learning is not inborn (Holec, 1981), the necessary skills must be developed to do so.

Likewise, autonomous language classrooms are completely different from the traditional classroom in such aspects as “telling and showing” where both teachers and the learners engage in “negotiation, interaction, and problem solving” (Little, 1991, p.48). Esch (1996) stresses the importance of developing awareness for language learners which afford learners a clearer image of the target language. Since learners' comprehension abilities vary, with having greater ability to develop in an independent autonomous manner while others require more teacher assistance, instructors must adopt practices which encourage all learners to take control of their learning as a means to promote widespread learner autonomy and improve general ability.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research confirm that the Libyan EFL students surveyed in the current study take a positive view of learner autonomy, and rely on technology and search engines to find information related to their academic needs. Moreover, they value both independent work and collaborative work and report a high degree of confidence and skills when using most of social media. Clearly then, expert use of social media and technology by learners exerts a positive effect on English language performance. While proper guidance and support by teachers enhance the potential for successful autonomous learning to take place, social media and technology also make notable contributions by promoting the vast array of digital materials which facilitate language learning autonomy.

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