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NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL SHIFT: SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING SKILLS AMONG EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

The growing integration of digital technologies into higher education has fundamentally reshaped the conditions under which students acquire knowledge. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of learner autonomy, relatively little empirical attention has been paid to how students in digitally transitioning contexts develop the metacognitive and organizational capacities that underpin self-directed learning (SDL). This paper examines the conceptual foundations of SDL, traces its historical development from classical educational thought to contemporary digital pedagogy, and situates these frameworks within the specific context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction at technical universities in Uzbekistan. Drawing on a synthesis of international SDL theory – including Knowles's andragogy model, Garrison's multidimensional framework, and contemporary digital autonomy perspectives – alongside Uzbek scholarly contributions, the article argues that SDL in digitized learning environments constitutes a distinct competency cluster that encompasses metacognitive regulation, digital tool appropriation, and self-organizational agency. The paper further identifies key contradictions in current pedagogical practice and proposes a conceptual model for developing SDL skills among EFL students within digitalized educational settings. Implications for curriculum design, teacher roles, and institutional policies are discussed.

Keywords: *self-directed learning, learner autonomy, digital education, EFL, higher education, Uzbekistan, metacognition, digitalization*

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the rapid expansion of digital infrastructure in higher education has prompted sustained scholarly inquiry into the changing nature of student learning. As universities across Central Asia – and Uzbekistan in particular – have increasingly embedded information and communication technologies into their educational

frameworks, a critical question has emerged: are students adequately equipped to learn independently within these environments? The answer, as both research and institutional observation suggest, is far from straightforward.

In Uzbekistan's higher education system, the hours allocated to independent study are, by legislative mandate, proportional to classroom contact hours. Yet the development of

the skills necessary to use this time productively – what scholars describe as self-directed learning (SDL) competencies – has received comparatively limited curricular attention. Students frequently arrive at university with functional digital literacy, yet without the self-regulatory and metacognitive skills that would allow them to leverage digital tools as genuine instruments of autonomous learning. The consequence is paradoxical: learners who are comfortable with technology but who default to its passive or shortcut-oriented use, such as submitting AI-generated content in place of independently developed work.

This article addresses the above paradox by pursuing three interconnected objectives: (1) to trace the conceptual genealogy of SDL across Western andragogical and Russian/Soviet pedagogical traditions; (2) to map the particular challenges that digitalization poses for SDL in EFL contexts at Uzbek technical universities; and (3) to articulate a theoretically grounded framework for SDL skill development suited to these conditions. The article contributes to an underdeveloped intersection in the literature – one where digital pedagogy, foreign language learning, and Central Asian educational reform converge.

2. Conceptual Framework: Defining Self-Directed Learning

2.1 Western Traditions of Self-Directed Learning

The theoretical roots of SDL reach back to ancient educational philosophy. Socratic pedagogy, for instance, positioned the learner as an active agent in the construction of knowledge, treating inquiry and self-examination as fundamentally educational acts. However, the formalization of SDL as a research domain is largely a product of mid-twentieth-century adult education scholarship. Lindeman (1926) was among the first to identify a “deep need for self-direction” among adult learners, while Houle’s (1961) empirical inquiry into voluntary learning behavior provided initial evidence that self-initiated intellectual activity constitutes a regular feature of adult cognition.

Malcolm Knowles’s foundational contribution lay in systematizing SDL as a five-stage process encompassing needs diagnosis, goal formulation, resource identification, strategy selection, and outcome evaluation, anchored

by intrinsic motivation (Knowles, 1975). Knowles explicitly positioned self-directedness as a marker of mature learning, distinguishing andragogy – the education of adults – from teacher-centered pedagogy. Tough’s (1971) complementary work on independent learning projects reinforced the claim that substantial learning routinely occurs outside formal instructional contexts.

Subsequent theorists complicated and enriched this picture. Brookfield (1985) critiqued the individualism embedded in early SDL models, arguing that learning always occurs within social and institutional contexts that shape and sometimes constrain learner autonomy. Garrison (1997) proposed a multidimensional model integrating self-management (contextual control), self-monitoring (cognitive responsibility), and motivation – a framework that acknowledges the co-constitutive relationship between internal dispositions and external conditions. More recently, the proliferation of massive open online courses (MOOCs), mobile learning platforms, and AI-assisted study tools has introduced what researchers describe as “technology-mediated autonomy” – a reconceptualization of SDL suited to the affordances and constraints of digital learning environments.

2.2 Soviet and Uzbek Pedagogical Traditions

Parallel conceptual developments unfolded within Russian and Soviet pedagogy, though under different institutional and ideological conditions. Ushinsky’s insistence that genuine intellectual development requires independent cognitive labor provided an early native-language formulation of SDL principles. By the mid-twentieth century, Esipov (1961) had elaborated a systematic account of independent work (*samostoyatelnaya rabota*) in classroom settings, treating it not merely as task completion without teacher supervision, but as a consciously goal-oriented activity that the learner undertakes with an understanding of its educational purpose. Pidkasisty (1972) further argued that independent work is fundamentally a means of engaging students in self-regulated activity, rather than a discrete method or organizational form.

In contemporary Uzbek scholarship, this tradition has been extended and adapted to higher education contexts. Researchers such

as Aripova (2022), Sarimsaqova (2022), Utaeva (2022), and Musakhanova (2022) have examined SDL in relation to foreign language learning competencies, sociolinguistic development, grammatical competence, and organizational skill formation respectively. These contributions reflect a growing recognition, institutionally codified in Uzbekistan's Education Law (2020), the Concept for Development of Higher Education to 2030, and the State Educational Standard for Higher Education (2021), that SDL is not merely a pedagogical desideratum but a policy imperative. The legislative mandate that independent study hours equal classroom contact hours positions SDL development as structurally central to the Uzbek higher education system.

2.3 Toward an Integrated Definition

A review of the definitions advanced by scholars across these traditions reveals both convergence and productive tension. Where Adizova (2023) defines SDL as a form of extra-classroom learning directed toward the consolidation and extension of curriculum-specified competencies, Dusyurova (2025) emphasizes its character as an active cognitive process involving the independent search, analysis, and appropriation of knowledge – a process that not only transfers information but cultivates the learner's capacity to analyze, apply, and generate new understanding. Abdullayeva and Toshmukhammedov (2020) foreground the metacognitive dimension, characterizing SDL as an approach that enables students to self-manage all phases of the learning process, including continuous review, evaluation, and self-assessment.

Integrating these perspectives, this article adopts a composite definition: self-directed learning is a competency-constituted educational activity – conducted within and beyond classroom settings – in which the learner exercises initiative in diagnosing learning needs, formulating goals, selecting and deploying appropriate resources and strategies, and evaluating outcomes, with the teacher serving as a designer of conditions rather than a director of content. This definition encompasses the organizational, cognitive, metacognitive, and motivational dimensions of SDL identified in the literature, while remaining open to the ways in which digital environments transform the specific competencies that SDL requires.

3. Self-Directed Learning in Digital Environments: Opportunities and Tensions

The digitalization of higher education has introduced a set of structural conditions that both expand and complicate the exercise of learner autonomy. On the expansive side, the availability of diverse digital resources – online corpora, language learning applications, multimedia platforms, AI-driven tutoring systems – provides students with an unprecedented range of tools for self-directed inquiry. Technological infrastructure can, in principle, support each stage of Knowles's SDL cycle: diagnostic tools can help learners identify gaps; goal-setting applications can support objective formulation; curated digital libraries can facilitate resource selection; interactive platforms can provide strategic practice; and analytics dashboards can enable outcome evaluation.

Yet the same technological landscape poses distinctive challenges. Tochilina's (2024) observations regarding the digital education era are pertinent here: students in digitally saturated environments frequently demonstrate high competence in tool use alongside low competence in self-regulatory application of those tools. The availability of generative AI systems, in particular, creates conditions in which the cognitive labor that SDL is designed to cultivate – effortful information processing, critical synthesis, reflective self-assessment – can be circumvented rather than exercised. The result is a paradox of apparent efficiency concealing genuine learning deficit.

Mamadaliyeva (2025) addresses this paradox specifically in the context of EFL instruction, arguing that digital tools in language learning serve their educational function only when students have developed the self-organizational agency necessary to deploy them purposefully. Her analysis of SDL in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts at Uzbek technical universities suggests that linguistically productive independent study is inseparable from the learner's capacity for metacognitive self-direction. Students who understand why they are using a particular resource, what they hope to learn from it, and how they will assess their progress, achieve qualitatively different outcomes from those who engage with the same resource without this reflective framework.

4. Key Contradictions in Current Practice

Analysis of the current state of SDL in Uzbek technical universities reveals several significant contradictions that motivate the need for systematic pedagogical intervention. First, there exists a structural requirement for independent learning – encoded in legislative frameworks and reflected in study hour allocations – without a corresponding developmental methodology. Students are expected to engage productively with self-study hours, yet the curriculum offers limited explicit instruction in how to do so. Second, educational policy and institutional rhetoric increasingly emphasize digital tool integration, yet the specific pedagogical conditions that would transform digital engagement from passive consumption into active self-directed learning remain underdeveloped. Third, students entering technical universities have typically developed baseline digital fluency through secondary schooling and everyday technology use, yet this fluency has not been translated into the disciplined, goal-oriented self-regulatory practices that productive independent learning requires.

These contradictions are not merely theoretical. In the EFL classroom at technical universities, the consequences manifest concretely: students who do not independently extend their language exposure outside class hours make measurably slower progress; the linguistic gap between classroom instruction and authentic professional communication widens; and the equal distribution of classroom and independent study hours becomes educationally unequal in practice, with independent hours generating substantially less learning than their nominal allocation would predict.

5. Implications for Pedagogy and Policy

The framework advanced in this article has several direct implications for EFL pedagogy at Uzbek technical universities. At the level of course design, it suggests the value of making SDL skill development an explicit instructional objective – alongside language objectives – particularly in the first year of study, when foundational learning habits are most malleable. This might include structured activities designed to scaffold metacognitive reflection,

digital resource selection, and self-evaluation practices, gradually releasing responsibility to learners as their SDL competency develops.

At the level of teacher role, the framework implies a shift from content delivery toward what might be called learning environment design – the deliberate structuring of tasks, feedback mechanisms, and resource environments that activate and sustain self-directed activity. Teachers who understand SDL as a competency to be developed, rather than a disposition students either have or lack, are positioned to intervene educationally rather than merely to lament its absence.

At the institutional and policy level, the persistent contradiction between SDL mandates and SDL developmental support indicates a need for systemic attention. Curriculum frameworks that specify independent study hour allocations without prescribing or assessing the SDL skills required to use them productively produce compliance without learning. Policy instruments that address this gap – through teacher professional development, curriculum guidelines, and assessment frameworks that include SDL competency indicators – are likely to be more effective than those that address only the organizational features of independent study.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the conceptual terrain of self-directed learning, traced its historical development across Western andragogical and Uzbek-Soviet pedagogical traditions, and situated SDL within the specific challenges and opportunities of digitalized EFL instruction at Uzbek technical universities. It has proposed a five-component SDL competency framework suited to this context and identified the structural contradictions in current practice that create both the need and the rationale for targeted pedagogical intervention.

The central argument has been that SDL in the digital age is not simply a matter of providing students with access to digital tools or independent study time – it is a matter of developing the metacognitive, organizational, and evaluative competencies that allow learners to use these resources in disciplined, goal-oriented ways. Without this developmental focus, the structural provisions for

independent learning in Uzbekistan's higher education system – considerable as they are – risk producing the appearance of self-directed study without its educative substance.

Future research should examine the empirical outcomes of SDL skill development interventions in EFL contexts at Uzbek tech-

nical universities, with attention both to language learning outcomes and to the transfer of SDL competencies to other domains of study. The intersection of SDL theory, digital pedagogy, and Central Asian educational reform remains a generative and underexplored research space.

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