



Beyond the Hype: the Complex Relationship between Technology and Autonomy in Language Learning

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex relationship between technology and learner autonomy in the context of language learning. Advances in technology have the potential to facilitate independent learning, but it is crucial to understand learners' experiences and provide appropriate support. Therefore, this study examines the practices and experiences of seven Saudi female university students who used smartphones to facilitate English learning. The data analysis revealed that smartphones played a key role in facilitating diverse language learning activities, allowing participants to seamlessly integrate English practice into their daily lives and engage in communicative language activities. However, challenges were identified, including the need for additional guidance to fully harness the potential of these tools for improving English skills. The outcomes contribute to an enhanced understanding of how smartphones can foster learner autonomy in language learning. They also highlight the importance of providing support to maximise the benefits of technology in independent language learning. Learners need the necessary skills to navigate and manage their learning effectively, to use smartphone tools and applications. By exploring learners' experiences with technology, this study offers practical strategies for supporting independent language learning. It underscores the importance of effectively preparing learners to utilise technology in their learning journey.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Independent learning, Smartphones, MALL

1 Introduction

In recent years, the widespread adoption of smartphones has revolutionised language learning, providing learners with new avenues beyond the traditional classroom. These portable devices have become increasingly prevalent, offering unique opportunities for independent language learning and empowering learners to take charge of their own learning experiences. The concept of learner autonomy, defined by Holec (1981) as the ability to take charge of one's own learning [1], lies at the heart of this transformation.

The literature surrounding technology-mediated language learning discusses extensively the transformative role of smartphones in fostering learner autonomy. The portability of smartphones allows learners to access language materials conveniently, transcending the limitations of time and space [2]. Learners can engage in a wide range of language learning activities, such as reading, listening, watching videos, and interacting with proficient speakers through social networking sites [3]. This flexibility and freedom to learn according to their needs and preferences significantly enhance learners' motivation and engagement.

Moreover, smartphones' portability offers learners flexibility, enabling them to break free from the confines of traditional study environments. Learners can access valuable language-learning resources outside the classroom, curating personalised collections of materials [4]. Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) through smartphones enables learners to tailor their language learning to their specific needs [5]. They can adjust their learning pace and engage in interactive activities aligned with their language goals. Smartphones provide learners with agency in their interactions, facilitating independent language study and empowering them to take ownership of their learning [6]. Social networking sites, in particular, have been found to promote language proficiency as learners actively select and explore learning opportunities that cater to their interests and needs [7].

However, while technology plays a facilitating role in learner autonomy, it also presents challenges. Effectively utilising technology for autonomous learning requires learners to develop digital literacy, information literacy, media literacy, and self-organisation skills [8]. Some technological tools may not be conducive to autonomous actions due to their features [9]. Learners may encounter difficulties transitioning from other-regulation to self-regulation in technological environments due to design limitations, inadequate pedagogical arrangements, or lack of computer literacy [10].



In recent years, research has focused on the interaction between technology and learner autonomy in informal learning contexts. Informal language learning with technology is driven by learners' interests, encompassing receptive and incidental learning [11]. Learners rely on language learning technologies and audio-visual resources, selecting materials based on personal interests and employing them flexibly [12].

In this paper, I aim to explore the role of smartphones in supporting independent language learning and to examine the dynamic relationship between technology and learner autonomy. By analysing the literature and drawing on empirical evidence, I seek to provide insights into how smartphones can empower learners and enhance their autonomous language learning experiences.

2 Methodology

The study utilised a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of seven Saudi female university students who used smartphones for English language learning. Qualitative research is well suited for capturing the richness and depth of individuals' experiences and perceptions. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and observations of participants' language-learning activities. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights related to the participants' experiences and perceptions of using smartphones for language learning. The research questions and objectives of the study guided the analysis process. To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, steps were taken to enhance the research's rigour, including member checking. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants to ensure confidentiality. The participants are referred to as C1, C2, C3, and C4 throughout the paper.

3 Findings

The findings of this study revealed that participants utilised smartphones for language learning activities effectively, leveraging various mobile applications, websites, and online platforms to enhance their English proficiency. These resources facilitated vocabulary practice, supplied listening exercises and provided opportunities for speaking practice, making it convenient for participants to integrate English practice into their daily lives and to learn independently.

One notable activity among participants was using smartphones to watch films and listen to songs in English. This practice proved to be popular and beneficial, as it helped participants to maintain contact with the English language, improve their listening skills, and acquire new vocabulary. C1 and C2 highlighted the importance of listening skills and shared how watching English films on their smartphones enhanced their understanding of spoken English. Smartphone features such as adjusting playback speed, pausing, repeating, and using captions enhanced participants' overall comprehension and vocabulary retention. Furthermore, C3 shared her original approach to using YouTube, where she watched documentaries rather than films. This tailored practice allowed her to target specific interests and topics of personal relevance, demonstrating the adaptability of smartphone-based language learning to individual preferences.

The findings also highlighted participants' active engagement in communicative exercises through smartphone applications and online platforms. Platforms such as Twitter and HelloTalk provided opportunities for participants to interact with proficient English speakers and fellow learners, fostering meaningful language exchanges and enhancing their communicative competence.

While smartphones offered numerous advantages for language learning, participants also encountered challenges, particularly the need for guidance and training. Participants expressed their desire for expert recommendations and strategies to improve specific language skills such as reading and writing. C3 expressed her desire for expert guidance: "I seek recommendations from language teachers for apps and websites that can serve as valuable tools... helping me master specific skills such as reading and writing". Her recognition of her specific learning needs in reading highlighted the importance of access to targeted resources and expert guidance to enhance language skills.

The study identified a lack of in-class support for independent learning, which hindered participants' ability to effectively plan their language learning and make the most of available resources. C4 expressed her disappointment with the lack of guidance, stating: "Because I am a beginner in English, I need a plan... I need someone to guide me." This lack of structured support hindered C4's ability to effectively plan her language learning and make the most of available resources. However, some participants met their needs by subscribing to online language courses, they emphasised the positive impact of structured resources on their language learning journey.



4 Discussion

The results demonstrate that learners actively engage in independent language learning activities through their smartphones. These devices play a significant role in empowering learners, enabling them to exercise agency and enhance their autonomy in the learning process. They provide the freedom to choose materials and personalise the learning experience, as well as offering supportive features for comprehension and language practice.

However, while smartphones offer numerous benefits, learners still require additional support from their teachers to develop the necessary skills for independent language learning. Training in resource selection, evaluation, and self-monitoring skills is crucial to assist learners in effectively managing their learning. As argued by [8], learners need to develop self-organisation skills and metacognitive strategies, even if they are competent in digital literacy. Teachers can guide learners in navigating the abundance of available resources, helping them make informed choices that align with their language level and learning goals.

Furthermore, in-class discussions and sharing independent language learning experiences with technology can greatly benefit learners. Creating a supportive learning environment where learners can exchange ideas, reflect on their experiences, and learn from one another fosters a sense of community and maximises the advantages of independent language learning. Peers and teachers can offer valuable insights, recommend new strategies and resources, and provide feedback and encouragement.

The study provided an example of the complex relationship between autonomy and technology. One learner (C2) managed her learning effectively by utilising technology, as she understood how to access suitable materials. By contrast, another learner (C4) faced challenges in finding appropriate reading materials for her language level. This highlights the importance of developing independent learning skills alongside the use of technology. Autonomy empowers learners to fully harness the benefits technology offers, whilst technology, in turn, supports and enhances learner autonomy.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I examined the complex relationship between technology and learner autonomy in language learning, focusing specifically on Saudi female university students who use smartphones for English language learning. The findings make significant contributions to the existing body of knowledge. Firstly, smartphones were found to be powerful tools that seamlessly integrate English practice into learners' daily lives and facilitate engaging communicative language activities. The portability and flexibility of smartphones provide convenient access to language materials, allowing learners to personalise their experiences according to their needs and preferences, thereby fostering agency and autonomy. Secondly, while smartphones offer numerous benefits, additional guidance and structured support are crucial to fully harness their potential for improving English skills. Learners need essential skills such as digital literacy, resource evaluation, and self-organisation to navigate and utilise technology for autonomous language learning effectively. This study highlights the importance of providing learners with the necessary support and training to develop these skills and maximise the benefits of technology. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, as it focused on a specific group of Saudi female university students, limiting the generalisability of the findings to other contexts and learner populations. Future research should explore the role of smartphones in fostering learner autonomy across different language learning contexts and diverse learner groups, as well as delving deeper into specific strategies and pedagogical approaches.

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