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ENHANCING FIRST YEAR STUDENTS' SELF LEARNING SKILLS THROUGH ONLINE PLATFORMS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the rapid and widespread integration of digital technologies into higher education has fundamentally reshaped traditional teaching and learning environments. Conventional, teacher-centered instructional models are increasingly being supplemented or replaced by technology-enhanced approaches that emphasize learner engagement and independence. In this context, online learning platforms have emerged as essential pedagogical tools for fostering learner autonomy, particularly among first-year university students who are in the critical phase of transitioning from secondary education to the demands of academic learning. For first-year students, the ability to manage learning tasks independently is especially important, as they often encounter new academic expectations, unfamiliar learning strategies, and increased responsibility for their own progress. Previous research highlights that self-directed learning is closely associated with learners' capacity to regulate cognitive, motivational, and behavioral aspects of their learning processes (Zimmerman, 2002). Self-regulation enables students to set goals, monitor their performance, and reflect on learning outcomes, all of which are essential skills in digital and blended learning environments.

***Keywords**: self-learning skills, first-year students, online platforms, learner autonomy, higher education*

INTRODUCTION

The development of self-learning skills has become a fundamental objective of contemporary higher education, particularly in response to the growing demands for lifelong learning and academic independence. Learner autonomy, as defined by Holec (1981), refers to learners' capacity to take responsibility for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning processes. In higher education contexts, this ability is considered essential for academic success, as students are expected to manage learning tasks with minimal external supervision. However, first-year university students frequently experience challenges when adapting to independent academic study. The transition from teacher-guided secondary education to self-directed university learning often reveals difficulties such as ineffective time management, limited self-regulation skills, and a strong dependence on instructor guidance. These challenges may hinder students' academic performance and reduce their motivation to engage in independent learning activities. Moreover, traditional teacher-centered instructional approaches, which emphasize knowledge transmission rather than learner engagement, may be insufficient in fostering autonomous learning skills (Little, 2007). In recent years, the rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT) has introduced new opportunities for supporting self-directed learning in higher education. Online platforms, including learning management systems, virtual courses, and digital learning resources, provide flexible and accessible learning environments that encourage students to take greater control of their learning. Such platforms enable learners to access instructional materials independently, regulate their learning pace, and engage in reflective and self-assessment practices (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Therefore, investigating the role of online platforms in enhancing first-year university students' self-learning skills is of considerable academic and practical significance. Understanding how digital learning

environments contribute to the development of learner autonomy can inform more effective pedagogical strategies and support students in becoming independent, self-regulated learners during the early stages of higher education.

METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine the impact of online learning platforms on the development of students' self-learning skills. The mixed-methods approach was selected because it enables a more comprehensive analysis by integrating quantitative data with qualitative insights, thereby capturing both measurable learning outcomes and students' subjective learning experiences (Garrison, 1997). Such an approach is particularly suitable for educational research, where learning processes are complex and multifaceted. The participants of the study were first-year undergraduate students enrolled at a higher education institution. These students were selected due to their transitional stage from teacher-directed secondary education to more independent forms of academic learning. Their participation provided valuable insights into how online platforms support the development of self-directed learning skills at the early stages of university education. Data collection involved multiple instruments to ensure methodological triangulation. Quantitative data were gathered through structured questionnaires and the analysis of students' online learning activities, including task completion rates and interaction with digital resources. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to express their perceptions, challenges, and experiences related to self-paced learning. The online learning environment incorporated several digital tools, including a learning management system (Moodle), video-based instructional materials, and interactive quizzes designed to promote engagement and self-assessment. Students were required to complete self-paced learning tasks, monitor their own progress, and reflect on their learning experiences through guided reflection activities. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods to identify general trends in students' engagement and self-learning behaviors. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of recurring patterns and themes related to learner autonomy, motivation, and self-regulation. The integration of both data sets provided a more holistic understanding of the role of online platforms in enhancing first-year students' self-learning skills.

RESULTS

The analysis of the collected data revealed a notable enhancement in students' self-learning skills as a result of consistent engagement with online learning platforms. Quantitative findings from the questionnaires demonstrated that a majority of participants experienced increased motivation and a heightened sense of responsibility for their own learning processes. These outcomes are consistent with the principles of self-regulated learning, which emphasize learners' ability to set goals, monitor progress, and adjust strategies independently (Zimmerman, 2002). Students particularly valued the flexibility and accessibility afforded by the online platforms, which allowed them to organize their study schedules according to personal preferences and learning needs. The data indicated that learners who regularly utilized the digital resources, including video-based lectures and interactive quizzes, reported improved time management and a greater capacity to plan and structure their study activities effectively. In addition, qualitative analysis from semi-structured interviews highlighted the critical role of immediate feedback and self-assessment tools. Participants noted that timely feedback enabled them to identify knowledge gaps, monitor their understanding, and adjust their learning strategies accordingly. Thematic analysis revealed that students perceived the online environment as supportive of independent learning, fostering both cognitive engagement and metacognitive reflection. Overall, the findings suggest that online learning platforms contribute positively to the development of autonomous learning skills by combining accessibility, flexibility, and interactive elements that

promote active learner participation. These results corroborate previous research indicating that well-designed digital learning environments can enhance students' self-directed learning capabilities, particularly during the early stages of higher education (Means et al., 2013).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the significant role of online learning platforms in fostering self-learning skills among first-year university students. The availability of diverse digital resources, interactive exercises, and self-assessment tools creates an environment that supports learner autonomy and encourages independent decision-making within the learning process (Benson, 2011). By providing flexible access to materials and opportunities for active engagement, online platforms enable students to take ownership of their learning and develop strategies for effective self-regulation. Moreover, the personalized nature of online learning experiences appears particularly beneficial for students who are transitioning to higher education. First-year students often face challenges such as adjusting to unfamiliar academic expectations and managing increased responsibilities. Digital platforms allow learners to progress at their own pace, revisit content when necessary, and tailor their learning according to individual needs, thereby facilitating a smoother adjustment to autonomous academic study. Nevertheless, the study also highlights that some students require initial guidance and scaffolding to develop effective self-learning strategies. Without structured support, certain learners may struggle with maintaining self-discipline, setting achievable goals, and monitoring their progress. This observation aligns with Little's (2007) assertion that autonomy is not an innate skill but rather one that must be nurtured gradually through well-designed instructional support. In practice, this suggests that educators should integrate online platforms with targeted guidance, orientation sessions, and mentoring to help students build the necessary competencies for independent learning. These findings indicate that while online platforms provide a conducive environment for promoting self-directed learning, their effectiveness is maximized when combined with structured pedagogical interventions. This dual approach ensures that students not only have access to technological tools but also acquire the skills and strategies required to navigate and benefit from autonomous learning effectively.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that online learning platforms play a crucial role in enhancing the self-learning skills of first-year university students. By providing flexible access to diverse learning resources, interactive tools, and opportunities for self-assessment, these digital environments foster learner autonomy, increase motivation, and support the development of self-regulation strategies. Such skills are particularly important during the initial stages of higher education, when students are adjusting to independent academic study and developing the ability to manage their own learning processes effectively.When thoughtfully integrated into higher education curricula, online platforms can also promote readiness for lifelong learning, equipping students with the competencies necessary to adapt to evolving educational and professional demands. However, the study emphasizes that the benefits of digital learning are maximized when accompanied by structured guidance and pedagogical support. Educators should therefore design learning experiences that combine technological tools with mentorship, scaffolding, and instructional strategies to ensure that students can develop sustainable, autonomous learning practices. Ultimately, the findings underscore the importance of leveraging online platforms not merely as supplementary tools, but as integral components of a pedagogical approach aimed at cultivating independent, self-directed learners. By doing so, higher education institutions can foster both immediate academic success and long-term personal and professional growth among students.

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