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Self-Study and Intercultural Communicative Competence in EFL Learners: Challenges and Support Strategies

Abstract

In today's globalized world, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are increasingly expected to develop Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) alongside language proficiency. This article explores the role of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) in fostering ICC and identifies key challenges that learners face, including motivational barriers, limited access to intercultural resources, digital literacy gaps, and traditional educational structures. The article highlights practical strategies for educators and institutions to support SDL, such as scaffolded learning, digital training, peer collaboration, and intercultural exposure through virtual exchanges. Emphasis is placed on creating autonomy-supportive environments and incorporating structured feedback to help learners become independent and culturally competent communicators.

Keywords: EFL learners, self-study, intercultural communicative competence, learner autonomy, digital literacy, motivation, virtual exchange

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EFL öyrənənlərdə özü müstəqil öyrənmə və mədəniyyətlərarası kommunikativ səriştə: problemlər və dəstək strategiyaları

Xülasə

Qloballaşan dünyada xarici dil kimi İngilis dili (EFL) öyrənənlərdən yalnız dil bacarıqlarını deyil, həm də mədəniyyətlərarası ünsiyyət bacarıqlarını (ICC) inkişaf etdirmələri gözlənilir. Bu məqalədə ICC-nin inkişafında özünüidarə olunan öyrənmənin (SDL) rolu və bu prosesdə tələbələrin qarşılaşdığı əsas çətinliklər, o cümlədən motivasiya əksikliyi, məhdud mədəniyyətlərarası resurslara çıxış, rəqəmsal savadlılıq problemləri və ənənəvi tədris metodlarının təsiri araşdırılır. Məqalədə müəllimlər və təhsil müəssisələri üçün SDL-i dəstəkləyən effektiv strategiyalar — mərhələli öyrənmə, rəqəmsal hazırlıq, tələbələrarası əməkdaşlıq və virtual mübadilə vasitəsilə mədəniyyətlərarası təcrübələrin təşkili təklif olunur. Avtonomiyanı təşviq edən mühitin yaradılması və strukturlaşdırılmış geribildirim sisteminin tətbiqi müstəqil və mədəniyyətlərarası bacarıqlı kommunikatorların formalaşmasına xidmət edə bilər.

Açar sözlər: EFL öyrənənləri, özü müstəqil öyrənmə, mədəniyyətlərarası ünsiyyət bacarığı, öyrənən avtonomiyası, rəqəmsal savadlılıq, motivasiya, virtual mübadilə

Introduction

As global communication becomes an essential aspect of modern life, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are increasingly expected to develop not only language skills but also the intercultural competence needed to engage meaningfully with diverse communities. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) involves understanding, interpreting, and appropriately responding to cultural differences, making it a vital component of effective language use. One

promising approach to fostering ICC is self-directed learning (SDL), which empowers learners to take control of their own educational processes through independent goal-setting, reflection, and resource exploration. However, many learners face obstacles in leveraging SDL for intercultural growth, including issues with motivation, digital access, cultural isolation, and a lack of institutional guidance. This article investigates the difficulties EFL learners encounter when using SDL to improve ICC and suggests practical, supportive strategies that educators and institutions can adopt to enhance learner autonomy and intercultural engagement.

Research

Challenges Faced by EFL Learners in Using SDL to Improve ICC

Many EFL learners struggle with SDL due to several factors, including motivation, resource accessibility, and cultural barriers. According to Little (2007), one of the primary difficulties is a lack of intrinsic motivation, which can hinder learners from actively engaging in self-directed activities. According to Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), motivation can be intrinsic (driven by personal interest and enjoyment) or extrinsic (influenced by rewards, grades, or external pressure). Autonomous learning is most effective when learners are intrinsically motivated because they engage with learning materials willingly rather than out of obligation. If external rewards are the primary motivators, SDL may become less effective since learners depend on external validation rather than internal curiosity and self-improvement. Ushioda (2011) emphasizes that motivation in language learning should be **person-in-context** rather than just goal-oriented. In SDL, learners need to see personal relevance and long-term benefits in their efforts to stay motivated. She argues that a positive learning environment that encourages autonomy can sustain motivation, while excessive structure or rigid expectations can hinder self-directed learning.

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System posits that three key factors influence motivation in autonomous learning:

1. **"Ideal L2 Self"** – This represents an individual's vision of themselves as a successful language user.

2. **"Ought-to L2 Self"** – This involves external pressures and expectations, such as the necessity of English for career advancement.

3. **"L2 Learning Experience"** – This refers to the learning environment and resources that impact the learner's level of engagement.

Consequently, self-directed learning (SDL) becomes more effective when learners have a clear vision of their **"Ideal L2 Self"**, meaning they perceive themselves as competent language users in intercultural contexts.

Implications for EFL Learners Using SDL to Improve ICC:

• **Intrinsic motivation** (interest in intercultural communication) leads to more sustainable engagement in SDL than **extrinsic motivation** (passing exams, teacher expectations).

• SDL environments should provide **choice, flexibility, and real-world applications** to keep learners engaged.

• **Mentorship, peer collaboration, and digital resources** can support motivation by providing a sense of structure while maintaining autonomy.

• If motivation is not nurtured, learners may abandon SDL efforts due to frustration, lack of progress, or difficulty in finding meaningful intercultural engagement.

Additionally, limited access to authentic intercultural materials can pose a significant obstacle (Benson, 2011). Exposure to diverse cultural perspectives is essential for ICC development, but many EFL learners, particularly those in homogeneous cultural environments, lack direct contact with intercultural interactions (Byram, 1997). This limitation hinders their ability to develop empathy, cultural awareness, and adaptability, which are essential for effective communication in intercultural settings (Deardorff, 2006).

Another challenge involves the complexity of intercultural interactions. Research by Kramsch (2009) suggests that ICC development requires more than just language proficiency; it also necessitates the ability to interpret and negotiate meaning in intercultural contexts. However, SDL

often lacks the structured feedback necessary for learners to refine these skills (Gao, 2010). Without proper guidance, learners may reinforce cultural stereotypes rather than develop nuanced intercultural understanding (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Technological and digital literacy challenges also affect SDL effectiveness. While online resources provide opportunities for intercultural exposure, learners with limited digital literacy may struggle to critically evaluate such materials (Reinders, 2010). Moreover, navigating unfamiliar digital tools can add cognitive load, making SDL overwhelming for learners who are not accustomed to autonomous online learning (Stockwell, 2013).

Furthermore, learner autonomy in SDL can be constrained by the broader educational culture. In some contexts, traditional teacher-centered methodologies dominate, making it difficult for students to transition to SDL effectively (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Students accustomed to structured instruction may lack the necessary self-regulation skills to engage in SDL, which can result in frustration and inefficacy (Murray, 2014).

These challenges highlight the need for structured guidance to help learners maximize SDL opportunities in ICC development. Without proper institutional and pedagogical support, many EFL learners may struggle to develop their ICC effectively through SDL alone.

Supporting EFL Learners in Using SDL for ICC Enhancement

To address these challenges, educators and institutions must play an active role in facilitating SDL for ICC improvement. One effective approach is the integration of scaffolded self-directed learning strategies within formal curricula. For instance, according to Kumaravadivelu, teachers can design structured autonomous learning tasks that incorporate intercultural exposure, such as virtual exchanges, cultural journaling, and reflective assignments (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). These activities provide learners with opportunities to engage in authentic intercultural communication while developing self-regulation skills necessary for SDL (Holec, 1981).

Moreover, promoting metacognitive awareness is crucial for enhancing learners' SDL capabilities. Research suggests that metacognitive training, which includes goal-setting, self-monitoring, and self-reflection, significantly improves students' ability to manage their learning independently (Cotterall, 2000). Teachers can introduce guided reflection activities, such as learning logs and self-assessment checklists, to help learners critically evaluate their progress and adjust their learning strategies accordingly (Nunan, 1997).

Institutions can also foster SDL by providing access to diverse intercultural resources. Establishing language and cultural exchange programs, both online and offline, can significantly enrich learners' exposure to different cultural perspectives (Thorne, 2010). Telecollaboration platforms, such as eTandem and Virtual Exchange programs, allow learners to engage with peers from different cultural backgrounds in meaningful communicative tasks, thereby enhancing their ICC (O'Dowd, 2018).

Additionally, digital literacy training is essential for enabling students to navigate online learning resources effectively. Many SDL opportunities rely on digital tools, such as MOOCs, podcasts, and discussion forums, which require learners to develop skills in information evaluation and online communication (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Providing structured training on how to use these digital platforms can empower students to take full advantage of SDL for ICC enhancement (Reinders & White, 2016).

Another important factor is fostering a supportive learning environment that encourages autonomous learning behaviors. According to Benson (2011), a key determinant of successful SDL is the presence of an autonomy-supportive learning culture. Educators can achieve this by incorporating collaborative learning activities, such as peer feedback sessions and discussion groups, where learners can share insights and strategies for SDL (Dam, 1995). Such initiatives create a sense of community, which can mitigate feelings of isolation that often accompany SDL (Murray, 2014).

Furthermore, the role of assessment in SDL should not be overlooked. While SDL emphasizes learner independence, structured assessment mechanisms can provide learners with constructive feedback and a sense of direction. Formative assessments, such as self-evaluations and teacher feedback on intercultural projects, can help students identify areas for improvement in both language

proficiency and ICC (Little, 2007). Incorporating rubrics that assess both linguistic and intercultural competencies can ensure that learners develop a well-rounded skill set (Deardorff, 2006).

Lastly, institutions should consider developing SDL-friendly policies that promote flexible learning opportunities. Blended learning models, where students engage in both instructor-led and self-paced learning activities, can offer a balanced approach to SDL and ICC development (Stracke, 2007). Providing access to self-access learning centers equipped with multimedia resources, language-learning software, and intercultural content can further support SDL initiatives (Morrison, 2008).

Conclusion

While SDL presents an effective means of improving ICC among EFL learners, various challenges can hinder its effectiveness. By addressing issues related to motivation, resource accessibility, and digital literacy, educators and institutions can better support learners in their self-directed intercultural learning journeys. Implementing scaffolded SDL strategies, providing intercultural exposure, and enhancing digital literacy are essential steps toward fostering ICC in EFL contexts. Future research should explore the long-term impact of these strategies on learners' communicative and intercultural competencies.

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