

Effects of Student Choice on Intrinsic Motivation and Language Proficiency in High School L2 Education

Yiyi Hou^{1,a,*}

¹*The University of Sydney, City Road, Camperdown, Sydney NSW 2006, Australia*

a. jazhyy1025@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This literature review investigates the impact of student choice on intrinsic motivation and language proficiency in high school second language (L2) classrooms. The study addresses the existing gap in comprehensive research regarding how the implementation of student autonomy influences these educational outcomes. A systematic review of empirical studies, teaching practices, and peer-reviewed articles was conducted. Relevant keywords were used to search journals from different academic databases. The identified studies were evaluated based on their methodology, relevance, and quality. This review finds that providing students with autonomy in selecting learning materials and activities could enhance their intrinsic motivation. Increased autonomy fosters greater interest, engagement, and enjoyment in learning. However, the impact of autonomy on language proficiency is mixed. Some studies demonstrate improved proficiency due to personalised learning experiences, while others indicate that excessive autonomy without adequate instructional support can hinder language development. The review highlights the necessity of balancing autonomy with teacher guidance and considers the developmental stage of high school students. While student autonomy in high school L2 classrooms generally increases intrinsic motivation, its impact on language proficiency necessitates carefully combining autonomy with appropriate instructional support. This review underscores the need for longitudinal research to better understand the long-term effects of autonomy on motivation and proficiency, the development of sophisticated tools for measuring intrinsic motivation, and the implementation of practical strategies for integrating student choice in educational practices.

Keywords: student choice, intrinsic motivation, language proficiency, second language learning, learner autonomy.

1. Introduction

High school second language instruction brings a diverse set of challenges as well as possibilities. Intrinsic motivation is defined as engaging in an activity for its intrinsic satisfaction and delight rather than seeking a separate outcome or external reward. Students who are genuinely driven learn because they enjoy the process of learning. This form of motivation is defined by curiosity, a desire for mastery, and a real interest in the subject matter [1]. Intrinsic motivation is an important aspect of successful language acquisition. Research has indicated that students who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to connect deeply with the language, have greater tenacity, and attain better levels of

proficiency [2]. However, typical L2 teaching approaches frequently prioritise extrinsic motivators, such as grades and test scores, and may not properly foster students' innate desire to learn a new language [3].

This literature review intends to look into the question, *"How does the implementation of student choice in high school second language classrooms influence the growth of intrinsic motivation and language proficiency between students?"*. Multiple factors influenced the decision to conduct this particular inquiry. To begin, it indicates a need for a more comprehensive understanding and evidence on how the implementation of student choice in high school L2 classrooms affects intrinsic motivation and language proficiency. While numerous studies have investigated various teaching approaches and their effects on language learning outcomes, there is a dearth of research that specifically examines the role of student choice and autonomy in building intrinsic motivation and improving linguistic competence. A few studies have suggested the potential benefits of introducing student choice into language acquisition. However, these studies frequently lack a specific focus on high school students and do not fully analyse the direct relationship between student choice, intrinsic drive, and language proficiency.

Second, this study has implications for advancing educational journeys and future teaching practices. This literature review seeks to appraise the subject field by combining empirical research studies, teaching practices, and peer-reviewed articles. It aims to identify and explain current trends, key findings, and potential research needs on the subject. The review aims to identify common themes, patterns, trends, and methodological differences in the existing body of research, as well as to highlight key contextual, theoretical, and methodological variables that influence results. Furthermore, the current study's limitations and areas for future investigation are mentioned.

The author initiated this literature review by determining pertinent keywords and search phrases, then consulted databases like *Linguistics and Language Behaviour Abstract*, *ERIC*, *Education Source*, and *Google Scholar*, and combined these terms to enhance the searches. The methodology of the literature review is based on strict criteria for the selection of peer-reviewed studies to investigate the influence of student autonomy on intrinsic motivation and language performance in secondary-level language learners. The review process began with a thorough review of the titles and abstracts to identify the relevant studies. Subsequently, detailed assessments of the entire text were conducted to evaluate the methodology, relevance, and theoretical framework of the texts. To ensure completeness, the review also included a review of references cited in the main article and consultations with experts in the field.

2. Common Themes and Patterns

Extensive research has consistently demonstrated that providing students autonomy in selecting their learning materials, topics, or activities significantly enhances their intrinsic motivation. When students are allowed to make choices regarding their learning process, they typically exhibit higher levels of interest, engagement, and enjoyment [4]. This increased autonomy of letting students have their right to what they want to learn fosters a deeper and more enduring motivation for language acquisition, as students perceive greater interest, relevance, and satisfaction in their educational pursuits [5, 6]. The empowerment associated with such decision-making in their academic journey cultivates a more profound commitment to learning.

The motivational benefits of autonomy are widely acknowledged, but the impact of independence on language learning has been inconsistent. Some research has shown that student autonomy could improve language learning by customising the experience to fit personal preferences and requirements, thereby enabling a more personalised method of language acquisition [7]. Studies suggest that when students have a say in their learning process, they are more likely to engage deeply with the material, leading to improved proficiency. Conversely, other research argues that excessive

autonomy, particularly without sufficient guidance from educators, may hinder language proficiency development [8]. This is especially pertinent in areas requiring mastery of complex grammatical structures or other intricate aspects of language [9]. The divergence in findings suggests that while autonomy can be advantageous, it must be carefully balanced with adequate instructional support to ensure comprehensive language development.

Additionally, this literature covers how age and developmental stage influence the effects of autonomy. High school students, as adolescents, may exhibit distinct reactions to autonomy compared to younger children or adult language learners. Their preferences for independence, cognitive growth, and identity development could greatly affect the results in different learning environments [10]. As adolescents navigate the complexities of growing independence and self-concept, their responses to autonomy in learning are shaped by these unique developmental characteristics [11]. This necessitates a meticulous approach, where educational strategies are tailored to leverage the developmental strengths and address the challenges specific to this age group, thereby maximising the potential benefits of autonomy in language education.

3. Methodological Variations

There are evident methodological differences in the analysis of autonomy in educational research, specifically concerning its impact on intrinsic motivation and linguistic proficiency. The variety of measurement instruments used in different investigations is one significant difference. A variety of tools, such as written reflections, single-question surveys, and self-report questionnaires like the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory, are used by researchers to evaluate language proficiency and intrinsic motivation. Due to the wide range of evaluation instruments available, it is more difficult to make direct comparisons between studies since the extent and depth of the data gathered might vary significantly, making it more difficult to synthesise findings across various study contexts.

Moreover, the designs of research procedures differ greatly from one another. To see certain results, several studies use experimental designs in which researchers adjust autonomy levels in carefully regulated environments. Randomised controlled trials, which isolate the effects of autonomy and aid in the establishment of causation, are frequently used in these experimental procedures. On the other hand, some studies employ qualitative or observational approaches to investigate autonomy in real-world classroom settings. These studies could include case studies, interviews, or ethnographic methodologies to provide a more nuanced understanding of how autonomy functions in actual educational settings. Additionally, to provide a more thorough investigation of the impacts of autonomy, some researchers combine quantitative and qualitative methodologies in mixed-method designs. These various methodological techniques highlight the complexity involved in researching autonomy in educational contexts and contribute to the variance in findings among studies [12].

4. Limitations and Research Gaps

One limitation in the existing body of research on student autonomy in educational settings is the predominance of cross-sectional studies. The dynamic nature and temporal change of student motivation have been rather overlooked in previous research. These studies provide a static snapshot of the impact of autonomy at a specific point in time but fail to capture how these effects evolve over an extended period. The absence of longitudinal studies means that the long-term sustainability and development of the benefits associated with autonomy remain underexplored. Mastering an L2 is a protracted process that often takes many years and in which the motivation of learners fluctuates [13]. Longitudinal research could provide deeper insights into how sustained autonomy influences motivation and proficiency over time, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of its long-term effects.

The influence of autonomy on motivation and language proficiency is also highly contingent on various contextual factors, such as cultural, institutional, and specific educational environments. Ushioda pointed out that "we need to understand second language learners as people, and as people who are necessarily located in particular cultural and historical contexts" [14]. Many studies might benefit from a more thorough consideration of these complexities, as overlooking them can affect the generalisability of their findings. The impact of autonomy can vary based on the students' cultural backgrounds, the educational system in use, and the specific dynamics within the classroom [15]. Therefore, future research should incorporate these contextual variables to understand the diverse impacts of autonomy better.

Furthermore, the teacher's role in promoting student autonomy is sometimes disregarded. While the focus tends to be on the student's ability to exercise autonomy, the interaction between teacher support and student autonomy is crucial in shaping educational outcomes. The findings imply a dynamic interaction exists between the constructs of learner autonomy, teacher support, and teacher autonomy indicating these need to be treated together rather than in isolation [16]. Teacher guidance and how autonomy is facilitated can influence the levels of intrinsic motivation and proficiency attained by students. To promote multilingual literacy, Proctor et al. stress that language instruction should be simultaneously contextualised and decontextualised, highlighting the importance of teachers being aware that "language is never neutral, and this awareness should be part of all multilingual literacy instruction" [6]. Understanding how teachers can effectively support and guide autonomous learning is essential for maximising the benefits of autonomy in educational settings [17].

Measuring intrinsic motivation presents a substantial challenge in the research on autonomy. The complexity of intrinsic motivation means it is difficult to capture its multifaceted nature using existing instruments. Traditional measurement tools, such as self-report questionnaires, may only partially encompass the depth and breadth of intrinsic motivation. More complex and sophisticated assessment techniques are required to measure intrinsic motivation with any degree of accuracy. These techniques ought to be able to convey the dynamic and ever-changing character of motivation, offering a deeper and more comprehensive comprehension of how autonomy shapes students' motivational moods. Moreover, understanding the data collected on intrinsic motivation is highly dependent on the interpretations of the investigator. Researchers bring their own perspectives, biases, and contextual understandings to their analysis, which can influence how data is interpreted and reported [18].

5. Practical and Research Implications

Teachers should employ methods that engage student autonomy, such as deciding on project topics or selecting learning resources, to boost their intrinsic motivation. However, educators should carefully blend student independence with guidance to guarantee that learners obtain the necessary support to strengthen their language skills while staying motivated [7]. Educational authorities should prioritise professional development opportunities that equip teachers with the skills to apply autonomy-supportive practices effectively. Learners who experience increased educator autonomy support express a more pressing sense of competence, expanded self-direction, dedication and academic incentives, and lower tension [19]. According to Bennett and Reinders, curriculum selection should consider the potential for motivational growth and skill development among students [11]. It is recommended that students engage in discussions with their teachers about any interests they have, as well as actively participate in language learning. The learning process gains more autonomy through this empowerment [3].

Addressing unresolved questions about the long-term effects of student choice on language proficiency and intrinsic motivation is essential. To gain a deeper understanding, longitudinal research is required, tracking students over several years to observe how their motivation and

proficiency evolve with sustained autonomy [20]. Evidence suggests that students who experience the benefits of autonomy support in their classrooms exhibit greater levels of intrinsic boost and a strong orientation towards mastery goals [21, 22]. Teachers could conduct action research to find fruitful strategies to balance student will and instructional leadership in the language classroom. Teachers need to consider certain practices, including integrating student input into lesson planning or encouraging students to value their perspectives and ideas, that promote autonomy. Also, the effects of autonomy on motivation and performance in particular teaching contexts may be investigated through teacher studies [23].

This literature review examines how the implementation of student choice in high school second-language classrooms affects intrinsic motivation and language proficiency, revealing that while student autonomy generally increases intrinsic motivation, not all decisions are autonomy-supportive, necessitating balanced instructional support. The review emphasises the necessity of educators implementing autonomy-supportive practices while offering required supervision, customising tactics to individual situations, conducting longitudinal research, and using advanced measuring tools to assess intrinsic motivation. This review promotes the knowledge and use of autonomy in second language education by synthesising existing research, finding gaps, making practical recommendations, and contributing to theoretical discourse, laying a solid platform for future efforts in the subject. However, there are opportunities for improvement, such as providing a more detailed analysis of the impact, undertaking a more comprehensive review of the literature, and emphasising precision in research methods when evaluating individual studies. Additionally, incorporating appropriate theoretical models could provide greater depth and context to the findings.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, while student choice is an effective strategy for increasing intrinsic motivation in high school L2 classrooms, its use needs to be carefully regulated to ensure that it promotes rather than undermines language acquisition. Educators are encouraged to create learning environments that blend student autonomy with structured instruction based on their students' developmental requirements. Future studies could look into the long-term effects of student choice and create more advanced instruments to evaluate internal drive and language proficiency. Bridging these gaps would help educators and researchers comprehend how to leverage autonomy's motivational benefits while guaranteeing full language development.

References

- [1] Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and New Directions*. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 54–67. <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1020>
- [2] Noels, K. A., Pelletier, L. G., Clément, R., & Vallerand, R. J. (2000). *Why are you learning a second language? Motivational Orientations and Self-Determination theory*. *Language Learning*, 50(1), 57–85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00111>
- [3] Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2009). *A Person-in-Context Relational View of Emergent Motivation, Self and Identity*. In *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self* (Vol. 36). *Multilingual Matters*.
- [4] Johansen, M. O., Eliassen, S., & Jeno, L. M. (2023). "Why is this relevant for me?": increasing content relevance enhances student motivation and vitality. *Frontiers in psychology*, 14, 1184804. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1184804>
- [5] Davis, W. S. (2018). *What makes a learning experience intrinsically motivating for American high school language learners?* *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 2(3), 167–180.
- [6] Proctor, C. P., Silverman, R. D., & Jones, R. L. (2021). *Centering language and student voice in multilingual literacy instruction*. *The Reading Teacher*, 75(3), 255–267. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2051>
- [7] REEVE, J. (2009). *Why teachers adopt a controlling motivating style toward students and how they can become more autonomy supportive*. *Educational Psychologist*, 44(3), 159–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520903028990>

- [8] Marzuki, M., Indrawati, I., & H, I. Y. (2023). Teachers' challenges in Promoting learner Autonomy. *Pioneer*, 15(1), 119. <https://doi.org/10.36841/pioneer.v15i1.2853>
- [9] Benson, P. (2013). Teaching and Researching: Autonomy in Language Learning. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315833767>
- [10] Bloemert, J., Paran, A., & Jansen, E. (2020). Connecting students and researchers: The secondary school student's Voice in Foreign Language Education Research. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 50(4), 429–449
- [11] Pfeifer, J. H., & Berkman, E. T. (2018). The Development of Self and Identity in Adolescence: Neural Evidence and Implications for a Value-Based Choice Perspective on Motivated Behavior. *Child development perspectives*, 12(3), 158–164. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12279>
- [12] LITTLE, D. (2007). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Perspectives on the Making of Supranational Language Education Policy. *The Modern Language Journal* (Boulder, Colo.), 91(4), 645–655. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2007.00627_2.x
- [13] Dörnyei, Z., MacIntyre, P. D., & Henry, A. (2015). Motivational dynamics in language learning. *Multilingual Matters Limited*.
- [14] Ushioda, E. (2009). 11. A Person-in-Context Relational View of Emergent Motivation, Self and Identity. In *Multilingual Matters eBooks* (pp. 215–228). <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847691293-012>
- [15] Benson, P., & Reinders, H. (2011). *Beyond the language classroom*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [16] Basri, F. (2020). Factors influencing learner autonomy and autonomy support in a faculty of education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28(2), 270–285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1798921>
- [17] Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural Theory and the Genesis of Second Language Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [18] Sutton, J., & Austin, Z. (2015). Qualitative Research: Data Collection, Analysis, and Management. *The Canadian journal of hospital pharmacy*, 68(3), 226–231. <https://doi.org/10.4212/cjhp.v68i3.1456>
- [19] Ma, Q. (2021). The Role of Teacher Autonomy Support on Students' Academic Engagement and Resilience. *Frontiers in psychology*, 12, 778581. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.778581>
- [20] Muth, J., & Lüftenegger, M. (2024). Associations between Autonomy-Supportive Teaching, the Use of Non-Academic ICTs, and Student Motivation in English Language Learning. *Sustainability*, 16(3), 1337. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16031337>
- [21] Ciani, K. D., Middleton, M. J., Summers, J. J., & Sheldon, K. M. (2010). Buffering against performance classroom goal structures: The importance of autonomy support and classroom community. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 35(1), 88–99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2009.11.001>
- [22] Lazarides, R., Rohowski, S., Ohlemann, S., & Ittel, A. (2015). The role of classroom characteristics for students' motivation and career exploration. *Educational Psychology*, 36(5), 992–1008. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2015.1093608>
- [23] Jones, J. (2020). Innovations in learning: Design enhances engagement. *Childhood Education*, 96(1), 58–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2020.1707540>