

Title

From CEFR-Guided Planning to Oral Presentation: Short-Cycle Self-Directed Learning and EFL Autonomy in a Taiwanese Freshmen English Course

Research Overview

This study examines whether a six-week, CEFR-guided self-directed learning cycle can foster learner autonomy among 37 Taiwanese university freshmen. Through goal setting, resource selection, weekly plans, progress logs, and a three-minute English oral presentation, it traces changes in motivation, learning strategy use, and metacognition in a self-selected Freshmen English class.

Purpose of Study

Learner autonomy remains a central concern in EFL education because sustained language development depends on learners' capacity to make informed decisions beyond teacher-led instruction (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2013; Little, 2001, 2007). In Taiwanese university classrooms, however, autonomy is not always an immediately available disposition. Many freshmen enter tertiary English courses after years of examination-oriented and teacher-mediated learning, with limited experience in diagnosing needs, setting feasible goals, locating appropriate materials, or evaluating their own progress. This tension underscores the necessity of autonomy-supportive tasks that are structured enough to guide novice autonomous learners, yet open enough to preserve meaningful choice.

The local curriculum ecology further sharpens this concern. Taiwan's recent "16+2" semester format compresses formal instruction into 16 weeks, followed by two flexible weeks. In practical terms, this compressed schedule leaves little room for extended autonomy training, especially in Freshmen English classes where students often differ considerably in proficiency and learning experience. Against this background, the practical issue is how learner autonomy can be embedded in a short instructional cycle through feasible routines that make students' planning, monitoring, and reflection visible without disrupting course pacing.

This study therefore investigates a short-cycle, CEFR-guided self-directed learning (SDL) task organized around a proposed design-mechanism-outcome chain. CEFR can-do descriptors served as a shared decision language for level-appropriate goal setting and

resource selection. Weekly plans and progress logs made students' regulatory activity more visible. A three-minute individual oral presentation, delivered entirely in English, functioned as the capstone through which learners reviewed, organized, and presented their learning process. The guiding question was whether this structured SDL task improved EFL learner autonomy over six weeks.

Research Methods

The study adopted an embedded mixed-methods design. Participants were 37 freshmen enrolled in a university Freshmen English course in Taiwan. Although all students had completed an institutional placement test before the semester began, enrollment in this course was based on students' own selection rather than strict proficiency placement. As a result, the class included learners with varied initial levels of English proficiency.

Learner autonomy was measured with the EFL Learner Autonomy Scale developed by Huang and Wang (2015). The 21-item instrument uses a five-point Likert scale and measures three dimensions: Motivation, Learning Strategies, and Metacognition. The items were administered in Mandarin Chinese to ensure comprehension. Open-ended prompts, grouped under Task Planning and Self-Reflection, asked students to report their goal choice, material selection, CEFR use, perceived learning changes, and views on future independent learning. Brief semi-structured interviews were also conducted with eight volunteers.

The six-week SDL cycle comprised three stages:

1. **Orientation and goal setting (1st week)**

Students were introduced to CEFR levels and can-do descriptors, then selected a personal English learning focus and formulated level-appropriate objectives.

2. **Implementation and regulatory documentation (2nd-5th weeks)**

Over four weeks, students engaged in regular self-directed learning and maintained brief weekly plans and progress logs. These concise routines made self-regulation traceable without imposing excessive workload.

3. **Oral presentation (6th week)**

Students delivered a three-minute individual presentation entirely in English, summarizing their learning goal, resources, process, outcomes, and reflection.

Quantitative analysis included participants who completed both pre- and post-task surveys. Negatively worded items were reverse-coded, and total and component scores were calculated. Descriptive statistics and paired-samples t-tests examined pre-post differences. Qualitative responses and interview notes were analyzed thematically through open coding, constant comparison, and theme consolidation.

Results and Discussion

Paired-samples t-tests showed a statistically significant increase in overall learner autonomy from pre-task to post-task, $t(36) = 6.17$, $p < .001$. The mean gain was 7.97 points, with a large within-subjects effect size, $d_z \approx 1.02$. The size of the gain suggests that the change was not only statistically detectable but also meaningful in classroom terms. Individual trajectories were uneven: eight students showed near-zero or negative gains, a pattern plausibly related to a ceiling effect among learners who had entered the task with relatively high initial autonomy.

The qualitative data give a clearer sense of what may have supported this change. Approximately two-thirds of the participants explicitly reported using CEFR when selecting learning materials, and all students indicated that they had considered their English proficiency level. For lower-proficiency learners, CEFR descriptors reduced uncertainty and gave them a more legitimate basis for self-judgment. Higher-proficiency learners, by contrast, tended to rely more on prior experience and self-assessment, often choosing more demanding resources. In this sense, CEFR functioned less as a rigid placement tool than as a flexible scaffold for agentic but level-sensitive decision making.

Weekly plans and progress logs also appeared to strengthen students' self-regulatory capacity. By asking learners to specify what they intended to study, how they followed through, and whether progress was visible, the task turned autonomy from a general expectation into a set of traceable practices. The oral presentation added a different kind of pressure to the SDL cycle. Once students had to deliver an English oral presentation on what they had chosen, practiced, and learned, their independent work was no longer only a private record of effort. It became something they needed to organize, justify, and evaluate in front of others.

Keywords: learner autonomy; self-directed learning; oral presentation; CEFR; EFL