Learning without a teacher
self-directed language learning in the digital wilds

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Potential impact	high
Timescale	ongoing
Keywords	self-directed learning, autonomy, polyglot, informal learning, community

What is it?

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) has been the focus of attention on the part of scholars for at least four decades. However, it is with the advent of technology and the possibilities offered by the Internet that researchers and practitioners have begun to look more closely at what students do autonomously to support their own learning outside of the classroom. Indeed, as Sauro and Zourou (2019) have recently pointed out,

> **❝❝** developments in technology – such as mobile devices that afford connection and social interaction anytime and anywhere, social networking offline and online, horizontal patterns of connectivity that allow users to create natural bonds based on shared interests – all offer possibilities for user-driven, self- and group-initiated practices that redraw models of production, distribution, and reuse of knowledge" (p. 1).

However, much of the literature on autonomy in language learning focuses on developing autonomy within the language classroom (Dam et al., 1990; Little, Dam,

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& Legenhausen, 2017; Miller, 2009); and learner practices that take place outside the classroom itself are often seen – at least by language education researchers and practitioners alike – as supplementary to classroom-based teaching.

Indeed, an under-researched area is precisely what these "user-driven, self- and group- initiated practices" mentioned by Sauro and Zourou (2019, p. 1) are when they are totally independent from any connection to a language classroom or to a teacher. One such group of language learners, from which it is possible to observe these autonomous, user-driven practices, is the polyglot community – individuals interested in learning languages for their own sake, who willingly share their language learning strategies, resources, and experiences, acting as inspirational guides for other learners. For example, the *Facebook* page *Polyglots – the Community* has over 46,000 members, polyglot Olly Richards's page *I Will Teach You a Language* has over 53,000 followers, while Tim Donner's 2013 video *Teen speaks over 20 languages* has had more than 10 million views. As well as forming an active an online community, these independent learners also meet face-to-face during highly popular events such as the *Langfest* in Montréal (https://montreal.langfest.org/en/), the *Polyglot Gathering* (https://www.polyglotgathering.com/2021/) or the *Polyglot Conference* (https://www.facebook.com/PolyglotConference).

Example

An interesting example of a user-driven, group-initiated practice is *My Language Challenge*, where independent learners get together at regular intervals to study a language for three months. As the homepage of the website states,

> ❝ [it] was created to be a community of language learners with a common goal - to improve our ability in our target language over a period of 3 months. It's called My Language Challenge because language learning is an individual thing. The way I learn a language works well for me but that does not mean it will work for you. We are all individuals so it differs from person to person. This

challenge is all about finding out what works for you and doing it consistently with the help and support of a community of learners" (https://www.mylanguagechallenge.com/about/).

Thus, the participants choose the language they want to focus on, define their own goals, plan their study routine, and complete a daily tracker of their language learning activities to encourage accountability. If they start falling behind, their peers will often nudge them and encourage them to continue. Therefore, although learners may be studying very different languages, they can share strategies and provide support to their peers, through both the *My Language Challenge* platform, and the *Facebook* community page.

In addition, throughout the three months of the programme, regular micro-challenges involving all four skills ensure that motivation remains high. For example, once a month participants are expected to record and share a brief video of themselves speaking their target language. This is a way of both maintaining a sense of commitment and accountability, and tracking one's own progress.

Other micro-challenges include reading, writing, and listening tasks suggested (and voted on) by the community. This means they change from one challenge to the next, and may include writing a short paragraph every day for a week, listening to a podcast, or reading a short book or document (such as a simplified reader for less proficient participants, if these exist in their target language). Finally, once a month, well-known polyglots or linguists (but seldom language teachers) are invited for a live online discussion and Q&A session. Although learners may be studying very different languages, they share strategies and provide support to their peers through both the *My Language Challenge* platform and the *Facebook* community page.

Benefits

Self-directed language learning within a networked online community offers great advantages to learners. First, it enables them to study any language starting at almost any time without the requirement of a local course or at least a teacher.

Second, learners can work at their own pace and choose to work on skills that are more relevant to them and their needs. Third, networked communities offer learners a form of scaffolding in their endeavour – by providing opportunities to learn from others and with their support, find relevant resources and, through initiatives such as language challenges, set themselves time-bound goals and create a sense of accountability.

Potential issues

SDL is not for everyone. Inexperienced language learners may find it difficult, for example, to set themselves attainable goals, understand what strategies work best for them, establish workable routines, and manage time and expectations well.

Looking to the future

> An increased recognition of informal learning (see MacKinnon, this volume, on open badges) may encourage individuals to take advantage of the opportunities offered by technology and the Internet to independently develop their language skills, also in less commonly taught languages. At the same time, communities and networks such as those mentioned above, with their learner-driven initiatives, may become progressively popular, particularly among young learners.

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Italki: https://www.italki.com

My Language Challenge: https://www.mylanguagechallenge.com

'Polyglots – The Community' Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/groups/polygotcommunity/

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