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Research Article

Learner Agency Transforming into Autonomy in Discussion Skills Course Via Moodle

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Abstract

The Internet has been conducive to English as a foreign language (EFL) students' agency. However, EFL learners' agency does not necessarily make them autonomous learners, although agency and autonomy are interchangeably used. By addressing the link and difference between these two constructs, this qualitative exploratory case study sets out to explore how a blended-designed course mediates Turkish EFL high school students' autonomy development scaffolded by Moodle LMS during the 2018-2019 academic year. The sociocultural theory forms the theoretical prism of the study. The data, collected via semi-structured interviews and reflective journals, were analyzed via grounded theory. The findings revealed that students enjoyed metacognitive, socio-cognitive, and socio-emotional benefits. The main pedagogical implication to be drawn from this study is that LMSs could be employed to transform the students' existing agency into autonomy. Theoretical implications are discussed in light of the post-pandemic period and technological affordances.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

irade

özyönetim

karma öğrenme

İngilizce öğrencileri

öğrenme yönetim sistemleri (ÖYS)

Öğrenci İradesinin Moodle Destekli Tartışma Becerileri Dersinde Özyönetime Dönüşmesi

Internet, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin öğrenme iradeleri için uygun fırsat sunmaktadır. Ancak, irade ve özyönetim birbirinin yerine kullanılsa da öğrencilerin bu iradesi onların özyönetimi gerçekleştirebilen öğrenciler haline getirmemektedir. İrade ve özyönetim arasındaki bağlantı ve farklılığı irdeleyerek bu nitel çalışma, 2018-2019 akademik yılında lisede İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin, öğrenme yönetim sistemi Moodle destekli karma desen ders katılımlarıyla özyönetim gelişim süreçlerini incelemeyi hedeflemektedir. Çalışmanın teorik çerçevesini sosyokültürel teori oluşturmaktadır. Yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlar ve yansıtıcı günlükler aracılığıyla elde edilen veriler, gömülü teori ile analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, öğrencilerin üstbilişsel, sosyobilişsel ve sosyoduygusal kazanımları olduğunu göstermiştir. Bu çalışmanın ana pedagojik çıkarımı, öğrenme yönetim sisteminin (ÖYS) öğrencilerin var olan öğrenme iradelerini özyönetime dönüştürmede kullanılabilmesidir. Teorik çıkarımlar, salgın sonrası dönem ve teknolojik gelişmelerin kazanımları doğrultusunda ele alınmıştır.

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1. Introduction

Tech-savvy learning spaces, including learning management systems such as Blackboard, Moodle, and Canvas, are believed to help today's digital native learners gain autonomy in their learning processes by moving away from spoon-fed teaching, which assigns passive roles to learners. Mainly, the Covid-19 outbreak has precipitated the transition to distance learning, and the post-Covid era has witnessed the struggle to explore the feasibility and efficacy of striking a balance between face-to-face and online learning modes. Such blended learning holds the potential to be a viable design for today and the future by combining the best properties of virtual and physical contexts by assigning teachers the role of facilitator and providing students with an agency which most of the teachers target to inculcate in the learners of the contemporary era. Bringing the autonomy construct to the foreground, the pertained literature highlights the affinity of technology and autonomy (Little & Throne, 2017) in two distinct contexts: a) formal learning contexts and b) informal learning contexts. While the former is intentional and other-directed, the latter is unplanned and self-directed. Although there are studies focusing on the role of textbooks in fostering learner autonomy (Reinders & Balçıkanlı, 2011) and EFL instructors' interactional competence in online teaching (Demirkol & Dişlen Dağgöl, 2022), there is a paucity of research investigating the nexus of these two contexts (Güneş & Alagözlü, 2021; Lai, 2019) in relation to the development of autonomy, particularly at the speaking level.

Given that teaching EFL learners to speak English entails the development of oral production skills ranging from accurate pronunciation to discourse organization, which means developing different sets of communication skills, it requires more time and output chances than those of in-class activities. Thus, this requires fostering autonomy as this study focuses on the emergence of autonomy in relation to speaking skills, which has not been addressed to the best of my knowledge. Besides, all learners are engaged in discussions for which they need to be prepared to think on their feet (Hinkel, 2017). By filling this lacuna in line with Yüce's (2019) call for augmenting the efficiency of language education contexts, this study is expected to make a contribution to how to actively benefit learners' technology-mediated autonomy in informal learning contexts to enhance learner autonomy in formal context teaching in which learners develop their discussion skills in English on Moodle LMS.

1.1. Agency and Autonomy

Due to the lack of definitional clarity and scant conceptual discussion, two constructs - autonomy and agency - are interchangeably used (Toohey & Norton, 2003). Gao (2010) defines agency as learners' willpower to reach their desired goals by exercising their capacity. Autonomy is defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). These definitions highlight not only muddled boundaries between agency and autonomy and also the intertwined nature. To clarify the blurred boundaries, Benson (2011) proposes autonomy as "a systematic capacity for effective control over various aspects and levels of the learning process" (p. 119) by highlighting the overarching feature of autonomy. Benson (2011) thus centers autonomy at a higher level as a capacity when compared to the agency as a learning behaviour, which displays that agency does not naturally translate into autonomy. In other words, intertwined as they are, autonomy implies control of the learning process by going beyond self-conscious reflexive learning actions (i.e., agency) (Huang & Benson, 2013). As such, taking conscious actions aiming at a particular goal (agency) does not necessarily mean being in control of the process (autonomy). To achieve autonomy, Learning Management Systems (LMSs) present an opportunity.

1.2. Learner Autonomy and Learning Management Systems

Dam (2003) defines learner autonomy as the capacity to "act independently and in cooperation with others as a socially responsible person" (p. 137) to take control of one's learning process by promoting lifelong learning (Smith, 2008). Though seemingly phenomenal at first sight, it entailed students making decisions in conventionally institution-wise-determined areas ranging from objectives, materials, methods, and pace to evaluation process, which they lacked (Smith, 2008). As for autonomy in language learning, Benson (2012) states that learners have difficulty in determining their own directions for learning. This problem made it clear that there was a need to help students develop their abilities to work effectively in their own ways so that they can develop competency in converting contextual constraints into affordances to enact freedom leading to autonomous action (Benson, 2011). At this point, distance learning emerged as an option to enable students to take control in conventionally institution-wise-determined areas (Smith, 2008). Computer-assisted language learning (e.g., designing websites or blogs, integrating LMSs) seems to be particularly suitable for developing learner autonomy by providing opportunities to improve language as well as technical skills (Illes, 2012). Activities conducted on distance learning platforms at the individual, group, or collective level can also endorse learner autonomy by empowering students to exert control over the social structure of their learning settings (Blin, 2004; Ferriman, 2013; Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2011). Developing independence and interdependence is also another benefit (Illes, 2012). Being mostly web-based, LMSs are defined as "software programs that teachers can use to administer a myriad range of courses in numerous different ways" (Cowie & Sauki, 2013, p. 461). In addition to facilitating access to learning content and administration, LMSs hold the potential to provide quick feedback and improve two-way interactions and interactive materials (Bradford et al., 2007). Herse and Lee (2005) assert that an LMS "can be used as a catalyst for self-reflection and to help facilitate change from passive to active learning" (p. 51), which enables learners to choose and explore their own learning path. Similarly, Lonn and Teasley (2009) add that LMSs promote a deeper and more meaningful learning experience. To fine-tune the benefits and features of an LMS, Tseng (2020) presents three categories with particular technological tools and teaching practices: a) content, b) communication, and c) evaluation. These benefits can be translated into developing discussion skills in English in EFL contexts while utilizing LMSs to foster autonomy, which is discussed below.

1.3. Learner Autonomy, Learning Management Systems, and Discussion Skills

Self-access facilities, engaging learners in decision-making, creating opportunities for self-assessment, peer evaluation, and group and pair work are among the methods to promote learner autonomy (Chan, 2003). Learner autonomy is often categorized into three dimensions: a) personal/general autonomy, b) language use, and c) language learning autonomy. As the focal dimension in this study, language learning autonomy encompasses skills ranging from taking the initiative to ensure optimal learning conditions to monitoring the cognitive, metacognitive, social, and psycho-affective dimensions of learning (Toffoli & Perrot, 2017). Although autonomy emerges as a corollary of efficient target language use (Benson, 2011), autonomy is the capacity to ensure problem-solving during actual instances of language use (Widowson, 1983). In this regard, engaging learners in problems that do not have ready-made answers leads them to activate their problem-solving capacity, which also helps to develop independent thinking since autonomous learners are independent language users who are able to solve problems and make decisions (Illes, 2012). In this regard, technology affects the execution and development of autonomy (Lai, 2019). However,

technological environments significantly demand learners' self-organization skills and metacognitive strategies (Toffoli & Perrot, 2017). At this point, LMSs can play a facilitative role in transforming learners into self-regulated learners who can make decisions and solve problems (Vovides et al., 2007). LMSs can also be conducive to the development of discussion skills to effectively communicate in that it is necessary for learners to expand their background knowledge in content areas and augment their vocabulary knowledge as well as grammar repertoire, in addition to developing information sequencing and discourse organisation (Hinkel, 2018). Further, given that preparing to speak plays a crucial role in helping learners discuss, LMSs can help learners prepare background information, think of ideas, organize their discourse, and elaborate the necessary grammar and vocabulary more effectively and efficiently in their face-to-face courses. In so doing, learners can communicate with other learners and teachers in a diversity of collaborative, interactive, and autonomous manners (Cowie & Sakui, 2013). Thus, LMSs can serve as a springboard to promote learner autonomy by enhancing learners' control over their language learning in relation to discussion skills, which is the focal point of this study.

As an LMS, Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is a free online Learning Management system that enables educators to generate their own private website filled with dynamic courses which extend learning anytime, anywhere. In addition, LMSs provide teachers and teacher educators with blended learning opportunities which combine online and face-to-face learning (Levy, 2009). In a similar vein to studies presenting the utility of blended learning in reading and grammar (Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017), in vocabulary enhancement (Tosun, 2015), Ko and Rossen (2017) indicate that grouping and discussion options are effective in online course designs such LMSs as Moodle since small groups and guided discussion sections help build a strong basis for effective communication and interaction.

In this study, fostering discussion skills via Moodle also intersects with the five aspects of learner autonomy: (a) setting learner goals, (b) monitoring the language learning process, (c) conducting tasks, (d) developing learner strategies, and (e) making reflection on learning (Cotterall, 2000) by enabling smooth transfer of responsibility from teacher to learner. By addressing these principles, the discussion skills course on Moodle enables learners to achieve what they deem essential (e.g., improving their discussion skills) by replicating real-world discussion tasks and providing rehearsal for these tasks. Learners also have time to raise awareness of both specifying objectives and identifying strategies as well as resources. Thereby learners, rather than being consumers of language courses, are capable of questioning the role of input texts and trying alternative strategies. Learners can also reflect critically on the effectiveness of their learning environment.

1.4. Theoretical Framework

The sociocultural theory has been fundamental to all modern language learning and teaching – be it virtual or face-to-face – (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Also, autonomy is social in nature as it denotes the interaction of "the in-group 'we' with the autobiographical 'I,'" (Little & Throne, 2017, p. 24). As for language learning, Vygotsky (1962) asserts that two or more individuals can learn a language – be it first or second - by working together through the zone of proximal development, which implies a space between what a learner can do without help and a learner can do in collaboration with more capable ones. By reinterpreting the role of input in more complex manners, interactionist researchers (Long, 1991; Schmidt, 1990) contend that interlocutors negotiate meaning when communication breakdowns occur due

to unfamiliar structures. Swain (200) also highlights that trying out grammatically or lexically specific items might lead target language learners to pinpoint their lack of knowledge, triggering learning. Current constructionist educational approaches favour student-centered environments rather than teacher-centered ones (Blake, 2017) by assigning students active roles (Schwienhorst, 2008), which is particularly relevant for LMS contexts (Guillen, 2014). As for the development of autonomy, it is argued to be a process of transitioning from other- and object-regulation to self-regulation. This transition is mediated by the social settings where learners interact and cooperate by developing agency (Murray, 2014). Thus, the sociocultural theory presents the intertangled relationship between language learning and the autonomy development process.

Based on Cotteral's (2010) aspects of learner autonomy, which are also in line with Dang and Robertson's (2010) three categories: a) initiating – creating learning opportunities, preparing study plans by taking into account learner preferences and thus setting goals - b) monitoring – maintaining engagement in learning – c) evaluating – assessing the learning outcomes, I target to explore the impact of LMSs – Moodle LMS in this study - on learners' autonomy, particularly in the field of English discussion skills. To this end, this study seeks answers to the following research question: How does LMS technology affect learner autonomy for high school students who have participated in an extracurricular blended course on English discussion skills?

The course integrates activities entailing learners to reflect on the goal-setting process, analysis of task types, and experimentation with strategies to gauge progress and assess their learning by completing a journal entry each week. The course also provides students with opportunities to negotiate meaning for the comprehensible input and output, which is facilitated by the teacher who demonstrates how to conduct the skilled use of interaction strategies while discussing. It is a prerequisite for second language acquisition (Pica, 1987).

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

A qualitative exploratory case study (Yin, 2009) was adopted to investigate a small group of Turkish EFL students in an extracurricular blended course at a high school to foster autonomy through sociocultural theory. A multi-case study approach was also followed (Cresswell, 2012) to conduct an in-depth cross-case comparison, thus unpacking "present relationships … among variables in a given situation and [accounting] for changes occurring in those relationships over time" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 205) since especially 3-5 cases suffice to capture the detailed picture of dynamic change (Creswell, 2012). This study has three case studies representing the participant students and providing up to 13 h of data (nine interviews and ten face-to-face session observations) combined with reflective journals. This amount of data endorses Stern's (2007) argument that foregrounds depth instead of breadth to reach data saturation.

2.2. Participants

A purposive sampling strategy (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) was utilized when choosing the participants. The participants should be active in discussions during English classes and desire to improve their discussion skills. The participants should also have self-regulation skills and computer literacy. In this parallel, the researcher of this study contacted five students who were actively engaged in in-class activities and involved in computer-related school projects and extracurricular activities such as English reading classes, foreign

language day shows, and shooting short movies. Three of them accepted the invitation, providing a convenience sample. Thus, this study involved three Turkish EFL students at a high school, two male and one female, during the 2018-2019 academic year. The students (16–17 years old) in at least the 97th percentile in a high-stakes test (i.e., the nationwide high school admission test entitled LGS) were all studying at a highly prestigious high school in the north of Turkey. They have been learning English for ten years. Their proficiency level is B1 according to the school curriculum. They have never been abroad.

2.3. Course Design

The course was designed in line with blended learning and consisted of asynchronous sessions (2 hours) and a face-to-face session (1 hour). The course which followed the ADDIE (i.e., analyze, design, develop, implement, and evaluate) model lasted ten weeks. Throughout the asynchronous sessions, students were supposed to carry out various tasks targeting to develop discussion skills in English about a controversial topic (controversial topics in the course were chosen by the students unanimously after a search on the Internet) and discuss the topic in the face-to-face session. That is, the participant students were provided with videos, ppts, and texts to expand their background knowledge in the controversial topic in addition to key vocabulary items and grammatical structures. Moreover, they were guided on how to develop information sequencing and discourse organisation. Before face-to-face discussions, they were required to upload self-made videos and discuss the topic in the forums so that they could organize their discourse and elaborate the necessary grammar and vocabulary more effectively and efficiently in their face-to-face courses. Table 1 presents an asynchronous sample lesson. During face-to-face discussions, they first presented their stance within two minutes. Afterward, they discussed the topic in depth by justifying their arguments and presenting counterarguments.

Table 1.

A sample asynchronous lesson plan

Time	Objectives	Stage And Activities	Materials	Interaction
10 Minutes	To provide the necessary information about the discussion topics and the organization of mind maps	*Lead-In*: Controversial discussion topic which is: 1. Using animals in medical research helps people.	Word documents and ppt	T → SS
25 Minutes	To enable the pupils to discuss	*Development*: The pupils express their opinions about the controversial topic by backing up with a reason, if possible and discuss the topic by making use of useful phrases and they share their opinions through videos or podcasts in the forums by interacting with their peers.	Self-made videos And forums	SS ↔ SS
5 Minutes	To self-check their understanding To provide an opportunity for critical thinking	*Wrap-Up:* In the survey, they make a self-assessment. Because of assignment 2, students are required to make a mind map for the face-to-face lesson in which they will support the opposite idea that they supported in the second lesson.	Discussion forums	SS ↔ SS T ↔ SS

2.4. Data Collection

Data was collected over the spring semester during the 2018-2019 academic year. Three interviews were conducted with different aims, one before the course, one during the course, and one after the course. These interviews were made in the participants' first language, Turkish, to make them feel comfortable. Additionally, reflective journals were utilized for data triangulation. Before the course, the aim of the study was explicated, and written consent was taken from the participants and their parents, guaranteeing their anonymity. The interviews, each lasting 25–35 min, were recorded and transcribed. The students submitted reflective journals for which they were not provided with any prompts but were asked to write their thoughts and emotions every week.

2.5. Data Analysis

Upon completing the transcription, the transcripts were read multiple times and coded using MAXQDA. First, open coding was applied to analyze the data, focusing on students' own words as far as possible to get the true meanings and intentions of the students (Seidman, 2006). This process was followed by axial coding and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Constructed from various data sources through MAXQDA: interviews and reflective journals, a thick description of the cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is provided. As the researcher of this study, I also kept a reflective journal to overcome researcher bias. In doing this, I built the cases by following a deductive and inductive approach and presented them chronologically in order to highlight their transformation. In addition, another departmental colleague was involved in analyzing all the data. Both coders reached a consensus after initial intercoder reliability (90%). Finally, participant students read and confirmed their cases (i.e., member-checking) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3. Findings

I present the cases below, each of which represents a student. The interviews and reflective journals reveal the transformation of each student's agency into autonomy. In accordance with such ethical issues as confidentiality and anonymity, the students' names below are pseudonyms. 'Int' stands for semi-structured interviews (i.e., Pre-int for pre-course interviews, while-int for interviews during the course, and post-int for post-course interviews), while data obtained from the students' reflective journals are demonstrated as 'RJ.' (see Appendix for the distribution of codes).

3.1. Abdullah

Abdullah, a 16-year-old student at a prestigious high school in the city, has been learning English for eight years. He was a second-grade primary school student when he took his first English class. I offered him to join my extramural research entitled discussion skills due to his outstanding participation in class activities and extracurricular activities such as English reading classes, foreign language day shows, and shooting short movies. After accepting my invitation, he wanted to learn the timeline and the tasks.

In the pre-course interview, Abdullah defined himself as an ever-developing English speaker. However, he expressed his reservations as follows:

> *I just use some basic structures that I pick up on the Internet most of the time, which seems enough in my class discussions. Yet, I cannot go into detail and base my ideas on well-grounded arguments. I want to go beyond stating my personal opinions with a few sentences.* (Pre-int).

He founded his reservations on lack of autonomy while improving his English speaking skills: "*Although I am keen on learning English and integrating English into my life by listening to English songs, watching English movies, and reading English books, I have a sense of inadequacy and have difficulty in putting information together*" (Pre-int). In addition, he expressed his desire to cultivate an inquiring independent mind by stating: "*I would like to go beyond the expressions such as I like it because blah blah and develop strategies to discuss it in detail*" (Pre-int).

From the first week of the course, he began to raise learning awareness in his RJ: "*I can pinpoint the content which I need to develop my arguments and structures I could use while expressing my thoughts*" (RJ). He also started to conduct self-reflection on his English learning and use: "*It seems all the things I have done so far have helped me develop my fluency in English, but I need to plan my learning, choose topics, and think about them in-depth and work in groups*"(RJ). The Moodle-enhanced online part of the learning seemed to help him organize his learning process, i.e., developing metacognitive skills, as he expressed in his while-course interview: "*Another thing I have realized during this course is that I have never focused on the content, posed questions about the content, and set goals, but just focused on finding possible answers to the question"* (While-int).

This metacognitive development also empowered him to develop self-regulatory skills as follows: "*I am happy as I think that I can select the best option among the alternatives for me, navigate obstacles, and think about what to use when and why"* (Post-int). He also highlighted the affective dimension of this blended learning by emphasizing the role of virtual sociability: "*I also felt more relieved and empowered during our face-to-face discussions after having seen the reactions of others on the Internet*" (Post-int).

3.2. Ceren

Ceren, a 16-year-old student at a prestigious high school in the city, has been learning English for eight years. She started to learn English during her kindergarten years (i.e., at the age of four). I offered her to join my extramural research entitled discussion skills due to her high performance in class activities and her participation in various English-related projects within the school, such as reading club and language day. She accepted my invitation to the study and gave her consent before the study.

In the pre-course interview, Ceren described herself as a competent English speaker. However, she complained about being unable to conduct a discussion about a topic as follows:

> *I am really good at speaking English, and I am actually fluent. But I cannot develop counterarguments about a topic and justify my ideas. I feel stuck, and I do not know how to combine my ideas and move from one idea to another.* (Pre-int)

She founded her complaint on the lack of time and strategy to develop arguments about a topic:

> *We read a text and answer questions about it, and we sometimes express our thoughts. But when faced with deep questions, I notice that a lesson time is not enough to think about the topic and express my opinion in detail fluently.* (Pre-int)

Moreover, she expressed her ambition to adopt an inquiring stance by stating: "*I want to consider the other side of the topic by asking questions and doing research and then consider different perspectives*" (Pre-int).

At the very beginning of the course, she started to reconceptualise learning as a complex process in her reflective journal: "*Discussing something is not just having your argument accepted or expressing your point of view fluently. Rather, we learn other perspectives and see different angles and their interactions. This is learning*" (RJ). According to her conceptualisation, she made self-reflection on her English learning and use by highlighting the scaffolding role of the LMS, Moodle: "*Before expressing my thoughts, I should do research, use various resources, and then generate ideas, and I should not focus only on pronunciation and fluency. Moodle helped me organize my thoughts and justify my arguments*"(RJ). The Moodle LMS seemed to provide her with socio-cognitive support in her reconceptualised learning process, as she expressed in her while-course interview: "*I noticed that learning itself is more valuable than getting the correct answer thanks to the concepts maps showing the relationships between the topics and collaborating without being limited to forty-minute lesson time*" (While-int).

This socio-cognitive support also helps her appreciate the necessity of cooperation as follows: "*Each has different strength which I should benefit. I think it not only broadens my perspective but also shows me another way to conduct a task*" (Post-int). She also underlined the emotional aspect of this blended learning by stating: "*I enjoyed reading and exchanging ideas online and discussing the topic in a well-prepared manner, which also showed me how to plan my English learning in the future*" (Post-int).

3.3. Mehmet

Mehmet, a 17-year-old student at a prestigious high school in the city, has been learning English since his primary school years when he started to learn English as a second grader. He is committed to developing his English speaking skills. Thus, he picks a topic every week, does research, and discusses that topic with me during recess time. He voluntarily joins after-school activities, including English theatres, reading, and language day. I offered him to join my extramural research entitled discussion skills due to his remarkable performance and improvement both in class and after-school activities. After accepting my invitation and giving his consent, he asked for the procedural steps.

In the pre-course interview, Mehmet delineated himself as a fluent English speaker. Nonetheless, he underlined the need to develop strategies for extended talks: "*I can express my thoughts and answer questions after a listening or a reading activity. But I am not sure I can discuss a topic with a person*" (Pre-int). He explicates this inability by stating: "*I do not have enough information about any topic and do not know how to get the right information and support it in English*" (Pre-int). Furthermore, he underlined his goal to be an autonomous learner by stating: "*I want to be able to monitor my English learning process. There is a lot on the Internet. If I learn how to use it, I can decide what to do and how to do*" (Pre- int).

From the second week of the course, he began to become critically aware, as he expressed in his reflective journal: "*We do not discuss various topics in our classes. Why not? Also, why don't we ask questions? Why are we supposed to answer the questions?"* (RJ). He also reflected on his English learning process: "*I just focus on pronouncing the words correctly rather than the meaning, the impact that I would like to have, and restrict myself to English exams*"(RJ). The online part of the learning seemed to help him acquire a strategy for autonomy, as he expressed in his while-course interview: "*More importantly, I understood the importance of setting goals and determining criteria to reach these goals through a plan*"(While-int).

In addition to this metacognitive skill, he also benefitted from the social-emotional contribution of this blended learning as follows:

> "*I did not feel pressure while expressing my thoughts thanks to being away from the crowd and sitting in front of the screen. Additionally, I could put myself in others' shoes, which also enabled me to see others' judgments from different perspectives*" (Post-int).

He could also develop a growth mindset thinking in addition to the scaffolding role of the LMS, Moodle, as he stated in the post-course interview:

> *Before face-to-face sessions, I could deepen my knowledge about the topic and polish the language. It improved my discussion skills. Besides improving my discussion skills, I guess I can better handle such challenges as what information to use, where to look for it, and how to use it. They used to seem daunting on the way to achieving my goal as an effective and efficient learner.* (Post-int)

4. Discussion

This study sought to address what effects LMS technology (i.e., Moodle LMS) has on learner autonomy for high school students who have participated in an extracurricular blended course on English discussion skills through the sociocultural theory perspective. The findings revealed that metacognitive, socio-cognitive, and socio-emotional dimensions are among the main themes. Since these dimensions address the aspects of learner autonomy: (a) setting learner goals, (b) monitoring the language learning process, (c) conducting tasks, (d) developing learner strategies, and (e) making reflection on learning (Cotterall, 2000), the study evinces the positive role of a blended course in fostering autonomy in relation to speaking skills. That is, the blended course on discussion skills in English played a significant role in transforming the students' agency (i.e., their willpower to foster their speaking skills in English) into language learning autonomy (i.e., the ability to take charge of their English learning and use). This finding resonates with Genç and Köksal's (2021) study suggesting the integration of digital media.

Therefore, all of the students enjoyed the social-emotional contribution of this blended course to their evolving language learning autonomy through self-access facilities, their involvement in decision-making, self-assessment, peer evaluation, and group and pair work (Chan, 2003). They also had socio-cognitive development by expanding their knowledge and skills in a similar fashion to Al-Ghamdi and Al Bargi's (2017) flipped classroom. Further, they have become more self-confident, as in Wu, Hsieh and Yang's study (2017). All these opportunities were influential in creating optimal learning conditions to manage the cognitive, metacognitive, social, and psycho-affective aspects of learning (Toffoli & Perrot, 2017) to develop autonomy (Benson, 2011).

Furthermore, the blended course design engaged students in problems that do not have ready-made answers, which led them to activate their problem-solving capacity and concomitantly make decisions (Illes, 2012). These skills fostered by Moodle LMS environment led them to develop self-organization skills and metacognitive strategies (Toffoli & Perrot, 2017), which are among the essential components of the execution and development of autonomy (Lai, 2019). As such, Moodle LMS played a facilitative role in transforming students into autonomous language learners who can make decisions and solve problems (Vovides et al., 2007) in that Moodle LMS provided the students with the ground to expand their background knowledge in discussion topics and augment their vocabulary knowledge as well as grammar repertoire besides developing information sequencing and discourse organisation (Hinkel, 2018). Further, students could communicate with other students and their teacher in collaborative, interactive, and autonomous manners (Cowie & Sakui, 2013), which served as a springboard for students to develop autonomy by assigning

them control over their language learning in relation to the discussion skills. This finding is also aligned with Tütüncü and Aksu's (2018) study revealing that speaking skills could be augmented through the flipped classroom.

In addition to explicit instruction to develop metacognitive skills in face-to-face sessions, Moodle LMS enabled students to set their goals as well as reflect on their language learning process and strategies (Cotterall, 2000). Students also had time to raise learning awareness by specifying objectives and identifying strategies as well as resources so that they could even reflect critically on the effectiveness of their learning environment. They had opportunities on Moodle LMS to negotiate the meaning necessary for comprehensible input and output (Pica, 1987) by actively participating in discussions.

Theoretically, the integration of the Moodle LMS into developing discussion skills in English mediated the interaction between "the in-group 'we' with the autobiographical 'I,'" (Little & Throne, 2017, p. 24). Moreover, the Moodle LMS enabled students to work through the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962), where they could negotiate meaning when communicational breakdowns occurred (Schmidt, 1990; Long, 1991). In a student-centered environment, the Moodle LMS exacerbated the transition from object-regulation to self-regulation in addition to students' interactions and cooperation with others (Murray, 2014). As such, the sociocultural theory provided vistas into the intertangled relationship between language learning and the autonomy development process.

5. Conclusion

In brief, integrating LMSs into face-to-face lessons could promote learner autonomy by fostering metacognitive skills with socio-cognitive and socio-emotional endorsement in addition to removing time and resource constraints. Therefore, this study offers pedagogical implications for policymakers, teacher educators, and teachers. They should consider benefitting from LMSs to support autonomous language learners since '"autonomy is a fundamental human need' (Ryan & Deci, 2006, p.1580). Autonomy should also be among language learning and teaching goals, not to shape students' identities in predetermined ways but to guide them to transform their potential into kinetics (Ushioda, 2011). As shown in this study, blended courses benefitting from LMSs, such as the Moodle LMS in this study, might be integrated into English classes and other foreign language classes. This study is not without limitations. As it is a qualitative study, the findings are not decisive but suggestive. Further, the participants were high school students with high academic success, motivation, agency, and computer literacy. Despite these limitations, this study suggests that LMSs, in essence, could be utilized as facilitative environments in developing learner autonomy, given the students' and teachers' increased familiarity with online tools during the Covid-19 pandemic. Further research could be conducted in other K-12 contexts and higher education institutions to expand the applicability and generalizability of these findings. In the post-pandemic area, blended instruction promises to be useful to reshape the way language lessons are delivered (Dixon et al., 2021).

Note on Ethical Issues

The author confirms that the study does not need ethics committee approval since the data was collected between 2018 and 2019. (Date of Confirmation: 20/01/2023)

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Appendix

The density of the emerging main and sub-themes

Main Themes	Density	Sub-themes	Density
Metacognitive dimension	55	Favouring independent mind	12
		Raising learning awareness	14
		Making elf-reflection	18
		Developing self-regulatory skills	11
Socio-cognitive dimension	42	Questioning mind maps	8
		Reconceptualising learning	13
		Adopting inquiring stance	12
		Embracing social criticality	9
Socio-emotional dimension	31	Benefiting from virtual sociability	15
		Enjoying online group study	16