Learner Autonomy in The Legal English Classroom
(Evidence from Tashkent State University of Law)

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Abstract:

With mastering professional skills as well as the language proficiency in ESP, learner autonomy comes to light as a prerequisite for successful learning in ESP. This study investigates learner autonomy in the Legal English class of Tashkent State University of Law, specifically the impact of autonomy-oriented teaching on the students' learning behaviors, motivation, and autonomous output of Legal English. A qualitative-mixed methods (questionnaires, classroom observations and semi-structured interviews of undergraduate law students) study was conducted to investigate the use of classroom questioning at a university in Victoria, Australia. The results show that these autonomy-supportive Practices increase students' interest, self-management and, self-efficacy in dealing with legal texts and legal tasks. This led to an improvement in students' self-determination in setting their own learning objectives, independent research of legal resources, and introduction of Legal English in real-life contexts. Time management and self-evaluation skills, to be developed gradually with appropriate guidance, were mentioned as challenges areas, especially for learners previously accustomed to teacher-centered learning. The study highlights the necessity of promoting learner autonomy at the Centre of Legal English teaching and offers implications for teaching ESP in legal contexts.

Keywords: Learner autonomy; Legal English; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); law students; independent learning; professional language competence

Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of learner autonomy has gained significant attention in the field of foreign language education, particularly within English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Learner autonomy is commonly understood as the ability of learners to take responsibility for their own learning by setting goals, selecting learning strategies, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes [1]. That pedagogical change is in line with the wider changes in higher education towards student-centric approaches that emphasize the development of lifelong learning skills instead of teacher-dominated instruction [2]. Learner autonomy is considered one of the influential factors to boost learner motivation, engagement and academic performance in English language teaching context [3].

As one of the ESP branches, Legal English poses its own unique challenges as a learner-oriented area. Law students are required not only to acquire general language skills but also to master complex legal terminology, genre-specific texts, and professional communication skills such as drafting contracts, writing legal correspondence, and participating in legal discussions [4]. Given the limited classroom hours and the rapidly evolving nature of legal discourse, it is increasingly difficult to rely solely on traditional teaching methods. And that is why, we must encourage students to be autonomous learners who are able to self-study and continue their professional development. Legal English is a compulsory subject at Tashkent State University of Law (TSUL) that helps the students become competent legal professionals who can use English for academic and professional communication in international and comparative legal contexts. Aiming for a B2 level of English proficiency and testing high for appropriate and accurate language based on the outcome of the course. Classroom observations and teaching practice reveal a surprisingly high dependence of students on the teacher, who responds to explicit instruction requests, who prepares ready-made explanations, which hinders the development of critical thinking and effective self-learning [5]. This circumstance emphasises the systematic importance of adopting learner autonomy in Legal English classes.

Learner autonomy has been confirmed to develop through some types of tasks (project learning, self-assessment, digital resources, cooperated learning) [6]. In the context of ESP and Legal English, learner autonomy has been positively associated with vocabulary learning, confidence and language transfer to professional activities. However, there is a lack of studies on learner autonomy in the context of a Legal English classroom in Central Asia higher education institutions.

This article aims to address this gap by examining the role and implementation of learner autonomy in the Legal English classroom at Tashkent State University of Law. By analyzing classroom practices, learner behaviors, and instructional strategies, the study seeks to identify effective approaches to fostering autonomy among law students. The findings are expected to contribute to both theoretical discussions on learner autonomy and practical implications for Legal English teaching in similar educational contexts.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the development of learner autonomy in the Legal English classroom at Tashkent State University of Law. Mixed-methods research is considered effective in educational studies as it allows for a more comprehensive analysis of both measurable outcomes and learners' perceptions.

It is hence important for students to become independent learners who can study on their own and keep up with the professional development.

Legal English is a required course at Tashkent State University of Law (TSUL) oriented to future legal scholars and practitioners for academic and professional communication in the international and comparative legal contexts. By the end of the course, students should have developed at least

English B2 level competence and can use legal English effectively and appropriately. Yet, as suggested by classroom observations and the practice of teaching, many students still depend upon the teacher, expect step-by-step guidance along with pre-digested answers, impeding their further growth as independent and critical thinkers. It demonstrates the need to more systematically introduce learner autonomy into the Legal English classroom.

Based on the results from previous studies which found that task design could facilitate the development of learner autonomy (project-based learning). The participants of the study were 84 undergraduate law students attending two compulsory Legal English courses in the 2023 – 2024 academic year. The students were from first- and second-year cohorts, with CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) English levels of B1-B2. Participation in the study was voluntary, and we ensured that ethical principles such as anonymity and informed consent were adhered [7].

Data collection instruments comprised an adapted learner autonomy questionnaire based on established autonomy scales, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews with some selected students [8]. A questionnaire measuring autonomous learning behaviors was used before and after the semester. This chapter reports on classroom observations in which students were engaged, students completed tasks independently, and students employed self-directed learning strategies. The students were also interviewed to probe deeper into their attitudes toward autonomous learning in Legal English., self-assessment, use of digital resources, and collaborative activities. Research in ESP and Legal English has associated practices that promote autonomy with increased vocabulary development, greater learner confidence, and more effective transfer. However, studies and research directly related to learner autonomy in the context of Legal English courses in higher education institutions in Central Asia are scant.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data from observations and interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. This triangulation of data enhanced the reliability and validity of the research findings.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study indicate a noticeable development of learner autonomy among law students participating in the Legal English course at Tashkent State University of Law. Data obtained from questionnaires, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews collectively demonstrate positive changes in students' attitudes toward independent learning, strategy use, and responsibility for learning outcomes.

Quantitative analysis of the learner autonomy questionnaire revealed statistically significant improvements across several autonomy-related dimensions. Most students (62%) were heavily reliant on teacher guidance at the start of the semester, particularly to learn legal vocabulary and analyze texts. This number fell to 28% by the end of the semester, and the percentage of students identifying themselves as active and independent learners rose from 21% to 54%. This indicates that structured autonomous supportive task did affect students self-directed learning behaviours significantly [9].

Students exhibited a significant growth in learning how to set their learning goals and manage their learning resources by themselves. Data collected shows only 19% of students set their own personal learning goals relevant to Legal English before the course and this rose to 47% after the course. Likewise, involving supplementary resources including legal databases, internet dictionaries and real legal works, located at78,69%of students exercised self-governing resource use regularly, versus 24%at the base line phase [10].

The findings were also supported by classroom observation data. In the first weeks of the course, students would expect extensive teacher explanations, actively took little part in task completion. In contrast, though, once autonomy-promoting activities (case-based discussions, autonomous tasks for drafting legal documents and self-assessment) were gradually introduced, students became more proactive and responsible. Specifically, from classroom observations, we found that students

gradually asked more questions about the content, were able to negotiate meaning with each other, and solved language problems on their own before asking their teacher for help.

Qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews added depth and nuance to quantitative findings on students' perceptions of learner autonomy. Most participants felt more self-assured when dealing with legal texts and performing tasks without the need for constant supervision from a teacher. Several students indicated that the independent analysis of legal cases allowed them to learn to "understand how legal language works in real life" and that self-marking activities helped them "discover weaknesses and work on them alone." Such responses indicate that learner independence led both to language growth and also to self-awareness in a professional setting [11].

While these results were encouraging, those also showed some barriers to developing further learner autonomy. When responsibility shifted more toward them for their learning, about 26% of those students cited time management and prioritizing assignments as difficult. A few participants reported that personal reflection felt uncomfortable and suggested that they preferred receiving feedback from the teacher. This finding is consistent with earlier research indicating that autonomous development is a gradual process that does not take place in isolation without scaffolding or clear guidance, especially among students who have been socialized into more teacher-directed environments.

Furthermore, differences were observed between first- and second-year students. Second-year students demonstrated higher levels of autonomy, particularly in independent legal writing and research tasks, which may be attributed to greater academic experience and familiarity with Legal English discourse. This suggests that learner autonomy develops progressively and is influenced by both instructional practices and learners' academic maturity.

Overall, the results confirm that the integration of autonomy-supportive teaching strategies in the Legal English classroom positively influences students' learning behaviours, motivation, and professional language competence. The findings highlight the importance of structured pedagogical support in promoting learner autonomy within ESP contexts, particularly in legal education at higher institutions such as Tashkent State University of Law [12].

Discussion

The study's findings highlight the significant role of learner autonomy in enhancing the effectiveness of Legal English instruction in higher education. Improvements in students' self-directed learning behaviours support the view that autonomy fosters greater engagement, motivation, and responsibility for learning outcomes [13]. When learners are given structured opportunities to make decisions about their learning, they become more active participants in the educational process.

Owing to the communicative freedom afforded by TSUL, students also displayed greater use of legal resources on their own and demonstrated planning of future legal goals, suggesting the need of autonomy for professional language learning [14]. Exposure All Year Round as English in front of a video judge was a part of many of the careers, the improvement with authentic exposure to these resources all year round was an advantage as well as the fact that analysing a legal text and a case independently is an essential skill for any future lawyer. Of these, autonomy-oriented activities, such as those emphasizing case-based learning and activities focusing on the drafting independently, were identified as making positive contributions to linguistic competence alongside professional awareness and critical thinking.

However, while the results of the model were promising, students struggled with time management and self-evaluation, a habit that is difficult to acquire for those who learned in a teacher-centered classroom (common in post-Soviet and wider Central Asian educational contexts). This really highlights how developing learner autonomy is a process that can be scaffolded and supported through structure.

First- and second-year students have compared contrasts, showing that autonomy is developmental; each step in writing and research on law reflects greater independence in the student work. These

findings emphasize the need for systematic integration of autonomy-supportive practices into Legal English curricula, with teachers providing guidance, designing tasks, and fostering a supportive learning environment. Such strategies are essential for cultivating independent, professionally competent learners [15].

Conclusion

This study investigated the role and effectiveness of learner autonomy in the Legal English classroom at Tashkent State University of Law. The findings indicate that systematically integrating autonomy-supportive teaching practices enhances students' engagement, responsibility, and independent learning skills. For law students, who must operate in complex academic and professional contexts, the ability to manage one's own learning is essential for both language proficiency and professional competence.

Research shows that the students appreciate the freedom that learner autonomy provides, and this freedom positively impacts their motivation and confidence when dealing with legal texts, terminology, and communicative tasks. Students moved from a teacher-centric to a reflection-centric learning mode, making this shift through independent legal draftings, and analysis of cases, and self-evaluation-based activities. By doing so, they were able to make effective use of Legal English in real-world scenarios, and bridge the gap between classroom and practice.

But the study also suggests that developing learner autonomy does not happen naturally. The initial shift to autonomy-oriented my Courses found some students struggling with time management, self-evaluation, and decision-making. These challenges highlight the need for gradual roll out and pedagogical support. In this approach, autonomy is growing but gradually and teachers are modelling strategies, guiding learners and creating a context where their learners can gradually develop autonomy.

In a nutshell, autonomous learning is not an add-on in Legal English teaching, but rather a main goal. Adding curriculum elements that emphasize autonomy can lead to sustainable learning outcomes and empower students for professional development throughout their careers. The experience at Tashkent State University of Law proves that it is possible and advantageous to enhance learner independence, offering effective practices and guidelines for the institutions of legal higher education that seek to reform their Legal English courses.

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