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Research Article

Exploring the Role of Self-Directed Learning in the Development of Lifelong Learning Competences among English Studies Students

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Abstract

Self-directed learning (SDL) is increasingly recognised as central to the development of lifelong learning competences (LLCs) in higher education. However, qualitative evidence remains limited regarding how English Studies students enact SDL in practice, how contextual conditions shape these processes, and how SDL contributes to competence development over time. Guided by Knowles' theory of andragogy, Self-Determination Theory, and Zimmerman's self-regulated learning model, this study adopts an interpretivist qualitative case study design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate English Studies students and instructors at a Vietnamese university and analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Analysis was guided by a focused framework comprising four SDL practices involving goal-setting and planning; strategy use and monitoring; help-seeking and resource management; and reflection and self-evaluation and four lifelong learning competences: autonomy, adaptability, critical thinking, and reflective capacity. The findings show that students conceptualised SDL as an active, responsibility-driven process and enacted it through personalised planning, strategic learning behaviours, and selective use of digital and social resources. Goal-setting and planning emerged as the most dominant SDL practice, while reflection was frequently triggered by assessment and feedback rather than by deeper identity-oriented inquiry. SDL engagement was strongly shaped by contextual conditions, including instructional scaffolding, assessment design, feedback practices, digital tools, and time constraints. Students perceived sustained engagement in SDL as contributing to the development of autonomy, adaptability, critical thinking, and reflective capacity, though these competences developed unevenly. Overall, the study demonstrates that SDL and lifelong learning competences evolve through the dynamic interaction of learner agency and contextual support rather than through individual effort alone. The findings highlight the need for structured yet autonomy-supportive learning environments to foster sustainable self-directed learning in English Studies programmes.

Keywords

English communication skills, English for Specific Purposes, software industry, Ho Chi Minh City

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

In contemporary higher education, graduates are increasingly expected to manage their own learning beyond formal instruction. Rapid technological change, evolving

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professional demands, and expanding knowledge ecosystems have intensified the need for learners who can regulate, adapt, and sustain learning over time. Consequently, self-directed learning (SDL) has been widely recognised as a key mechanism for fostering lifelong learning competences (LLCs), including autonomy, adaptability, critical thinking, and reflective capacity.(Candy, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Knowles, 1975)

SDL is commonly conceptualised as a learner-managed, goal-oriented process involving planning, strategy use, resource mobilisation, and evaluation of outcomes. Contemporary models emphasise SDL as cyclical and developmental rather than linear or trait-based. Knowles's (1975) andragogy, Zimmerman's (2002) self-regulated learning cycle, and Garrison's (1997) SDL framework converge in highlighting iterative phases of forethought, performance, and reflection, shaped by both learner agency and contextual conditions. These perspectives suggest that SDL quality depends not only on individual initiative but also on instructional design, feedback, and learning environments.

English Studies programmes provide a particularly relevant context for examining SDL. Students are required to engage in sustained language development, interpretive analysis, and critical engagement with texts across diverse genres and tasks. Such demands extend beyond classroom instruction and require learners to plan, monitor, and reflect on learning continuously. Moreover, the increasing integration of digital and AI-supported tools has expanded access to resources while simultaneously raising concerns about superficial engagement and uncritical reliance. Understanding how English Studies students enact SDL within these conditions is therefore essential for promoting meaningful lifelong learning.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite broad agreement on the importance of SDL and lifelong learning, existing research presents several limitations. Much of the literature treats SDL as a general learner disposition or measures it through readiness scales, offering limited insight into how SDL is enacted in concrete academic practices. These approaches often overlook the task-specific, developmental, and context-dependent nature of self-directed learning.

Similarly, lifelong learning competences are frequently discussed as abstract graduate attributes, with limited empirical examination of how specific SDL practices contribute to their development. Autonomy, adaptability, critical thinking, and reflective capacity are often assumed outcomes of higher education rather than examined as competences emerging through particular learning processes.

Within English Studies, qualitative research on SDL remains limited, particularly in the Vietnamese higher education context. Existing studies tend to prioritise learning strategies or outcomes without closely examining how students plan, monitor, seek support, and reflect across authentic academic tasks, or how instructional and institutional conditions shape these processes. As a result, there is insufficient understanding of how SDL functions as a developmental pathway toward lifelong learning competences in English Studies programmes.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study addresses these gaps by examining self-directed learning as a practice-based, cyclical process and by explicitly linking SDL practices to the development of lifelong learning competences. Adopting a focused 4×4 analytical framework, the study examines four SDL practices—goal-setting and planning, strategy use and monitoring, help-seeking and resource management, and reflection and self-evaluation—and their perceived contribution to autonomy, adaptability, critical thinking, and reflective capacity.

Empirically, the study contributes qualitative, discipline-specific evidence grounded in students' and instructors' lived experiences, responding to calls for context-sensitive research on SDL enactment. Pedagogically, the findings offer practical insights into how structured guidance, feedback, and supportive learning environments can foster sustainable SDL rather than assuming autonomy develops independently. At a broader level, the study informs curriculum design and institutional efforts to embed lifelong learning competences meaningfully within higher education.

Overall, the study positions SDL as both a developmental process and a developmental outcome, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between learner agency and contextual support in cultivating sustainable lifelong learning in English Studies.

2. Literature review

This review synthesizes scholarship on self-directed learning (SDL) and lifelong learning competences (LLCs) to ground the study's analytical framework. It first conceptualizes SDL as a cyclical, learner-managed process, then defines four LLCs relevant to higher education and language-related disciplines, and finally clarifies why a focused practice-to-competence approach is necessary to address gaps in SDL research, especially in EFL/English Studies contexts where digital tools and assessment pressures shape how autonomy is enacted.

2.1 Self-Directed Learning as a Cyclical and Situated Process

Self-directed learning is commonly defined as a process in which learners take primary responsibility for diagnosing learning needs, setting goals, identifying resources, selecting and implementing strategies, and evaluating outcomes (Knowles, 1975). This definition positions learners as active agents whose learning is intentionally planned and regulated rather than passively received. Subsequent theorization has emphasized that SDL is not a linear checklist but a cyclical process shaped by feedback, task demands, and contextual constraints.

Zimmerman's self-regulated learning (SRL) model conceptualizes learning as a recursive cycle comprising forethought, performance, and self-reflection phases (Zimmerman, 2002). Although SDL and SRL are not identical constructs, SRL offers a compact process model that clarifies how learning episodes unfold through planning, execution/monitoring, and reflective adaptation - mechanisms that align closely with SDL enactment in academic settings. Complementing this process view, Garrison's (1997) model highlights the interaction among cognitive responsibility, self-management, and motivation, foregrounding the idea that SDL depends not only on strategic skill but also on learners' willingness to assume ownership and persist through difficulty. developmental orientation of SDL.

Taken together, these models support an understanding of SDL as situated and variable: learners enact SDL with different quality and intensity depending on the clarity of tasks, availability of feedback, and motivational or institutional conditions. This cyclical and contextual interpretation provides the conceptual basis for operationalizing SDL in observable practices rather than treating it as a stable trait.

2.2 Operationalizing SDL Through Four Observable Practices

To maintain analytic precision and alignment with interview-based data, this study operationalizes SDL as four observable practices that map onto the SRL cycle:

1. Goal-setting and planning (forethought)
2. Strategy use and monitoring (performance)
3. Help-seeking and resource management (performance; environmental structuring and regulatory support)
4. Reflection and self-evaluation (self-reflection; adaptive inferences)

Goal-setting and planning provide direction and intentionality for learning episodes. In SRL research, goal specificity and proximal planning strengthen persistence and self-efficacy (Schunk, 1990), while in SDL theory, goal-setting is central to learner initiative and ownership (Knowles, 1975). In language-related disciplines, planning typically includes prioritizing skill areas (e.g., reading, writing, speaking), structuring revision routines, and organizing long-term projects.

Strategy use and monitoring capture how learners select and regulate cognitive and metacognitive techniques such as summarizing, note-taking, inferencing, elaboration, and task-based rehearsal (Anderson, 1985; Oxford, 1990). Metacognition, defined as monitoring and regulation of cognition, enables learners to track understanding, evaluate whether strategies are working, and adapt approaches when progress stalls (Flavell, 1979). Within Zimmerman's model, these behaviours align with the performance phase (self-control and self-observation), while within SDL they indicate how learners manage task demands through intentional strategy deployment.

Help-seeking and resource management are treated here as regulatory supports rather than dependence. In SRL literature, managing time, environment, and social support, including strategic help-seeking, constitutes an important dimension of self-regulation (Pintrich, 2000). In language learning contexts, resource management extends to mobilizing peer networks, consulting instructors, selecting digital tools, and structuring study environments to sustain attention and effort.

Finally, reflection and self-evaluation represent the mechanisms through which learners close the learning loop. Reflection involves reviewing processes and outcomes, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and making decisions about future improvement (Moon, 2004). In SRL terms, self-evaluation and adaptive inferences drive the next cycle of goal-setting and strategy choices (Zimmerman, 2002). In academic language learning, reflective practices often occur through revision cycles, feedback interpretation, and post-task error analysis.

This operationalization deliberately avoids expansive strategy taxonomies in favour of a compact practice framework that fits qualitative accounts and supports clear mapping to developmental outcomes.

2.3 Lifelong Learning Competences in Higher EducationFactors Influencing Language Variation

Lifelong learning competences refer to transferable capacities that enable individuals to sustain learning over time and across contexts, particularly under conditions of change and uncertainty. In higher education, lifelong learning is widely framed as a graduate outcome reflecting the need for autonomy, adaptability, critical engagement, and reflective development in complex professional environments.

2.4 Four LLCs and Their Conceptual Links to SDL Practices

Autonomy refers to learners' ownership over decisions

about what, how, and when to learn, alongside regulation of behaviour and responsibility for outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Knowles, 1975). Within SDL, autonomy is enacted when learners set goals, plan routines, choose and adjust strategies, and manage resources without constant external direction. Autonomy is treated as both a partial starting condition and a competence that can strengthen through repeated cycles of self-directed engagement.

Adaptability is the capacity to adjust strategies, behaviours, and perspectives in response to changing demands and novel situations (Pulakos et al., 2000). In SDL, adaptability is expressed through strategy switching, recalibrating learning approaches, transferring methods across tasks, and flexibly responding to feedback and constraints. Garrison's emphasis on self-management and cognitive responsibility helps frame adaptability as an outcome of sustained regulation under variable task conditions (Garrison, 1997).

Critical thinking involves analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information to make reasoned judgements, including scrutiny of credibility and justification of decisions (Brookfield, 1987). In SDL, critical thinking is implicated when learners evaluate resources (including digital/AI content), assess strategy effectiveness, interrogate feedback, and choose among competing sources or approaches. Transformative learning theory further highlights critical reflection on assumptions as central to adult learning development (Mezirow, 1991).

Reflective capacity is the competence of examining experience to generate insight and guide future action (Moon, 2004). In SDL cycles, reflection and self-evaluation support cumulative development by turning task outcomes into informed adjustments, preventing learning from becoming repetitive or purely reactive. Reflective capacity can be strengthened through structured self-evaluation, feedback interpretation, and deliberate revision practices.

Conceptually, these competences relate to the SDL cycle as follows: planning supports autonomy; monitoring and adaptation support adaptability; evaluative resource use supports critical thinking; and reflection supports reflective capacity while also feeding forward into stronger planning and regulation.

2.5 Motivation and Context: SDT as a Narrow Explanatory Lens

While SDL emphasizes learner agency, agency is not exercised in a vacuum. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) explains how motivation and persistence are shaped by satisfaction of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In this study, SDT is applied narrowly as an explanatory lens for why learners sustain or disengage from SDL practices under real academic pressures.

When students experience autonomy support (meaningful choice and ownership), they may be more likely to set goals and experiment with strategies. When they experience competence support (clear criteria, manageable challenge, usable feedback), they may monitor progress more effectively and persist through difficulty. When they experience relatedness (supportive peers and approachable instructors), they may seek help strategically and engage in collaborative reflection. SDT therefore helps interpret motivational conditions as enablers or barriers that shape the quality and continuity of SDL cycles, without expanding the study into a broad motivational taxonomy.

2.6 SDL in English Studies and Digital Learning Ecologies

SDL is especially relevant in language-related disciplines because language proficiency develops cumulatively through sustained practice, strategic regulation, and exposure to diverse texts and communicative demands. Strategy research in language learning emphasizes that learners select strategies in task- and context-sensitive ways rather than following universal prescriptions (Oxford, 1990). However, language learners may struggle to articulate goals, monitor progress, or evaluate strategy effectiveness in environments where teacher-centred instruction remains dominant or where assessment demands compress learning into short-term performance cycles. This reinforces the importance of examining SDL as enacted practice rather than as abstract readiness.

Digital technologies further complicate contemporary SDL. Online resources, learning apps, and AI language tools expand access to practice and explanations, potentially supporting independent learning and strategy experimentation. Yet increased access does not automatically produce strategic learning; without metacognitive regulation and critical evaluation, technology use can become superficial or dependency-forming. Cazan and Stan (2015) argue that learners often require guidance to move from tool usage to strategic learning behaviour. In digital-rich environments, SDL therefore includes not only using tools, but also evaluating credibility, verifying outputs, and deciding when technology supports learning versus replaces cognitive work.

2.7 Empirical Links Between SDL and Lifelong Learning, and Remaining Gaps

Prior research links SDL to stronger academic engagement, self-efficacy, and learning persistence. Quantitative studies frequently report positive associations between SDL readiness and academic outcomes (Cazan & Stan, 2015), while conceptual work emphasizes the importance of scaffolding

and instructional design in supporting novice autonomous learners (Song & Hill, 2007). Research also suggests that SDL-related behaviours such as reflection and independent inquiry can support deeper learning and competence development (Loyens et al., 2008). In Vietnam, recent work indicates that English majors can demonstrate moderate-to-high SDL levels and that SDL is positively related to performance under online or disrupted learning conditions (Cuong, 2023). However, much existing evidence relies on self-report scales that treat SDL as a general characteristic and may not capture how students actually enact planning, monitoring, help-seeking, and reflection within specific tasks.

Three gaps remain salient. First, SDL is often treated as a stable trait rather than a developmental and context-dependent process. Second, the dominance of readiness measures obscures the mechanisms through which SDL contributes to specific competences such as autonomy, adaptability, critical thinking, and reflective capacity. Third, discipline-specific qualitative studies in English Studies/EFL contexts, especially those accounting for digital/AI tool use and institutional constraints, remain limited.

To address these gaps, the present study adopts a focused 4×4 practice-to-competence framework that (a) operationalizes SDL as four observable practices aligned with a cyclical process model, (b) examines four LLC outcomes that plausibly develop through repeated SDL engagement, and (c) interprets motivational and institutional conditions as contextual influences that enable or constrain sustained participation in the SDL cycle.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate how self-directed learning (SDL) contributes to the development of lifelong learning competences (LLCs) among English Studies majors. A case study approach was appropriate because SDL is a complex, contextually situated process that unfolds through learners' perceptions, practices, and interactions within authentic academic environments (Yin, 2017). Rather than seeking generalisation, the study aimed to generate rich, interpretive insights into how SDL is enacted and experienced in higher education language contexts.

The research was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that learning realities are socially constructed and that meaning is co-created through participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Accordingly, the study prioritised participants' subjective accounts of learning practices, decision-making, and reflection. Analysis was guided by a locked analytical framework that linked four SDL practices namely goal-setting and planning; strategy use and monitoring; help-seeking and resource management; and reflection and self-evaluation, with four lifelong learning competences: autonomy, adaptability, critical thinking, and reflective capacity. This framework ensured conceptual coherence between the research questions, data collection instruments, and thematic analysis, while allowing sufficient flexibility for inductive interpretation.

Data were generated primarily through semi-structured interviews with students and instructors, enabling in-depth exploration of SDL enactment across tasks, courses, and learning conditions. Conducting the study online allowed participants from multiple institutions to reflect on SDL practices as they occurred within digitally mediated learning environments, which are increasingly central to contemporary English Studies programmes.

3.2 Participants

3.2.1 Student Participants

Student participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure rich, information-dense data from individuals with demonstrated experience in self-directed (Patton, 2014). An initial pool of sixteen undergraduate students enrolled in English Studies or closely related programmes volunteered to participate. All volunteers completed a brief screening questionnaire designed to assess engagement with the four SDL practices underpinning the study.

Based on screening results and preliminary interview responses, three students were excluded due to minimal or inconsistent engagement with SDL behaviours. The final sample therefore comprised thirteen undergraduate students from Years 1 to 4 of study. This refinement was consistent with qualitative sampling principles, prioritising depth, relevance, and analytic focus over representativeness.

The final cohort included students with varying levels of SDL experience (novice to experienced), enabling examination of developmental variation across academic stages. Participants regularly engaged in independent learning activities such as self-paced digital study, project-based assignments, reflective tasks, and peer-supported learning. Most reported frequent use of digital tools for language learning, reflecting the technologically mediated contexts in which SDL was enacted.

3.2.2 Instructor Participants

To triangulate student accounts, two instructors from English Studies programmes participated in the study. Both held Master's degrees in Applied Linguistics or TESOL and had extensive teaching experience in courses incorporating independent and self-directed learning components.

Instructors were purposively selected based on their professional role and familiarity with students' learning behaviours rather than through screening procedures.

Instructor interviews provided complementary perspectives on how SDL practices are observed, scaffolded, and constrained within instructional contexts, and how students' autonomy and lifelong learning competences develop over time. These perspectives enhanced the credibility of the findings by situating student-reported SDL behaviours within broader pedagogical and institutional conditions

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in two sequential stages: an initial online screening questionnaire administered to student volunteers, followed by semi-structured interviews with selected students and instructors. All procedures were carried out online, enabling participation from multiple institutions and reflecting the digitally mediated learning environments in which self-directed learning (SDL) practices commonly occur.

In the first stage, student volunteers completed a brief online screening questionnaire designed to assess engagement with the four SDL practices underpinning the study: goal-setting and planning, strategy use and monitoring, help-seeking and resource management, and reflection and self-evaluation. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items adapted from established SDL and self-regulated learning literature (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Knowles, 1975; Zimmerman, 2002). Responses were evaluated using predefined inclusion criteria requiring a minimum overall level of SDL engagement and adequate engagement across multiple SDL domains. This screening ensured that interview participants had sufficient experience with SDL practices to provide information-rich accounts, while reflective depth and meaning-making were explored more fully during interviews.

In the second stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen eligible undergraduate students and two instructors from English Studies programs. Student interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and were conducted via Zoom or Google Meet, depending on participant preference. The interview protocol was structured around the study's locked 4×4 analytical framework, prompting students to describe how they enacted the four SDL practices and how these practices contributed to the development of autonomy, adaptability, critical thinking, and reflective capacity. The semi-structured format allowed for probing and follow-up questions while maintaining consistent thematic coverage across participants.

Instructor interviews, of similar duration, focused on how SDL behaviours were observed in instructional contexts, how autonomy and strategy use were scaffolded through task design and feedback, and how instructors perceived students' development of lifelong learning competences. These interviews served a triangulation function, providing instructional and contextual perspectives that complemented student narratives.

All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and translated into English by the researcher to support systematic thematic analysis while preserving participants' intended meanings.

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all procedures adhered to principles of informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and secure data management. Digital data were stored in password-protected, encrypted files accessible only to the researcher, and additional safeguards were applied to ensure secure online communication during virtual interviews.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, guided by a locked 4×4 analytical framework linking four self-directed learning (SDL) practices with four lifelong learning competences (LLCs). This approach enabled systematic yet flexible analysis while ensuring conceptual coherence between the research questions, theoretical framing, and interpretation of findings.

In the first phase, the researcher familiarised herself with the dataset through repeated reading of all interview transcripts. Initial observations were recorded regarding participants' descriptions of SDL practices, perceived competence development, and contextual influences. This phase supported immersion in the data and the identification of preliminary patterns.

During the second phase, transcripts were examined line by line to generate initial codes. Each meaningful segment was assigned a descriptive code and mapped to the relevant SDL practice or LLC domain. Coding was conducted manually using structured Excel sheets to document excerpts, codes, analytic notes, and theoretical alignment.

In the third phase, conceptually related codes were clustered into preliminary subthemes. For example, codes related to time allocation, workload management, and strategy modification were grouped under broader categories of planning regulation or strategy adaptation. This phase focused on identifying patterned meaning across participants rather than isolated instances.

The fourth phase involved reviewing and refining themes to ensure internal coherence and clear boundaries between categories. Coded extracts were revisited to confirm that themes accurately represented shared experiences and aligned with the locked analytical framework. Overlapping or weakly

supported themes were merged or redefined.

In the fifth phase, themes were clearly defined and named. Analytic memos were written to articulate how each theme addressed specific research questions and related to theoretical constructs from self-directed learning, self-regulated learning, and lifelong learning literature.

The final phase involved producing the analytic narrative presented in Section 4. Themes were synthesised into a coherent account of how students enacted SDL practices, how these practices were shaped by contextual conditions, and how they contributed to the development of lifelong learning competences. Interpretation remained grounded in participant accounts and was situated within relevant theoretical perspectives.

To strengthen dependability and confirmability, an audit trail was maintained throughout the analysis, including raw transcripts, coding sheets, evolving codebooks, and analytic memos. An AI language model was used solely as an auxiliary consistency-checking tool to review the application of existing codes; all interpretive decisions remained with the researcher. Together, these procedures ensured methodological transparency, analytic rigour, and trustworthiness of the findings.

4. Research Findings

This section reports the findings in direct alignment with the four research questions. The analysis is grounded exclusively in participants' accounts and focuses on describing how English Studies majors enact self-directed learning (SDL), perceive its contribution to lifelong learning competences (LLCs), and experience contextual enablers and constraints. Interpretation is intentionally limited and deferred to the Discussion section.

4.1 RQ1 – Enactment of Self-Directed Learning Practices

Participants consistently described self-directed learning as a planned and intentional process embedded in everyday academic routines. SDL was enacted primarily through goal-setting, time scheduling, task prioritisation, and planning informed by self-awareness. These practices were not described as isolated techniques but as interrelated behaviours that structured students' independent learning.

4.1.1 Multi-level Goal-Setting

Students distinguished clearly between short-term academic goals and longer-term developmental goals related to certification, graduation, and future careers. Short-term goals typically focused on grades or specific skill improvement, whereas long-term goals extended beyond immediate coursework.

One participant explained that "*my short-term goal is to get IELTS 6.5 or 7.0, but long-term I want to become an English teacher and continue studying after graduation*" (U10), illustrating how immediate targets were situated within a broader learning trajectory. Other students expressed similarly layered aspirations, combining institutional requirements with personal ambition. As U05 stated, "*I want IELTS 8.0 and to graduate with Distinction. That's what motivates me to study seriously*."

Instructor accounts suggested that while many students held such goals internally, these goals were not always clearly articulated or visible in classroom contexts. One lecturer noted that *"they have goals in mind, but they don't really talk about them clearly, especially weaker students"* (I01). This indicates a distinction between the presence of goals and their explicit communication.

4.1.2 Time Scheduling

Time scheduling functioned as a key organisational mechanism supporting SDL. Participants reported regulating study time through digital tools, handwritten planners, or internalised routines. One student described using Google Calendar to allocate study time, stating, "*I usually plan 2–3 hours per subject at night"* (U01). Others relied on habitual routines rather than written plans, such as U10, who noted, *"I don't write it down, but every night I know it's English time."*

Instructor perspectives indicated that visible scheduling behaviours were unevenly distributed across learners. As one instructor observed, *"only a few students really plan ahead. Those are usually the proactive ones*" (I02). This suggests that while scheduling was common among participants, it was not always observable in formal learning spaces.

4.1.3 Prioritisation under Academic Workload

When managing overlapping deadlines, students described prioritising tasks based on urgency, difficulty, and available time. One participant explained, "I check deadlines first, then divide tasks and do the most difficult subject earlier" (U02). Others adopted flexible prioritisation strategies that varied with time constraints. As U08 noted, "*if I only have a little time, I choose lighter tasks; if I have more time, I do the difficult ones."*

Instructor accounts indirectly supported these descriptions by noting that planning and prioritisation became most visible in structured contexts such as draft submission cycles or flipped-classroom preparation (I01; I02).

4.1.4 Planning Informed by Self-Awareness

Planning decisions were frequently informed by students' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. Several participants described allocating additional time to weaker

skills. For example, U09 stated, *"listening is my weakest skill, so I practise it every day."* Feedback also played a role in triggering plan revision. One student explained, *"when I got a low score, I changed my plan and spent more time reviewing"* (U04).

Instructor data suggested that self-awareness was unevenly developed, with some students remaining uncertain about what to prioritise. As one lecturer noted, *"some students are still confused about what exactly they should study"* (I02).

4.2 RQ2 – Strategy Use, Monitoring, and Adaptation

Students reported employing a wide range of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, often supported by digital tools. Strategy use was characterised by diversification, ongoing monitoring, and iterative adjustment rather than fixed routines.

4.2.1 Diversified Strategy Repertoires

Participants described using multiple strategies tailored to task demands. These included handwritten note-taking, mind mapping, immersive exposure, and differentiated approaches for theory-based versus skills-based learning. One student explained, "*for theory, I read and summarise; for skills, I practise tests and review mistakes"* (U05). Another emphasised the value of handwriting, noting that *"writing by hand helps me remember better, like teaching myself"* (U01).

4.2.2 Tech-Integrated Strategies

Digital tools formed an integral part of students' SDL practices. Participants reported using vocabulary applications, online platforms, mock-test websites, and AI tools to support learning. As U01 explained, *"I use flashcards, quizzes, and AI like ChatGPT to summarise lessons."*

Students emphasised selective and ethical use of technology. One participant stated, *"I use AI to explain, but I never copy. I still have to understand myself"* (U02). Others described reducing tool use when it interfered with focus or originality.

4.2.3 Monitoring Strategy Effectiveness

Monitoring was described as an evaluative process grounded in learning outcomes. Students assessed effectiveness based on performance, retention, and perceived improvement. One participant noted, *"if my results improve, the strategy works; if not, I change it"* (U02). Monitoring also included recognising mismatches between strategy difficulty and proficiency. As U05 explained, *"when I try levels that are not suitable for me and don't remember, I know it's not working."*

Evaluation extended to digital tools. Participants reported verifying AI output rather than accepting it uncritically, with U01 stating, *"ChatGPT is not always accurate, so I have to check again."*

4.2.4 Trial-and-Error Adjustment

Participants described abandoning ineffective strategies and replacing them through experimentation. One student reported, "*writing vocabulary again and again didn't work, so I switched to collocations"* (U09). Another explained reducing reliance on AI to preserve independent thinking: *"I reduced AI use because I wanted my own thinking"* (U04).

4.3 RQ3 – Perceived Contribution of SDL to Lifelong Learning Competences

Participants consistently perceived sustained engagement in self-directed learning as contributing to the development of lifelong learning competences, though the depth and visibility of these competences varied across domains. Autonomy was reported most frequently and explicitly, while adaptability, critical thinking, and reflective ability appeared more situationally and were often linked to specific learning demands or feedback events.

4.3.1 Autonomy

Autonomy emerged as the most salient and consistently articulated competence. Students described increased responsibility for setting goals, managing learning routines, and making decisions about resources and strategies. Rather than framing autonomy as an abstract attribute, participants described it through concrete behaviours associated with independent learning management.

Several students emphasised goal ownership and initiative, noting that they no longer relied solely on external direction. One participant explained, *"I always set my own goals and try to accomplish them myself"* (U04), while another reported growing confidence, stating, *"I feel more confident managing my learning now"* (U05). Autonomy was also reflected in students' willingness to engage in learning beyond formal requirements, such as seeking additional materials or practising independently.

Instructor accounts aligned with these perceptions, observing that students who demonstrated regular planning and self-monitoring behaviours tended to show greater confidence and independence in academic decision-making (I01). These accounts indicate that autonomy was both perceived internally by students and observable externally in learning behaviour.

4.3.2 Adaptability

Adaptability was evident in students' descriptions of adjusting strategies, learning approaches, or help-seeking behaviours when faced with difficulty or unfamiliar demands. Unlike autonomy, adaptability was often described in response to specific challenges rather than as a stable disposition.

Students frequently referred to changing strategies when initial approaches proved ineffective. As one participant noted, *"If one way doesn't work, I change or ask friends"* (U12). Others described adapting learning methods across subjects or contexts, particularly during transitions or when encountering new academic expectations. These adjustments were often pragmatic and task-driven, focusing on maintaining progress rather than optimising learning efficiency.

Instructor perspectives suggested that adaptability became more visible when tasks were clearly structured or repeated across time, allowing students to refine their approaches (I02). Overall, adaptability appeared as a responsive competence activated by contextual demands rather than a consistently articulated learning orientation.

4.3.3 Critical Thinking

Critical thinking was less frequently mentioned than autonomy and adaptability but was evident in students' accounts of resource evaluation, information comparison, and judgement-making, particularly in digital learning environments. Participants associated critical thinking primarily with how they processed and selected information rather than with abstract reasoning skills.

Several students described evaluating multiple sources before accepting information. One participant explained, *"I don't trust one source. I compare many before choosing"* (U08), while others referred to checking credibility or cross-referencing explanations. These practices were especially prominent when students used online materials or AI-generated content, where verification was perceived as necessary.

However, references to critical thinking were often linked to specific tasks, such as research assignments or debates, rather than described as a generalised habit. Instructor accounts supported this pattern, noting that critical thinking became most visible when tasks explicitly required justification, examples, or evidence (I01).

4.3.4 Reflective Ability

Reflective ability emerged through students' descriptions of reviewing performance, responding to feedback, and adjusting learning approaches. Reflection was most commonly triggered by external input, such as grades or teacher comments, rather than initiated spontaneously.

Students described revisiting assignments after receiving feedback to identify weaknesses and improve future performance. As one participant explained, *"After getting comments, I look back at my whole assignment to learn for next time"* (U10). Others described self-questioning practices, such as identifying why mistakes occurred or why strategies failed.

Instructor perspectives reinforced this pattern, observing that students who engaged in revision and reflection tended to show clearer improvement over time, while also noting that reflective accuracy varied, particularly among lower-performing students (I01; I02). These accounts indicate that reflective ability was present but unevenly developed.

4.4 RQ4 – Contextual Conditions Affecting SDL Engagement

Students' engagement in self-directed learning was shaped by a complex interplay of motivational, instructional, technological, and social conditions. These conditions functioned dynamically, at times enabling sustained engagement in SDL practices and at other times constraining learners' capacity to plan, monitor, and reflect effectively.

4.4.1 Motivational Conditions

Motivational conditions were central to students' ability to sustain SDL. Self-discipline emerged as a key internal enabler, frequently framed as a prerequisite for effective self-directed engagement. One participant stated plainly, *"The biggest problem is myself. Discipline is hard"* (U13), highlighting the perceived fragility of motivation.

At the same time, time pressure and fatigue were the most frequently cited motivational barriers. Heavy coursework, clustered assessments, and competing responsibilities reduced the time and energy available for independent learning. As one student noted, *"When there are many tests, I have no time for self-study"* (U03). In such contexts, SDL was often deprioritised or reduced to minimal maintenance.

4.4.2 Instructional Conditions

Instructional conditions played a significant role in shaping SDL engagement. Instructor guidance, particularly through the provision of recommended materials and early orientation, supported students' independent learning. One participant reported that *"lecturers introduce useful books and websites at the beginning"* (U08), which helped structure self-study.

Conversely, mismatches between teaching styles and learners' preferences constrained SDL engagement. Students described increased difficulty when instructional approaches did not align with their learning needs, as reflected in comments such as *"sometimes teaching style doesn't match my way of learning"* (U01). Limited access to timely feedback further reduced students' confidence in adjusting strategies.

Instructor accounts confirmed that SDL was often

embedded within task design rather than institutionalised broadly, making students' engagement dependent on course-level structures (I01; I02).

4.4.3 Technological Conditions

Technology functioned as both an enabler and a constraint within the SDL process. Learning management systems and online resources provided opportunities for independent practice, as one student noted: *"Extra exercises on the LMS help me practise"* (U08). Digital tools and AI applications also expanded access to explanations and examples.

At the same time, technology introduced significant distractions. Mobile phone use was frequently described as undermining concentration, with one participant admitting, *"Once I use my phone, I get distracted"* (U05). Students also reported limitations in institutional digital infrastructure, such as restricted access to academic databases.

4.4.4 Social Conditions

Social conditions influenced SDL through learning environments, peer relationships, and living arrangements. Quiet study spaces such as libraries supported concentration, with one student stating, *"The library is quiet, so I can focus"* (U03). Peer support functioned as both academic and motivational assistance, helping students clarify content and sustain effort.

Living independently increased responsibility for time management and self-regulation. As one participant explained, *"Living alone means I must manage everything myself"* (U04). While this independence supported autonomy, it also intensified the demands placed on learners' self-regulatory capacity.

5. Discussion

5.1 SDL as a Cyclical, Practice-Based Process

The findings position self-directed learning (SDL) as a cyclical, practice-based process rather than a fixed learner trait or stable disposition. Students' accounts demonstrate that SDL unfolds through iterative engagement with planning, strategy use, monitoring, and reflection, with learners repeatedly revisiting earlier phases in response to outcomes and feedback. This dynamic movement aligns closely with Zimmerman's (2002) self-regulated learning cycle, in which forethought, performance, and self-reflection operate recursively rather than sequentially.

At the same time, the findings extend Knowles' (1975) conceptualisation of SDL by illustrating how learner initiative is enacted through everyday academic practices rather than abstract self-management alone. SDL in this context was not characterised by complete independence from instruction, but by students' active regulation of goals, strategies, and resources within existing curricular structures. This reinforces contemporary views of SDL as a situated and developmental process shaped by experience, feedback, and contextual affordances, rather than as an inherent characteristic possessed by a subset of "autonomous" learners.

5.2 SDL Practices and Differential Competence Development

The uneven development of lifelong learning competences (LLCs) observed in the findings suggests that SDL does not cultivate all competences simultaneously or to the same degree. Autonomy and reflective ability emerged more strongly and consistently than adaptability and critical thinking, indicating that competences related to self-management and internal regulation may develop earlier or more visibly through SDL engagement.

This pattern supports prior research suggesting that learner autonomy and basic reflective regulation often precede more complex competences such as evaluative judgement and transfer across contexts. While planning, monitoring, and feedback-driven reflection directly support learners' capacity to manage their learning, adaptability and critical thinking appear to require additional conditions, including exposure to unfamiliar tasks, opportunities for comparison, and explicit demands for justification or transfer. The findings therefore highlight SDL as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the full development of lifelong learning competences, particularly those requiring higher-order evaluation and contextual flexibility.

5.3 Contextual Scaffolding and the Limits of Autonomy

The study further demonstrates that SDL is environmentally situated rather than self-sustaining in isolation. While learner agency and self-discipline were central to sustained SDL engagement, autonomy alone proved insufficient when instructional clarity, feedback access, or workload balance were lacking. Students' reliance on course structures, teacher guidance, and assessment design underscores the limits of unscaffolded autonomy, particularly for learners with developing self-regulatory capacity.

These findings align with Song and Hill's (2007) argument that SDL requires structured support to function developmentally, especially in formal educational contexts. Rather than diminishing autonomy, instructional scaffolding appeared to enable more meaningful self-direction by reducing uncertainty and cognitive overload. In this sense, SDL flourished most effectively in environments where

expectations were clear, resources were accessible, and feedback loops were present, allowing learners to focus on regulation and adaptation rather than survival or remediation.

5.4 Revisiting the 4×4 SDL–LLC Framework

Taken together, the findings provide empirical support for the proposed 4×4 SDL–LLC framework by demonstrating reciprocal interaction between SDL practices, competence development, and contextual conditions. The framework is validated not as a linear model but as a cyclical system in which SDL practices generate competence growth, and emerging competences, in turn, enhance learners' readiness for subsequent self-directed engagement.

Importantly, the findings show that SDL functions simultaneously as a mechanism for developing lifelong learning competences and as an outcome strengthened by those same competences. Autonomy supports initiative, adaptability enables strategy revision, critical thinking improves decision-making, and reflective ability closes the regulatory loop. Contextual conditions mediate this cycle by either amplifying or constraining learners' capacity to sustain high-quality SDL. This reciprocal logic reinforces the framework's central claim: sustainable self-directed learning emerges through the dynamic convergence of learner agency, regulatory practice, and supportive educational contexts.

5.5 Synthesis – Interaction between SDL Practices, Competence Development, and Context

Synthesising across the four research questions, the findings point to a cyclical and mutually reinforcing mechanism linking supportive contexts, SDL engagement, and the development of lifelong learning competences (LLCs). Rather than a linear sequence, students' accounts suggest a looped developmental trajectory: contextual conditions shape the quality of SDL engagement; sustained SDL engagement fosters competence growth; and strengthened competences, in turn, increase learners' readiness and confidence to re-enter and sustain subsequent SDL cycles.

Conceptually, this interaction can be represented as a cyclical model (Figure 5.1) in which enabling contexts (e.g., instructional clarity, accessible resources, supportive spaces, and stable motivation) facilitate engagement with the SDL cycle; SDL engagement cultivates autonomy, adaptability, critical thinking, and reflective ability; and these competences then function as developmental resources that support more sophisticated self-direction over time.

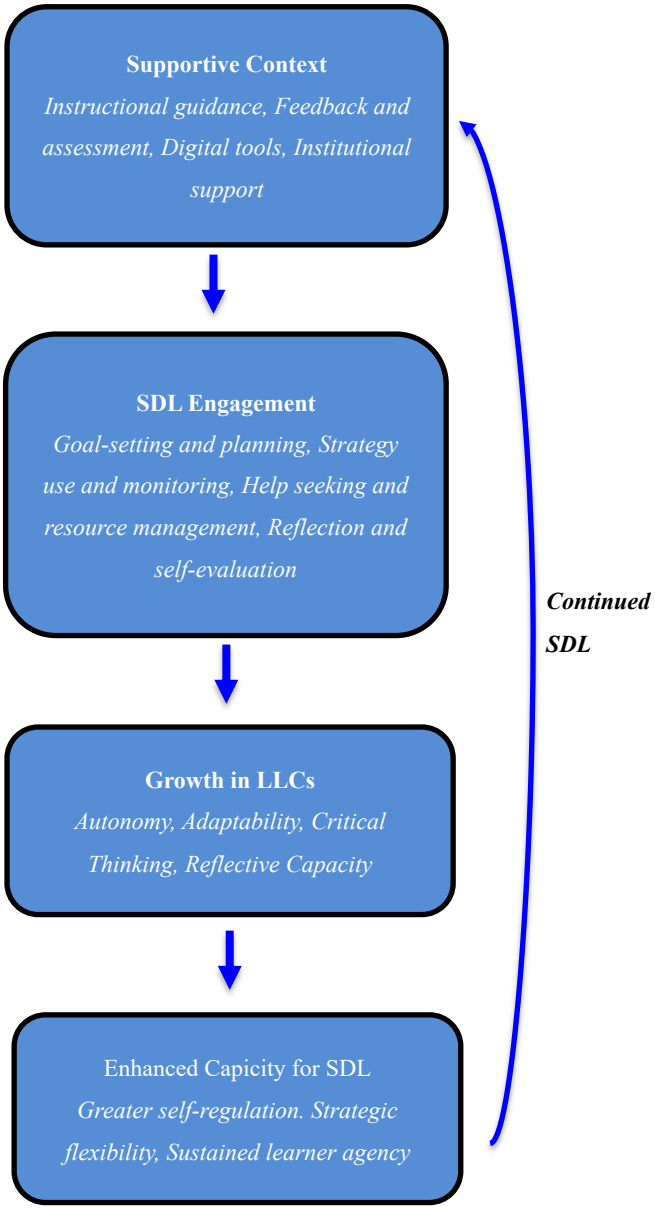

Figure 1. Cyclical relationship between supportive contexts, self-directed learning engagement, and the development of lifelong learning competences.

Within this mechanism, each SDL practice contributes a distinct developmental function. Goal-setting and planning provide direction and intentionality for learning activity, serving as the entry point through which learners translate perceived needs into actionable objectives. Strategy use and monitoring maintain momentum during task performance by enabling learners to select, evaluate, and revise approaches based on effectiveness. Help-seeking and resource management broaden access to knowledge, tools, and social support, reducing isolation and extending learners' capacity to resolve difficulties strategically. Reflection and self-evaluation consolidate experience into learning,

transforming outcomes and feedback into informed decisions that guide future cycles.

Competence development is therefore multi-dimensional rather than singular. Through repeated SDL cycles, autonomy strengthens as learners assume greater ownership of decisions, schedules, and resources. Adaptability grows as learners learn to adjust strategies and transfer methods across tasks and contexts, particularly when demands change or difficulties arise. Critical thinking develops through evaluative engagement with resources and information credibility, especially in digitally saturated learning environments where verification and selection are necessary. Reflective ability emerges through iterative review and feedback engagement, ensuring that learning becomes cumulative rather than repetitive.

Importantly, competences also feed back into the SDL process. Autonomy increases willingness to initiate and persist; adaptability supports flexible responding when strategies fail; critical thinking enhances the quality of decision-making about resources and approaches; and reflective ability closes the loop by connecting past performance to future planning. Together, these competences form a developmental engine that enables increasingly self-renewing SDL.

Instructor perspectives further validated this model, suggesting that learners who engage meaningfully in planning, strategic adjustment, and reflection demonstrate clearer independence, more deliberate judgement, and more consistent academic decision-making over time. This convergence supports the interpretation that competence development becomes observable in practice, not merely reported conceptually.

Overall, the synthesis affirms the study's 4×4 SDL-LLC framework and positions SDL as both a process that generates competence and an outcome strengthened by competence. Sustainable SDL depends on the convergence of individual agency and contextual support. When autonomy and scaffolding are appropriately balanced, SDL becomes progressively more sophisticated and self-sustaining; when support is insufficient or demands are excessive, SDL risks stagnation or superficial strategy adoption. These findings highlight that fostering lifelong learning in English Studies requires not only encouraging learner initiative but also designing ecosystems of instructional clarity, supportive guidance, and intellectual challenge that make high-quality SDL both possible and sustainable.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Conclusion

This study examined how English Studies majors engage in self-directed learning (SDL), how such engagement contributes to the development of lifelong learning competences (LLCs), and how contextual conditions enable or constrain this process. Drawing on in-depth interviews with students and instructors, the findings demonstrate that SDL is enacted through four interconnected practices including goal-setting and planning, strategy use and monitoring, help-seeking and resource management, and reflection and self-evaluation, which are embedded in students' everyday academic routines rather than functioning as abstract or isolated skills.

The findings reveal that SDL among English Studies majors is active but unevenly developed. Students demonstrated strong engagement in goal-setting, planning, and technology-supported strategy use, while metacognitive monitoring and deeper forms of reflection varied considerably across individuals and learning contexts. Reflection and feedback loops emerged as particularly powerful drivers of SDL development when instructional tasks required revision, independent decision-making, and sustained engagement over time. These results indicate that SDL does not mature automatically with experience but is strengthened through repeated, structured opportunities to plan, act, monitor, and reflect.

Importantly, the study confirms that engagement in SDL practices contributes directly to the development of lifelong learning competences. Goal-setting and planning fostered autonomy by increasing learners' ownership of decisions and responsibility for learning management. Strategy monitoring and adaptation supported adaptability, enabling students to respond flexibly to changing task demands and learning challenges. Critical thinking developed through the evaluation of learning resources and the need to judge credibility, particularly in digitally rich environments. Reflective capacity emerged through feedback-driven revision and self-evaluation, allowing learners to consolidate experience and inform future action. Together, these competences did not merely accompany SDL but were actively cultivated through sustained engagement in the SDL cycle.

The findings further demonstrate that SDL is context-dependent rather than self-contained. Supportive instructional design, accessible feedback, clear expectations, peer collaboration, and digital resources enabled students to sustain SDL engagement, whereas heavy workloads, time pressure, unclear instructions, and uncritical reliance on technological tools constrained their capacity to plan, monitor, and reflect effectively. These results underscore that learner autonomy is best developed through a balance of guidance and independence, rather than through a hands-off approach.

Overall, the study positions SDL as both a developmental process and a developmental outcome. Engagement in SDL strengthens lifelong learning competences, and these competences, once developed, enhance learners' readiness

and confidence to re-engage in SDL over time. This reciprocal and cyclical relationship highlights the importance of designing higher education environments that intentionally support self-directed engagement. Within English Studies programmes, fostering SDL requires not only encouraging students to learn independently but also creating pedagogical and institutional conditions that make autonomy achievable, meaningful, and sustainable.

6.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research adopted a qualitative case study design with a relatively small, purposively selected sample of English Studies majors. While this approach enabled rich, contextually grounded insights, it limits the generalisability of the findings to other disciplines, institutions, or educational contexts. Future studies may therefore benefit from larger-scale or multi-site investigations to examine whether similar patterns of SDL engagement and competence development emerge across different settings.

Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported interview data, which may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability, particularly when participants describe behaviours that are academically valued. Although instructor perspectives were included to triangulate student accounts, future research could incorporate additional data sources such as learning journals, classroom observations, or learning analytics to provide a more comprehensive picture of SDL enactment in practice.

Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits insight into how SDL practices and lifelong learning competences evolve over time. Longitudinal research tracking students across multiple semesters or key transition points such as internships, capstone projects, or post-graduation stages, would provide valuable evidence on the stability, progression, and sustainability of SDL development.

Future research may also employ mixed-method or quantitative designs to examine relationships between SDL engagement, academic performance, motivation, and self-efficacy. Intervention-based studies that trial structured goal-setting activities, guided reflection tasks, or critical AI-literacy training would further clarify which forms of support most effectively foster sustainable SDL practices. Comparative studies across disciplines could illuminate how disciplinary cultures and epistemological demands shape SDL differently. Finally, given the increasing presence of digital and AI tools in academic learning, future research should explore how learners negotiate autonomy and dependency in AI-mediated learning environments and how critical digital literacy can be embedded without undermining independent learning.

Together, these directions would extend the present study's contributions and support the development of pedagogical and policy initiatives that promote sustainable self-directed and lifelong learning in higher education.

Abbreviations

SDL	Self-Directed Learning
SRL	Self-Regulated Learning
AI	Artificial Intelligence
RQ	Research Question
U (e.g., U01)	Student participant code
I (e.g., I02)	Instructor participant code

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