



Learner Autonomy and Strategy Use in Blended EFL Higher Education: A Structured Review and Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT: Blended learning has become routine in EFL higher education, shifting substantial practice and pacing decisions into online spaces that are flexible but less visible to instructors. This structured review synthesizes research on learner autonomy in blended EFL courses, focusing on strategy use as the most observable mechanism through which autonomy is enacted. Across studies, autonomy is most consistently supported when course designs clarify goals and progress cues, integrate online work with in-class activity, and provide predictable feedback routes that reduce learners' coordination costs. Strategy routines—planning, time and resource management, monitoring, help-seeking, and reflective adjustment—are more sustainable when teaching presence and platform features turn them into repeated practices rather than one-off skills. Building on these patterns, the article proposes a design-sensitive research agenda that specifies minimum reporting standards for blended designs and measurement priorities that combine learner reports with process evidence, with attention to private-university contexts in mainland China.

KEYWORDS: Blended Learning, Learner Autonomy, EFL Higher Education, Strategy Use.

I. INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is no longer a temporary “post-pandemic fix” in many universities. In EFL programs, it has settled into a routine way of allocating time and accountability across classrooms, learning-management systems, and mobile platforms. This stability matters because it changes what “keeping up with learning” requires. Students are not only responding to what happens in class; they are expected to manage dispersed deadlines, work with abundant online resources, and sustain practice when teacher oversight is intermittent. In many courses, the teacher sees only a thin slice of the learning process—quiz scores,

log-ins, or a handful of forum posts—while the decisive work (or non-work) happens offstage. Under these conditions, learner autonomy is less a desirable add-on and more a practical requirement (Mohammed, 2023).

At the same time, the relationship between blended learning and autonomy is not straightforward. The label “blended learning” hides substantial variation in design: the proportion of online time, the integration between online and in-class tasks, the cadence of feedback, assessment incentives, and the degree of learner choice. Autonomy outcomes therefore depend on how blended designs make goals legible, how they cue progress, and how they route learners toward help. Moreover, institutional context shapes what is feasible. In mainland China, private universities have expanded blended provision rapidly, yet they often do so with uneven infrastructure and variable faculty training. Such conditions can raise the cost of self-regulation for students and reduce the stability of instructional support (Wang et al., 2024). This paper offers a structured review that connects two strands that are too often discussed separately: (a) conditions reported to enable or constrain learner autonomy in blended EFL higher education and (b) the strategies through which learners enact autonomy under blended demands. Two questions guide the synthesis: What factors are most consistently linked to the enactment and development of learner autonomy in blended EFL higher education? What autonomy-relevant strategies do learners use in blended environments, and how is their effectiveness evidenced? Rather than prescribing universal “best practices,” the goal is to clarify recurring patterns, boundary conditions, and evidence gaps. The paper closes with a research agenda that translates the synthesis into testable propositions and reporting standards, with specific attention to private-university contexts.



II. Method

This article follows a question-driven structured review approach. The purpose is not to exhaust every publication on blended learning, but to synthesize evidence that speaks directly to the two guiding questions: (a) what conditions shape learner autonomy in blended EFL higher education, and (b) what strategy patterns represent autonomy in action.

Search and screening. Relevant studies were located through keyword searches combining terms for blended learning (e.g., blended, hybrid, flipped), learner autonomy (e.g., autonomy, self-directed, self-regulated), and strategy use (e.g., learning strategy, self-regulation, help-seeking) in EFL/ESL higher-education contexts. To keep the corpus aligned with current blended implementations, the review prioritized work published in the past decade, while retaining seminal autonomy scholarship for conceptual grounding. Studies were included when they examined blended or hybrid designs in tertiary EFL settings, reported empirical evidence related to autonomy and/or strategy use, and provided sufficient methodological description to interpret findings (participants, tasks, and data sources). Studies were excluded when blended learning was merely mentioned without design detail, when autonomy was used only as a slogan with no indicators, or when the context was non-tertiary.

Synthesis procedure. Evidence was extracted into an analytic matrix capturing context (institution type, region), key design features (integration of online/offline tasks, feedback routines, assessment weight), reported autonomy indicators, strategy categories, and evidence forms (self-report scales, interviews, logs/diaries, platform traces, performance outcomes). The synthesis proceeded in two cycles. First, findings were coded into recurring condition categories and strategy domains. Second, the review examined how conditions and strategies were linked in the underlying studies—explicitly (tested relationships) or implicitly (narrative claims). Where evidence relied on single-method self-report, conclusions are treated as suggestive rather than *definitive*.

Scope note. Because private-university contexts in mainland China are under-represented in international syntheses but increasingly salient in practice, the agenda section highlights boundary conditions and design implications relevant to that setting. The aim is to support more comparable future work by specifying what to report and what to measure, rather than to claim a one-size-fits-all model.

III. Conceptual Frame

Across language-education traditions, learner autonomy is commonly defined as learners' capacity to take charge of decisions about objectives, content, and evaluation (Holec, 1981). For the purposes of this review, autonomy is treated as enacted regulation—what learners actually do to keep learning coherent when time and tasks are distributed across modalities. This stance is pragmatic: most empirical studies infer autonomy from observable indicators such as goal-setting, monitoring, help-seeking, resource management, and reflective adjustment. It also avoids a false choice that sometimes shapes discussions of blended learning: autonomy versus teaching. In practice, autonomy in blended environments typically develops through calibrated support, not through the absence of instruction.

Strategy use is therefore central. In blended designs, flexibility increases both opportunity and risk. When deadlines sit outside contact hours and platforms present abundant resources, weak planning and monitoring become costly. Strategy use functions as a coordination mechanism that aligns learners' intentions with the demands of the design. Accordingly, this review organizes strategy evidence into domains aligned with influential self-regulation accounts (Zare et al., 2024): planning and goal orientation, time and resource management, monitoring and self-evaluation, feedback and help-seeking, and reflective adjustment.

To connect individual strategy enactment to course conditions, the review draws on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000). CoI conceptualizes productive online and blended learning as an interaction of teaching presence (design and facilitation), social presence (relational and interactional conditions), and cognitive presence (meaning-making processes). CoI is useful here because autonomy claims in blended learning often hinge on these presences: teaching presence makes goals and standards visible; social presence reduces the interpersonal cost of participation and help-seeking; cognitive presence is strengthened when learners engage in reflection and revision rather than procedural completion.

Finally, the review uses Littlewood's distinction between communicative autonomy and learning-management autonomy to clarify what autonomy looks like in EFL settings (Littlewood, 1997). In many blended EFL courses, the online space expands opportunities for rehearsal and participation, while the offline space anchors



interaction norms and provides timely mediation. The central claim emerging from the literature is that autonomy in blended EFL learning is not a trait that technology “produces.” It is a patterned outcome of how designs and institutions make self-regulation doable, and how learners respond strategically to those conditions.

IV. Synthesis

4.1 Conditions That Make Autonomy Doable

Learner autonomy in blended EFL contexts is unevenly distributed because students enter with different language foundations, prior experiences of self-directed study, and levels of digital literacy. These differences shape whether flexibility becomes opportunity or burden. Learners with steadier routines and higher self-efficacy are more likely to plan early, use platform cues formatively, and persist with online work. By contrast, learners with weaker routines often drift: they start late, study in fragmented bursts, and complete tasks close to deadlines in ways that reduce genuine language practice. Motivation also matters. When online components are experienced as meaningful extensions of classroom learning, learners invest effort and use strategies such as rehearsal, self-testing, and brief reflection. When online tasks feel like add-ons or surveillance, strategy use shifts toward compliance. Design clarity is a recurring enabler of autonomy. Blended courses support autonomy when they make expectations explicit: what counts as progress, how online and in-class tasks connect, and how effort should be distributed across the week. Clear sequencing with checkpoints reduces the executive burden on learners and makes planning realistic. Integration is especially consequential in EFL settings. When online practice feeds directly into in-class use—for example, online preparation that becomes material for speaking tasks—learners have a reason to engage beyond completing quizzes. When online work runs in parallel to the classroom with weak linkage, interaction thins and learners treat the online component as a separate requirement **rather** than part of language development. Blended learning reduces the visibility of learning, which makes teacher mediation more—not less—important. Autonomy-supportive teaching presence is not permissiveness; it is guidance that preserves learner agency while lowering uncertainty. Effective mediation includes explaining the purpose of online tasks, modelling strategies (such as how to use feedback), setting participation norms, and providing timely cues when learners fall behind. Where mediation is weak or inconsistent, learners

struggle to interpret platform feedback, misjudge priorities, or disengage quietly. Assessment structures strongly shape strategy patterns. When assessment privileges outcomes only, learners tend to adopt short-term tactics such as cramming and superficial completion. When assessment includes process markers—draft–revision cycles, staged submissions, and participation traces used formatively—learners have incentives to monitor progress, seek feedback, and revise. Feedback routes also matter. In blended environments, feedback may come from teachers, peers, and automated systems. Autonomy is supported when these routes are predictable and when learners know where to ask questions and how quickly responses are likely to arrive. Infrastructure, platform usability, and faculty support set the outer boundary of what learners can realistically manage. When platforms are unstable, interfaces are confusing, or automated feedback is noisy, cognitive load increases and strategy enactment becomes fragile. Institutional supports—training, technical help, and coherent platform policies—stabilize teaching presence and reduce friction costs for learners. In private-university contexts, rapid innovation may coexist with uneven training and inconsistent tool integration, eroding the predictability that self-regulation relies on (Philipsen et al., 2022).

4.2 Strategy Use as the Visible Face of Autonomy

Evidence of autonomy in blended EFL research clusters around five strategy domains: planning and goal orientation; time and resource management; monitoring and self-evaluation; feedback and help-seeking; and reflective adjustment. Planning is more robust when designs provide a legible weekly rhythm, exemplars, and a clear link between preparation and classroom use. Time and resource management involves allocating effort across modalities, curating a small set of high-value resources, and protecting **short** but regular practice windows. Monitoring becomes meaningful when criteria are transparent and platform cues are interpretable; trace indicators are most persuasive when read alongside task demands and artifacts. Help-seeking functions as a key autonomy move in blended environments because problems can remain invisible until they accumulate. The strongest autonomy accounts show reflective adjustment over time: learners revise strategies, re-allocate time, and shift from passive consumption to active production.



4.3 How Strategies Play Out Across the Blended Space

Because EFL learning is fundamentally interactional, autonomy in blended settings is not only about managing tasks; it is also about taking initiative to use language. Online spaces can lower performance pressure by allowing learners to rehearse, edit, and participate asynchronously, which may broaden participation beyond students who dominate in-class talk. However, expanded interaction spaces do not automatically generate meaningful engagement (Xie & Correia, 2023). Without structured prompts and facilitation, online interaction often becomes perfunctory posting. Autonomy-supportive designs make interaction purposeful by requiring reference to course materials, substantive responses to peers, and explicit links to in-class speaking or debate tasks. Three breakdown patterns recur. Temporal diffusion occurs when tasks are dispersed across a week with limited checkpoints, leading learners to delay work until deadlines cluster; deliberate practice gives way to rushed completion. Resource overload arises when abundance undermines decision-making,

resulting in wide browsing but shallow practice. Feedback ambiguity appears when automated scores signal completion without indicating quality, leaving learners uncertain about what to revise. These patterns are often design failures in how self-regulation is made doable. Effective blended designs respond by creating visible weekly rhythms, curating resources and modelling selection criteria, and establishing feedback routines that translate cues into next steps. AI-mediated tools—chatbots, writing assistants, speech recognition, and automated feedback—**can** support autonomy by enabling low-risk rehearsal, rapid feedback, and repeated practice. They also introduce new autonomy demands: learners must evaluate feedback quality, avoid over-reliance, and align tool use with communicative goals rather than narrow correctness targets. These tools are most autonomy-supportive when they are positioned as strategy partners and learners are asked to justify revisions and reflect on changes, rather than treating tool output as a shortcut.

Table 1. Strategy domains, manifestations, and evidence forms

Strategy domain	Illustrative manifestations in blended EFL settings	Common evidence forms
Planning and goal orientation	Setting targets across online/offline tasks; mapping deadlines; breaking assignments into steps; aligning online preparation with in-class use.	Interviews; learning logs/diaries; planning artifacts; self-report measures.
Time & resource management	Protecting regular practice windows; managing distractions; curating a small set of high-value resources; using reminders/checklists.	Platform traces interpreted with task demands; self-reports; observation notes; task artifacts.
Monitoring and self-evaluation	Using dashboards/quizzes to track progress; checking against criteria; self-testing; noticing drift early.	Trace sequences; staged submissions; reflective notes; performance indicators.
Feedback and help-seeking	Seeking teacher/peer help; posting questions; triaging automated feedback; revising based on criteria.	Forum records; feedback logs; revision histories; learner accounts.
Reflective adjustment	Re-allocating time; switching strategies; revising resource choices; moving from passive consumption to active production.	Reflective journals; revision histories; stimulated-recall interviews; longitudinal checkpoints.

Note. Author-constructed synthesis based on the reviewed literature.

4.4 An Integrative Map and Testable Propositions

Read together, the reviewed studies point to a simple logic: design and institutional conditions shape what learners can realistically regulate; strategy routines are the mechanism; and learning quality depends on whether those routines are sustained rather than episodic. To make this logic usable for cumulative research, Table 2 translates

the synthesis into design-to-strategy propositions that can be tested and compared across **contexts**.

Taken together, the literature supports an integrative reading: autonomy in blended EFL learning emerges when enabling conditions activate strategy routines that learners can sustain. Teaching presence translates into scaffolds that cue planning and monitoring; social presence lowers the interpersonal cost of participation and help-seeking; and cognitive presence strengthens when learners



use reflection and revision strategies rather than merely completing tasks. When any presence is weak, strategy quality tends to degrade—unclear teaching presence yields reactive last-minute work,

low social presence reduces help-seeking, and weak cognitive presence turns online tasks into procedural clicking (Alshammari, et al., 2025).

Table 2. Design-to-strategy propositions for cumulative blended EFL research

Design / contextual feature	Expected mechanism (autonomy and strategy use)	Observable indicators (examples)
Explicit weekly rhythm with checkpoints	Lowers coordination costs, supporting earlier starts and steadier monitoring.	Time-stamped submission patterns; reduced deadline clustering; reflective logs showing planned pacing.
Tight integration between online preparation and in-class use	Increases perceived purpose and encourages communicative initiative beyond compliance.	Reuse of online input in speaking tasks; higher-quality forum replies; task artifacts showing transfer.
Predictable feedback routes (teacher/peer/automated) with clear criteria	Strengthens help-seeking and targeted revision by making next steps legible.	Question-asking traces; revision histories; rubric-referenced edits; follow-up attempts after feedback.
Curated resources plus modelling of selection criteria	Reduces overload and improves strategic resource management.	Narrower, higher-value resource sets; fewer idle clicks; logs explaining why resources were chosen.
Stable platform policies and learner/teacher support	Stabilizes routines and reduces friction that disrupts self-regulation.	Lower dropout from online tasks; fewer technical-related gaps; more consistent participation traces.

Note. Author-constructed propositions to support comparison and replication across studies.

V. Research Agenda

The agenda below keeps the focus on cumulative work. Many autonomy studies in blended EFL settings still treat “blended learning” as a label, yet omit the design information needed to interpret claims. Future research should therefore report a small set of design minima—how online time is used, how online work is integrated into in-class activity, what feedback routes are available and when they operate, and how participation is incentivized (De Bruijn-Smolters & Prinsen, 2024).

Measurement also needs to move closer to enacted regulation. Self-reports remain useful for learners’ perceptions, but they should be paired with process evidence that is explicitly linked to task demands (e.g., staged artifacts, revision histories, interaction records, or trace sequences interpreted alongside what students were asked to do). Clear inferential logic is essential when learning-analytics indicators are used.

Finally, readiness and institutional variation should be treated as boundary conditions rather than noise. The same blended design can support autonomy for some learners and overwhelm others. Studies should examine which scaffolds help less-prepared learners develop stable strategy routines without removing agency, and how platform stability and support capacity shape

the relationship between perceived autonomy, strategy use, and outcomes. These priorities open space for testable propositions that connect design features to strategy routines and, in turn, to learning quality.

VI. Implications and Conclusion

For practitioners, the review suggests a simple design check before attributing problems to low autonomy. Are weekly goals and standards explicit? Are online tasks used for something students value in class? Do learners have a predictable route to feedback within a reasonable time window? Is there at least one low-stakes checkpoint that forces an early start and supports revision? When these conditions are absent, learners’ strategy breakdown is expected, and autonomy training alone is unlikely to help. Conversely, when these conditions are present, even less prepared learners are more likely to develop stable routines because the environment gives regulation a workable structure.

Implications. The synthesis suggests that autonomy in blended EFL learning is best framed as regulation made feasible by design. When courses render goals, pacing, and feedback routes visible, learners are more likely to plan early, monitor progress, seek help, and revise; when those



cues are opaque, disengagement can look like a learner deficit even when the underlying problem is instructional **design**.

For teaching practice, this means that fostering autonomy is not about withdrawing support. It is about reducing hidden coordination costs: a stable weekly rhythm, explicit links between online preparation and in-class use, curated resources, and feedback routines that translate cues into actionable next steps. Such scaffolds do not remove agency; they make agency exercisable.

For research, stronger claims depend on tighter links between constructs and evidence. Autonomy measures should be aligned with the strategies a course actually demands, and supported by process-proximal indicators (artifacts, revisions, interaction records, or task-interpreted traces) rather than by perceptions alone. This combination improves comparability across studies by making design features and inferential steps explicit.

This review is constrained by the uneven reporting quality of the underlying literature. Strategy labels and autonomy indicators vary across studies, and many publications provide limited detail about blended design features. Accordingly, the synthesis emphasizes robust patterns but treats single-method claims cautiously. The agenda proposed here translates the field's insights into reporting and measurement practices that would make future work more comparable. A final point concerns tone and responsibility in autonomy discourse. In blended environments, it is tempting to treat autonomy as a learner trait and to interpret weak participation as a personal deficit. The evidence reviewed here suggests a different reading: learners' regulation succeeds or fails in interaction with design choices that either clarify or obscure what to do next. When designs make progress cues, feedback routes, and task integration visible, strategy use becomes steady and purposeful; when they do not, even motivated learners can look "unautonomous" on paper.

Limitations. The underlying literature varies in how clearly it reports blended design features and how directly it links autonomy claims to task-based evidence. Accordingly, the synthesis emphasizes robust patterns while treating single-method claims cautiously.

Conclusion. Learner autonomy in blended EFL higher education is best understood as enacted regulation under design and institutional constraints. Evidence suggests that autonomy is supported when blended designs make goals and progress cues explicit, provide predictable

feedback routes, and integrate online work into meaningful classroom use. Under these conditions, learners' strategy use—planning, monitoring, help-seeking, and reflective adjustment—becomes sustainable rather than episodic. Future research can strengthen the field by making blended designs visible, tracing strategy enactment with comparable process evidence, and treating institutional and learner diversity as a boundary condition rather than a **footnote**.

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