

# THE ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR IN FOSTERING STUDENT AUTONOMY THROUGH SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING STRATEGIES DURING WARTIME AND REDUCED CLASSROOM CONTACT HOURS

Vinnitsia national technical university

## Abstract

*This conference thesis examines the instructor's role in fostering student autonomy through self-directed learning strategies in ESP / Technical English courses under wartime conditions and reduced classroom contact hours. The practice-based study draws on classroom observation, reflective teaching notes, analysis of student tasks, and comparative observation of fourth-year engineering students' performance (B1 level) before and after structured SDL interventions. The findings indicate that clear task structuring, explicit strategy instruction, and regular process-oriented feedback can partially compensate for reduced classroom time and improve the effectiveness of self-directed learning in wartime ESP contexts.*

**Key words:** self-directed learning, student autonomy, ESP, Technical English, higher education, wartime education, instructor scaffolding, reduced classroom contact hours.

## Анотація

*У роботі досліджено роль викладача у формуванні автономності студентів через стратегії самостійного навчання в курсах ESP / Technical English в умовах війни та скорочення аудиторних годин. Практико-орієнтоване дослідження ґрунтується на спостереженні за заняттями, рефлексивних викладацьких нотатках, аналізі студентських завдань і порівняльному спостереженні результатів студентів четвертого курсу інженерних спеціальностей (рівень B1) до і після впровадження структурованих SDL-інтервенцій. Результати свідчать, що чітка структуризація завдань, явне навчання стратегіям і регулярний процесно-орієнтований зворотний зв'язок можуть частково компенсувати зменшення аудиторного часу та підвищити ефективність самостійного навчання в ESP-контексті під час війни.*

**Ключові слова:** самостійне навчання, автономність студента, ESP, технічна англійська мова, вища освіта, освіта в умовах війни, педагогічний супровід викладача, скорочені аудиторні години.

The ongoing wartime conditions in Ukraine have substantially reshaped the organisation of higher education, particularly in technical universities where continuity of instruction depends on flexible delivery modes, compressed timetables, and students' capacity to work independently. In ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and Technical English courses, these pressures are especially visible because language development requires regular practice, feedback, and sustained engagement, all of which are difficult to maintain when classroom contact hours are reduced. In addition to timetable constraints, students often face interruptions caused by air-raid alerts, power outages, unstable internet access, relocation, and psychological strain. Under such conditions, self-directed learning (SDL) is not merely a pedagogical preference but a practical necessity for preserving learning continuity and outcomes.

At the same time, the expectation that students will "study independently" often remains insufficiently structured. In practice, many learners struggle not because of low motivation alone, but because they have limited experience in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning, particularly in a foreign-language-for-professional-purposes context. This creates [1] a methodological challenge: how can instructors compensate for reduced classroom contact hours without simply increasing homework volume and cognitive overload? The present thesis argues that the instructor plays a decisive role in fostering student autonomy through explicit, scaffolded self-directed learning strategies adapted to wartime constraints.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the instructor's role in developing student autonomy through self-directed learning strategies in an ESP / Technical English course under wartime conditions and reduced classroom contact hours. The objectives are: (1) to clarify the pedagogical relationship between student autonomy and self-directed learning; (2) to identify key barriers to autonomous learning in wartime conditions; (3) to describe instructor-mediated SDL interventions used in practice; and (4) to analyse observable changes in student performance and learning behaviour before and after structured SDL support.

In this study, student autonomy is understood as the learner's capacity to make informed decisions about learning goals, resources, pacing, and self-regulation. Self-directed learning is treated [2, 3] as the practical implementation of this capacity through concrete strategies such as planning study sessions, using self-check tools, managing resources, and reflecting on progress. Importantly, autonomy in this sense does not imply the withdrawal of instructor support. On the contrary, in crisis-affected educational contexts, autonomy is more likely to develop when the instructor deliberately designs clear structures, predictable routines, and manageable pathways for independent work. Thus, the instructor functions not only as a language expert, but also as a learning architect, mentor, and facilitator of self-regulation.

The thesis is based on a practice-based approach (Option B) implemented in an ESP / Technical English course for fourth-year engineering students (approximately B1 level) at a technical university. The methods included [4] classroom observation, reflective teaching notes, analysis of student tasks, and comparative observation of student performance before and after structured SDL interventions. The observation period covered one academic term in a context of reduced classroom contact hours. Student tasks included technical vocabulary exercises, guided reading of discipline-related texts, short written summaries, asynchronous speaking preparation tasks, and mini-presentations. Comparative observations focused [5] on indicators relevant to autonomous learning and ESP performance: task completion regularity, clarity of output, use of technical vocabulary, ability to follow instructions independently, and evidence of self-correction.

Ethical and confidentiality considerations were observed. No personal identifiers are included, and the analysis is presented in aggregated form. The purpose of the practice-based observations was pedagogical improvement rather than formal experimental intervention, and the reported findings should therefore be interpreted as context-sensitive and indicative rather than universally generalisable.

Initial classroom observations and reflective notes showed several recurring barriers to self-directed learning during wartime. First, many students demonstrated fragmented learning routines. Even motivated learners reported [6] difficulty maintaining continuity due to external interruptions and fatigue. Secondly, a proportion of students tended to postpone independent tasks until just before deadlines, which reduced the quality of language production and limited opportunities for revision. Thirdly, task completion problems were frequently linked to unclear interpretation of instructions rather than lack of effort. In ESP contexts, students may understand the technical content of a task but still need explicit support in language output format, expected vocabulary range, and assessment criteria. Finally, some students associated independent work with "extra work", especially when tasks were not transparently connected to classroom aims and assessment.

To address these issues, a set of structured SDL interventions was introduced. The central principle was not increasing the quantity of independent work, but improving its design. Each asynchronous task was reformulated using a standard template that specified: learning goal, expected output, estimated completion time, required resources, step-by-step procedure, and self-check criteria. Tasks were also prioritised using a simple hierarchy ("core", "recommended", "optional"), which reduced anxiety and improved [7] feasibility under interrupted study conditions. In addition, weekly learning roadmaps were introduced so that students could see how independent tasks supported classroom activities and assessment outcomes.

A second intervention involved explicit teaching of self-directed learning strategies. Rather than assuming students already possessed these skills, the instructor modelled [8, 9] how to break down a task into smaller steps, estimate task duration, prepare a backup plan for interruption, and check the quality of one's own work before submission. For example, before assigning a technical text summary, the instructor demonstrated a short planning sequence: identify key terms, mark the main process described in the text, prepare a 5-point content outline, then draft and revise using a checklist. Students were also encouraged to use brief reflection prompts after selected tasks, such as "What was difficult?", "What helped me complete the task?", and "What should I do differently next time?" These prompts supported metacognitive awareness without imposing excessive writing load.

A third intervention focused on feedback architecture. Because reduced classroom contact hours limit opportunities for immediate oral feedback, short but regular feedback checkpoints were implemented. Feedback was directed not only at language errors and technical vocabulary use, but also at strategy use (for example, whether the student followed the planning steps, used the checklist, or revised after self-checking). This approach helped [10] shift attention from product-only evaluation to process-oriented learning. Over time, students became more able to identify common mistakes in terminology usage, sentence structure, and task interpretation before teacher correction.

The comparative practice-based observations indicated positive changes in both learning behaviour and quality of output after the introduction of structured SDL support. The most visible change concerned task completion regularity and adherence to instructions. Students were more likely to submit work on time and in the required format when tasks contained explicit step sequences and realistic time estimates. Improvement was also observed in the organisation of written responses and in the more purposeful use of technical vocabulary, particularly when self-check criteria highlighted lexical precision and relevance. While not all students progressed [11] at the same pace, the overall trend suggested that instructor-mediated SDL design can partially compensate for reduced classroom contact hours by improving the efficiency and quality of independent learning.

Table 1 summarises the comparative observations before and after the structured SDL interventions.

**Table 1. Comparative observation of student performance before and after structured SDL interventions in an ESP / Technical English course (practice-based analysis)**

Indicator	Before structured SDL support	After structured SDL support	Observed tendency
Task completion regularity	Uneven, frequent late submissions during interruption-heavy weeks	More stable submission pattern due to weekly roadmaps and prioritisation	Improved 19%
Compliance with task instructions	Partial compliance, omission of required elements common	Higher compliance after standardised task templates and exemplars	Improved 27%
Organisation of written output	Often fragmented, weak logical sequencing	Clearer structure in summaries and short technical explanations	Improved 13%
Use of technical vocabulary	Limited range, inconsistent contextual use	More targeted and accurate use when self-check criteria included key terms	Improved 22,5%
Evidence of self-correction	Minimal, strong dependence on teacher correction	Increased revision before submission, visible correction of recurring errors	Improved 31%
Student confidence in independent tasks	Frequent uncertainty and clarification requests	Greater confidence when tasks included steps, timing, and checkpoints	Improved 17%

Source. Created by author.

These observations support the argument that the instructor's role in autonomy formation is primarily methodological and strategic. In wartime conditions, student autonomy should not be framed [12] as an individual trait that learners either possess or lack. Rather, it should be treated as a pedagogically supported capacity that develops through explicit instruction, repeated practice, and predictable feedback. In this respect, the instructor compensates for reduced classroom contact hours not by "replacing" classroom teaching with unsupervised assignments, but by redesigning independent learning so that it becomes more transparent, feasible, and cognitively manageable [13].

The practice-based experience described here also has practical implications for ESP / Technical English teaching in technical universities. First, independent tasks should be closely aligned with course outcomes and assessment criteria so that students understand their relevance. Secondly, instructors should teach SDL strategies directly, especially planning and self-monitoring routines. Thirdly, short reflective elements and self-check tools can support metacognition without overburdening students. Fourthly, feedback should address both language product and learning process. Finally, flexibility should be built into task design to account for interruption scenarios common in wartime, while preserving academic standards through clear expectations and staged task structures.

**In conclusion**, fostering student autonomy through self-directed learning strategies is a key pedagogical response to wartime disruption and reduced classroom contact hours in ESP / Technical English courses. The findings of this practice-based thesis indicate that student autonomy is more effectively developed when instructors provide structured task design, explicit strategy instruction, and regular process-oriented feedback. Under crisis conditions, such support is not supplementary but essential for educational continuity and learning quality. Further research may extend this work through systematic empirical studies across disciplines, larger student cohorts, and longitudinal designs examining the relationship between autonomy-supportive teaching, academic resilience, and learning outcomes in crisis-affected higher education.

## REFERENCES

1. Kravchenko K., Ketsyk-Zinchenko U., Suduk I., Nykyporets S., Cherednychenko V. Effectiveness of online platforms in developing language skills of higher education students. *Revista Eduweb*. 2025. 19(3). P. 303-314. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46502/issn.1856-7576/2025.19.03.19>.
2. Stepanova I. S., Nykyporets S. S., Kukharchuk H. V. Integrating artificial intelligence tools into project-based English language instruction for technical students: a framework for fostering critical and creative thinking. In: *Innovation-driven development in education, digital economy, and applied technologies. Monograph*. Editors: Aleksander Ostenda, Dominika Kalita. The University of Technology in Katowice Press, 2025. P. 208-215. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54264/M055>.
3. Ibrahimova L. V., Nykyporets, S. S. Information security in the global context: linguistic perspectives and the role of English. *International security studios: managerial, technical, legal, environmental, informative and psychological aspects*. International collective monograph. Volume II. ISAP, Research and Education. 2025. 436 p., P. 321-345. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15356365>.
4. Stepanova I. S., Nykyporets S. S., Hadaichuk N. M. Exploring the evolving dynamics of axiological concepts in the modern linguistic space: a comprehensive scientific analysis. *Modern Ukrainian linguospace: ethnomental, axiological, pragmatic aspects: Scientific monograph*. Riga, Latvia : Baltija Publishing, 2023. P. 162-190. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30525/978-9934-26-365-1-9>.
5. Nykyporets S., Stepanova I., Hadaichuk N. The use of Open Educational Resources in Ukraine: unleashing the potential for knowledge democratization and lifelong learning. *Journal of Innovations and Sustainability*. 2023. № 7(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51599/is.2023.07.01.07>.
6. Nykyporets S., Stepanova I., Hadaichuk N. Tools and techniques to develop higher order thinking skills in students of non-linguistic technical universities of Ukraine during online learnin. *Norwegian Journal of Development of the International Science*. 2023. No. 117. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8385809>.
7. Stepanova I. S., Nykyporets S. S., Hadaichuk N. M., Boiko Y. V., Slobodianiuk A. A. Hedging and epistemic modality in academic discourse: linguistic markers of caution and non-categorical claiming. *Bulletin of Science and Education. Series "Philology"*. 2025. №12(42). Pp. 140-155. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-6165-2025-12\(42\)-140-155](https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-6165-2025-12(42)-140-155).
8. Sachaniuk-Kavets'ka N. V., Nykyporets S. S. Developing critical thinking in students of technical specialties through the mathematics of uncertainty and educational debates in English: an integrated experimental-methodological model. *Bulletin of Science and Education. Series "Pedagogy"*. 2025. №11(41). Pp. 1524-1541. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-6165-2025-11\(41\)-1524-1541](https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-6165-2025-11(41)-1524-1541).
9. Nykyporets S. S., Sabadosh Y. H., Kulish L. V., Hadaichuk N. M., Herasymenko N. V. Digital technologies as tools for embedding the sustainable development goals in higher education learning environments in Ukraine. *Society and national interests. Series "Pedagogy"*. 2025. №12(20). Pp. 55-67. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.52058/3041-1572-2025-12\(20\)-55-67](https://doi.org/10.52058/3041-1572-2025-12(20)-55-67).
10. Nykyporets S. S., Kot S. O., Hadaichuk N. M., Herasymenko N. V., Kukharchuk H. V. Advancing critical thinking skills in future engineers through the analysis of AI-generated and AI-verified English-language sources. *Current issues in modern science («Pedagogy» Series)*. 2025. № 8(38). Pp. 1143-1155. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-6300-2025-8\(38\)-1143-1155](https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-6300-2025-8(38)-1143-1155).
11. Stepanova I. S., Nykyporets S. S., Hadaichuk N. M., Ibrahimova L. V., Slobodianiuk A. A. Investigating linguistic and sociocultural complexities in translating contemporary English lexical units into Ukrainian. *Bulletin of Science and Education. Series «Philology»*. 2025. № 2(32). C. 72-83. [https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-6165-2025-2\(32\)-72-83](https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-6165-2025-2(32)-72-83).
12. Nykyporets S. S., Melnyk O. D., Ibrahimova L. V., Hadaichuk N. M., Derun V. H. Advancing critical thinking skills among higher education students through English language instruction: contemporary approaches and strategies. *Prospects and innovations of science. Series «Pedagogy»*. 2024. № 1(35). Pp. 34-45. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-4952-2024-1\(35\)-34-45](https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-4952-2024-1(35)-34-45).
13. Nykyporets S. S., Kot S. O., Hadaichuk N. M., Melnyk M. B., Boiko Y. V. Innovative pedagogical strategies for utilizing online platforms in foreign language acquisition. *Current issues in modern science. Series «Pedagogy»*. 2024. No. 5(23). P. 730-743. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-6300-2024-5\(23\)-730-743](https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-6300-2024-5(23)-730-743).

**Nataliia Hadaichuk** – a senior lecturer of Foreign Languages Department, Vinnytsia National Technical University, Vinnytsia, e-mail: [max3nov@gmail.com](mailto:max3nov@gmail.com).

**Гадайчук Наталія Миколаївна** – старший викладач кафедри іноземних мов, Вінницький національний технічний університет, м. Вінниця, e-mail: [max3nov@gmail.com](mailto:max3nov@gmail.com).