

Understanding Learner Autonomy, Self-Directed Learning, and Self-Regulated Learning Through the Lens of Learner Control

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Abstract

Learner autonomy (LA), self-directed learning (SDL), and self-regulated learning (SRL) are often used interchangeably in educational research, yet they originate from different fields and are not fully interchangeable. This paper explores the similarities and differences among these constructs, highlighting their disciplinary origins, conceptual status, scope, and locus of control. The comparison reveals that LA is the broadest of the three concepts, covering a dimension that does not explicitly exist in SDL or SRL. The paper draws on Benson's model to clarify the relationships among the three constructs. The analysis shows that SDL is closely related to the learning management dimension of LA, whereas SRL is closely related to the cognitive processes dimension. Neither SDL nor SRL fully extends to the third dimension, namely control over learning content, indicating that LA is the broadest concept, encompassing learners' capacity to control and make decisions about their learning in social, pedagogical, and institutional contexts. By addressing these differences and similarities, researchers can effectively distinguish and compare LA, SDL, and SRL in educational research and determine when to use each construct in research design.

1. Introduction

In contemporary learner-centered approaches, learners are frequently viewed as proactive participants, emphasizing their capacity to assume responsibility, regulate their learning, take initiative, make decisions, and exercise control over what they learn and how they learn it (Benson, 2011; Knowles, 1975; Weimer, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000). Within this paradigm, learner autonomy (LA), self-directed learning (SDL), and self-regulated learning (SRL) are considered fundamental concepts extensively examined in educational and language-learning research (Williamson Hawkins, 2018). Although these constructs originate from different theoretical frameworks and research domains, they are frequently used interchangeably. Lu, Woodcock, and Jiang (2014) highlight that LA and SDL are treated as synonymous related constructs, and, more recently, Gupta, Ali, Jiang, Fink, and Du, (2024) state that although they belong to different disciplines, SDL and SRL are closely related concepts and are often used interchangeably. Knowles (1975, p.18) also notes that LA, among other concepts, is used as a label in the literature to describe SDL.

The overlap among these constructs has led researchers to examine their relationships from different perspectives. Murray (2014) explores this overlap by examining the relationship between LA and SRL, focusing on the points of convergence and divergence between the two

constructs. He notes that LA and SRL both emphasize metacognition and learner control, but they differ in how they are applied in the learning environment, particularly with respect to the learning task. In SRL, teachers set learning tasks for students, and students engage cognitively with the task, whereas in LA, students determine learning tasks by taking control of their learning management and content selection. Loyens, Magda, and Rikers (2008) examine how SDL relates to SRL, suggesting that the two concepts are related developmental processes but not synonymous. They state that the two concepts converge because they share similar mechanisms, such as active engagement, goal-directed behavior, and metacognitive skills. More recently, Kharroubi & ElMediouni (2024) considered all three constructs together, proposing a pedagogical framework for how SDL and SRL can support the development of LA in the classroom.

Given that these concepts share considerable conceptual overlap, there is a need to clarify how they converge, where they diverge, and how insights from research on one construct might inform work on the others. The objective is not to prove that LA, SDL, and SRL overlap, but to clarify the nature and boundaries of that overlap. Clarifying these three constructs is consequently important not because overlap should be eliminated, but to better understand how they relate.

This paper explores Benson's (2011) conceptualization of learner autonomy as a means of addressing the problem. It compares and contrasts LA, SDL, and SRL, highlighting their similarities and differences. The paper emphasizes how SDL and SRL align with Benson's (2011) model. By examining SDL and SRL within Benson's (2011) model, the paper critically clarifies their relationship to LA, thereby supporting more theoretically informed concept selection, highlighting related issues, and exploring directions for future research.

2. Learner Autonomy

Broadly speaking, LA is a learner-centered approach to second-language learning that emerged from the popularity of liberal education, which emphasizes self-instruction and the proactive, independent learner. The 1980s' view of learner autonomy emphasized understanding it as a capacity for independent learning and self-instruction (Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981). Within applied linguistics, Holec (1981) defined autonomy as the learner's ability to take charge of his or her own learning. This responsibility encompasses all aspects of the learning process. Learners take responsibility for their individual objectives, which they may adjust and reconsider in response to internal or external changes. Additionally, learners possess the ability to determine the content and progression of their learning, as learner autonomy drives learners to select content based on their personal preferences.

Little (1991) positioned psychology as central to learner autonomy, redefining it as the capacity for "detachment," which denotes an individual's ability to remove themselves from the situation (specifically, their own learning) and to analyze and synthesize objectively without the influence of emotions. He added that it is the capacity to have critical reflection, make decisions, and take independent actions. It assumes that learners will develop cognitive and emotional relationships to the process of learning and the content they learn, which will lead to developing intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and metacognitive awareness. Little (1995) later argued that the psychological processes underpinning developmental and experiential learning operate within a social interaction framework. As a result, learning does not occur in isolation but through interaction with others, which is internalized by the learner. This shift represents a move from understanding autonomy as an individual capacity, in which the learner takes charge of his or her own learning in isolation, to recognizing autonomy as a capacity that can be fostered through social interaction. Increasingly, numerous scholars (e.g., Benson, 2007; Littlewood, 1999; Nunan, 1997) have emphasized that learner autonomy develops through social interaction rather than isolation, thereby challenging the misconception that autonomy

requires working alone. As a result, from the 1990s onward, autonomy has been seen as a matter of degree rather than a single trait (Benson, 2007).

This shift led scholars to develop theoretical and empirical models that encompass various levels and dimensions of autonomous behavior. The most influential model for the current framework is Benson's (2011), which suggests autonomy involves control over three interconnected dimensions: (a) learning management, which includes observable behaviors like planning, organizing, and evaluation of learning; (b) cognitive processes, mental activities focused on regulating internal thoughts rather than directly affecting actions; and (c) learning content, representing the learner's ability to make informed decisions about the subject they are studying. Other models offer complementary emphases—Nunan's (1997) five-level model consisting of awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence, Littlewood's (1999) distinction between proactive and reactive autonomy, and Oxford's (2003) systematic model of second language (L2) learner autonomy structured around four interconnected perspectives: technical, psychological, sociocultural, and political-critical perspectives—but Benson's model is adopted here because it provides the clearest basis for comparing LA with SDL and SRL.

3. Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

SDL is a concept developed in opposition to traditional content-centered and teacher-centered approaches to education, especially in higher education. It is a shift from the authoritative role of the instructor as a transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of the learning process (Caffarella & O'Donnell, 1987; Garrison, 1997). This shift adapts to the new educational development where the learners have more responsibility for their learning, while these self-regulated inquiry skills help the students avoid experiencing anxiety and frustration (Knowles, 1975).

Knowles (1975) emerged as a leading researcher in the field of SDL and popularized the term andragogy, referring to adult education. According to Knowles (1975), SDL can be seen as a process in which learners engage in setting goals, identifying resources, and evaluating learning outcomes. Self-directed learners are understood as self-initiated learners who have the motivation to apply the knowledge they have learned in real-life situations (Caffarella & O'Donnell, 1987; Kerka, 1994; Knowles, 1975). The main characteristic of SDL is that the learner is in full control of the learning process, which can take place inside or outside formal learning settings; that is to say, learners can plan, evaluate, and set goals inside or outside the classroom setting (Kerka, 1994). Another definition was introduced by Garrison (1997), who defined SDL as an approach in which learners have a high motivation to take personal and collaborative control of their self-monitoring and self-management processes to construct meaningful learning objectives. In this view, knowledge and meaning are both personally and socially constructed, and SDL has the potential to enhance learning outcomes in both the short and long term. This personal control does not necessarily lead to fully autonomous learning but rather to a degree of autonomy, since autonomy is understood as the ability to take responsibility for all aspects of learning (Holec, 1981).

SDL is a complex concept that has led numerous scholars to explain it from various perspectives. Candy (1991) argues that SDL should no longer be seen as merely acquiring skills and knowledge in which learners are considered asocial individuals who do not interact with their environment; instead, it should be viewed as a product of the interaction between learners and their environment, leading to socially constructed knowledge. To clarify this concept, Candy proposes a four-dimensional model. These dimensions consist of two interacting processes: learner-controlled instruction, which refers to the learner's influence over their learning, and autodidaxy, meaning a process in which the learner pursues knowledge outside formal educational settings. The model also includes two personal attributes: self-management,

the ability to organize, conduct, and assess one's own learning, and personal autonomy, where the learner develops a sense of responsibility and becomes more proactive.

Other models offer complementary perspectives—Brockett & Hiemstra's (1991) Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) Model, which is based on the idea that learners take ownership of their own learning and actions; Grow's (1991) Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model which emphasizes the role of teachers in facilitating the learner's development, through stages, toward self-direction and, eventually, developing greater autonomy; and Garrison's (1997) Three-Dimensional Model of Self-Directed Learning, which integrates self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. Candy's (1991) four-dimensional model is adopted as the main reference because it distinguishes self-direction as a personal attribute from self-direction as a mode of organizing instruction, a distinction that benefits the subsequent comparative framework.

4. Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)

Self-regulated learning draws on general psychological accounts of self-regulation and was developed specifically for educational contexts by Zimmerman & Schunk (1989). SRL is a self-oriented feedback loop (Carver & Scheier, 1981) in which learners use monitoring to measure their development, and evaluation to assess and receive feedback on their progress and the effectiveness of their learning strategies (Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989). Learners can be seen as self-regulated when they have the capability to direct their own efforts to acquire knowledge and skills, which will help them in attaining the goals that they have already set through effective management of time and information. For Zimmerman (2000), self-regulated learners regulate their learning by engaging in the learning process metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally to accomplish their own goals, a cyclical process spanning forethought, performance, and self-reflection phases.

Self-regulated learners proactively seek out knowledge and learning opportunities, and they are aware of the processes and strategies they use. They develop a high level of self-efficacy, and they are intrinsically motivated. Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in his or her ability to organize and execute a set of actions that are pivotal to successfully achieving tasks using a skill that he or she possesses (Bandura, 1986). For example, when self-regulated learners have a goal to achieve, they plan and set specific goals, monitor their performance to measure progress, manage their time, and evaluate their methods (Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989). The use of self-efficacy here helps them face challenging tasks, put in great effort to pursue their goals, and remain persistent.

Various models have been used to investigate SRL in Educational Psychology. Pintrich (2000) investigates the link between self-regulation and motivation, proposing a model with four sequential phases: (1) Forethought, planning, and activation; (2) Monitoring; (3) Control; and (4) Reaction and reflection. These phases follow a typical chronological sequence that learners experience during task completion. Boekaerts and Cascallar's (2006) Dual Processing Model emphasizes the interaction between cognitive and emotional regulation, especially in language education; it identifies two distinct bottom-up strategies: volitional and emotion regulation strategies. Additionally, strategy-based learning theories (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2013) offer a behavioral perspective, focusing on the strategies learners actively employ during language tasks. Zimmerman's (2000) widely accepted model views self-regulation as a self-directed process in which learners direct their efforts to acquire knowledge and translate mental abilities into academic skills. He assumes that learners acquire different cognitive skills and become experts at different tasks through observing and social interaction with others (Zimmerman, 2000; Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989). In order to explain how learners proactively use strategies to achieve their goals, he has developed the cyclical model (Zimmerman, 2000). The model is divided into three phases: Forethought, Performance, and Self-reflection. In the Forethought phase, learners analyze the task, set goals, and plan the

strategies needed to achieve them. In addition, learners seek to develop high self-efficacy expectations to face challenging tasks and to increase their self-motivational beliefs. In the Performance phase, there are two main processes by which learners maintain their concentration and progress towards their goals, namely self-observation and self-control. In the self-observation process, learners monitor their accuracy in implementing specific strategies. The self-control process is used to maintain interest, motivation, and concentration (Panadero & Alonso-Tapia, 2014), and it includes two main sets of strategies, namely metacognitive and motivational strategies. Finally, during the Self-reflection phase, learners assess their personal effectiveness in achieving outcomes and evaluate their performance throughout the process. This paper primarily references Zimmerman's (2000) cyclical model, because of its extensive use in self-regulated learning research.

5. Comparative Framework

After examining each construct in the previous section within its disciplinary context, this section brings LA, SDL, and SRL together to explore their relationships across six dimensions: disciplinary origin, conceptual status, primary focus, level of analysis, key processes, and type of control. Table 1 provides a summary of this comparison.

Dimension	Learner Autonomy	Self-Directed Learning	Self-Regulated Learning
Disciplinary origin	Applied linguistics and education — Holec (1981), Little (1991), Benson (2011)	Adult education (andragogy) — Knowles (1975), Candy (1991)	Educational psychology — Zimmerman (2000), Pintrich (2000)
Core Conceptualization	Capacity	Self-directed process	Regulatory process
Primary Focus	Integrated control over process, cognition, content, and context	Control over the learning process	Internal cognitive, motivational, and behavioral regulation
Level of Analysis	Broad/multidimensional	Broad but learning-process oriented	Narrower / process-oriented
Key Processes	Critical reflection, strategic management, content control, social and political awareness	Planning, managing, and evaluating	Metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral self-regulation
Type of Control	Integrated (cognitive + procedural + contextual)	Procedural control	Cognitive/metacognitive control

Table 1 A Comparative Framework of Learner Autonomy, Self-Directed Learning, and Self-Regulated Learning

Disciplinary Origins and Conceptual Status

Having defined LA, SDL, and SRL based on the literature, it is evident that each one originates and develops in a distinct field: LA in applied linguistics and language education, SDL in adult education, and SRL in educational psychology. Although these concepts are often used interchangeably in the literature (Gupta et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2014; Williamson Hawkins, 2018), their separate origins demonstrate that they are not just different names for the same phenomenon. Lewis & Vialleton (2011, p.206) covers the origins of both LA and SRL, stating that LA “is a student-centered approach to second language learning”, while SRL originates in educational psychology.

Since these concepts originate from different fields, their scope also varies accordingly. LA is typically regarded as “a capacity to take control over one’s own learning”, (Benson, 2011, p.2). SDL is best understood as a self-directed process in which learners take the initiative to manage their own learning, with or without the help of others, by engaging in “diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for

learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (Knowles, 1975, p.18).

Benson (2011, p.37) demonstrates the distinction between autonomy and SDL by describing SDL “as a mode of learning, in which the learner makes the important decisions about content, methods and evaluation”. In this sense, SDL is a mode of learning in which the learner decides the direction of his or her learning, rather than having others direct it, while autonomy is the capacity to take control of one's learning.

SRL, on the other hand, refers to the regulatory process in which the learner uses cognitive, motivational, and behavioral mechanisms to regulate their behaviors and achieve a learning goal (Zimmerman, 2000). Recognizing this distinction—a capacity, a self-directed process, and a regulatory process—clarifies why the three constructs, although related, do not address similar aspects of learner activity but rather different conceptual positions.

Scope and Locus of Control

Another difference lies in the scope of these three concepts. LA's scope is relatively broad, encompassing control over the management of learning, cognitive processes, and learning content, as well as decision-making within social, pedagogical, and institutional contexts in which learning occurs (Benson, 1997, 2011; Little, 1991). In addition, LA involves managing cognitive processes, specifically, the ability for critical reflection as theorized by Little (1991), which denotes the capacity to make conscious decisions about the learning process. This makes LA a comparatively broad construct, extending beyond the management of learning to encompass the cognitive processes involved in learning as well as learners' engagement with and decisions about the content being learned.

SDL functions across the entire learning process and underscores the learner's control over it. According to Knowles (1975), it involves a learner who actively takes charge, from identifying learning needs and setting goals to finding resources for learning, choosing strategies, implementing them, and evaluating outcomes. SDL, therefore, extends beyond mere cognitive processes and includes the learner's capacity to take initiative in planning, managing, and evaluating their progress. The focus is consequently more on procedures, although self-directed learners might still have control over their goals and resources (Loyens et al., 2008).

SRL, by contrast, has a more process-specific scope, in which learners actively control their own learning by planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Self-regulated learners cyclically regulate their internal cognitive, motivational, and behavioral strategies to achieve their personal goals (Zimmerman, 2000). SRL typically concentrates on particular tasks, enabling learners to focus on gaining knowledge and translating mental skills into academic abilities (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000), rather than on the broader question of learners' overall control of learning.

The distinctions between these constructs can thus be clarified through the locus of control emphasized earlier. LA involves control across various dimensions, namely control over learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content (Benson, 2011); SDL highlights responsibility for initiating, directing, and managing their learning process (Knowles, 1975); and SRL mainly centers on how learners regulate their learning once they are engaged in a task or set a goal through cognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes (Zimmerman, 2000). It is worth mentioning that these three constructs share some processes, but are used in different ways. Planning, for instance, is a process of LA, SDL, and SRL, but its manifestation varies slightly depending on the context in which it is interpreted. In LA, Benson (2011) views planning as a core process within the learning management dimension, involving observable behaviors, such as learners' ability to plan their language learning. In SDL, planning is a process where the learner takes the initiative to diagnose needs, identify resources, and decide how to pursue learning (Knowles, 1975). In SRL, strategic planning is a key part of the forethought phase, in which learners choose appropriate methods to complete the task (Zimmerman, 2000).

Connecting Self-Directed Learning and Self-Regulated Learning to Learner Autonomy

Benson's (2011) conceptualization of LA offers a valuable perspective by differentiating learner control in terms of learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content. From Benson's perspective, these dimensions are not to be understood as separate from one another but as interconnected, helping to clarify how control over learning, as Benson (2011, p.2) defines LA, "a capacity to take control over one's own learning," operates across them. The first relationship reviewed is between SDL and the control over learning management dimension; the second connection is between SRL and the control over cognitive processes dimension; the third section shows the connection between SRL and SDL and the control over learning content dimension, emphasizing and explaining how this dimension operates in LA.

Self-Directed Learning and Control over Learning Management

The strongest connection between SDL and Benson's framework can be traced in learning management. Benson (2011, p. 100) asserts that control over learning management can refer to "observable behaviours, while control over learning management refers to the cognitive competences underlying these behaviours". He argues that these behaviors are insufficient because they do not fully explain the dimension. Therefore, he expands on LA's control over the learning management dimension by referencing specific elements from the SDL literature, such as studies on expert self-directed learners and adult learners' planning behaviors (Gibbons et al., 1980; Spear & Mocker, 1984) to examine the cognitive and attitudinal factors underlying those behaviors. Benson's reference to the SDL literature indicates a conceptual overlap between SDL and control over learning management. However, drawing on the SDL literature does not necessarily imply that the two are synonymous; rather, it suggests that certain processes within SDL overlap with aspects of the control over learning management dimension. Similarly, Knowles's (1975) definition of SDL emphasizes learners taking the initiative to set goals, identify resources, choose and apply learning strategies, and evaluate outcomes. These activities closely relate to the "planning, organization, and evaluation of learning" definition discussed above, in which autonomous learners engage in similar activities, such as planning, selecting resources, and allocating time to their learning.

However, this connection does not imply that SDL can be reduced to control over the learning management dimension. Self-direction also includes making decisions about learning goals, resources, and the learning material itself (Loyens et al., 2008). Still, analyzing the concept through Benson's dimensions highlights its unique focus. SDL emphasizes the learner as the individual who takes the initiative and guides their learning, while Benson's wider view of LA includes this form of management along with control over cognitive processes and learning content.

Self-Regulated Learning and Cognitive Processes

Zimmerman's (2000) framework centers on how learners self-regulate their learning toward meaningful goals. Thus, SRL focuses heavily on learners' monitoring and regulation of cognitive processes, while also including motivational and behavioral processes. Benson (2011, p.100) highlights that "control over cognitive processes is purely cognitive in the sense that it is not concerned with direct control of behaviour". This dimension focuses specifically on attention, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge. Benson's (2011) approach to this dimension builds on research regarding attention, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge that also provides conceptual resources for understanding SRL (Candy, 1991; Wenden, 1995).

The overlap between Benson's (2011) cognitive processing dimension and Zimmerman's (2000) framework is primarily in cognitive and metacognitive processes. Benson (2011) notes that reflection is an internal mental process that bridges the learner's experience and future self-management. Benson (2011, p.106) states that "the relationship between reflection and autonomy lies in the cognitive and behavioral processes by which individuals take control of the stream of experience they are subject to". Reflection is a psychological component of autonomy, where autonomous learners consciously reflect on their learning process. Engaging

in this cognitive process, learners interpret their learning experiences and use those interpretations to take control of future actions. This shows a convergence with SRL at the self-reflection phase of Zimmerman's (2000) cyclical model, in which processes occur after the learner performs the task, allowing the learner to self-evaluate their performance. During self-evaluation, learners compare their previous and current performance to assess their success on a task. The overlap, however, does not imply a theoretical similarity. Within Benson's account, reflection is a cognitive process, whereas self-reflection constitutes a phase that encompasses self-judgment and self-reaction within which many processes take place. In the same vein, Benson (2011, p. 44) makes the relationship between LA and SRL explicit by describing SRL as somewhat narrower than the broader concept of autonomy. This emphasis closely ties SRL's cognitive and behavioral aspects to Benson's (2011) cognitive processes dimension of LA.

This connection, however, does not imply that SRL is equivalent to the control over cognitive processes dimension. SRL is more than a simple concept reducible to the cognitive processes dimension of LA; rather, its theoretical development has provided a more detailed understanding of how regulation occurs, especially regarding cognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes. This connection is meant to illustrate how SRL and LA relate, highlighting that some processes of SRL are linked to Benson's (2011) model.

Learning Content and the Broader Scope of Learner Autonomy

Benson's (2011) third dimension, control over learning content, adds a new perspective to understanding learner autonomy, distinguishing LA from SDL and SRL. Benson (2011, p.112) defines control over learning content as “an aspect of control over learning management, which is concerned with the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of language learning”. Drawing on radical educational reform theories, such as Dewey, Freire, and Illich, this dimension extends beyond the management of day-to-day tasks and cognitive regulation to encompass a political aspect in which learners decide what they want to learn and why they want to learn specific content. This stimulates proactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999), where learners set their own directions for what they want to learn, rather than reactively taking control of learning content that is decided by others. This dimension broadens the question of control over learning by not only addressing how learning is organized or managed but also by questioning what learners choose to learn, their reasons for learning, their role in decision-making about content, and why they learn a specific content, using their capacity to assess and self-determine their learning. Benson (2011) also emphasizes that these decisions often involve negotiation with others, indicating they are not solely individual choices.

This dimension is LA's contribution, which makes it distinct from SDL and SRL. In SDL, Knowles's (1975) five processes, namely diagnosing learning needs, setting goals, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, identifying resources, and evaluating learning outcomes, are primarily concerned with managing and directing the learning process rather than taking control of the content itself. Although these processes influence what learners choose to study, they do not, by themselves, entail a stronger form of control conceptualized by Benson (2011) in his learning content dimension. Later discussions, however, have extended the scope of control discussed in relation to SDL. Loyens et al. (2008), for example, distinguish SDL from SRL by arguing that SDL includes an additional aspect in which learners are given freedom and a broader role in selecting and evaluating learning materials. Brookfield (1984, 1993) introduces another discussion, arguing that SDL has the potential to address major issues such as control and power, which are inseparable from political issues, to foster a critical practice in adult education. He advocates for a shift toward a more political and social aspect, which SDL lacks. Brookfield (1984, 1993) asserts that while SDL mainly focuses on encouraging the learner to take control of their learning processes and the curriculum content they engage with, control of content is still neglected. This potential of SDL to encompass aspects of control over the learning content is not realized in practice, which makes SDL, so

far, limited to learners taking responsibility for taking initiative, directing learning, and managing the learning process.

The difference becomes clearer when focusing on SRL. While self-regulated learners set goals and choose strategies for their learning (Candy, 1991; Zimmerman, 2000), SRL mainly emphasizes managing the internal processes that facilitate learning. According to Zimmerman, (2000), SRL is “self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions” in which learners actively manage their learning behaviors, knowing how and when to use self-regulatory mechanisms to achieve a specific goal. Questions like who decides what to learn, why specific content is chosen, or how learning goals are negotiated with institutions or social contexts are less central to the core concept of SRL.

Neither SDL nor SRL explicitly addresses LA’s unique emphasis on learners’ ability to exercise control and make informed decisions about their learning within specific social, pedagogical, and institutional contexts (Benson, 1997; Little, 1991). This concerns not only reflecting on one’s own learning but also learners’ roles in relation to curricular authority and pedagogical negotiation. The learner identifies their learning goals and actively pursues them, shaping the learning content accordingly (Little, 1991). Determining the content of learning encompasses not merely selecting what to learn, but also understanding why the content is chosen and how the learning takes place. As a result, the learner takes responsibility and proactively engages in deciding the learning content, which ensures that his or her individual experiences and needs are taken into consideration (Benson, 1997, 2011; Little, 1991). However, this control is not exercised individually or independently; Benson (1996, p.33) states that “Control is a question of collective decision-making rather than individual choice”, which indicates that the learner has the capacity to participate in negotiating over the goals, purposes, content, and resources collectively with others, rather than deciding on his or her own. In the same vein, when covering the learning content dimension, Benson (2011, p.112) notes that “in institutional contexts, there are usually social and political dimensions”. The social dimension arises because deciding what to learn in an institution involves engaging in a collective learning situation, where the learner uses social interaction to negotiate with others, including classmates and teachers, about the content they want to learn. The political dimension arises because control over learning content is also related to authority issues in educational settings: learners’ desire to control what they learn can lead to “conflict with teachers and institutions” Benson (2011, p.112). In this sense, autonomy in learning content involves institutional negotiation and collective decision-making rather than individual choice. Within this institutional negotiation, control over learning content presents a much greater challenge to the existing authority, including teachers and institutions, to determine the goals and purposes of learning.

This clarifies that the learning over content dimension extends beyond the scope of both SDL and SRL, since neither concept was developed to address the learner’s capacity to negotiate and make decisions with others about what to learn. Thus, LA is a broad, multidimensional concept that encompasses control over various dimensions, including learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content.

6. Conclusion

The exploration of the relationship among LA, SDL, and SRL shows that they differ in scope, origin, and locus of control. LA is regarded as a capacity in which learners take control of their learning across three dimensions; SDL is understood as a process that involves directing and managing learning; and SRL is an internal cognitive process in which learners regulate various aspects of their learning, including cognitive, behavioral, and motivational aspects. The paper highlights similarities and differences among the three constructs, emphasizing that while they overlap, they are not interchangeable. In addition, the analysis of similarities and differences shows that LA is the broadest, encompassing control over learning

management, cognitive processes, and learning content (Benson, 2011). SDL is also broad but not holistic, as it emphasizes the direction and management of the learning process (Knowles, 1975). SRL is viewed as a narrower concept because it focuses on cognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes (Zimmerman, 2000), rather than encompassing taking control over other elements of the learning process, such as the learning content.

This paper provides insights on how SDL and SRL can be understood through Benson's model. Understanding SDL and SRL through the lens of Benson's three dimensions reveals several key points. The first dimension of LA, control over learning management, overlaps with SDL, as some SDL processes described by Knowles (1975) closely align with Benson's definition of the dimension. The second dimension, control over cognitive processes, is closely connected to SRL's cognitive and behavioral aspects, where Zimmerman's (2000) self-reflection phase aligns with the reflection process discussed by Benson (2011). The third dimension, control over learning content, does not overlap with SRL or SDL, although there is a suggestion that SDL research be directed more toward learning content (Brookfield, 1984, 1993, 2009).

The overlap here does not imply that the constructs can be used interchangeably; rather, it highlights their similarities and differences to help distinguish between them in research. Similarly, analyzing SDL and SRL through the lens of Benson's model does not suggest that the two constructs are reducible to LA. Each construct originates in a distinct field (LA, applied linguistics and education; SDL, adult education; and SRL, educational psychology) and contributes to research in its own way.

Understanding the distinction between LA, SDL, and SRL carries implications for research design, although these are understood as insights arising from comparison rather than as firm prescriptions. Choosing a construct should be guided primarily by the research question's theoretical focus rather than by specific learner behaviors. A study should focus on LA when it investigates learners' exercise of control over their learning and the conditions under which such control is exercised, including learning management, cognitive processes, learning content, or a combination of these dimensions, as well as learners' negotiation of their role within a curriculum, an institution, or a classroom's power relationships. Therefore, LA is especially relevant when examining how learners exercise control over learning, including opportunities that promote this control or constraints that limit it, and how learners negotiate and make decisions concerning content within social, pedagogical, and institutional contexts. A study concerned with learners taking the initiative in planning, managing, and evaluating their learning, without a specific focus on social, pedagogical, or institutional contexts, is primarily relevant to SDL. SDL is suited to questions about how learners take the initiative to identify their needs and direct their own learning, or how they take responsibility for organizing, planning, setting goals, and evaluating their own progress. A study is more directly relevant to SRL when it focuses on the regulation of cognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes. Thus, SRL is primarily concerned with questions investigating how learners plan, monitor, regulate, and reflect on their cognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes during learning. These distinctions are not mutually exclusive, since the same processes, such as goal-setting or planning, can be investigated through different constructs based on the focus of the research question. This has corresponding implications for operationalization: rather than assuming that specific behaviors, instruments, or methods belong exclusively to a single construct, researchers must ensure that the evidence accurately reflects what the construct is meant to measure. Thus, selecting a questionnaire, interview, observation, or other type of evidence should be based on the research question and the specific learner behavior under investigation. For instance, questions concerning negotiations with teachers and institutions require a research design capable of capturing the social and political aspects of control over the learning content dimension and may need to go beyond questionnaires to include qualitative or mixed-methods designs that investigate the question through interviews, classroom observations, learners' diaries, or analysis of negotiated syllabi.

Rather than attempting to cover the full conceptual diversity in the literature on LA, SDL, and SRL, this paper draws on the conceptualizations of Benson (2011), Knowles (1975), and Zimmerman (2000) for each construct, respectively. This selective approach allows for a coherent theoretical comparison while acknowledging that other conceptual frameworks may reveal different interrelations among LA, SDL, and SRL. Future research could examine these constructs using alternative definitions to see whether their relationships differ. The value of distinguishing LA, SDL, and SRL lies in establishing conceptual clarity about their relationships and clarifying the overlap among the constructs. Understanding their convergence and divergence allows researchers to select concepts on theoretical grounds and recognize their shared aspects without conflating their theoretical differences.

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