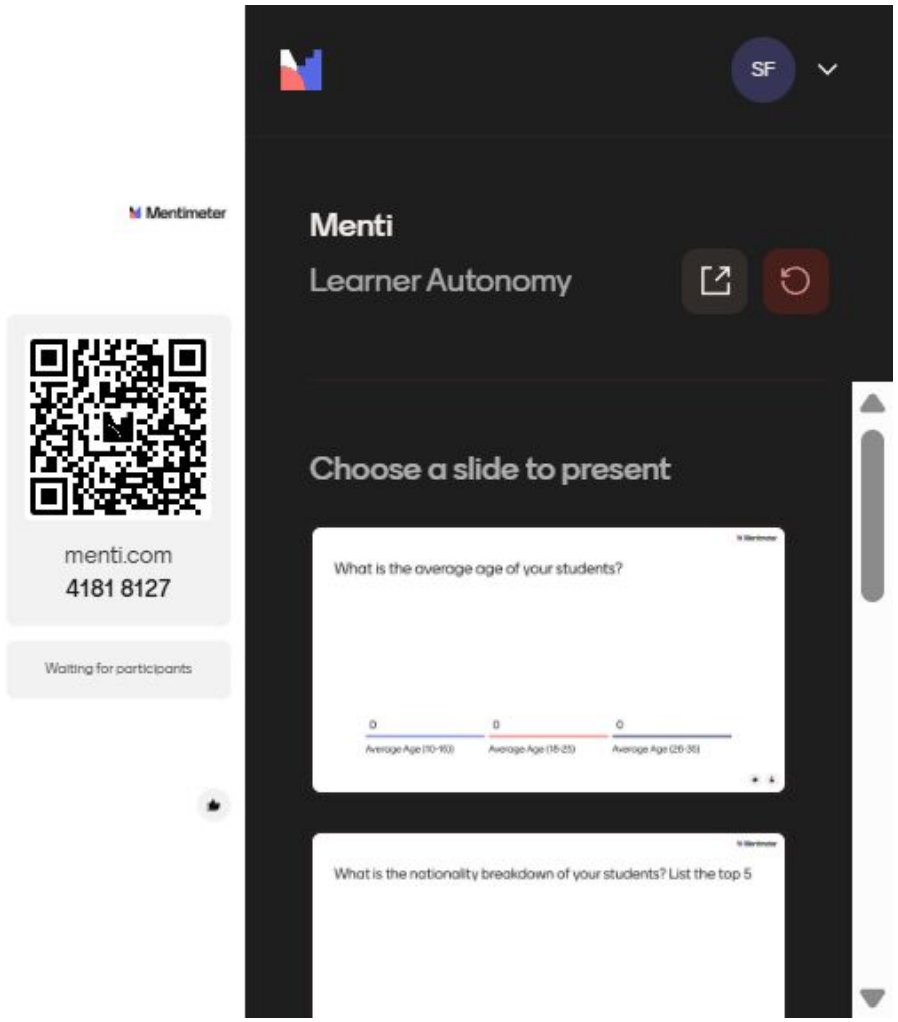
“Teaching’em how to Fish”
The Importance of Learner Autonomy in adult ESL Education

ILSC Education Group
March 12th, 2026

Pair-Share Activity – What is Learner Autonomy?

What is Learner Autonomy?



What does Learner Autonomy mean?

Learner autonomy refers to the capacity of adult learners to take charge of, take responsibility for, and control their own learning journeys. Rather than being passive recipients of instruction, autonomous learners are active participants who set their own goals, choose their own learning strategies, and self-evaluate their progress.

Core Characteristics

1- Active Ownership

2- Goal-oriented

3- Metacognitive Awareness

4- Self-reflection

5-Resourcefulness

Why Learner Autonomy Matters?

1- An autonomous learner is a lifelong learner

2- Autonomous learners tend to be more engaged, empowered, independent, and responsible.

3- This approach humanizes learners by showing sensitivity to their individual needs and preferences

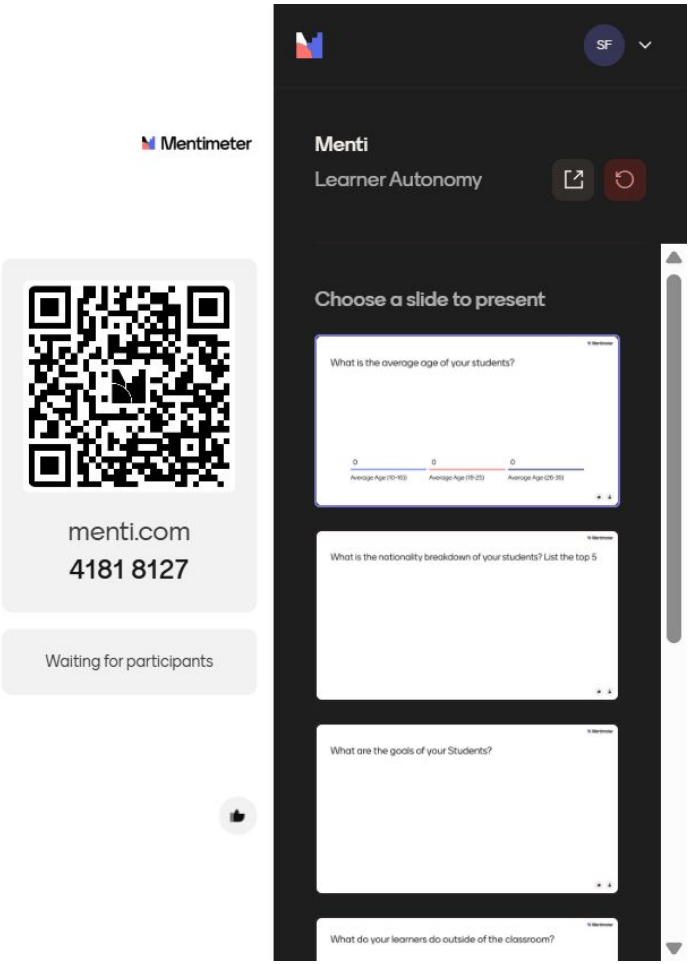
4- This approach acknowledges that learning is not equivalent to “being taught”.

How well do you know your students?

Student Age

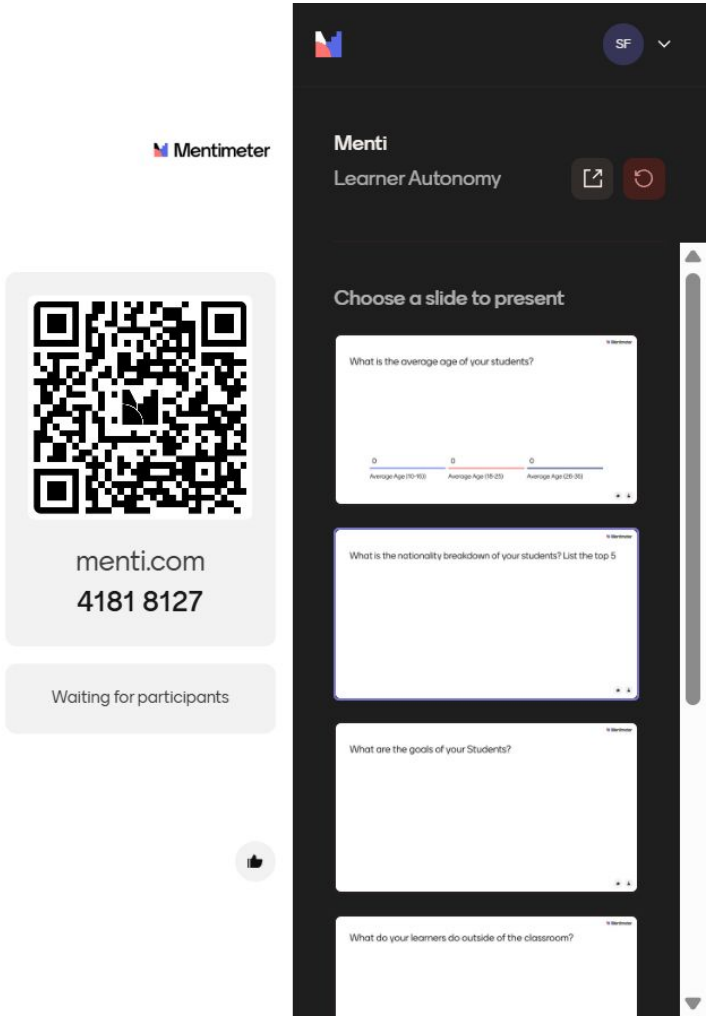
What is the average age of your students?

0	0	0
Average Age (10-16))	Average Age (18-25)	Average Age (26-35)



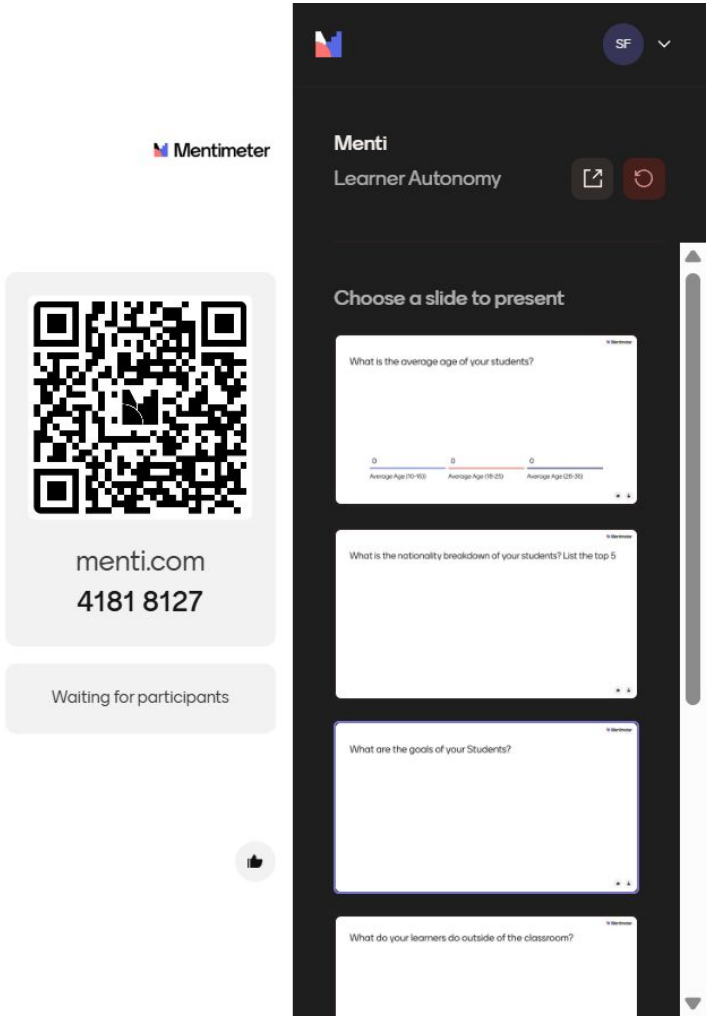
Nationality Composition

What is the nationality breakdown of your students? List the top 5



Student Goals: Why Study English?

What are the goals of your Students?



How can schools facilitate learner autonomy?

1- Curriculum, : interest-based content, learning strategies, enabling self-assessment, Can-Do statements

2- Creating choices: shifting away from cookie-cutter teacher-led courses to variety of content to accommodate different needs and interests.

3- Knowing their students. Placing students' needs at the center, fostering self-awareness and metacognition

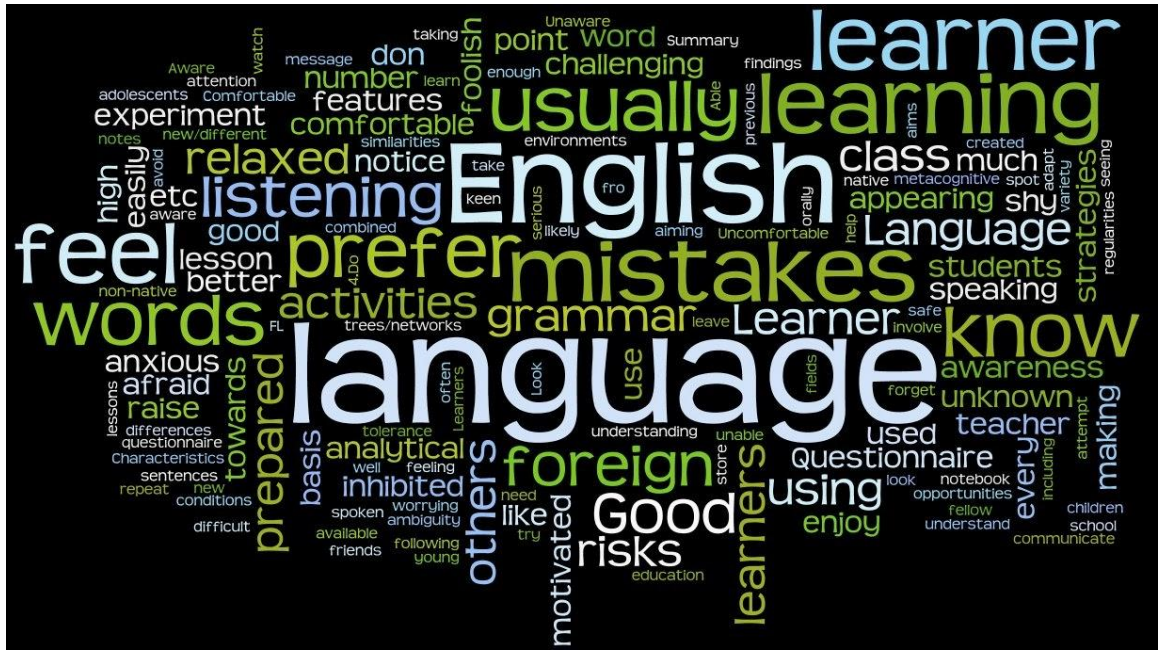
How can schools facilitate learner autonomy?

4- Instructor training: scaffolding independence, provide choices, project-based learning, guide goal-setting and encouraging reflective learning

5- Teaching Learning Strategies: vocabulary learning methods, listening (gist vs detail) & reading strategies (Skimming, scanning), using authentic materials

6- Resources: Provide access to self-study materials, online resources, and libraries.

What we do at ILSC to encourage Learner Autonomy



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Pre-Arrival

- Online Language Assessment
- Capturing Student Goals with our online assessment
- Pre-Arrival Course Selection
- Access to the ILSC App

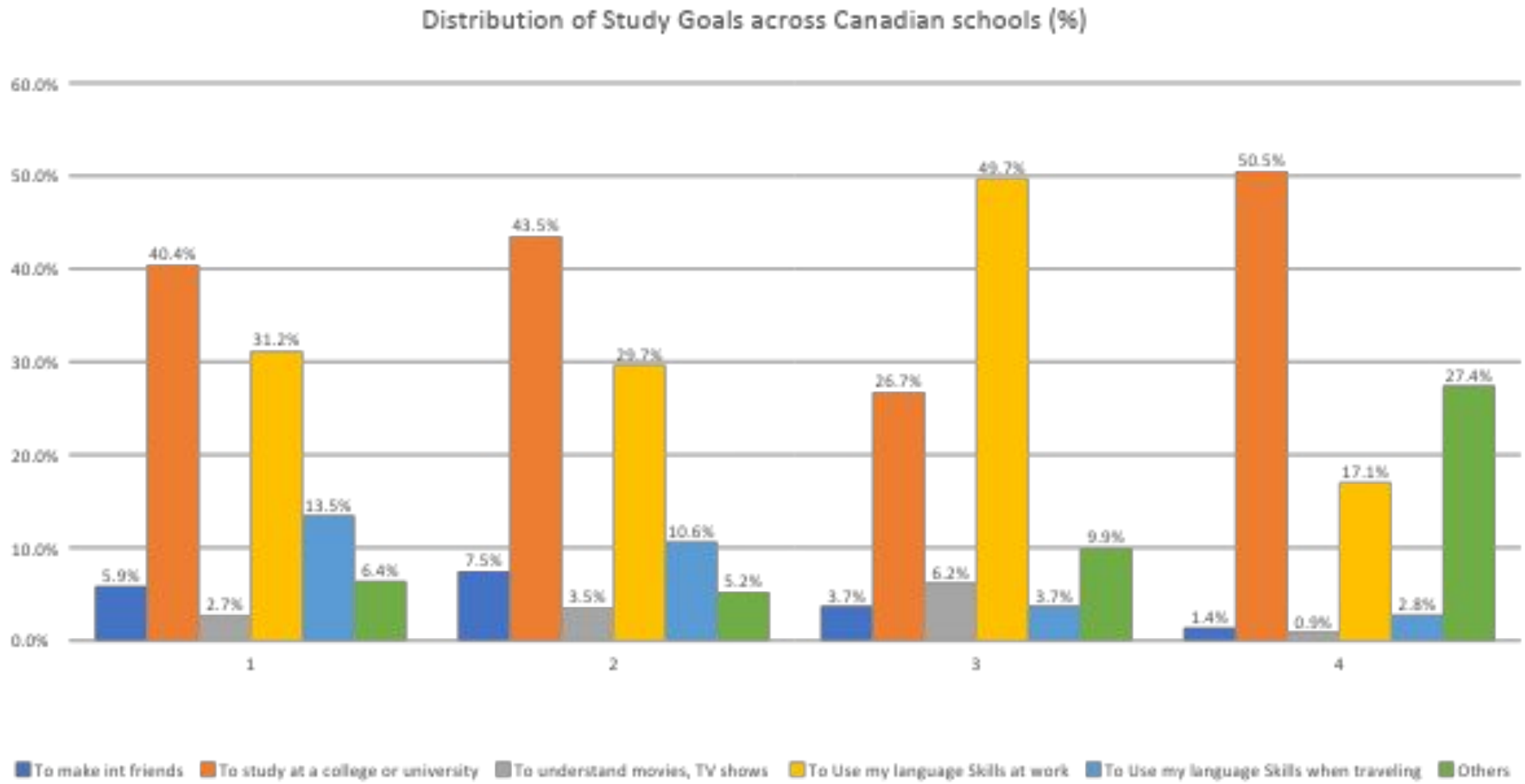
Pre-Arrival

- Pre-Arrival Assessment – Goal Question

Questions asked:

1. Why do you want to study at ILSC?

2. My primary goal is: (students have a drop-down menu of various goals to choose from i.e. To study at a college or university)


Distribution of Study Goals across Canadian schools (%)
60.0%
50.0%
40.0%
30.0%
20.0%
10.0%
0.0%
5.9%
40.4%
2.7%
31.2%
13.5%
6.4%
7.5%
43.5%
3.5%
29.7%
10.6%
5.2%
3.7%
26.7%
6.2%
49.7%
3.7%
9.9%
1.4%
50.5%
0.9%
17.1%
2.8%
27.4%
1
2
3
4
To make int friends
To study at a college or university
To understand movies, TV shows
To Use my language Skills at work
To Use my language Skills when traveling
Others

At ILSC

- Access to the ILSC App
- Creating awareness of goals. These are transferred to our Student Management System (SMS) & goals are transferred to the Progression Report.
- First week Survey to students
- Offering PDs to Instructors

At ILSC

Goals in our SMS:

At ILSC

- Offering content for self-directed learning
- Evaluation & feedback throughout the course & at the end (Progress reports)
- Having/creating diverse set of options for studies in additional sessions

Courses Available

Level	Core Class Options 8:30am-11:45am	Elective (E1) Options 11:45am-1:00pm	Elective (E2) Options 2:00pm-3:00pm
Upper Intermediate 3	English for Academic Purposes (EAP I3) English Communication (ECM I3) People & Places Through Time (PPT) Global Social Issues (GSI) Green Leadership (GLR) IELTS (IEL I3-A2) Business English (BE I3-A2) Medical English (MED I2+)	Conversation (CNV I3-A2) Business Presentation (BMK I3-A2) Grammar (GRM I3-A2) Pronunciation Accent Red (PRN I3-A2) Canadian Studies (ECS I3-A2) Vocabulary (VCB I3-A2) Reading (RDG I3-A2) Public Speaking (PSK I3-A2) Academic Vocabulary (AVB I3-A2) Writing (WRT I3-A2) IELTS-All Skills (IES I1-I4) Slanguage (SLG-I1-I3) English Through Art (I1-A2) Speaking & Listening (SLN I3-A2) English through Yoga (YOG I1-A2) Cafe Work Skills (CWS I2+)	Conversation (CNV-I3-A2) Grammar (GRM I3-A2) International Current Events (ICE I3-A2) Speaking & Listening (SLN I3-A2) Vocabulary (VCB I3-A2) Slanguage (SLG I1-I3) Writing (WRT I3-A2)

Variety in Options

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Progress Report: Goals

Intake level Assessed January 20, 2026	Lev
I1	

Assessment	Lang
Class Performance & Weekly Assessments including unit tests, writing assessments, presentations, etc.	Spea Liste Read Writi
End-of-Session Assessments	Comr Writt
	Over

Participation: Satisfactory

Learning Goals: To use my language skills at work

Post ILSC

- Students keep all books/materials received for post ILSC study
- Offering content for self-directed learning
- Access to the ILSC APP

Post ILSC: Online Practice

1 | Video | 1

Watch the video. Choose <u>all</u> the topics that Brian Buma talks about.

- [ ] What he was like as a child.
- [ ] A bad experience he had when he was young.
- [ ] What his parents enjoyed doing.
- [ ] Things that he made when he was young.
- [ ] What he enjoys doing now.
- [ ] Things that he does with his children.
- [ ] Things he has never done with his children.
- [ ] What his children enjoy doing.

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What are you doing at your school to encourage learner autonomy?

Sources

Barrantes Elizondo, Lena, and Cinthya Olivares Garita. *A Closer Look into Learner Autonomy in the EFL Classroom*. Universidad Nacional, Sede Regional Brunca, Costa Rica, n.d.

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Myers, Clare. "Sharing the Power: Facilitating Learner Independence in the Adult ESL Classroom." n.d.

Saad, Sharina. "The Challenges and the Possible Solutions in Fostering Learner Autonomy in ESL Classrooms: ESL Teachers' Voices." Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kedah, 2024. Received 6 Dec. 2023, accepted 22 Jan. 2024, published online 30 Apr. 2024.

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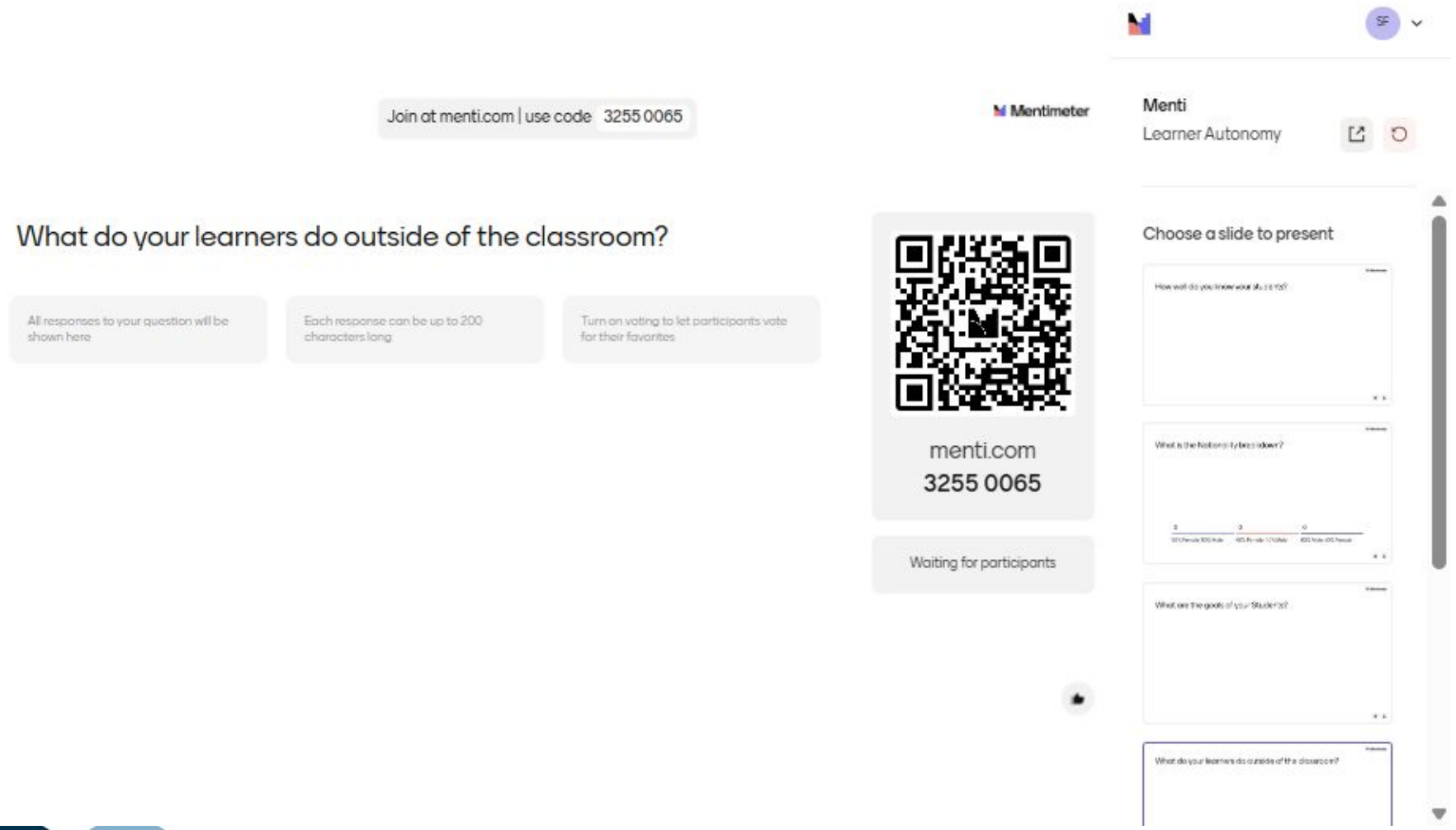
Key Take-Aways

- Autonomy is a skill
- Teachers Guide the process
- Small Changes Matter

Pair-Share Activity



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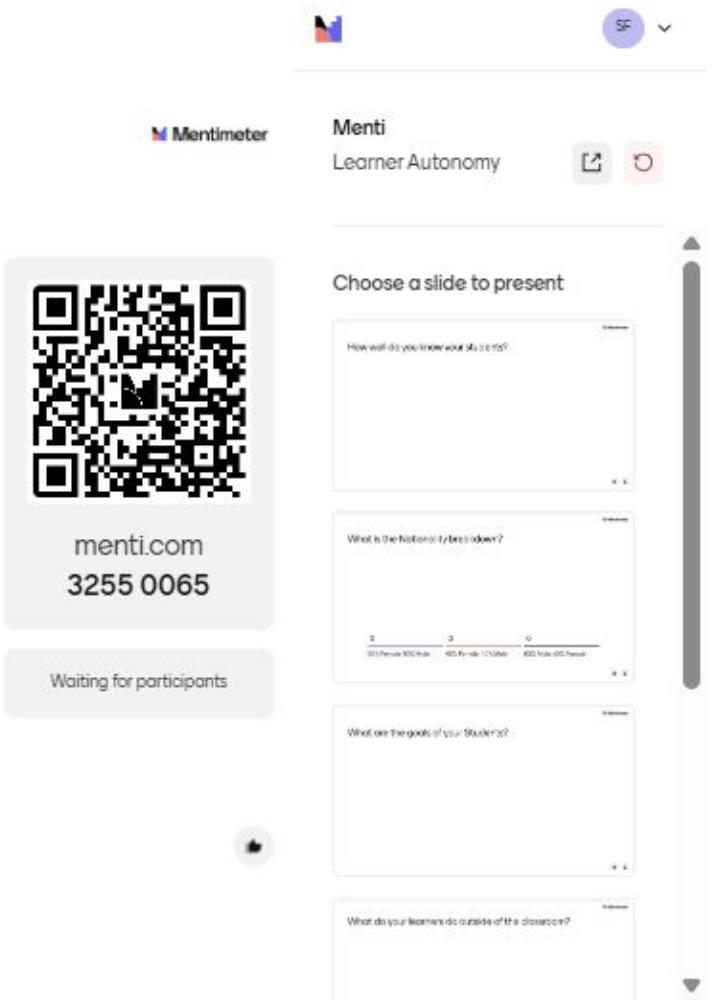
Pair-Share Activity

Why does this matter to Adult ESL Learners?



Activity: From Teacher-Led to Learner-Led

Task (small group):

1. Common ESL Activity
2. Identify where the teacher controls the learning
3. How can we redesign to make it more learner led?

Activity: From Teacher-Led to Learner-Led

Activity: From Teacher-Led to Learner-Led
Level: CLB 4–5 (Low-Intermediate)
Skill Focus: Speaking – Making Appointments by Phone
Time: 30–40 minutes

Part 1: The Traditional (Teacher-Led) Version
Objective
Students will practice making a doctor's appointment by phone.

Procedure
- Teacher presents model dialogue on board.
- Teacher explains vocabulary.
- Students repeat sentences.
- Students practice the exact dialogue in pairs.
- Teacher corrects errors.

Activity: From Teacher-Led to Learner-Led

Where the Teacher Controls Learning

- Chooses topic
- Provides script
- Controls language
- Leads correction
- No strategy instruction
- No reflection

Activity: From Teacher-Led to Learner-Led

Choice

Instead of only “doctor’s appointment,” learners choose:

- Doctor
- Dentist
- Hair salon
- Child’s school
- Job interview

They can also choose:

- Phone call role-play
- Voice message
- In-person conversation

✔ **Learners select a scenario relevant to their life.**

Activity: From Teacher-Led to Learner-Led

Strategy Instruction

Teacher models and names strategies:

- Write key phrases, not full sentences
- Use a question checklist
- Practice asking for repetition
- Listen for key information (date, time, name)

Teacher says explicitly:

- “You can use this strategy when you call outside of class.”

Students create a small cue card using these strategies.

Activity: From Teacher-Led to Learner-Led

Practice
Pairs role-play using their own scenario and cue cards.

Teacher:
- Observes
- Takes notes
- Delays correction

Encourage self-correction first:
- “Did that sound clear?”
  “What strategy did you use?”

Activity: From Teacher-Led to Learner-Led

Reflection (5 minutes)

Students answer:

1. What was difficult?
2. What strategy helped you most?
3. How confident do you feel (1–5)?
4. Would you feel ready to do this in real life?

Optional:

Students set a real-world goal:

“This week, I will call to…”

Activity: From Teacher-Led to Learner-Led

What Changed?

Teacher-Led	**Learner-Led**
One script	Multiple choices
Full sentences given	Students build own language
Immediate correction	Guided self-monitoring
No strategy focus	Explicit strategy teaching
No reflection	Structured reflection