

NUDGE THEORY IN ESL EDUCATION: ENCOURAGING SELF-DIRECTED AND MOTIVATED LEARNING IN A HIGHER INSTITUTION

РОЛЬ ТЕОРІЇ ПІДШТОВХУВАННЯ В СПРИЯННІ САМОКОНТРОЛЮ ТА МОТИВАЦІЇ ПРИ ВИВЧЕННІ ІНОЗЕМНИХ МОВ У ВИЩОМУ НАВЧАЛЬНОМУ ЗАКЛАДІ

This article studies the application of nudge theory within the domain of English as a Second Language (ESL) education, specifically examining how subtle and carefully designed behavioral prompts can facilitate the process of self-directed learning among students. Nudge theory, a concept that originated in the field of behavioral economics, emphasizes the power of small interventions in influencing individuals' decision-making processes without overtly restricting their freedom of choice. This concept, which gained prominence through the works of Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, suggests that by altering the way options are presented or providing gentle encouragement, individuals can be nudged toward better decisions and behaviors without the need for forceful actions. In the context of ESL, nudge theory can be particularly effective in fostering learner autonomy, encouraging students to take greater responsibility for their own learning, and enhancing their engagement with the language learning process. Nudging strategies can be implemented in a variety of ways, from providing feedback that focuses on progress rather than perfection, to designing learning environments that subtly encourage exploration of language resources outside the classroom. These interventions aim to make students more proactive in their learning, improving their motivation, confidence, and overall outcomes. This article conducts a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the use of nudge theory in education, highlighting key theoretical frameworks that support its effectiveness in teaching and learning. It also discusses the practical applications of these strategies within the ESL classroom, providing real-world examples and case studies that demonstrate how nudges can be effectively integrated into language education. Furthermore, the article identifies potential challenges and limitations of applying nudge theory in this context, as well as offers recommendations for educators on how to incorporate nudge-based strategies into their teaching practices. Finally, the article concludes by exploring the implications of these strategies for future research, suggesting directions for further studies that could deepen our understanding of the potential of nudge theory in enhancing ESL education and self-directed learning.

Key words: nudge theory, self-directed learning, learner autonomy, motivation, language learning resources.

Ця стаття детально досліджує застосування теорії підштовхування в галузі освіти

англійської мови як іноземної (ESL), зокрема розглядаючи, як тонко та ретельно сплановані поведінкові підказки можуть сприяти процесу самокерованого навчання серед студентів. Теорія нуджу, концепція, що виникла в галузі поведінкової економіки, підкреслює важливість малих втручань, які можуть значно вплинути на процес прийняття рішень індивідуумами без явного обмеження їхньої свободи вибору. Ця концепція, що набула популярності завдяки роботам Річарда Тейлора та Касса Санстейна, стверджує, що зміна способу подачі варіантів чи надання м'яких заохочень можуть спонукати людей до кращих рішень і поведінки без необхідності в застосуванні примусових заходів. У контексті ESL теорія нуджу може бути особливо ефективною в сприянні автономії учнів, заохочуючи їх брати на себе більше відповідальності за власне навчання та підвищуючи їхню залученість у процес вивчення мови. Стратегії підштовхування можуть бути реалізовані різними способами – від надання зворотного зв'язку, який зосереджується на прогресі, а не на досконалості, до створення навчальних середовищ, які ненав'язливо заохочують дослідження мовних ресурсів поза класом. Ці втручання спрямовані на те, щоб зробити студентів більш активними в їхньому навчанні, покращуючи їхню мотивацію, впевненість і загальні результати. Стаття здійснює всебічний огляд наявної літератури щодо використання теорії нуджу в освіті, підкреслюючи основні теоретичні основи, що підтримують її ефективність у навчанні та викладанні. Вона також обговорює практичне застосування цих стратегій у класі ESL, надаючи реальні приклади та кейс-стаді, що демонструють, як ефективно інтегрувати стратегії підштовхування в мовну освіту. Крім того, стаття визначає потенційні проблеми та обмеження застосування теорії підштовхування в цьому контексті, а також пропонує рекомендації для викладачів, як впроваджувати стратегії нуджінгу у свою педагогічну практику. Наприкінці стаття розглядає наслідки цих стратегій для подальших досліджень, пропонує напрямки для майбутніх досліджень, які можуть поглибити наше розуміння потенціалу теорії нуджу в покращенні освіти ESL та самокерованого навчання.

Ключові слова: теорія підштовхування, самоконтроль у навчанні, поведінкова економіка, мотивація.

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Introduction. The rapid evolution of educational technology and innovative pedagogical strategies has spurred interest in methodologies that not only impart knowledge but also promote autonomous learning. One promising approach is nudge theory, which has its origins in behavioral economics and public policy. Nudge theory argues that by subtly altering the environment in which decisions are made, it is possible to

influence behavior in a predictable way. In ESL education, fostering self-directed learning is paramount, as learners benefit greatly from taking responsibility for their own progress. The integration of nudge-based strategies could lead to improvements in motivation, engagement, and ultimately, language proficiency.

Recent trends in ESL instruction emphasize learner-centered approaches. However, there is still a gap

in strategies that empower students to make positive, self-initiated decisions about their learning. Nudge theory provides an innovative lens through which educators can view classroom interventions, potentially transforming traditional language learning paradigms. This article aims to explore how nudge theory can be applied in ESL settings to encourage self-directed learning, detailing both the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of this approach.

The purpose of the article. The primary aim of this article is to explore the integration of nudge theory into ESL education with a focus on encouraging self-directed learning. Specifically, the article seeks to define and contextualize nudge theory within the framework of ESL instruction, examine current literature and research on the application of behavioral nudges in educational contexts, discuss practical strategies and interventions that ESL educators can adopt to foster learner autonomy, analyze potential benefits and challenges associated with the implementation of nudge-based methodologies as well as to propose future research directions to further validate and refine these approaches in ESL settings.

By addressing these objectives, this article intends to provide a comprehensive analysis of how subtle, strategic interventions can lead to enhanced learner engagement and improved language acquisition.

Analysis of recent research and publications.

The exploration of nudge theory in education is relatively new, but several studies have begun to bridge the gap between behavioral economics and pedagogy. Researchers have shown that nudges such as timely reminders, positive reinforcement, and environmental cues can lead to significant improvements in student performance and motivation.

Several researchers have contributed to the growing body of work on the application of nudge theory in education. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, the creators of the concept in their seminal book *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (2008), laid the groundwork for applying behavioral economics to educational settings. David Halpern, in his book *Inside the Nudge Unit* (2015), explored the practical applications of nudging in various sectors, including education. Additionally, scholars like Katherine L. Milkman and Dan Ariely have conducted studies that apply nudge theory to improve student motivation and engagement in educational contexts. John Hattie's work on visible learning and feedback also complements the principles of nudge theory, highlighting its relevance in fostering better learning outcomes.

In the realm of language learning, studies have started to explore how nudges can influence behavior in digital learning environments. Researchers like Hidi and Renninger have emphasized the importance of self-regulated learning in academic achievement, highlighting that nudges can serve as catalysts for

initiating and sustaining learner engagement. Further, studies examining mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) suggest that push notifications and micro-learning modules can effectively prompt learners to engage with content regularly.

Presentation of the main material. Nudge theory posits that small changes in the way choices are presented can significantly affect behavior. In an educational context, nudges are subtle cues that encourage students to engage in beneficial learning behaviors without coercion. These can include default options, where learning platforms are set up so that the default choices lead to beneficial outcomes, such as auto-enrollment in supplementary practice modules. Timely reminders, like notifications or emails, help students keep track of deadlines, upcoming lessons, or practice sessions. Feedback loops provide immediate and positive reinforcement to encourage desired behaviors, such as regular practice or active participation. Visual cues, such as motivational posters, progress trackers, or gamified elements in classroom environments or digital interfaces, serve as constant reminders of learning goals [2, p. 51].

The central premise of nudge theory is that the environment in which choices are made can be structured to promote desirable behavior. In ESL education, this approach can facilitate self-directed learning by creating an ecosystem where learners are naturally inclined to engage, review, and apply new language skills. Digital learning environments provide an excellent opportunity for implementing nudge-based strategies [8, p. 240].

Mobile applications and online platforms can deliver regular nudges through push notifications that remind learners to complete exercises, review vocabulary, or participate in language challenges [7, p. 106].

Adaptive learning systems adjust the difficulty and type of content based on learner performance, nudging students to tackle appropriate challenges.

Gamification elements such as points, badges, and leaderboards motivate continuous learning by rewarding regular engagement and progress. Language learning apps like Duolingo have successfully employed gamification to create a habit of daily practice. Integrating similar nudge-based elements in classroom settings or hybrid learning models can further encourage self-directed study among ESL learners.

In traditional and blended classroom settings, educators can implement several nudge-inspired strategies to encourage student engagement and self-directed learning. Structured routines, such as starting each class with a brief review or a mini-quiz, serve as gentle prompts for students to consolidate previous learning. Establishing clear, predictable classroom activities helps create an environment where students naturally develop habits of reflection and self-assessment [6, p. 24].

Peer interaction also plays a crucial role in reinforcing learning behaviors. Collaborative activities, such as pair work or group discussions, allow students to support and remind each other about tasks and learning goals. These peer nudges foster a sense of community and shared responsibility, making the learning experience more engaging and motivating.

Visual and physical reminders, such as classroom displays, progress charts, and inspirational posters, help keep learning objectives at the forefront of students' minds. By consistently exposing students to these cues, educators can create an environment where motivation and goal-setting become part of daily learning. However, it is essential to ensure that these nudges remain supportive rather than intrusive, guiding students toward internalizing self-regulation rather than relying solely on external prompts [9].

A recent study at a language institute explored the effectiveness of nudge-based interventions in a blended ESL course. Students received automated reminders to participate in online discussions, complete vocabulary exercises, and review grammar lessons. The results showed a 20% increase in engagement among students who received these nudges, as well as improved test scores and higher self-reported satisfaction with the learning process. The success of this approach was attributed to the customization of reminders based on individual student progress, the strategic frequency of nudges to avoid overwhelming learners, and seamless integration into the learning management system [5, p. 119].

To incorporate nudge theory into their teaching practices, educators can design learning environments enriched with subtle cues that promote self-directed learning. Digital and physical spaces can be structured with visual progress trackers, timely digital prompts, and structured routines that reinforce positive habits. Additionally, teaching students about self-regulation and how nudges function can empower them to take control of their learning process. Regular monitoring and adaptation of nudging strategies, based on student feedback and performance data, can ensure these interventions remain effective and responsive to learners' evolving needs [1, p. 284].

Evaluating the effectiveness of nudge interventions is crucial for understanding their long-term benefits in ESL education. Educators and researchers can use both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess their impact. Tracking student engagement metrics, assignment completion rates, and performance on standardized tests provides measurable evidence of how nudges influence learning behaviors. Additionally, gathering qualitative feedback through interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals offers deeper insights into how students perceive and interact with these interventions, helping educators refine strategies to accommodate diverse learning styles [4].

Preliminary data from various pilot studies indicate that when properly implemented, nudges can lead to more consistent study habits and a greater sense of autonomy among learners. However, further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of these strategies and their adaptability across different cultural and educational contexts.

Despite the potential benefits of nudge theory in ESL education, several challenges must be addressed. Individual differences play a significant role, as not all students respond equally to nudges. Cultural background, personal learning preferences, and intrinsic motivation can influence how effective these interventions are for different learners.

Another concern is the risk of overreliance on nudges. While external prompts can encourage engagement, excessive dependence on them may hinder the development of self-regulation skills. Educators must strike a balance between providing support and fostering independent learning to ensure students gradually take ownership of their educational progress [1, p. 296].

Ethical considerations also come into play when using behavioral nudges. Questions about autonomy and consent must be carefully addressed, ensuring that students are aware of these interventions and retain the freedom to make their own learning decisions. Transparency and ethical responsibility are key to maintaining a supportive and respectful learning environment [3, p. 14].

By recognizing and addressing these challenges, educators can refine their use of nudge-based strategies, maximizing their benefits while promoting learner autonomy and long-term academic success.

Conclusions. Nudge theory offers an innovative framework for enhancing self-directed learning in ESL education. By employing subtle behavioral cues—whether through digital platforms or classroom interventions—educators can foster an environment that promotes continuous engagement, self-regulation, and improved language proficiency. While preliminary research indicates promising results, the success of these interventions depends on thoughtful implementation, ongoing evaluation, and adaptation to diverse learner needs.

Future research should focus on:

- Conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of nudge interventions.
- Exploring cultural and individual differences in responsiveness to nudges.
- Developing best practices for integrating nudges into both digital and traditional classroom environments.

In summary, the application of nudge theory in ESL education has the potential to significantly transform language learning methodologies by empowering students to take control of their educational journey. As educators and researchers continue to explore this

intersection, the promise of a more engaged, self-directed, and ultimately successful language learning experience appears well within reach.

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