Language-Learning Autonomy among Adult Immigrants Based in Germany

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Abstract

This research investigates the self-regulated language learning strategy use (Oxford, 2011; Oxford, 2016) of adult immigrants in integration courses in Germany on levels A1, A2, and B1 (Council of Europe, 2001). The study has a European dimension as it examines European immigrants' self-directed use of language learning strategies and uses the example of Germany, which may be relevant in other European contexts. The study is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). As there has not yet been a survey of immigrants' strategy use in their language learning, the current study provides comparative values for later studies. The research has shown that the use of language learning strategies increases as language learning progresses, and it suggests that migrant language learners' strengths lie in metacognitive and cognitive strategies (Oxford, 2011; Oxford, 2016), while their weaknesses lie in meta-sociocultural-interactive strategies that are key to communication. Consequently, future pedagogical approaches should incorporate more comprehensive support for implementing these strategies. The (online) tools that are already frequently used by participants could be pivotal in this regard.

Keywords: self-regulated language learning strategy use; adult migrants; German integration courses

1. Introduction

In Germany, approximately 27.2% of the population (22.3 million people) has a migrant background (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022). Integration takes place in different ways and depends on the immigrants' political, economic, social, cultural, and religious dimensions. However, despite language courses and many other language and culture support initiatives, many immigrants do not have adequate language skills (Becker & Lauterbach, 2008).

The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge – BAMF) is responsible for carrying out asylum procedures, for protecting refugees, and for promoting nationwide integration. BAMF integration courses are specifically designed for adult migrants and guide participants in 6 modules (100 hours each) from the state of no language knowledge at all to level B1 (Council of Europe, 2001). However, many of those who, at least, attend language courses must retake the B1 exam, and only 50-60% of them pass the B1 level (BAMF-Bericht zur Integrationskursgeschäftsstatistik, 2020).

Research indicates that immigrants´ language proficiency in the host country´s language has a positive effect on labor market integration and subsequent earnings (Dustmann & van Soest, 2001). To be able to learn the language of the host country would be essential for immigrants to become equal to the country's residents in terms of rights, duties, and opportunities (Sezer, 2010). Immigrant workers and refugees often do not have a good educational background, meaning that participants in the integration courses have attended school for an average of 10.3 years, and 11.5% of them have not attended school for more than 4 years (Kay et al., 2023, p.50). Therefore, Saunders (2015) questions whether the preconditions for these immigrant adult learners to participate autonomously in the learning process are given. In other words, it is unclear whether these language learners can learn independently, set language learning goals for themselves, and pursue them. However, this is something that the integration course concept expects of them when it explains the personal responsibility of the participants (BAMF, 2015, p. 15). The framework curriculum of the integration courses (Buhlmann et al., 2007, p. 13) clearly emphasizes that "a central concern for this target group must be the teaching of strategies that allow participants in integration courses to learn efficiently depending on their learning type and learning tradition, to recognize and use communication situations inside and outside the classroom as learning situations and *to be able to shape their own (language) learning process independently* in the sense of life-long learning even after the end of the course." However, for us to support these adults in their independent learning, it would be useful to know whether, how, and to what extent they learn autonomously.

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research is to investigate the autonomous language-learning ability of immigrant language learners in Germany. The construct of autonomous language learning is defined by Benson (2001, pp. 59-60) as a conscious effort on the part of the learner to monitor the learning process from beginning to end continuously, which includes complex actions such as critical thinking, planning, and evaluating learning as well as reflection.

The evaluation and measurement of autonomy in language learning presents a challenge due to the absence of standardized metrics. However, the adoption of language learning strategies may offer a potential approach to address this issue. Hence, the construct of language learning strategies is relevant in this context as well, and it refers to behaviors or actions of learners to enhance their own learning (Oxford, 1990). As such, their use may indicate the level of a person´s autonomous learning ability. Language learning strategies support the improvement of language proficiency (Oxford, 1990) because they support self-directed and active involvement that is essential for improving communicative competence. Although they play a very important role in language learning processes, research examining immigrant and refugee self-regulated learning strategy use has been scarce so far, as most studies deal with groups of school children or university students.

For this reason, the current study investigates the self-directed strategy use (Oxford, 2016) by adult immigrants based in Germany and learning German as a second language in Integration Courses (BAMF integration courses). Autonomous language learning ability is measured in this study as the frequency, diversity, and conscious goal-orientation of self-regulated strategy use (Oxford, 2011; Oxford, 2016). We use a mixed-methods approach with a "self-regulated strategy use" questionnaire to capture this.

3. Theoretical background

3.1. Lifelong learning and continuing education: Lifelong and continuous learning

Adult education, otherwise referred to as lifelong learning (LLL), can help individuals adapt to a rapidly changing and uncertain world (OECD, 2022). Research supports this assertion, indicating that LLL has the potential for facilitating adaptability, particularly in contexts where immigrants are beginning to establish themselves in a new host country (Guo, 2010). Lifelong learning is defined by the OECD (2022) as all learning activities throughout life that aim to develop knowledge,

skills, and competencies in the context of personal, civic, social, or professional perspectives. It is the learning intention or purpose that constitutes a pivotal factor in distinguishing these activities from non-learning activities, such as cultural or sporting pursuits.

The paradigm of lifelong learning was already affirmed in the 'Memorandum on Lifelong Learning' published in the 1970s and issued after the Lisbon European Council in March 2000. This document asserted that "a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society must go hand in hand with steps to make lifelong learning a reality" (European Commission, 2001, p. 3). The Memorandum distinguishes three basic categories of purposeful learning activities: formal, non-formal, and informal, which are complementary, but in the context of lifelong learning, non-formal and informal learning have been identified as significant forms (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). The Memorandum also underscores the necessity of acquiring new skills: 'Learning to learn, adapting to change and navigating the vast information flow are now considered generic skills that everyone should have' (European Commission, 2000, p. 12). In this context, the concept of "learning to learn" refers to the mastery of the process of acquiring knowledge and skills, irrespective of the subject or context (Hoskins, 2010). Adapting to change can be defined as how an individual responds to shifts and disruptions in their environment, demonstrating flexibility and resilience to thrive in new circumstances (Kucuksuleymanoglu, 2025). The ability to navigate the vast information flow is predicated on the effective management of the quantity and quality of information available, to ensure that the information received, processed, and acted upon is both relevant and reliable (OECD, 2023). Each skill is interconnected: being able to learn how to learn makes it easier to adapt to change, and both are enhanced by the ability to effectively navigate information in a complex world (European Commission, 2002).

3.2. Independent learning

The concept of the Integration Courses examined in the current research emphasizes that the participant is responsible for the success of his/her learning, that he/she must actively participate in shaping the group and individual learning process, and that he/she must prepare and learn independently to acquire German language skills (BAMF-Konzept für Integrationskurse, 2015, p. 15). It is therefore important to review the more important concepts related to independent learning.

In independent learning, the learner does not rely on the help of peers or a teacher but solves tasks on his/her own or based on tasks assigned by someone else. Independent learning occurs in formal and non-formal learning (Szilágyi,

2017). The concept of autonomous learning is primarily related to informal learning and is often found in the literature together with other related terms. For example, Forray and Juhász (2009) highlight, but are not exhaustive, autodidactic learning, autonomous learning, self-development, self-regulated learning, self-directed learning, self-regulation, and self-education. These related terms are all slightly different in their meaning and are often used in the field of language learning and the acquisition of professional competencies. For this research, the terms self-regulated learning, self-directed learning, and autonomous learning are important concepts and should be briefly discussed below, because they represent different levels of learner independence.

3.3. Self-directed, self-regulated, and autonomous learning: Interweaving threads

Self-directed learning (SDL), self-regulated learning (SRL), and autonomous learning are crucial concepts for understanding adult independent learning. They are complementary aspects of a learner's agency in language learning. While there are other related terms, these three capture distinct yet interconnected aspects of adult learners' agency and engagement (Linkous, 2021; Schunk and Zimmerman, 1994; Dickinson, 1994).

3.3.1. Self-regulated learning (SRL)

According to Schunk and Zimmerman (1994), SRL is a complex self-developmental skill with thinking, emotional, volitional, and action components that focuses learning skills on achieving a goal of one's own. SRL is a component of self-directed learning. Its components are planning, implementation, monitoring, feedback, and regulation, the deliberate and conscious use of which plays an important role in the learning process (Molnár, 2002).

SRL focuses on the metacognitive skills adults use to set goals, plan and monitor their progress, reflect on their learning strategies, and adapt them as needed. This happens at the micro level, focusing on how individuals manage their learning within specific tasks or activities. Effective SRL enables adults to overcome challenges, identify knowledge gaps, and make deliberate choices to improve their learning outcomes. Finally, in self-regulated learning, the learner compares the learning outcomes with the learning goals and performs an assessment task based on a predefined system (Molnár, 2009). An example would be someone pausing during a listening exercise to identify comprehension difficulties, reviewing difficult sections, and choosing appropriate strategies to improve understanding.

3.3.2. Self-directed learning (SDL)

SDL is a form of informal learning (Szilágyi, 2017), based on a constructivist approach to learning, and is the foundation and prerequisite for lifelong learning. The focus is on initiative and independence in setting learning goals, choosing resources, and managing the learning process. This happens at the macro level, encompassing the overall direction and approach to learning.

According to Knowles (1975), SDL occurs when a learner takes the initiative to learn, diagnoses his or her own learning needs with or without the help of others, determines learning goals and the tools and resources needed to learn, selects appropriate learning strategies, and evaluates the outcomes of his or her learning. Adults often have diverse needs and motivations, and SDL emphasizes their ability to tailor their learning journey accordingly. An example would be someone who decides to learn a language, chooses an online course, and sets aside time for practice.

The distinction between autonomous and self-directed learning could be captured in the fact that SDL can be achieved in formal and non-formal settings while autonomous learning also occurs in informal settings. Self-directed learning is the process of taking initiative and responsibility for one's learning, often with some external support, while autonomous learning is the capacity to fully take charge of all aspects of learning, including deep reflection and self-regulation. Autonomy is considered the highest form of self-direction in learning (Dickinson, 1994).

3.3.3. Autonomous learning

Autonomous learning is predicated on the psychological ownership and responsibility of adults for their learning, which is driven by internal motivation and self-determination (Smith, 2019). This happens on an overarching level, integrating aspects of both SDL and SRL. Autonomous learners are intrinsically motivated, self-determined, and actively seek opportunities to apply their learning in meaningful ways. Learning autonomy is an important concept in the field of foreign language education and is also linked to the concept of lifelong learning. According to Holec (1979), autonomy can be defined as the ability to control one's own learning. In contrast, Dickinson (1994) emphasizes that autonomy is a situation in which the learner is entirely responsible for all decisions made about learning and implementing those decisions. An example would be someone who approaches learning with a genuine interest in a language, driven by personal goals, and looking for opportunities to use the language independently.

While learning autonomy can be understood in the classroom, it can also refer to learning outside the classroom, in all aspects of life, and primarily in informal

learning situations. Murray (2014) also draws attention to the importance of individual responsibility. Reich (2012) argues that constructivist teaching-learning techniques can be used to enable learners to acquire and incorporate new knowledge independently in a personalized and problem-tailored way (Arnold, 2012). Holec (1979), Dickinson (1994), Little (1996), and Benson (2000), among others, have investigated autonomy in foreign language learning.

The concepts of SDL, SRL, and autonomous learning are highly relevant to research on self-directed language learning strategy use because they highlight the importance of learner agency, the role of metacognitive skills, and the interplay of motivation and autonomy. SDL, SRL, and autonomous learning provide a strong foundation for understanding adult independent learning. As we have shown above, the main difference between them lies in the level (micro-macro) and the setting (formal, non-formal, informal) in which they occur. All three are important in the present study because they represent different forms of independent learning.

3.4. Possibilities for measuring learning autonomy

The notion of autonomy in language learning is not a final objective in itself, but it is of significant importance because it enables learners to identify and acquire the knowledge they require more effectively. Consequently, the concept of learning autonomy is not evaluated in relation to the purpose or outcome of learning. Instead, an analysis of the characteristics of the learning process should be employed as the evaluative framework (Benson, 2010; Benson, 2011).

3.4.1. Language learning strategies

Language learning strategies are the behaviors or actions learners take to enhance their learning (Oxford, 1990), and as such, their use may indicate the level of autonomous learning ability of the individual. Language learning strategies support the improvement of language proficiency (Oxford, 1990) by promoting self-directed and active participation, which is essential for improving communicative competence. According to Oxford (2011), there are cognitive, affective, and sociocultural-interactive strategies accompanied by their meta-strategies, such as metacognitive, meta-affective, and meta-sociocultural-interactive strategies. Each of these broad categories can be broken down into a series of less complex strategies, which are more basic learning strategies.

According to Oxford (1996), it is imperative that learning strategies be duly considered in the context of instructional design. Mutlu and Eroz-Tuga (2013)

posit that the prerequisite for learners to become autonomous is their own readiness for it. It is therefore incumbent upon the teacher to assess whether learners are ready for autonomous learning.

To assess language learning strategy use, Oxford (1990) developed the "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning" questionnaire, of which there are two versions. The 5.1 version is used by native English speakers learning a foreign language, and the 7.0 version is used by non-native English speakers (ESL or EFL learners – English as a second language when learning English in an English-speaking country and English as a foreign language when learning English in a non-English-speaking country). The questionnaire has since been translated into many languages and has been used effectively to assess language learning strategy use. In this research, we used the questionnaire in an adapted form by Magyar and Habók (2018).

4. Research questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What self-directed learning strategies do participants use outside the classroom for self-directed learning?
RQ2: What techniques and tools do participants use and how often outside the classroom for self-directed learning?

5. Methods/methodology

5.1. Methods

We used a mixed methodology design with a questionnaire consisting of two parts: a quantitative and a qualitative part. The quantitative part is a revised version of the SILL questionnaire (Oxford, 1990, 2011) by Habók and Magyar (2018). We have supplemented this questionnaire with additional questions: As we did not know what tools the participants were using, we wanted to explore this. We didn't want to predetermine the result with predetermined answer options; rather, open-ended questions were employed. This is the qualitative part of the questionnaire. This study is based on the first data collection cycle from autumn 2021 to early 2023; however, we plan to have more iterations and batches. The data collection cycles follow a mixed-method research design, by using quantitative and qualitative research tools.

5.1.1. Questionnaire for the preliminary assessment of strategic self-regulated language learning

The first part of the questionnaire is a revised version of the SILL questionnaire (Oxford, R. (1990, 2011)) by Habók and Magyar (2018), and it corresponds to Research Question 1 concerning self-directed learning strategies for self-directed learning used by participants outside the classroom. The new version of the questionnaire was assigned to the strategy fields of Oxford's Strategic SRL (self-regulated learning) model: There were metacognitive questions (8 items), cognitive (6 items), meta-affective (8 items), meta-sociocultural-interactive (8 items), and sociocultural-interactive questions (4 items). A five-point Likert scale was used for the participants' responses. The scale ranged from 0 ("Never or almost never true of me") to 4 ("Always or almost always true of me"). Participants received the strategic self-regulated language learning questionnaires in their native languages or in a language they were familiar with. We received 58 completed questionnaires at level A1, 65 at level A2, and 45 at level B1.

The second part of the questionnaire contains quantitative and qualitative questions, and it addresses the second research question: What techniques and tools do the participants use how often, outside of the classroom for self-directed learning?

5.1.2. Participants and Venue

We used convenience sampling as a method of sampling. The participants of the study are a group of volunteering adult immigrants (N=121) who are learning German as a second language in Germany in Integration Courses which are specifically designed for the integration of adult immigrants, and which lead participants from no language skills to B1 level (Council of Europe, 2001) in 6 language learning modules (A1.1, A1.2, A2.1, A2.2, B1.1, B1.2) and a further module on civic orientation. Each module includes 100 course hours á 45 minutes.

The courses take place at a so-called "Volkshochschule" (Adult Education Center). It is a non-profit institution for adult and continuing education in Germany. Similar institutions can be found in various countries, but their character, structures, and objectives can differ from those of the German Volkshochschule. In Germany, they offer courses on many topics for the whole population. They also offer German Integration and Professional Language Courses for different language levels. The Integration Courses are commissioned by the German Ministry of the Interior and are available throughout Germany under the control of BAMF.

The sample of adult immigrants is heterogeneous in terms of nationality, age, education, and occupation. Respondents are aged between 19 and 64 years, but most of them are in their 30s (Figure 1).
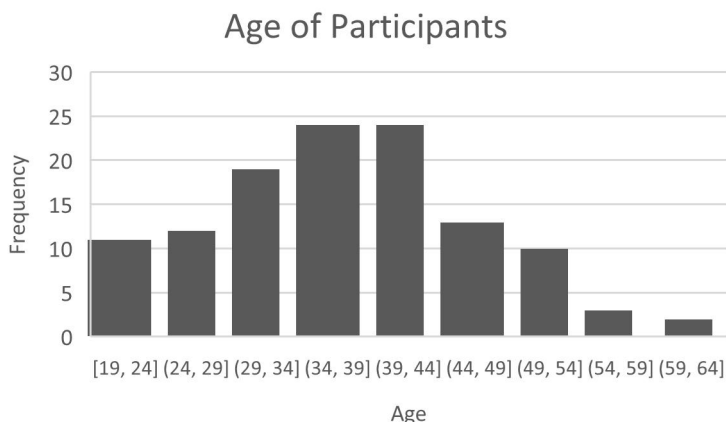
Age of Participants

Figure 1 Age of participants

The study sample comprised 37 male respondents (representing 31% of the sample) and 84 female respondents (representing 69% of the sample). Most of them have spent between 13 and 23 months in Germany. Concerning nationality, 59% of respondents reported being from Ukraine, 24% from the Balkan countries, and 10% from Asia (India, Thailand, Afghanistan, Syria, Vietnam, Iran, and Indonesia).

As demonstrated in Figure 2, more than 64% of participants have a university degree which is interesting because Lechner and Atanisev (2023) state (when analyzing data from the Federal Statistical Office and initial results from the 2021 micro census in Germany) that Germany-wide the share of third-country national women with an academic degree is only 23% and the share of third-country national men with an academic degree is even less, 20%. They state that the share of women with an academic degree without an immigrant background is only 18%, and the share of men with an academic degree without an immigrant background is 23%. This means that the high share of participants with a university degree could not have been caused by the large number of well-educated Ukrainian refugees alone. Even without the Ukrainian refugees, the share of participants with a university degree would have been as high as 56%, which in itself is more than twice the average for Germany as a whole. Schuller et al. (2011) still wrote in 2011 that 25.6% of the respondents in their study on integration courses stated that they had obtained a university degree (in the control group, it was 17.0%) (N participants=1930, N control group=1811). Furthermore, the

study by Schuller et al. (2011) revealed that 12.3% of the participants said they had never been to school at all. As indicated by the statements, the group currently under study does not include any such participants.

More research is needed to examine whether there has been a recent change, and if yes, why, in the composition of integration course participants, or whether it is just a regional or local phenomenon. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that this deviation has the potential to compromise the integrity of the study´s findings.
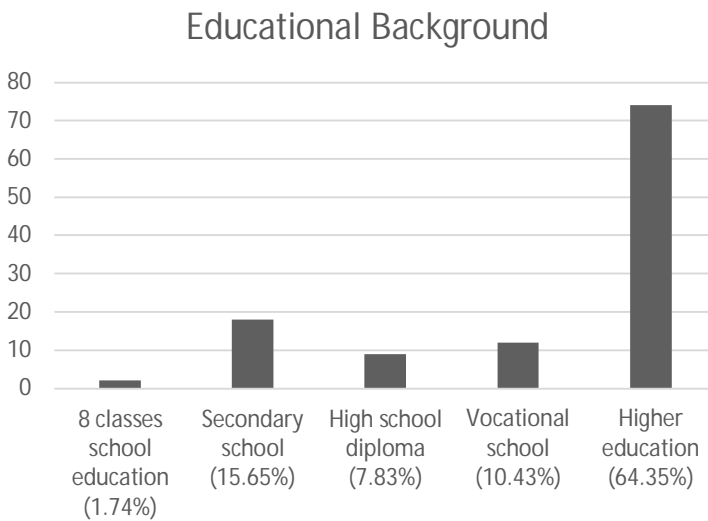
Educational Background

Figure 2 Educational background of participants

Even though many participants have a university degree, they very often work in jobs that do not exhaust the possibilities of their educational background. Participants could indicate in the questionnaire what their highest school-leaving qualification was, what profession they had learned, and what occupation they currently held. Unfortunately, most of them either did not state anything or their statement is not meaningful in this context because they said they were unemployed or learning German (64 persons). As illustrated in Figure 3, 23 respondents indicated that their current employment status falls below the level commensurate with their educational attainment. Thus, despite having a university degree, they often work in jobs such as waiters, unskilled workers, or cleaners. This partly results from the lack of German language skills, but it is questionable to what extent these people can later develop their full potential. In these times of a shortage of skilled workers in Germany, it seems like a luxury to have cleaners with university degrees.

It is an uncommon occurrence for course participants to be engaged in professional activities that are aligned with their educational qualifications. To illustrate this point, one may consider an individual who has worked in their country as a software engineer and who subsequently finds employment in Germany in the same field. This is only the case for 17 respondents who indicated that their current employment aligns with their educational attainments. In contrast, no participant reported currently occupying a position that demands a level of education that exceeds their own. This means that no one responded that they have a job whose requirements exceed their level of education, but that the position allows them to utilize their other unique resources, such as those resulting from their immigrant status. This would be the case, for example, for a person who has not received teacher training. Nevertheless, owing to their native proficiency in Spanish and their broader communicative skills, they are well-suited to teaching Spanish in a language school context.

Unfortunately, these results are statistically not meaningful due to the large number of responses that cannot be interpreted. More research is needed to confirm or refute these results. In consideration of the demographic heterogeneity that characterizes the group, it is hypothesized that the motivation and degree of use of learning strategies exhibited by the participants will also be heterogeneous. However, they share the common goal of learning German and passing the B1 language test.
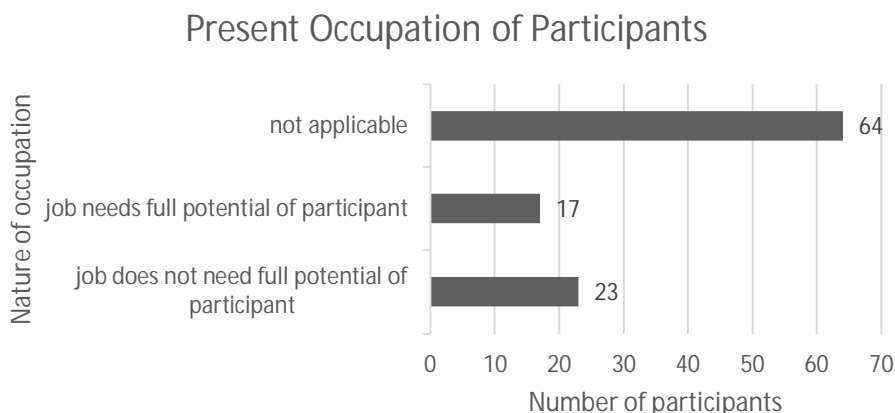

Figure 3 Present employment of participants

As these adult learners often have a full-time physical job (in addition to having a family and possibly a second job), their learning time must be spent efficiently. The language course, as defined by the BAMF curriculum (BAMF-Konzept für

Integrationskurse, 2015), aims to develop language skills, counteract negative learning experiences, support learner motivation, and enable learners to reflect on their language learning strategies and take responsibility for their language development. In the paradigm of lifelong learning, autonomous learning should naturally be the objective. However, in this particular context, the learners are on a course where the book and the teacher determine the content to be learned. Moreover, in many cases, their unlimited residence permit is dependent on passing the exam, which raises questions about the autonomy of their home learning. Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is not to clarify the concept theoretically but to focus on the description of autonomous learning of the learners to find ways to help them become more and more autonomous.

6. Results

6.1. Gradual development of language learning strategies

The A1, A2, and B1 level questionnaires of all participants (58, 65, and 45 completed questionnaires, respectively) show that *the use of language learning strategies increases as language learning progresses*. For the questionnaire using a Likert scale from 0 to 4 (0=never or almost never true of me; 1=usually not true of me; 2=somewhat true of me; 3=usually true of me; 4=always or almost always true of me), the sum of the averages of the answers to questions 1 to 34 at level A1 is 76.15 (max. 136), while at level A2 it is 85.62 and at level B1 87.86 (Figures 4-6). It seems that as language skills grow, so does strategy use. The Likert scale used would have a value of 2 in the "middle" as average (what the red line represents in Figures 4-6), so it shows that even at the starting point of the research, at level A1, the results are already above average (34x2=68). This is both surprising and to be expected. On the one hand, it was assumed originally that many participants lacked the prerequisites for independent learning due to their low level of education, but on the other hand, the analysis of the educational background of the current study participants showed that in the group studied, the proportion of participants with a good educational background is unusually high which could bias the results.

　　Given that 69.42% of the participants are female, it would also be interesting to find out to what extent this affects the results obtained about the use of language learning strategies. Nevertheless, one must be aware that this trend has the potential to introduce bias, thereby compromising the integrity of the results. Table 1 presents foreign language learning strategies proposed by Oxford (1990) described in Figures 4-6.

Table 1 Foreign language strategies proposed by Oxford (1990)

Metacognitive

1. I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.
2. I first skim an English passage, then go back and read carefully.
3. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.
4. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.
5. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.
6. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.
7. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.
8. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.

Cognitive

9. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.
10. I use the English words I know in different ways.
11. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.
12. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.
13. I try to find patterns (grammar) in English.
14. I try not to translate word for word.

Meta-affective

15. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.
16. I encourage myself as I learn English so that I can learn what I would like.
17. I read in English as a leisure-time activity.
18. I organise my English language learning so that I always enjoy doing it.
19. I plan my English language learning so that I can perform better.
20. I have more success learning English when I feel like doing it.
21. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.
22. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.

Meta-sociocultural-interactive

23. I try to learn about English-language cultures and/or other cultures through English.
24. I look for people I can talk to in English.
25. I look at English-language TV shows, movies or websites to get to know the cultures of English native speakers and/or other cultures through English.
26. I choose leisure activities where I encounter English-language cultures and/or other cultures through English as well.
27. I plan what I want to find out about the cultures of English speakers and/or other cultures through English.
28. I practise English with my peers.
29. I look for similarities and differences between my own culture and the cultures of English native speakers and/or other cultures through English.
30. Getting to know English-language cultures helps me to learn the language.

Sociocultural-interactive

31. I start conversations in English.
32. I make up new words in English if I do not know the right ones.
33. When I speak with highly proficient speakers of English, I think it is important to get acquainted with their culture.
34. I encourage myself to speak English even when I feel afraid of making a mistake.
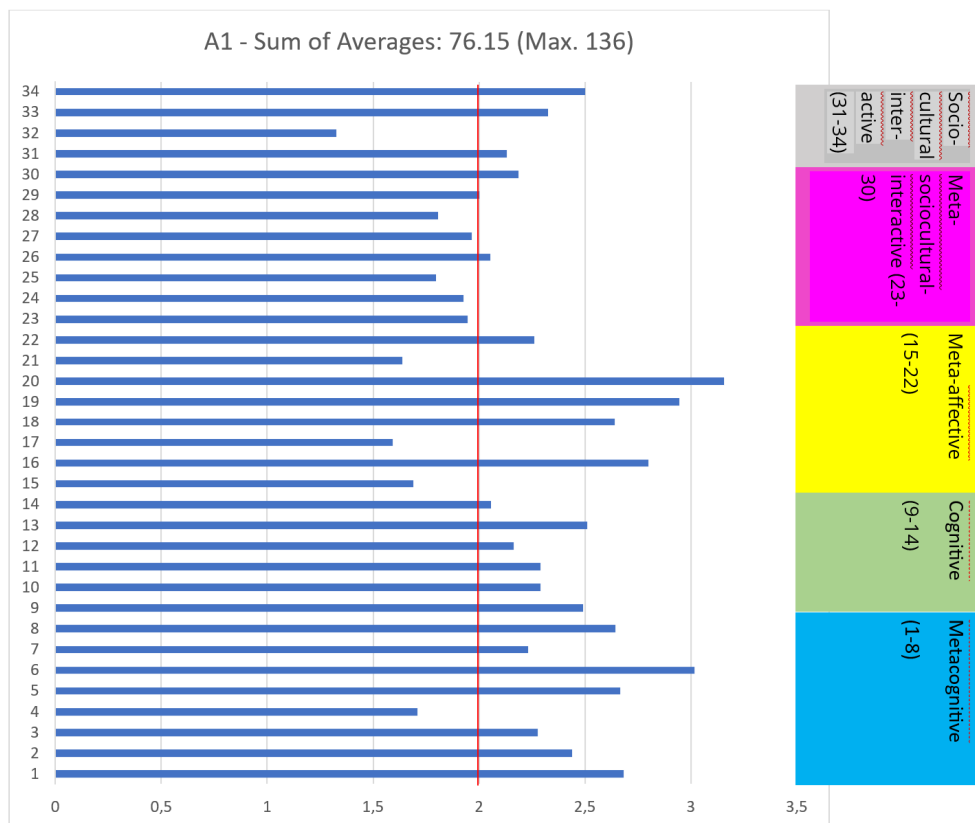
Figure 4 Results of the pilot phase at A1 level. The questions are grouped according to Oxford's (1990) categories (see Table 1)

6.2. Language learning strategies used

Our first research questions explored the self-directed language learning strategies used outside the classroom, and as found, the strongest (most used) strategy at the A1 level is no. 20: I have more success learning German when I feel like doing it (Average score: 3.15). The second strongest is no. 6: I pay attention when someone is speaking German (Average score: 3.01). Only these 2 strategies have an average score above 3 at this level. As for the least used strategies at the A1 level, we identified no. 17 (I read in German as a leisure-time activity) (1.59), no. 21 (I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in German) (1.63), and no. 32. (I make up new words in German if I do not know the right ones) (1.70) as representing this category.
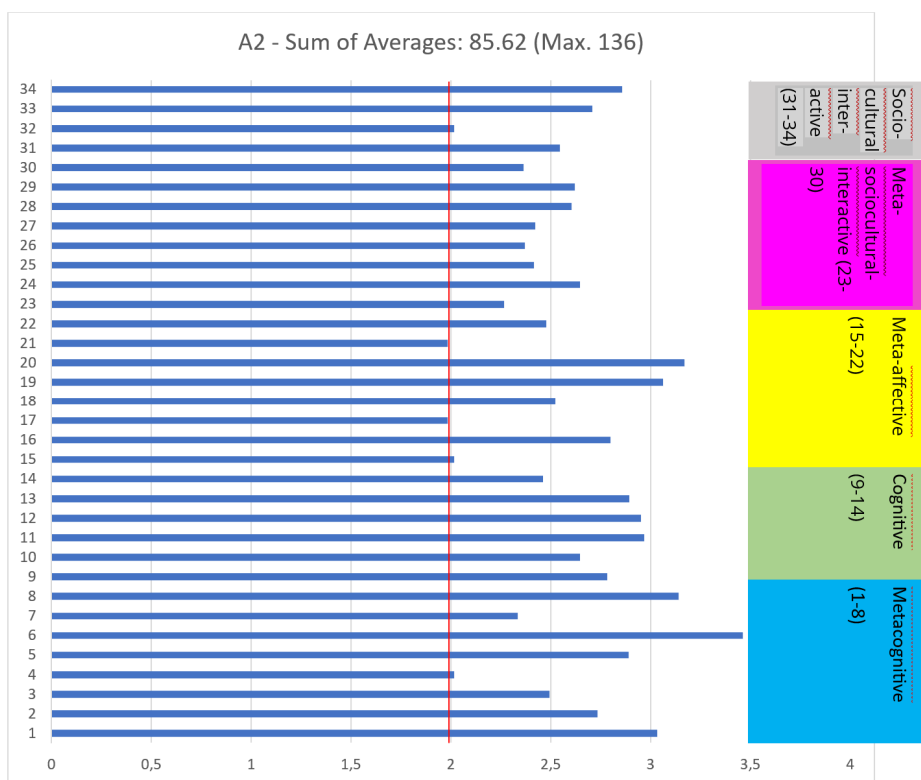
Figure 5 Results of the pilot phase at A2 level. The questions are grouped according to Oxford's (1990) categories (see Table 1)

At level A2, strategy 6 is the strongest (3.46), and strategy 20 is the second strongest (3.16). Here, strategies 8 (I try to find out how to be a better learner of German) (3.14), 19 (I plan my German language learning so that I can perform better) (3.06) and 1 (I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in German) (3.03) also score above 3. The least applied strategies at the A2 level are the same three strategies in the same order as at level A1: No. 17 (1.9843), No. 21 (1.9846), and No. 32 (2.0156).

At level B1, strategy 20 is the strongest (3.21), and strategy 6 is the second strongest (3.16) again. Here, strategies 1 (I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in German) (3.03) and 34 (I encourage myself to speak German even when I feel afraid of making a mistake) (3.00) also score above 3. The least used strategies at the B1 level are strategies No. 21 (I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in German) (1.9767), No. 4 (I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in German), No. 15 (I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using German), and No. 17 (I read in German as a leisure-time activity) (2.0465 all three).
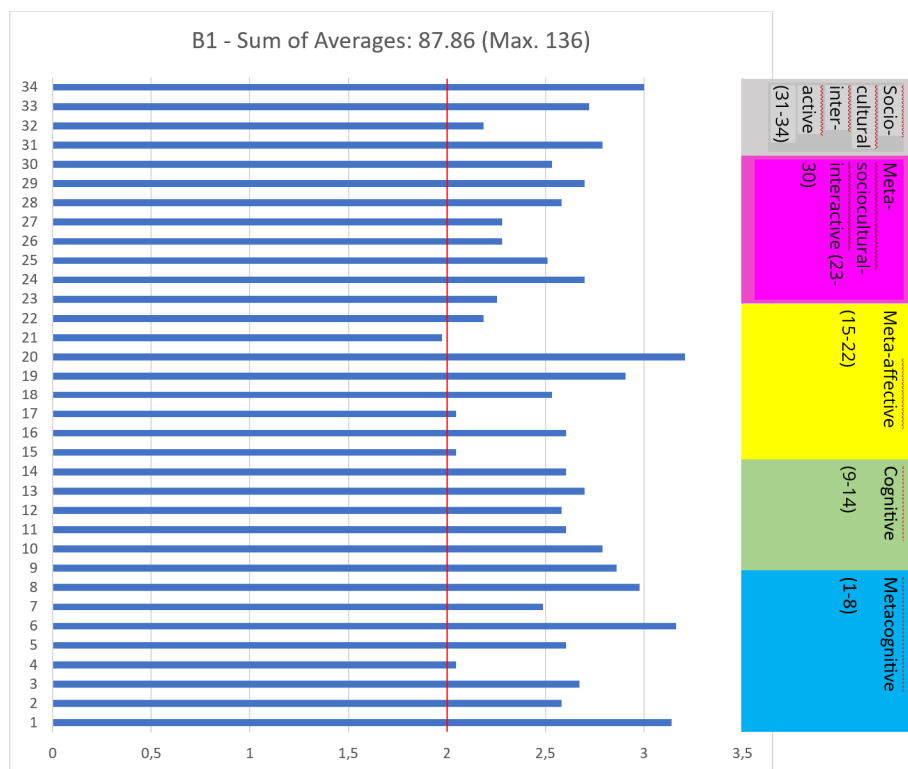
Figure 6 Results of the pilot phase at B1 level. The questions are grouped according to Oxford's (1990) categories (see Table 1)

Strategies 1, 6, 8, 19, 20, and 34 are among the strongest strategies on all 3 levels, which are metacognitive (1, 6, 8), meta-affective (19, 20), and sociocultural-interactive strategies (34). This is inconclusive because the weakest strategies on all three levels are also the same three categories (metacognitive (4), meta-affective (15, 17, 21, 22), and sociocultural-interactive (32) (and additionally strategy 23, which is meta-sociocultural-interactive). However, meta-sociocultural-interactive strategies appear only in the group of the weakest strategies on all three levels, and cognitive strategies appear only among the strongest strategies.

Looking at the overall results for all participants by category (Tables 2-3), it seems that in our sample, migrant language learners' strengths lie in metacognitive and cognitive strategies, while their weaknesses lie in meta-sociocultural-interactive strategies. This is an interesting finding, as based on our understanding, the point and pleasure of learning a language is to be able to communicate with other people in the target language and to get closer to their culture. Nevertheless, the results suggest that further research is needed to confirm or clarify the findings.

Table 2 Results at the language levels according to Oxford (1990) categories

Strategy category (Oxford, 1990)	Questions	Average at level A1	Average at level A2	Average at level B1
sociocultural-interactive	31-34	2.07	2.531	2.674
meta-sociocultural-interactive	23-30	1.960	2.463	2.479
meta-affective	15-22	2.340	2.502	2.438
cognitive	9-14	2.300	2.784	2.689
metacognitive	1-8	2.458	2.762	2.709

Table 3 Results at all language levels according to Oxford (1990) categories

Strategy category (Oxford, 1990)	Questions	Average at all levels
sociocultural-interactive	31-34	2.425
meta-sociocultural-interactive	23-30	2.300
meta-affective	15-22	2.427
cognitive	9-14	2.591
metacognitive	1-8	2.643

To have a more in-depth understanding, we also categorized the questions 1-34 according to the degree of independence in the respective activity; hence, we did not use Oxford's classification, which differentiates the nature of the activity. Establishing this grouping is a challenging endeavour, given the fact that the circumstances of the specific situation in which the activity takes place would significantly impact the scope of independence. The process is not straightforward, and the grouping could be achieved slightly differently. Nevertheless, it is conceivable to arrange the questions in such a manner that those which suggest self-regulation would be placed in Group 1, those which rather suggest self-direction would be placed in Group 2, and those which probably require autonomy would be placed in Group 3 (Table 4).

When the results of the survey are analyzed in this way, it is surprising how even the average values are. Autonomy is the least represented of the three at all levels, but the difference is not robust.

Hence, the concepts of self-regulation and self-direction have been demonstrated to yield largely analogous outcomes. This phenomenon could be

explained by the fact that all members of the study group had received some form of education, with self-regulation and self-direction techniques instilled during their school education. Conversely, autonomy is a concept that is less emphasized in the conventional school environment and is only of significance in specific pedagogical approaches such as those employed in Montessori or Waldorf schools (Edwards, 2002).

Table 4 Grouping of the questions according to the level of learner independence

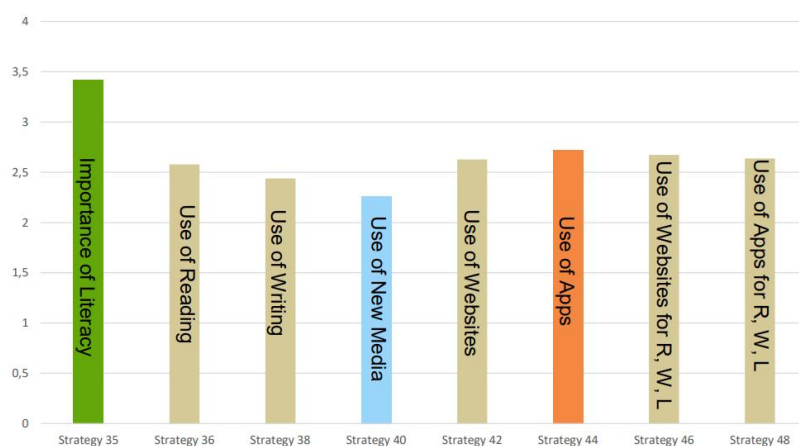| Group	Numbers of Questions	Average	Average at level A1	Average at level A2	Average at level B1
1 (self-regulation)	2, 9, 11, 12, 14, 21, 34	2.501	2.225	2.677	2.601
2 (self-direction)	1, 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 15, 18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 28, 30, 31	2.518	2.322	2.615	2.617
3 (autonomy)	3, 6, 8, 16, 17, 23, 25, 26, 27, 29, 32, 33	2.412	2.146	2.558	2.533

Figure 7 Respondents' frequency of tool use, measured on a Likert scale from 0 to 4 (never or almost never - always or almost always)

6.3. Tools used outside the classroom for self-directed learning

The second research question focused on the type of tools participants use and the frequency of their use outside the classroom for self-directed learning. We therefore discuss respondents´ frequency of tool use (Figure 7) and the most used tools (Figure 8). Literacy in general seems to be particularly important for

respondents, as shown in green in Figure 7, but reading, writing, and actual use of digital media are less emphasized. The lowest score is for strategy 40 in blue: Do you use new media for reading and writing? The strongest is strategy 44 in orange: How often do you use apps? About as strong as No. 44 are the strategies Use of Websites, Use of Websites for Reading, Writing, and Learning, and Use of Apps for Reading, Writing, and Learning.

This is interesting because participants either do not equate apps and websites with new media or do not think of their app and website activities as reading and writing. Further research is needed to learn more about participants' perceptions of their reading, writing, and learning behavior.

Finally, the pilot phase of the research also provided insights into the tools used by the respondents (Figure 8).
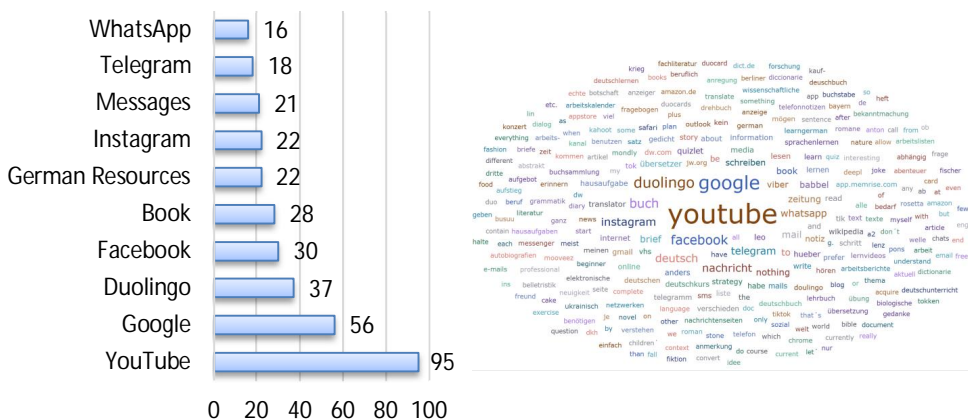

Figure 8 Tools most commonly used by respondents

The 10 most-used tools were mostly online sources. As demonstrated by both the graph and the word cloud, YouTube is outperforming all other tools, even Google and Duolingo.

Limitations of the study include the fact that the high number of well-educated participants may bias the results, and the low number of participants in the investigated group makes statistical analysis difficult. Nevertheless, the pilot phase of the research has shown that the weakness of adult immigrants lies in the meta-socio-cultural-interaction strategies that are key to communication. Consequently, future pedagogical approaches should incorporate more comprehensive support for implementing these strategies. The (online) tools that are already frequently used by participants could be pivotal in this regard.

7. Discussion

The study investigated the self-directed language learning strategy use of adult immigrants in integration courses in a particular German context at levels A1, A2, and B1. Although the research uses Germany as an example, findings could also be relevant for other countries in the European context, particularly as it is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Hence, the results obtained now could be compared with those from other European countries in later studies.

We explored a unique community, namely, immigrant adult language learners based in Germany and currently building a new life for themselves. Our exploratory literature review found that surveys regarding the learning of adult migrants in Germany are lacking, so data in this regard is scarce. Therefore, insights into their capacity for independent learning, although not perceived as homogeneous, are required. This is of particular importance given their need for language skills to facilitate successful integration into their host society.

First, our findings suggest that the use of language learning strategies increases as language proficiency progresses among adult immigrant learners in Germany. This indicates that as learners advance in their German language skills, they tend to employ a wider range of strategies to support their learning, which aligns with the emphasis on independent learning in the integration course concept (BAMF-Konzept für Integrationskurse, 2015). This also suggests that the participants have developed some foundational skills for autonomous learning, most likely through their prior educational experiences, but also in their learning process during the language courses.

Second, these participants' strengths are evident in metacognitive and cognitive strategies. These strategies are highly beneficial in that they facilitate comprehension of contexts and enable the identification of optimal learning methodologies (Oxford, 2016). However, our study also reveals that the participants' weaknesses lie in meta-sociocultural-interactive strategies, which are crucial for effective communication and cultural integration. This finding is of particular significance, given that the objective of language learning for immigrants is to facilitate their integration into the host society. Consequently, future pedagogical approaches should incorporate more comprehensive support for implementing these strategies, rather than "just" preparing for the exam.

A potential pedagogical approach that could provide more comprehensive support for the development of meta-sociocultural-interactive strategies could be, for example, scenario-based learning (British Council/Eaquals, 2010) with critical reflection (Zachrison, 2014). The utilization of realistic scenarios, such as job interviews and healthcare visits, is recommended for simulating

interactions necessitating cultural and linguistic negotiation. However, in contemporary pedagogical practice, there is a prevailing emphasis on the acquisition of qualifications, particularly linguistic proficiency, and the assimilation into societal norms of the host nation. This approach, however, often eclipses the cultivation of subjectivity, understood as the attainment of critical autonomy. It is therefore imperative to also incorporate debriefing sessions in which learners analyze their choices, engage in discourse on cultural norms, and reflect on power dynamics (e.g., how language use influences inclusivity/exclusivity) (Colliander & Nordmark, 2023). An effective approach must balance pragmatic skill-building with opportunities for critical dialogue, self-advocacy, and cultural negotiation.

Third, literacy in general seems to be particularly important for respondents, but reading, writing, and actual use of digital media are less emphasized. Results of the frequency of tool use show that it is the apps that participants use most frequently, followed by websites for reading, writing, and learning. The 10 most-used tools were mostly online sources, with YouTube outperforming all other tools, even Google and Duolingo. These (online) tools that are already frequently used by participants could also be pivotal in enhancing the learning of sociocultural-interactive skills, mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Online video culture is characterized by its enormous variety of content. YouTube alone covers a wide range of topics, including entertainment (such as music videos, comedy, pranks and vlogs), education (such as tutorials, explanatory videos and educational films), gaming (such as Let's Plays, walkthroughs, game reviews and live streams), lifestyle (such as cooking recipes, fitness, beauty, travel and DIY) and news and politics (such as reports, opinion pieces and political analyses), as well as community formats (such as challenges, reactions and Q&As). YouTube thus offers a vast range of topics for a global audience. In addition to the diversity of content and the substantial quantity of material available, this topic also has pedagogical implications. Various research studies deal with different aspects of the phenomenon. On the one hand, in the study of Borup et al. (2015), university students and instructors valued types of feedback, both rating the efficiency of text over the more effective benefits of video, because text enabled more efficient and organized feedback. Although video comments were longer and more supportive, text feedback contained more specific critiques. On the other hand, the study by Appiah (2006) showed that audio/video testimonial ads have a greater impact on browsers´ evaluations of commercial websites and online products than text/picture testimonials. Borup et al. (2015) also found that video encouraged more supportive and conversational communication.

The diversity of video content enables educators to customize materials to suit students' interests and backgrounds. The utilization of relatable entertainment or gaming formats has been demonstrated to enhance the appeal and relevance of

learning for diverse learner groups (Ikram et al., 2024). Videos characterized by a conversational and enthusiastic style, as recommended in educational research, have been shown to foster a sense of partnership and increase the likelihood that students will watch and engage with the material (Brame, 2016). Videos can also combine visual, auditory, and textual information, thus catering to a variety of learning styles and helping to manage cognitive load. Dual-channel presentations (e.g., narration with animation) have been shown to improve knowledge retention and transfer compared to text or static images alone (Brame, 2026). The capacity to explore spaces, observe real experiments, and utilize visualization to comprehend abstract concepts, facilitated by video, has been demonstrated to enhance comprehension, particularly in subjects where direct experience is not feasible (Ikram et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the most salient characteristic for this research is the interactive potential of video, for instance, through the incorporation of embedded questions and prompts for reflection, which has been demonstrated to promote active learning and self-assessment, thus exceeding the limitations of passive content consumption (Brame, 2026). The creation of video assignments or feedback has been demonstrated to encourage students to develop communication and technical skills relevant to the digital age (Ikram et al., 2024). The study of Wachob (2011) even showed that the utilization of video in educational settings presents a multifaceted opportunity to enhance learner autonomy. However, effective pedagogical video requires careful planning and accessibility features to ensure all students can benefit.

Finally, the potential bias of the study is the high number of well-educated participants in the sample. Nevertheless, the high share of participants with a university degree could not have been caused by the large number of well-educated Ukrainian refugees alone. Even without the Ukrainian refugees, the share of participants with a university degree would have been as high as 56%, which is more than twice the average for Germany as a whole. This suggests that the sample may not be representative of the broader population of adult immigrant language learners in Germany. Another bias is the gender imbalance in the sample. The study sample comprised 69.42% female respondents, which could potentially introduce a gender bias in the results. A further bias is the potential impact of prior educational experiences. The participants' prior educational experiences may have contributed to the development of some foundational skills for autonomous learning. This could mean that the results may not be generalizable to adult immigrant learners with less educational background. The small sample size could also bias and limit statistical analysis, as the low number of participants makes statistical analysis difficult. Further research is thus needed to confirm or clarify the findings.

8. Conclusions

Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the self-directed language learning strategies of adult immigrant learners in Germany. Further research should focus on how to better support the development of learning autonomy of adult migrants, which is needed for their successful integration and inclusion. This is not only important in the context of language learning. Participants in integration courses are considered a vulnerable group, a population threatened by social, economic, or political disadvantage or discrimination due to various factors (UNHCR, 2006). Language learning is only one of the first steps in the long, autonomous learning process that migrants need to follow to be able to achieve inclusion in the host country. The goal for them is integration, which is, as Sezer (2010) puts it, a gradual process at the end of which the immigrant becomes equal in terms of rights, obligations, and opportunities with the country's inhabitants. Empowering immigrants to take more and more responsibility for shaping their own lives in an increasingly autonomous manner is essential to ensure that they have access to opportunities and resources and that they can make their voices heard in decision-making processes that affect their lives (Clancy & Holford, 2023, p. 45). Our findings may contribute to supporting this process.

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APPENDIX

Self-Regulated Foreign Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire (Srfllsq)
Adapted from Habók and Magyar (2018)[1]

1.	Name:	
2.	Age:	
3.	Gender:	
4.	Nationality:	
5.	Country of origin/Citizenship:	
6.	Highest school degree:	
7.	Profession:	
8.	Current occupation:	
9.	How long have you been in Germany?	

When I learn German,

	0	1	2	3	4
	NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER TRUE OF ME	USUALLY NOT TRUE OF ME	SOMEWHAT TRUE OF ME	USUALLY TRUE OF ME	ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS TRUE OF ME
	means that the statement is very rarely true of you	means that the statement is true less than half the time	means that the statement is true of you about half the time	means that the statement is true more than half the time	means that the statement is true of you almost always
1. I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in German.					
2. I first skim a German passage, then go back and read carefully.					
3. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in German.					
4. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in German.					
5. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study German.					
6. I pay attention when someone is speaking German.					
7. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in German.					
8. I try to find out how to be a better learner of German.					
9. I connect the sound of a new German word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.					
10. I use the German words I know in different ways.					
11. I find the meaning of a German word by dividing it into parts that I understand.					
12. I use new German words in a sentence so I can remember them.					

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[1] https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01388

	0	1	2	3	4
13. I try to find patterns (grammar) in German.					
14. I try not to translate word for word.					
15. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using German.					
16. I encourage myself as I learn German so that I can learn what I would like.					
17. I read in German as a leisure-time activity.					
18. I organize my German language learning so that I always enjoy doing it.					
19. I plan my German language learning so that I can perform better.					
20. I have more success learning German when I feel like doing it.					
21. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in German.					
22. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using German.					
23. I try to learn about German-language cultures and/or other cultures through German.					
24. I look for people I can talk to in German.					
25. I look at German-language TV shows, movies, or websites to get to know the cultures of German native speakers and/or other cultures through German.					
26. I choose leisure activities where I encounter German-language cultures and/or other cultures through German as well.					
27. I plan what I want to find out about the cultures of German speakers and/or other cultures through German.					
28. I practice German with my peers.					
29. I look for similarities and differences between my own culture and the cultures of German native speakers and/or other cultures through German.					
30. Getting to know German-language cultures helps me to learn the language.					
31. I start conversations in German.					
32. I make up new words in German if I do not know the right ones.					
33. When I speak with highly proficient speakers of German, I think it is important to get acquainted with their culture.					
34. I encourage myself to speak German even when I feel afraid of making a mistake.					
	0	1	2	3	4
	NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER	USUALLY NOT	SOMETIMES	USUALLY	ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS
35. How important is literacy in your life?					
36. Do you read regularly?					
37. What do you read?					
	0	1	2	3	4
	NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER	USUALLY NOT	SOMETIMES	USUALLY	ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS
38. Do you write regularly?					
39. What do you write?					

	0	1	2	3	4
	NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER	USUALLY NOT	SOMETIMES	USUALLY	ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS
40. Do you use new media for reading and writing?					

41. Which websites do you like to visit most?	
42. How often do you use them?	
43. Which apps do you use most?	
44. How often do you use them?	
45. Which websites do you like to use most for reading, writing, or learning?	
46. How often do you use them?	
47. Which apps do you use most for reading, writing, or learning)?	
48. How often do you use them?	