

# Beyond Worksheets: Teacher–Student Interpersonal Communication and the Construction of Learning Independence in the Kumon Method

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## ABSTRACT

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Independent learning in educational contexts is often associated with students' ability to complete tasks autonomously; however, autonomy is not developed solely through learning materials or repetitive practice. This study examines how teacher–student interpersonal communication contributes to the construction of learning independence in the Kumon method. Moving beyond the assumption that Kumon relies primarily on worksheets, this research conceptualizes communication as a relational and symbolic process through which students interpret guidance, correction, praise, and learning challenges. Using an interpretive qualitative case study approach at Kumon Green Lake City in Tangerang, data were collected through in-depth interviews with two instructors and three students, supplemented by observations, documentation, and NVivo-assisted thematic analysis. The findings reveal that learning independence is constructed through the interaction between structured worksheets and supportive communication practices, including brief instructions, adaptive guidance, positive reinforcement, and nonverbal immediacy. This study contributes to educational communication by demonstrating that independence is not achieved through teacher absence but through meaningful interactions that transform external support into students' internal capacity for learning.

**Keywords:** Communication, Teacher-Student Interaction, Learning Independence, Kumon Method, Symbolic Interactionism.

## INTRODUCTION

Independent learning in childhood education is often understood as a student's ability to complete tasks without relying entirely on the teacher. However, in practice, independent learning does not arise solely from assignments, repeated practice, or worksheets. Independent learning is also fostered through communication experiences that make students feel capable, safe, valued, and courageous in the face of mistakes. In the context of the Kumon method, students are guided to read instructions, work through problems step by step, correct errors, and establish a consistent learning rhythm. This process is determined not only by the structure of the worksheet but also by the quality of interpersonal communication between teacher and student, such as brief instructions, guiding questions, gradual correction, praise, motivation, smiling, eye contact, nodding, and a calm tone of voice.

Contemporary educational communication studies confirm that teachers' interpersonal communication behaviors are a crucial foundation for creating meaningful learning experiences. Positive interpersonal communication behaviors, such as care, clarity, credibility, rapport, immediacy, and confirmation, foster student motivation, engagement, attendance, performance, and learning success (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). Similarly, teacher immediacy, both verbal and nonverbal, is associated with increased student motivation because it reduces the psychological distance in learning (Liu, 2021). Therefore, teacher communication cannot be reduced to delivering technical instructions, but rather to a relational process that shapes students' perceptions of learning, mistakes, effort, and self-efficacy.

In learning environments that demand independence, interpersonal support from teachers becomes increasingly important, as teacher concern and credibility are linked to student engagement in class (Froment & Gutiérrez, 2022). Teacher support is crucial for student academic achievement (Tao et al., 2022). Therefore, the success of independent learning is determined not only by the frequency of practice but also by how students

interpret teacher communication as assistance, encouragement, or pressure.

Learning independence is closely related to self-regulated learning, namely the student's ability to plan, monitor, control, and evaluate the learning process (Sutarni et al., 2021). The teacher-student relationship is also associated with academic self-confidence and learning emotions, as well as students' self-confidence in meeting academic demands (Jederlund & von Rosen, 2023; Ren et al., 2022). In the context of self-directed learning, students need not only the cognitive abilities to solve problems but also the confidence to overcome challenges step by step.

The nonverbal dimension of teacher communication is also crucial to instructor clarity, and nonverbal immediacy contributes to affective learning by fostering students' understanding of the teacher (Derakhshan et al., 2023; Hu & Wang, 2023; Jaya et al., 2023). These findings support the argument that smiling, eye contact, tone of voice, body posture, and expressions of acceptance can foster students' courage to ask questions, acknowledge difficulties, and remain engaged in learning activities. Furthermore, interpersonal communication is inseparable from the classroom's emotional context and atmosphere (Tian & Shen, 2023).

Supportive teacher interpersonal behavior can encourage autonomous motivation and positive learning emotions, whereas overly controlling behavior can elicit negative emotions (Shen et al., 2023; Dan & Bai, 2025). This means that self-regulated learning cannot be understood solely as an individual process, as students' ability to regulate their learning is also influenced by the social relationships and emotional climate they experience. Therefore, this article is important because it shifts attention from worksheets as learning tools to interpersonal communication as a process of meaning-making.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theory and Concepts

Interpersonal communication in learning serves as the foundation for establishing educational relationships between teachers and students. In the context of primary education, teachers' interpersonal communication strategies have proven crucial because learning is not solely about delivering material but also about fostering closeness, empathy, clarity of message, and emotional support (Pratiwi, 2021). In the context of religious education, teachers' interpersonal communication skills are also related to students' motivation to learn, particularly when teachers foster openness, support, and responsiveness that are appropriate to students' needs (Amin et al., 2022). Meanwhile, in the context of the pandemic, the relationship between teachers' interpersonal communication and students' learning independence suggests that the quality of teacher-student interactions remains crucial even in limited learning circumstances (Marwiji & Mariah, 2021).

Teacher behavior is understood as a factor that can either support or hinder students' self-regulation (Ahmadi et al., 2023). Supportive teacher behavior, on the other hand, is positively associated with the development of student self-regulation, while discouraging behavior can hinder this process (Opdenakker, 2022; Matulaitienė et al., 2025). Learning independence is conceptually related to self-regulated learning, which refers to students' ability to set goals, choose strategies, monitor progress, manage obstacles, and evaluate learning outcomes (Theobald, 2021). At the school level, students' perceptions of teachers' encouragement for regular learning are associated with the use of self-regulation strategies. Therefore, the quality of teachers' management of the learning process can serve as a model for students' management of their own learning (Šimić Šašić et al., 2024; Sáez-Delgado et al., 2022).

Teacher support is also related to learning engagement through self-regulatory mechanisms such as goal setting, environmental management, and time management (Yin & Luo, 2024; Zhong & Wang, 2025). In collaborative learning, teacher support is linked to student self-regulation through its motivational role (Bai et al., 2025). Self-regulated learning often faces challenges in time management, seeking help, and developing strategies (Santoso et al., 2022). While artificial intelligence-based technology support can aid self-regulated learning, it still requires clear feedback and guidance (Jin et al., 2023). This confirms that worksheets are not the sole driver of independence; students still need cues, directions, corrections, and reinforcement that they can interpret as learning support.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employed an interpretive qualitative approach with a case study strategy. Case studies were deemed appropriate because teacher-student communication occurs within a specific social context: Kumon learning routines, worksheet usage patterns, gradual correction, and verbal and nonverbal interactions during the learning support process (Mtisi, 2022). Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with two teachers and three students, and the results of data processing were documented in NVivo. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, selecting informants based on the relevance of their experiences to the research focus. Students were selected because they had participated in Kumon lessons for at least 6 months and were aged 8–15 years, and were thus deemed to have sufficient experience to reflect on interactions with teachers. Teachers were selected because they had at least 1 year of teaching experience, thereby enabling them to understand the patterns of communication, support, correction, and motivation that occur in Kumon classes.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: observation, in-depth interviews, and



The first finding indicates that interpersonal communication in Kumon classes follows a brief, repetitive, and adaptive pattern. Lessons typically begin with a greeting and a checkup on the students' progress. Afterward, the instructor provides instructions regarding the worksheet, and then the students are directed to work independently. The instructor does not immediately provide answers when students experience difficulty; instead, they monitor for signs of confusion, such as prolonged silence, repeated erasures, or hesitation. At these points, the instructor provides hints, guiding questions, or guidance on specific sections of the worksheet. This pattern suggests that instructor communication functions as interpersonal scaffolding, keeping students central to the learning process.

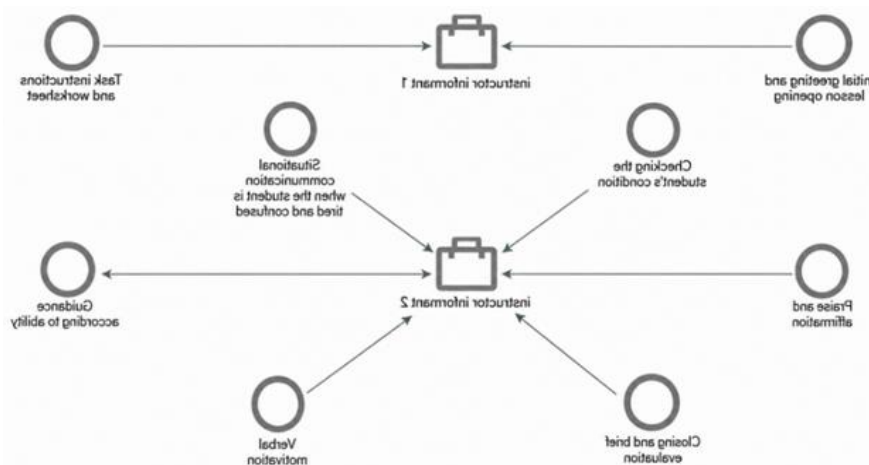


Figure 2. Interpersonal communication process map  
Source: Results of NVivo data processing by researchers (2026)

The interpersonal communication process map shows that Kumon's communication moves from greetings to checking students' progress to providing guidance based on their abilities, to verbal motivation, to brief evaluations. This means that communication doesn't just occur when students make mistakes, but is present throughout the learning cycle as a marker of presence, a rhythm regulator, and a source of psychological support.

Instructor verbal communication occurs in the form of brief instructions, open-ended questions, clues, slow explanations, corrective phrases such as "check again" or "reread," praise, light reprimands, and the normalization of errors. This communication characteristic aligns with Kumon's learning principles, which discourage lengthy explanations. Brief instructions ensure students continue reading, thinking, and trying on their own. Meanwhile, clues provide minimal support, allowing students to find their way to a solution without compromising their independent learning experience.

Praise is a crucial verbal element because students interpret it as a sign that their efforts are being noticed. Praise such as "good job," "you're getting more thorough," or "you've improved" is not only an expression of appreciation but also a symbol of recognition. When students feel their efforts are recognized, they are more likely to build self-confidence and maintain motivation to complete the next level. Gentle reprimands and corrections can also be positive when delivered in a non-judgmental tone. However, corrective communication that feels blaming can turn the learning experience into an emotionally stressful one.

In addition to verbal communication, the teacher's nonverbal communication is also an important finding. Students not only read the teacher's words but also interpret the teacher's facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, eye contact, body posture, and physical presence. Smiling, nodding, eye contact, and a low tone of voice signal that the teacher is present, paying attention, and willing to help. The nonverbal communication map shows that gestures such as pointing to the worksheet, body posture leaning toward the student, a warm tone, and a calm expression are closely related to students' experience of being cared for. Relational openness is a crucial condition for independent learning.

Students don't always ask questions immediately, especially when they feel embarrassed about being wrong, afraid of disturbing the teacher, or worried about a noisy class. Findings indicate that students who have interacted with the teacher for a long time tend to be more open, while quieter students require a slower approach. Openness is shaped by repeated experience: when students ask questions and receive a friendly response, they perceive the classroom as a safe space. On the other hand, when the teacher seems busy, gives too short responses, or uses a serious expression, students may hold back from asking questions.

Emotional support and empathy are evident in patiently waiting for students to think, providing space for them to express themselves, avoiding comparisons, calming them when they are frustrated, understanding their fatigue, and recognizing their progress. Empathy serves as a bridge between the Kumon system's demands for

discipline and the child's emotional needs. Without empathy, repetitive practice, correction, and level targets can be perceived as pressure. With empathy, the same process can be understood as a challenge to be overcome gradually.

Further findings indicate that students construct instructor communication in several key ways. First, assistance is understood as a guide, a compass, or a beacon that helps students find their way, not as a substitute for thinking. Second, correction is interpreted as assistance when delivered gradually and without embarrassment. Third, praise is interpreted as recognition of effort, not simply an assessment of the final result. Fourth, the instructor's enthusiasm fosters self-confidence. Fifth, mistakes are understood as part of the learning process when the instructor can normalize errors and confusion.

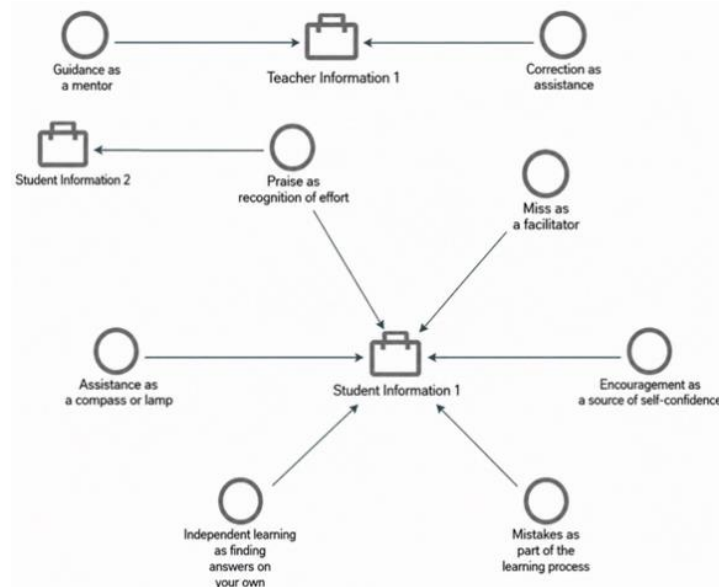


Figure 3. Map of students' meaning construction  
Source: Results of NVivo data processing by researchers (2026)

This construction of meaning demonstrates that independent learning does not leave students to their own devices. In students' experiences, independent learning means having the opportunity to try, reread instructions, correct mistakes, and find answers with appropriate support. In other words, independence is shaped by a balance between student autonomy and a teacher's supportive presence.

The Kumon independent learning map shows that students learn through trying things on their own, correcting their own mistakes, rereading instructions, doing homework regularly, and receiving gradually fading support. Worksheets serve as tutors by guiding students through a systematic learning sequence. However, these findings also indicate that worksheets do not operate in a neutral manner. Worksheets become meaningful when teachers help students understand how to use them, maintain a learning pace, and provide sufficient support without taking over the thinking process.

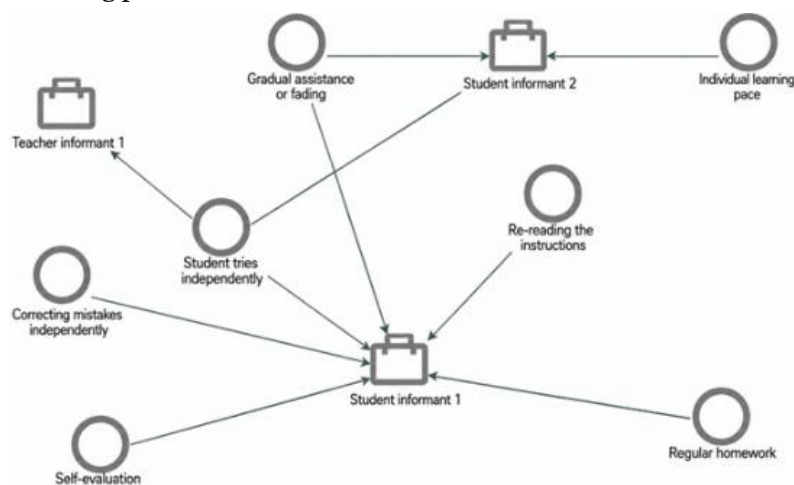


Figure 4. Kumon self-learning map  
Source: Results of NVivo data processing by researchers (2026)

Within this framework, teachers play a dual role: maintaining the principle of independence while ensuring that students do not feel abandoned. Gradual support is a crucial strategy because students continue to receive support, but this support is gradually reduced to allow them to refine their answers and evaluate their own processes. This is the essence of the "beyond worksheets" concept: worksheets are important as structure, but interpersonal communication is crucial as a catalyst for meaning, emotion, and the continuity of learning.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that learning independence in the Kumon method cannot be explained solely by structured worksheets, repetitive exercises, or the level-based learning system. Instead, independence emerges through a communication process in which students interpret instructional guidance, correction, encouragement, and emotional support from instructors. This finding expands the common understanding of Kumon as a worksheet-centered learning approach by highlighting the interpersonal communication dimension that enables worksheets to function as meaningful learning tools.

The first important finding is that teacher-student communication in Kumon operates as a form of interpersonal scaffolding. Although students are encouraged to complete tasks independently, instructors remain present through brief instructions, guiding questions, and adaptive assistance. This indicates that independence is not constructed through the absence of teacher involvement but through carefully managed teacher involvement. The instructor's role is not to replace students' thinking processes but to create conditions in which students can develop confidence in solving problems independently. This finding is consistent with research on self-regulated learning, which emphasizes that students develop autonomy through monitoring, evaluation, and control of their learning activities (Theobald, 2021). In this context, communication serves as the mechanism connecting external support and internal regulation.

The findings also reinforce the argument that supportive teacher communication contributes to students' psychological readiness for independent learning. Previous studies have shown that teacher care, credibility, and interpersonal relationships influence student engagement because students are more willing to participate when they perceive teachers as supportive figures (Froment & Gutiérrez, 2022). In the Kumon context, this support takes the form of simple yet meaningful communication practices, such as acknowledging effort, offering encouragement, and responding calmly to mistakes. These practices reduce students' fear of failure and allow mistakes to become part of the learning process rather than an indication of inability.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the findings reveal that communication in Kumon involves the continuous construction of meaning. Students do not simply receive messages from instructors; they interpret those messages based on their interactional experiences. For example, correction is not automatically understood as criticism. When delivered through supportive communication, correction becomes interpreted as guidance and assistance. Similarly, praise is not merely a verbal reward but a symbol of recognition that confirms students' competence and progress. This interpretation explains why similar communication behaviors may produce different outcomes depending on the relational context between teacher and student.

The importance of nonverbal communication is another significant contribution of this study. The findings show that students interpret facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, gestures, and teacher presence as indicators of emotional safety. This supports previous studies suggesting that teacher immediacy and nonverbal behaviors influence student motivation by reducing psychological distance between teachers and learners (Liu, 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2023). In Kumon learning environments, where students frequently work independently, these nonverbal signals become important because they communicate availability and support without interrupting students' concentration. Therefore, communication effectiveness is determined not only by what instructors say but also by how students experience their presence.

Another important finding concerns the balance between autonomy and assistance. The concept of "beyond worksheets" proposed in this study does not suggest that worksheets are insignificant. Rather, worksheets provide the structural foundation that organizes learning progression, while interpersonal communication provides the emotional and interpretative framework that allows students to engage with that structure. Without communication, worksheets may become mechanical tasks; with it, they become instruments for developing responsibility, persistence, and self-confidence. This finding contributes to educational communication studies by showing that learning independence is relationally constructed rather than purely individual.

The study also provides insight into the role of gradual assistance or fading support. Students in Kumon are encouraged to attempt solutions independently before receiving guidance. This process resembles the development of self-regulation, where learners gradually internalize strategies for solving problems and managing difficulties. Previous research has indicated that teacher support is related to student self-regulation through

motivational mechanisms (Bai et al., 2025; Yin & Luo, 2024). The present study extends this perspective by showing how communication practices become the pathway through which students transform external guidance into internal learning habits.

Furthermore, the findings challenge the assumption that independent learning requires teachers to become distant from students. Instead, effective independence requires a specific form of teacher presence: supportive but not controlling, available but not dominating, and encouraging without replacing student responsibility. This distinction is important because excessive control may reduce students' sense of autonomy, whereas insufficient support may create feelings of abandonment. The Kumon communication pattern demonstrates that independence develops through a dynamic relationship between student effort and teacher facilitation.

This study contributes theoretically by positioning interpersonal communication as a central component in understanding learning independence. While previous discussions of Kumon often emphasize worksheets, repetition, and discipline, this research demonstrates that communication functions as the symbolic bridge connecting instructional structure with students' emotional and cognitive development. Practically, the findings suggest that educational programs focusing on independent learning should not only design effective learning materials but also develop communication competencies among instructors, particularly in providing feedback, encouragement, and adaptive guidance.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations. The research was conducted at one Kumon center with a limited number of participants: two instructors and three students. Therefore, the findings should be understood as an interpretive explanation of communication processes within a specific learning context rather than a general representation of all Kumon environments. Future research may expand the number of participants, compare different learning centers, or examine how communication patterns influence measurable outcomes of student independence over longer periods.

Overall, this study argues that learning independence is not produced by worksheets alone. Independence is constructed through repeated interpersonal encounters in which students learn how to interpret instructions, manage mistakes, seek assistance, and develop confidence. The Kumon method illustrates that educational communication is not merely a channel for delivering information but a relational process that shapes students' understanding of themselves as capable, independent learners.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that learning independence in the Kumon method is constructed not only through structured worksheets, repetitive exercises, and a gradual learning system, but also through teacher–student interpersonal communication. The findings demonstrate that communication functions as a relational and symbolic process that enables students to interpret learning experiences, including instructions, corrections, challenges, and achievements. Rather than creating independence through the absence of teacher involvement, the Kumon learning process shows that autonomy develops through a balanced relationship between student effort and teacher facilitation. Brief instructions, guiding questions, adaptive feedback, gradual correction, and positive reinforcement help students build confidence while maintaining responsibility for their learning.

The concept of "beyond worksheets" proposed in this study highlights that educational materials alone do not automatically produce independent learners. Worksheets provide the structural framework that organizes learning progression, but interpersonal communication provides the meaning, emotional support, and relational context that make those materials effective. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, this study demonstrates that learning independence emerges through the continuous negotiation of meaning between instructors and students. Communication practices such as praise, encouragement, correction, and nonverbal immediacy are interpreted by students as symbols of support, recognition, and trust. Therefore, independence should be understood not merely as an individual cognitive ability but as a socially constructed process developed through meaningful interaction.

This study contributes to educational communication research by positioning interpersonal communication as a central mechanism in the development of learner autonomy. The findings suggest that educational programs aiming to foster independent learning should pay attention not only to instructional design but also to instructors' communication competencies, particularly in providing supportive feedback, emotional reassurance, and adaptive guidance. However, this study is limited by its qualitative case study design, which involves one Kumon learning center and a small number of participants. Future research may examine broader educational settings, diverse cultural contexts, and longitudinal communication patterns to better understand how interpersonal interactions contribute to the development of independent learning practices.

## ETHICAL DECLARATION

**Conflict of interest:** No declaration required. **Financing:** No reporting required. **Peer review:** Double anonymous peer review.

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