

AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN ELT: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES

Yuliana Friska¹

¹Universitas Pamulang
dosen01381@unpam.ac.id

Abstract

Autonomous learning is considered to be an important tool and is expected to appear in English language learning because it can have a positive impact on the learning process of students. Mainly in the English Language Teaching Department, various studies have been conducted on the views of students and teachers on autonomous learning. However, there is still a lack of investigations on autonomous learning in the context of non-English majors' students. This research aims to investigate students' perceptions of autonomous learning in English language learning. In addition, the research focuses on exploring students' practice in autonomous learning activities. The questionnaire and semi-structured interview were applied to a randomly selected sample of one hundred forty-nine (149) accounting students. The research findings show that students have a positive attitude towards autonomous learning and the importance of autonomous learning in language learning. Meanwhile, in terms of implementing autonomous learning itself, the students possess low efforts. Therefore, it is recommended that in order to improve the autonomous learning of accounting students of Universitas Pamulang in English teaching and learning, it should be integrated into English teaching and make it an integral part of the EFL curriculum.)

Keywords: *Autonomous learning, ELT, perceptions, practices.*

INTRODUCTION

Autonomous learning has been one of the most discussed topics in language learning during the last three decades (Dickinson, 1995; Cotterall, 2000; Egel, 2009). Language teaching methods particularly have improved with the evolution of the approach to foreign language teaching throughout history. Traditional teacher-centered learning methods have been replaced by student-centered methods that activate the individual strength of students and enable students to participate in learning. As (Kusurkar et al., 2011) states, in the process of student-centered learning, students are expected to make your own choices, take responsibility, have inherent motivation, and regulate and control their behavior without relying on others. Therefore, the question "How should teacher teach?" has been replaced by the question of "How do students learn?" (Yan, 2012). In other words, this method of emphasizing learning rather than teaching values learner autonomy and support for

learners to participate in learning (Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012). The self-study efforts and motivation of students began to play an important role in learning. The essence of learning lies in students' self-learning and the way of learning.

Learner autonomy in language learning is a multifaceted concept, which has been defined in different ways. Learning autonomy considered to be an outstanding figure in the field of autonomy, named it, the ability to learn independently (Holec, 1979). Holec's work on autonomy laid the theoretical foundation for many related studies that were later added to the literature, although so far there has been no consensus on the definition of this term (Kemp, 2009; Smith, 2008; Little, 1995) clarified learner autonomy by studying the degree to which learners can use a set of strategies to control their own learning. These strategies include the ability to determine goals, select materials and tasks, plan practice opportunities, and monitor and self-assess learning progress.

The concept of learner autonomy is often incorrectly defined as independent extracurricular learning in which learners can control all aspects of the learning process (Hafner & Miller, 2011). In this view, self-directed learners are those who can learn on their own without the guidance of a teacher or lecturer. Therefore, many experts (Marsh et al., 2001; Clegg *, 2004; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018) are in the education sector. Many literatures also show that many researchers cover different attributes of learner autonomy; however, they all believe in a principle that learner autonomy is the ability of learners to control their own learning. Recently, (Nguyen et al., 2014) classified the attributes of learner autonomy into three categories, namely, initiation, monitoring, and evaluation. Initiating the learning process involves attributes related to understanding personal learning preferences, setting goals, preparing learning plans, and creating learning opportunities. Monitoring the learning process may be the longest process, in which most of the learning occurs, including attributes related to learning participation and maintenance, such as selecting appropriate strategies, modifying learning paths, and negotiating with others. Assess

the properties of the learning process expected in relation to the way the learning results are reviewed.

In the field of English language teaching, many researchers have conducted a lot of research (Cotterall, 2000; Smith, 2008; Sultana, 2018). Benson's research (Benson, 2007) shows that learner autonomy and English proficiency are positively correlated on at least two points. First of all, the concept of autonomous learning is not limited to the Western context. This supports (Ho & Crookall, 1995), who believes that the concept of autonomous learning is not restricted by any particular culture. Further, (Dardjowidjojo, 2006) stated that learner autonomy applies most effectively to Western culture is debatable. Secondly, based on the findings of (Benson, 2007), it can be inferred that learner autonomy is significantly related to learner's English proficiency. Furthermore, (Cakici, 2017) conducted a study on teachers' perceptions of the extent to which learners should participate in the decision-making process in general aspects of learner autonomy. Specifically, the research aims to find out the learning autonomy of future English teachers in Turkey. These research results provide new insights for English language teaching and learning, that is, another option to improve learners' English proficiency and awareness through the development of autonomous learning, because it brings positive impact on learners' language learning efforts and strategies.

Furthermore, most of the research in terms of autonomous learning in ELT address to investigate learner motivation, responsibilities, and the method used in promoting autonomous learning in EFL classroom. (Lo, 2010) studied the perceptions of EFL students on their responsibilities and abilities related to learning autonomy. Specifically, the research aims to identify language students' preparation for autonomous learning in terms of educational responsibility, autonomous learning ability, and the actual performance of learners' autonomy. Another study was conducted by (Cheng, 2019) in Chinese context to investigate the views of EFL students on self-directed learning in Thai Lan private universities. Different from the previous researches, this research focuses on exploring students' perception and practices of the concept of autonomous learning which is conducted in non-English

majors of Universitas Pamulang. However, there is still a lack of surveys on the autonomy of non-English majors' students in language learning. Therefore, this study will fill in the gap by investigating accounting students' of Universitas Pamulang perceptions and practices on autonomous learning in ELT. More particularly, this study aims to elicit students' views and opinions on their autonomy, and to explore students' practice in autonomous learning activities, especially in the context of English language learning in Universitas Pamulang which has never been conducted before.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study as it concerns in exploring social phenomena. The data of this study were obtained from questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The questionnaire distributed through Google Forms and the interview was conducted online. The participants in this study were 149 students, including 41 males and 108 females, in the Accounting Department of Pamulang University.

Table 1. Number of Respondent

Gender	Respondent
Male	41
Female	108
Total	149

The questionnaire used closed-ended question which allows the respondent to answer according to the Likert scale. The score ranges from 1 to 4 (1 for never, 2 for sometimes, 3 for often, and 4 for always). Students' perception and practices questions were adjusted to the online self-study, with a total of 13 questions to investigate the perceptions of non-English majors on autonomous learning in ESP classrooms. More specifically, interviews were conducted online via Google meet application.

Regarding interviews, it was used to enrich the research results. The tool was developed by researchers to obtain information about students' perceptions and practices attributed to autonomous learning. Five participants were randomly selected during this data collection phase. The participants were asked several questions. After sharing their answers to the questions, they will be asked follow-up questions and surveys will be conducted based on these answers. They conducted one-on-one interviews for 10 minutes, and all responses were recorded for future analysis. Four main interview questions were given to the participants. In order to minimize possible language barriers, all interview session were conducted in Indonesian. Each participant was contacted and asked if they could conduct an interview. All interview session were performed separately as planned. Each interview takes about ten minutes.

RESULT/FINDINGS

Students' Perception on Autonomous Learning

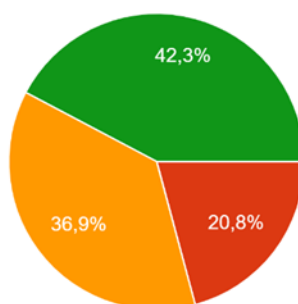


Figure 1: Definition of autonomous learning

Students' perception on autonomous learning were obtained through questionnaire distributed to 149 respondents. Figure 1 shows that 42,3% of students or sixty-three respondents are able to define autonomous learning perfectly. Meanwhile, 36.9% of students or 55 respondents succeed to define of learning autonomy as well. However, 20.8% or 31 students were not able to define the term correctly. This data show that

more than seventy percent of students were familiar with the term autonomous learning.

Table 2: Students' perception of specific aspect of Autonomous Learning

Statements	Answer Frequency				
	N	S	O	A	Number of responses
I understand the purpose of learning English in this semester		31	55	63	149
Percentage (%)		20.8	36.9	42.3	
I have a personal goal in learning English	1	32	63	53	149
Percentage (%)	0.7	21.5	42.3	35.6	
I made a plan for learning English	2	54	60	33	149
Percentage (%)	1.3	36.2	40.3	22.1	
I'm looking for other resources to help me with learning		31	47	71	149
Percentage (%)		20.8	31.5	47.7	
My way of self-study is appropriate		63	60	26	149
Percentage (%)		42.3	40.3	17.4	
I do better in learning English this semester		35	72	42	149
Percentage (%)		23.5	48.3	28.2	
I got better results in learning English		46	70	33	149
Percentage (%)		30.9	47	22.1	

Information:

N: Never

S: Sometimes

O: Often

A: Always

A detailed look at table 2 shows that more than half of the participants (42.3% choose “always” and 36.9% choose “often”), nearly 80%, believe that they understand the purpose of English learning. 77.9% participants have personal goal in learning English and 22.2% of the participants scarcely have their personal goal. This shows that most of the participant know what to do in teaching learning process. More specifically, in preparing learning plan the number of students is reduced to 62.4% compared to those who have personal goals in learning. The data above show that nearly 40% of respondents do not have their own lesson plans. Further, from the plans that have been made, 79.2% took efforts to find additional sources of learning. Merely, a small percentage of respondents, 20.8%, did not do so. This proves that their view of autonomous learning is positive, so that they performed to look for sources to develop their knowledge independently. Furthermore, the number of students who assumed their learning autonomy is appropriate is 57.7%, while 43.3% of respondents were doubt about their independent learning. The two points regarding autonomous learning and it’s result in teaching learning process, more than 60% of the respondent agreed that they did better and they obtained better result at the same time.

In order to elucidate better understanding regarding students’ perceptions of their autonomy, interview was conducted with five participants randomly chosen. In general, the overall observation of the interview results showed respondents’ positive perception toward autonomous learning in English language teaching as shown in these three participants’ responses:

“I think self-directed learning is quite important to language learner, including myself, because it can help me control my learning activities and learn English better.” (Student 1)

“In my opinion, learning autonomy plays an important role in learning especially in learning English. This is because it can help us learn more and improve our English skills.” (Student 2)

“In my view, autonomous learning is quite crucial in the era where technology dominates all aspect of life including learning. We can learn from many sources besides what lecturers give us in class.” (Student 3)

One participant claimed that the importance of autonomy should be linked to the necessity of knowing how to learn autonomously, which may help students succeed in language learning.

“Autonomy is very important in English learning, so students need to know how to learn independently. In addition, I think autonomous students may have a greater chance of success in learning English than non-autonomous students.” (Student 4)

Data obtained from the interview was further evaluated to provide more insight into the students' perspectives of autonomous learning. The results indicated that the technical factor was given the highest priority. Learner autonomy, according to nearly all interviewees, would help them learn autonomously and allow them to choose acceptable learning activities and techniques outside of the classroom.

“Learner autonomy allows us to be more proactive of learning outside of the classroom.” We will not be able to improve our English if we only study with our lecturers in class and do not put in enough practice time. I believe it is critical to plan a strategy for studying more effectively wherever we are.” (Student 5)

Interview results from the five participants were evaluated to have a better understanding of the students' assessments of their autonomous learning skills. The results revealed that the ability to conduct learning autonomy were not at the same level. Three out of the five participants specifically stated that they could accomplish this well if they were given the option to take charge of their own learning. They indicated that they were attempting to learn independently so that they could study English more effectively without relying much on their lecturers. The remaining two

respondents, on the other hand, demonstrated a low level of confidence in their ability to learn independently.

“I’m not really sure whether I could study independently without lecturers’ explanation, therefore I hope that my lecturers will guide me to do so. I’m now doing my best to practice autonomous learning because I know it will help me with learning.” (Student 4)

“I realize learner autonomy is very important, but I do not think I will be able to accomplish it properly. I simply do what my lecturers tell me to do, and I am unable to make decisions in my learning process. As a result, I am not certain that I would handle independent learning successfully, such as selecting learning techniques and assessing my own learning progress.” (Student 1)

Students’ practices of activities on autonomous learning

Table 3: Students’ practices of activities on autonomous learning

Statements	Answer Frequency				
	N	S	O	A	Number of responses
I read the module myself without being instructed by the lecturer	2	62	49	36	149
Percentage (%)	1.3	41.6	32.9	24.2	
I do non-compulsory exercise	12	97	28	12	149
Percentage (%)	8.1	65.1	18.8	8.1	
I write down the new words and their meaning	5	62	53	29	149
Percentage (%)	3.4	41.6	35.6	19.5	
I focus on learning activities		13	52	84	149
Percentage (%)		8.7	34.9	56.4	
I practice speaking English with friends or lecturers	8	89	34	18	149

Percentage (%)	5.4	59.7	22.8	12.1	
I work on assignment in a group	5	26	38	80	149
Percentage (%)	3.4	17.4	25.5	53.7	

Table 3 shows the activities performed by at least 50% of the participants at a certain frequency level. It can be seen that 57.4% of students did non-mandatory homework as reading module independently. Meanwhile, nearly half of remaining students sometimes even never did non-compulsory activities outside the class instruction. This showed that solely about fifty percent of students who exposed themselves to the activities of autonomous learning. In addition, non-compulsory assignment activities were done by 26.9% of students, the remaining students, 80%, did not do the exercises. It could be assumed that student activity towards the practice of e-learning is still low. Similarly, lack of practices in learning autonomy was shown by participant, less than fifty percent of students explored independent activities, such as noting the new words and speaking English to their friends and lecturers. Nonetheless, more than half of the students got immerse with teaching learning activities either inside or outside the class and they were able to learn in group.

The interview on students' autonomous learning practices was conducted to support the result obtained from questionnaire. Only one of the interviewees was satisfied with her practice in autonomous learning activities. She stated that besides doing compulsory activities, she also attempted to spend time on non-required activities that she believed were beneficial to her learning.

“In addition to the activities instructed by the teacher, I attempted to do other activities, such as reading books in English, listening to the music in English, doing non-compulsory exercises on module, and speaking English to my friends and lecturers even though it was not perfect.” (Student 5)

In contrast to the previous interviewee, two of the participants showed disappointment in the practice of activities inside and outside the classroom.

“Honestly, I was disappointed in my participation in learning activities inside and outside of class. I usually studied only for exams, and I did not take opportunities provided by the teacher to practice English. Therefore, I need to change to become better.” (Student 1)

The two remaining students stated that their level of practice in autonomous learning is at an average level. They sometimes do some non-compulsory activities to improve their English. In class, they prefer to discuss learning issues with friends instead of talking to lecturers.

“I think I practiced average-level autonomous activities in and out of class. I mean, I sometimes did some activities that was not instructed by my lecturer, such as talking to my friends in English outside of class, reading English books and watching English movies. In class, when I had a problem, I prefer to ask my classmates.” (Student 2)

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings above, the students perceived that autonomy was important in the process of learning English. This finding is in line with previous studies (Liu, 2015; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018; Tuan, 2021), which found that EFL students had positive view toward autonomous learning, and considered learning autonomy to be pivotal matter to their English learning. Nonetheless, the qualitative results revealed that activities outside of the classroom, influenced the students' perceptions of independent learning. To be more precise, the majority of respondents said that, besides studying in class, autonomous learning would help them study better by engaging in out-class activities and having appropriate learning techniques. Besides, more than half of the interviewees believed that by doing autonomous activities, they would be able to work together and develop their capacity to cooperate with one another, and that learner autonomy would help them improve their ability in language learning. In terms of EFL students' perception of their ability to study autonomously, the results revealed that two-third of students assumed themselves as autonomous

learner. This finding is in line with (Abdel Razeq, 2014) and (Tuan, 2021). In contrast to the previous studies, (Tran, 2020) discovered that EFL students considered they had limitations in their ability to learn autonomously. Furthermore, (Nguyen et al., 2014) discovered that the students agreed on the need of autonomous learning, they did not consider themselves to be autonomous learners.

In relation to the practice of students' autonomous learning activities, this study revealed that the students' level of practice was below the average. It showed that participants, non-English major students, considered the level of their autonomous learning practices was not satisfactory. Nevertheless, all participants perceived that learning autonomy is important to their English language learning, then, students practice relating to autonomous learning activities were below the average and need to be improved.

CONCLUSION

Autonomous learning is widely considered playing an important role in English language learning since it is viewed as a required characteristic of a successful learner. As a result, any students, particularly in higher education, should strive for a high level of learner autonomy. Nevertheless, the findings of this study revealed that EFL students' implementation of autonomous learning was poor, despite their awareness of the importance of learner autonomy in enhancing English language learning. The findings of this study also suggest that many non-English major students of Universitas Pamulang are more teacher-centered, since they are highly reliant on their lecturers during the learning process, resulting in a lack of autonomy in learning. As a result, in the context of accounting students at Universitas Pamulang, it is suggested that autonomous learning be included into EFL courses and that students should be given opportunities to engage in learning autonomously.

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