
Taking Control: Fostering Learners' Autonomy in Learning English Language

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Abstract

This qualitative–phenomenological study unearthed the personal and meaningful experiences of the participants on the use of autonomous learning in their studies. Sixteen freshmen students were purposively chosen, and in-depth interviews were used to obtain the relevant information. The findings of the study revealed that autonomous learning is seen as an essential tool for learners to engross their learning efficiency. It allowed the participants to take responsibility for their advancements, developed their planning and prioritizing skills, improved self-decision, motivation, willingness, determination, interest to learn, heightened sense of accountability of their actions, allowed to understand their capabilities, and it was self-rewarding. However, careful planning and procedures were necessary for autonomous learning, such as readying self to learn, securing complete materials, developing the ability to ask help, setting a conducive environment, and setting specific timelines to be followed. The participants perceived these procedures were efficient in order to learn effectively. Moreover, they suggested that learners should not rely heavily on teachers rather learn to be self-directed, motivated, and delved beyond the learning horizon. It was implicated that autonomous learning is necessary, especially during this time of the pandemic, where students and teachers do not have face-to-face encounters, instead of everything is done online.

INTRODUCTION

Autonomy has been a trendy expression in the foreign language training for quite a long time, putting the attention on the student, cultivating individual styles of learning, and urging students to assume liability for their advancement. The basis of learner autonomy is that the learner accepts the responsibility for his or her learning. Holec (1981) points out that this topic is not only promoting new kinds of learning but also pursuing learner autonomy as an explicit goal to help more learners succeed in their chosen career path. Learner autonomy in this day and age is a needed approach in producing productive members of society.

A study on the topic by Williams (1998) in the field of medical education proves that autonomy fosters active engagement and a sense of volition for learning. Moreover, another striking idea presented by Trim (1976) that autonomy is an adaptive ability, allowing learners to develop supportive structures within themselves rather than to have erected around them. The latter study was supported by Dickinson and Snow (1987, as cited in Oxford, 2003) that autonomy is a learning situation in which the individual manifests an attitude of responsibility. However, according to Sert (2006), students seem to be unable and puzzled to identify what language to master and how to do so efficiently.

Several researchers also scrutinized the influence of autonomous learning across cultural factors and student's motivation for learning, based on the assumption that children acquire needs, values, and attitudes from their culture (Brickman & Miller, 2001). According to Lim and Wang (1992), learner's active participation in class is also significantly related to improvements in language proficiency. By giving autonomy to students, they would have to do their own learning. However,

it is a serious error to leap from acceptance to the notion that learners must ultimately do their learning to embrace the doctrine of learner autonomy. By fostering learner autonomy, it provides an end towards which all teachers and learners ought to work. Moreover, Benson (2013) points out that learner autonomy is sometimes explained in terms of the positive relation between present and future learning. It has found out that learners who accept responsibility for their learning targets are more likely to maintain a positive attitude toward learning in the future.

Students enrolled in Southern Philippines Agribusiness and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology (SPAMAST) who had climbing proficiency in learning English as a second language sought help from the teachers. Learners' autonomy in the context is still not widely practiced. Many factors include the lack of motivation coming from students to learn, which could be the result of poor parental concern and a large population per class. Murcia *et al.* (2019) opined that contemporary students need learning autonomy especially that there is a changing scenario of language learning brought about by globalization and advancement in technology such as the internet, incorporating new methods of teaching inside the classroom by making use of technology and technology-based tools such as internet or computer-based programs and self-accessed language learning centers. However, internet connection is not available in some schools; hence, students face difficulty to be independent.

In fostering learning autonomy, teachers play important roles inside and outside the classroom. They have to equip students with the appropriate learning strategies successfully to help them take control of their learning. This study was of great significance to students and teachers who take into consideration the holistic nature of individual student learning and the most

effective practices for helping them develop become autonomous and responsible learners.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to determine relevant information that is useful in order to foster learners' autonomy and incorporate in the classroom instruction. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

- How autonomous learning helps the participants in their studies?
- What is the importance of autonomous or self-directed learning in the participants' studies?
- What are the positive and negative experiences faced by the participants in employing autonomous learning in their studies?
- What recommendations can the participants suggest to improve their autonomous learning strategy?

Theoretical Lens

The study was anchored on learner's autonomy by David Little (2007). This theory explores the concept of autonomy in teaching a second language in classroom instruction. It is divided into four sections; the first section relates to Holec's (1981) definition of learner autonomy to self-instruction in language learning, the next section emphasized a successful attempt in fostering autonomous learning in a classroom situation, the third section then created a theory of learner autonomy designed to apply equally to these two very different kinds of language learning and teaching, and the last section made a clear image of how learners can apply the theory to language learning and teaching.

Moreover, Little supported the idea of Holec which defines learner autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's learning which means to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, such as, determining the objectives, defining the contents and progression, selecting methods and techniques, techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition, properly speaking, and evaluating what has been acquired.

This theory of learner's autonomy was appropriate to this study because the study explores how learner's autonomy was to help learners in their studies. Further, the study determined that each learner's personal experiences on learner's autonomy, and it evaluated what suggestions the learners can offer so that their use of learner's autonomy could be improved.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used the qualitative-phenomenological method. This combined method was appropriate in this investigation because it explores the participant's individual views on a certain phenomenon (Rust *et al.*, 2017), illuminates the meaning of the participants' personal experiences (Christensen *et al.*, 2010; San Jose *et al.*, 2017), describes the participants' confessions, narratives, and reflection (Brinkman, 2014), and unveils and understands the reasons why such phenomenon happens (Rosenthal, 2016; Holtrop *et al.*, 2018). In this study, the participants' personal experiences and knowledge with regards to autonomous learning were acquired. Specifically, as indicated in the research questions, the researchers collected information on how the autonomous learning help in them, what was its relevance, what were its advantages and disadvantages, and what suggestions they could offer to advance its use. All

these led to gather their individual and meaningful encounters with autonomous learning. There was no survey conducted, and rigorous statistical application applied.

Research Instruments

The researchers formulated the interview guide questions. It was checked by the researchers' adviser and validated by two experts to ensure that the questions addressed the research questions. In formulating the guide questions, the researchers ascertained that all questions were open-ended, and probe questions were included.

Research Participants

Sixteen selected freshmen students of SPAMAST participated in the study. These students were purposively chosen from 100 enrolled in the Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English. They were chosen because they were identified to be self-reliant, independent, resourceful, and self-contained. Thus, the researchers believed that they were a good source of information for this investigation. Creswell *et al.* (2003) and Vehovar *et al.* (2016) mentioned that purposive sampling gives the researchers an opportunity to select the representative sample, which is believed to be the best source of information.

Data Gathering

The sources of information for this research study were taken from the responses and reflections of the participants in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Interview guide questions based on the research questions were provided. Also, probe questions were then included to exhaust relevant answers which were pertinent to the study.

A group of 16 participants was divided into four focus groups. The focus groups were conducted separately and at different times. However, before the conduct of the research, a letter of consent was given to each participant. This was done to address one of the requirements of ethics, which was to ask permission. The protocol was also included, and the researchers clearly discussed each of the participants so that they would be guided and informed. Moreover, to address confidentiality, the participants were asked to use pseudonyms. Further, before the formal interview, each participant was given a copy of the interview guide questions so that they could follow and participate actively in the interview.

After the conduct of the FGD, the interview proceedings were transcribed. Afterward, the information was coded and subjected to thematic analysis. The thematic analysis was presented in a table format, and discussions were provided below.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The presentation of the results was patterned after San Jose (2019), where participants' responses were considered General if it obtained 50% and above, Typical if it garnered 21% and above but not more than 49%, while Variant if it obtained less than 20% and below. Table 1

Process and Means to Autonomy Learning

The researchers found out that there are different convenient methods that play a significant role in autonomy learning. Benson (2007) said that over the past decades, traditional language classrooms and courses methods undergone the construction; Schwartz (1997) emphasized that self-directed learning is highly considered in order to initiate better learning, and assume responsibilities for one's own affair; Little (2007)

Table 1: Consolidated responses of the participants reflecting the themes and core ideas

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Core ideas</i>
Process and means to Autonomy learning	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing and securing complete notes • Setting a conducive and tranquil environment • Providing a timeline for a systematic detail
	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming ready to learn • Self-evaluation of the learning progress
	Variant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consulting the teacher
Efficacy of the procedures	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming self-motivated • Improving learning • Very effective
Relation of autonomy learning and studies	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making focus • Developing a sense of responsibility • Self-motivating
	Variant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing freedom to delve beyond teaching pedagogy • Getting higher academic achievements • Finding recourses for learning
Learning approach efficiency	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the ability to focus • Providing responsibility over learning progress
	Variant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not helpful • Reflecting whether an edge or asset
Pros and cons of autonomy utilization	General	Cons <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puzzling between teacher's intention and own interpretation
	General	Pros <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming an independent learner • Broadening horizons • Delving deeper beyond the context • Boosting confidence
	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminating anxiety • Eliminating fear, cramming, and stress during exam • Giving better learning • Changing habits and behavior
Difficulties applied resolution	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not dictated by anyone • Asking the teacher for further information • Reschedule my autonomous study • Procrastinating
	Variant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning by sharing with others • Enhancing initiative pertinent to learning strategies
Autonomous learning commendable suggestions	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choosing a style befitted to preferences
	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being mindful and setting priorities in studies • Interacting with clique
A learning approach as best suitable	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guiding to have meaningful learning • Providing intrinsic motivation
	Variant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having control on learning • Having a detailed view on self's motivation • Helping to learn better and have a good improvement in class • Examining own abilities/ capabilities

*Source: Thematic analysis conducted on the transcribed information of focus group discussion

was convinced that through autonomous learning, students have the freedom to set procedures with conditional freedom in which learners determines their objectives, define the content, select their methods and techniques, as well as monitor and evaluate their own progress. Generally, the results showed that all participants unanimously provided a timeline with systematic details to be followed in their self-directed learning. Typically, few of the participants mentioned that they assessed themselves first their readiness to learn, and this self-evaluation guide them in doing their plans. Moreover, they also confessed that in autonomous leaning, having a secured setting for studies, a conducive environment, and complete materials such as books, notes, pen, highlighter, etc., were very important. Few others revealed that teacher's guidance and pastoral support ignited their self-autonomy.

These findings imply that generally, learning autonomy is a self-decision of the learners and do not depend on someone's

assistance and encouragement. It is the person's motivation, willingness, and interest in learning that determine their autonomy.

Efficacy of the Procedures

The researchers gathered the information and found out that taking control of one's own learning is very efficient. Parallel to the study of William (1998), learning autonomy fosters active engagement and a sense of volition. Likewise, Trim (1976) asserted that autonomy in an adaptive ability that allows learners to develop supportive structures within themselves. Generally, all the participants find their autonomy learning procedures very advantageous. It guided them to have better academic achievements and perceived better stand than their classmates who heavily rely on their teacher's support and guidance to learn the lessons. These findings showed that planning is an essential aspect of learning autonomy. With planning, all activities may be done smoothly and at ease.

Relation of Autonomy Learning and Studies

Autonomy is a situation in which a student is entirely responsible for all the decisions related to their learning (Tavallali & Marzban, 2015). Based on the results, autonomy learning and the learner's desire to study are bound together that provide opportunity. Dickinson (1987, as cited in Oxford, 2009) opined that autonomy is a learning situation in which the learner manifests an attitude of responsibility. Variantly, few participants responded that doing autonomous learning served as a basis for providing freedom for them to delve beyond teaching pedagogy. Moreover, it did provide not only higher academic achievements but also find recourses of learning. Typically, other participants stressed out that through autonomy, it helped them to be focused, self-motivation, confidence, and sense of responsibility to their actions. This implies that autonomous learning allows students to take control of themselves and develop their sense of accountability for their actions.

Learning Approach Efficiency

Typically, some participants revealed that though autonomous learning, they developed a sense of responsibility and learned to evaluate their learning progress. Others also stated that autonomous learning helped them to become more independent and focused on their studies. However, few participants found autonomous learning as not helpful at all. They were in doubt whether being autonomous and self-directed was an asset or an edge over others. They could not disregard the importance of collaboration with their colleagues. One of their fears was, they need others to share, to confer, to ask, to argue, and to guide, especially that learning English was difficult and confusing.

This finding supported Sert (2006), who observed that in terms of language learning, many students seemed to be puzzled, especially those who the capacity to self-assess and monitor their learning. It can be reflected from this result that autonomous learning requires a good understanding of one's self. It also shows that collaborative learning challenges autonomous learning.

Pros and Cons of Autonomy Utilization

Generally, the participants unanimously confessed that they were confused between their teacher's intention and their own interpretation of autonomous learning. Their teacher's intention of making them independent learners was absolute, making them into total independence. However, they were dictated by their teachers what strategies they can use and apply. Variantly, only a few participants expressed likeliness of having autonomous learning. They revealed that autonomy in learning led them to become self-directed, wide and deep thinkers, broadened-minded, and reflective. For them, autonomous learning boosted their confidence, eliminated fear, cram, and stress, especially during the examination. They need not to rely on others but themselves. Also, their few mentioned that autonomy learning changed their old habits and behaviors. Through autonomous learning, they become resources and innovative. This finding implies that although autonomous learning helps the students, a common understanding of the concepts of autonomy and limitations may be defined. In doing autonomous learning, teachers may be guided by Holec's (1981) concepts, procedures, and definitions mentioned in the theoretical lens of this study.

Difficulties Applied Resolution

Littlewood (1999) pointed out that autonomy contained two key components: learner's ability and their willingness to make choices independently. In Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-

determination theory, they explained the linked human needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to self-determined motivation and self-regulated behavior. They also emphasized that people take in social values and extrinsic contingencies when their psychological needs are satisfied, which produces positive self-directed behavior and well-being.

In terms of the challenges encountered by the participants, they typically suggested that they should choose the style befitted to their preferences. They should not be dictated by someone else, not even by their mentors. Sometimes they didn't find answers to their assignments, and they needed to ask the help of their teachers. Likewise, rescheduling of the timetable was also troublesome because of the hectic activities they had. Also, sometimes procrastination happened because they felt tired and exhausted. Variantly, other participants had reflected that when they found difficulty, they interacted with their cliques. This way, they could gather helpful information. Few others mentioned that they explored more and exhausted possible ways to help them. They become resourceful and innovative.

Autonomous Learning Commendable Suggestions

Generally, the participants suggested that to become an autonomous student, they needed to choose their own styles that suited their personality and needs. This way, the setting of timetables for activities would be manageable. If a student would fit in a style that did not fit them, then everything would be strenuous. Typically, some others suggested that students should be mindful of their priorities in their studies. Setting priorities means putting goals and strategizing actions. They also mentioned that interacting with others would give an advantage in their studies whenever they need their assistance.

A Learning Approach as Best Suitable

Most of the participants found autonomous learning best in paving the way for the students to have a detailed view of themselves. Autonomous learning would guide them to have fruitful learning, motivated them to push further, and allowed them to have control of their studies. Variantly, few of the participants believed that taking control of their own learning was helpful in improving their learning. They also highlighted that through autonomous learning, they were able to examine their abilities and capabilities. These findings corroborated with Masouleh and Jooneghani (2011) and Wahyuni *et al.* (2019), who mentioned that as learners develop autonomy in their learning, they become independent, dispel myths, disabuse themselves of preconceived ideas, and can be considered as authors of their worlds.

CONCLUSION

Autonomous learning is seen as an essential tool for learners to engross their learning efficiency. Moreover, autonomous learning allows the participants to take responsibility for their advancements, develop their planning and prioritizing skills, improves self-decision, motivation, willingness, determination, and interest to learn, heightens the sense of accountability of their actions, and allows to understand themselves better. Lastly, autonomous learning is self-rewarding.

IMPLICATION

One of the greatest frustrations of many teachers, especially in developing countries, is having a classroom of diverse learners with different learning styles and behaviors. In reality, it is usually challenging to manage 50 students per class. The findings of this investigation may allow these teachers to implement

autonomous learning in their classrooms. However, appropriate consultation and planning may be done. Students may be given the objectives, timetables, rubrics, criteria for marking, syllabus, needed materials, and consultation information so that they will be guided accordingly. Autonomous learning is recommended, especially during this time of the pandemic, where students and teachers do not have face-to-face encounters; instead, everything is done online.

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