

A STUDY ON EFL LEARNER AUTONOMY IN POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract

In a country where English is taught as a foreign language like Indonesia, classroom instruction may be the only venue where students have contact with English. Once they leave the classroom, opportunities to use English are scarce as they are totally engrossed in their first language surroundings. Coupled with other unsupportive factors for successful language learning such as large class sizes, limited time allocation for English instruction, and lack of teacher's encouragement for students' participation in the classroom activities (Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Nur, 2004), promoting autonomous learning and effective learning strategies becomes more important if students are to achieve an appropriate level of communicative proficiency and become successful language learners.

The interest in both language.

Keywords: *Language, CORONA, Pandemic, Level etc.*

Introduction

Language learning strategies and learner autonomy are two different terms that have always attracted notable research attention over the past few decades. The escalating interest in learner-centered approaches to language teaching, coupled with the progressing use of the technology-based approaches during the recent Covid-19 pandemic, emphasizes the recognition of the learners' active role in their learning and effective strategies they use in learning a new language. In the context of second or foreign language learning, learning strategies refer to "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations" (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989, p. 8). Meanwhile, learner autonomy is defined as the capacity to take control or take charge of one's own learning (Benson, 2013), which is manifested in how they go about their learning and transfer what they have learned to wider contexts (Little, 1991). Research has demonstrated that language learning strategies help students become more effective learners and boost the improvement of the target language (Oxford, 2016; Wong & Nunan, 2011), and that learner autonomy increases student motivation (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998), active participation in learning activities (Dincer et al., 2012), and improves language proficiency (Dafei, 2007; Mohamadpour, 2013).

Language learning strategies and learner autonomy is mainly driven by a desire to understand the characteristics of good language learners because good language learners are supposed to take conscious actions to improve and control their language learning (Oxford et al., 2014). Thus, understanding the characteristics of good language learners is important because once the characteristics are understood, teachers can explore the potential for learner training and approach their students with helpful well-designed tasks to help their students become better language learners (Sewell, 2003). It has long been suggested in the literature that there is a close link between learning strategies and learner autonomy. Dickinson (1987), for example, maintains that learning strategies are central factors in the promotion and development of learner autonomy because appropriate strategy use allows learners to take more responsibility for their learning. According to Rubin (1987), students who use effective learning strategies have a better capacity to work beyond the classroom on their own when the teacher is not available to give directions input for their learning. In a similar vein, Oxford et al. (2014) stated that the use of language learning strategies promotes language learning as a cognitive process whereby learners take full control of their learning process. Cotterall (1999) asserted that if learners lack learning strategies training, they will have difficulties in the classroom that foster autonomous learning.

Coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, is a threat to life worldwide [1]. UNESCO claims that COVID-19 has affected the Turkish and global sectors of education. The government has released and enforced a variety of COVID-19 outbreak policies in Turkey. One of them is to prohibit people from meeting and performing

activities outside the house [2]. The COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey has triggered radical changes to the learning environment, including universities. In preparatory schools, for example, English is typically taught in the classroom in a formal system with the necessary equipment and facilities. However, COVID-19 has required online learning. The priorities remain unchanged, but the whole structure changed. Technology increased the language teaching options [3].

All universities in Turkey introduced a learning system through online media to mitigate the consequences of COVID-19. This condition changed the method of learning to keep students involved. For example, because of the limited guidance provided by lecturers, students are required to think critically, actively, and creatively. Online learning was implemented years ago and is not a new concept for education [4]. The implementation of online learning was consistent with the requirements of the 21st century, including connectivity, teamwork, imagination, and critical reasoning [5]. Online-based English language learning provides students with flexibility and comfort. However, when students are not autonomous, it was considered less effective [6]. Lack of autonomy and language skills in online classes can create psychological distance, dissatisfaction, and failure, especially in those who are not used to learning online [7], since the main aspects of the language learning process are autonomy and the use of language learning strategies. Autonomy has a long history that goes back to the 1970s, as a conception in the field of English language teaching. Autonomy refers to the ability of learners to monitor their education. The acquisition of one's learning with an active involvement is a prerequisite for language learning to be successful, whether it is to monitor or be in charge of learning [8].

The autonomy of learners does not inherently imply an intrinsic capacity. Learners should be able to develop autonomy to learn the target language more efficiently [9]. Chan [10] advises that an instructor should be responsible for making students understand that they are supposed to become autonomous learners. In other words, the growth of autonomy in each learner should be an objective in the sense of learning a second language (SLA) and in language classrooms. This goal increases the awareness that student autonomy in the course design process is to be incorporated into the curriculum. Cotterall [11] presents several techniques contributing to learner objectives and learning processes, which can be taken into account in fostering the autonomy of students through the curriculum. These techniques can also play a remarkable role in the process of language education. In other words, the autonomy of learners should also be one of the priorities of language teachers. The need for this incorporation can also be supported by the fact that teachers cannot pass all of their expertise to their students. It is easier to show them how to learn all by themselves [12].

Literature review

Sociocultural theory, proposed by Vygotsky (1978), has brought new perspectives to the field of language learning in addition to psychology. A shift of focus from teaching to learning has increased the number of studies related to learners and the process of learning itself in recent years. Learner autonomy, as a focal point, derived from this shift and has been studied comprehensively in educational context since the 1980s. In his report to Council of Europe, Holec (1981) first coined the term "learner autonomy" and defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" and added, "it is rather a skill to be acquired rather than having an inborn capacity". From the definition of learner autonomy, teaching in a formal context by professionals such as teachers or instructors may not suffice to be equivalent to learning. Studies related to learner autonomy are entitled to provide a deeper content for the link between inner processes of the learner and the learning process itself to provide a better understanding of the nature of learning. According to Little (1995), learner autonomy is extensively supported by learning strategies and learner training as well as pedagogical dialogue which could be defined by learning through interdependence. Benson (2011b) summarized the studies that have been carried out on learner autonomy by analysing them with respect to their originality. Benson (2011b) found that autonomy has been recently studied from a sociocultural perspective, technological advances and its interrelation with autonomy and teachers' perspective. Several scholars have defined learner autonomy in educational settings since the term showed up and became popular. Besides Holec's fundamental definition of learner autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning', there are numerous other definitions of learner autonomy provided by different scholars as a result of the process of relating it to other variables such as quality of motivation (Vansteenkiste Lens, & Deci, 2006), self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2002), self-regulated learning (Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989). Learner autonomy was also defined as a 'capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action' by Little (1995). He also added that autonomy uniquely entitles a different type of psychology in which the learner is able to make quite a difference both in the way of learning and synthesizing once acquired knowledge. Dam (1995) took the concept of autonomy from a more different perspective, and proposed that autonomy is 'principle driven' rather than 'activity-driven'. Ryan and Deci (2002) associated the term autonomy with motivation in their theory of self-determination. According to the self-determination theory, autonomy is one of the three major components of motivation along with relatedness and competence. Autonomy could be held responsible EFLIJ Volume 25

Issue 6 November 2021 10 10 for activities to be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated in different circumstances including learning. In this respect, autonomy might as well be interconnected with motivation. Vansteenkiste et al. (2006) related learning behaviour with the term 'quality of motivation' by distinguishing it from other related variables such as quantity, level or amount of motivation. According to Vansteenkiste et al. (2006), intrinsic goal framing supports task orientation, both short-term and long-term persistence and deeper processing of learning materials, which increases the overall quality of motivation. Zimmerman (2002) defined self-regulated learning as a process of transformation of cognitive abilities. Self-regulation theory focuses on the learning process in contrast to self-determination and quality of motivation theories focusing on the learner. In the three main stages of cycles of self-regulation, the learner set goals, use strategies and monitor themselves, and reflect and adapt to new strategies as a result of monitoring if necessary. According to Little (1991), autonomous learning within the language classroom is built on three principles: learner empowerment, reflexivity, and appropriate target language use. Najeeb (2012) also refers to autonomy in language classroom with three fundamental grounds, and these are involvement, which is related to the degree to which the learners see themselves responsible for their learning; reflection, which is a way enabling them to critically analyse the process by organising, observing, evaluating their learning; and, finally, appropriate use of target language, which is the authentic or expressive use of the language learned. Learner empowerment or involvement takes place in the correct sense when the language learner is eager (competent) to take responsibility for their own learning. On the other hand, the reflection process is an opportunity for language learners to think back on what materials they use and how they implement them, and according to Turloiu and Stefansdottir (2011) this kind of an awareness can contribute to learners' autonomy levels. Finally, Najeeb (2012, p. 1240) defines the appropriate use of the target language as "using the target language as the principal medium of language learning." Technology can today be considered as a factor in the scope of learner autonomy, and as facilities such as learning management systems, online resources, and language learning applications are integrated more into education, self-directed learning becomes even more significant. There are several studies conducted in online learning environments to assess autonomy levels, student and teacher perception, and possible factors affecting autonomy. Zhong (2018), for instance, aimed to analyse the way learners manipulated the technology-mediated classroom in accordance with their goals and needs, and results of the study suggested that in the case of his participant, he benefited from the opportunities the class offered, and learned through decision-making, goal setting, and material setting. Another study by Collins (2008) aimed to approach problems connected with learner autonomy in the distance teaching context in an online professional development course for EFL teachers, and it was concluded that activities set up on inadequate interaction might bring about an ineffective formation of socially oriented autonomy.

Objective

The objectives of this study are to identify the most and least used learning strategies by the EFL learner in the tertiary level of the post-pandemic period in India and to examine their abilities of students in autonomous English language learning and how The extent to which they are involved in these types of learning activities will have to be examined. The study will also examine the correlation between students' language learning strategies and their perceptions of their abilities in autonomous language learning, and between students' language learning strategies and autonomous language learning practice outside the classroom. Thus, the following research questions have been formulated to guide this study:

1. What kind of learning strategies do EFL learners use in English language learning in the post-pandemic period in India at the tertiary level?
2. How do students understand their abilities in autonomous English language learning?
3. To what extent do students engage in autonomous English language learning activities inside and outside the classroom?
4. Is there a relationship between students' language learning strategies and their perceptions of their abilities in autonomous English language learning?
5. Is there a relationship between students' language learning strategies and autonomous English language learning practices outside the classroom?
6. What is the level of autonomy of the EFL learner in the tertiary level of the post-pandemic period?
7. What language learning strategies are used by an EFL learner in the tertiary level of the post-pandemic period?
8. Is there a significant correlation between autonomy level and use of language learning strategies among EFL learners in the tertiary level of the post-pandemic period?

Research Methodology

This study is descriptive and based on quantitative methods of research. Correlation and descriptive models will be used in this research. EFL and autonomous learning will be the dependent variables in this study. An attempt will be made to describe the current situation in this study.

Additionally, a correlation analysis will be performed to determine whether EFL learner autonomy level and EFL use were statistically significant in the tertiary level of the post-pandemic period. To assess how the relationship varied during the post-pandemic period and within each group, the individual correlation would be studied.

Participants

A total of 155 students will be studied in this research. This would include 78 females and 77 males, aged between 18 and 21 years and from three different years of study, i.e. Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3, and with intermediate English language proficiency on average to select the participants, a feature sampling technique will be used.

Research tool

Two different questionnaires were employed in this study. To collect data on students' use of language learning strategies, the Oxford (1990) EFL learners were used. The EFL is a self-reporting questionnaire intended to assess the frequency of students' use of language learning strategies with 5-point Likert scale options, i.e. 'Never true of me', 'Not generally true of me', 'Somewhat true of me', 'usually true of me', and 'always true of me'. SILL consists of 50 items divided into six major categories of strategies, namely memory, cognitive, compensatory, meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies. This questionnaire was chosen because it is a standardized language learning strategy measurement tool that has been used in many studies around the world. In addition, the questionnaire is applicable to a variety of foreign languages and has a high degree of reliability, with a range of 0.91 to 0.94 (Cronbach alpha) (Oxford & Bury-Stock, 1995; Ardasheva & Traiter, 2013). To assess students' learner autonomy, an adapted questionnaire developed by Chan et al. (2002) was employed. For the purpose of this study, two of three sections of the original questionnaire were used. The first section consisted of 11 items focusing on students' perceptions of their abilities in several areas of English language learning both inside and outside the classroom. The participants rated their answers on a five-point scale, i.e. 1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = OK, 4 = good, and 5 = very good. The second section consists of 27 items that assess students' English language learning activities inside or outside the class, which could be considered as manifestations of autonomous language learning behavior. In this section of the questionnaire, students rated their answers on a four-point scale, i.e. 1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, and 4 = often. The rationale for choosing this questionnaire was that it integrated several concepts of LA suggested in the literature (Chan et al., 2002) and had been used in many previous research studies (e.g. Daflizar, 2017; Farahani, 2014; Razeq, 2014; Yıldırım, 2008).

Data collection and analysis

Students who agreed to participate in this study will be given two sets of questionnaires to complete. Prior to the administration of the questionnaire, participants will be informed of the objective of the study and will be requested to complete the questionnaire as honestly as possible so that the results of the study can inform students about language learning strategies and autonomy in the post-pandemic period and to provide a better understanding of usage.

The data obtained through questionnaire will be analyzed using both descriptive and inferential data with the help of SPSS. Specifically, mean scores, percentages and standard deviations will be used where appropriate for descriptive data, and the Pearson correlation will be used to measure students' use of language learning strategies and their abilities in autonomous learning in the post-pandemic period and to examine the correlation between perception and their learning strategy. Autonomous English language learning will be used and practiced outside the classroom in the post-pandemic period.

Conclusion

All these theoretical frameworks and studies led us to examine some aspects such as developing learning strategies, motivation, goal setting, achievement track, learning material organization, reflection and collaboration as these can be considered as components of learner autonomy. However, considering the wide range of EFL contexts around the world and the importance of language learning strategies and learners' autonomy in language learning, the above studies include very few studies and the results still need to be validated. To bridge the gap, this research seeks to provide a better understanding of the use of language

learning strategies by Indian students and the autonomy of their learning, as well as the relationship between the two. The results of the present study will be expected to validate and complement the results obtained in previous studies and help to offer suitable recommendations to teachers in the Indian context.

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