# LEARNER AUTONOMY AND LEARNING STRATEGY USE A STUDY BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Mote Neeraja, Dr. Suresh Kumar

*Research Scholar, English Deptt., Bhagwant University, Ajmer, Rajasthan*
*Professor, English Deptt., Bhagwant University, Ajmer, Rajasthan*

## Abstract

*The COVID-19 outbreak in late 2019 quickly became a pandemic, leading to the closure of schools around the world. To mitigate the negative impacts brought by COVID-19, educational institutions at all levels have essentially shifted from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. For English language teaching, fully synchronous online learning has been implemented around the world, which poses a great challenge to both instructors and learners. The purpose of this study is to explore autonomy levels and use of language learning strategies in a state university preparatory school before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. One hundred fifty-five state university elementary school students participated in the research.*

**Keywords***: Language, COVID-19, Face to Facec, Level, School etc.*

## Introduction

Most available studies on PA focus on the context of schooling or college level in mother tongues (e.g., Afonso et al., 2018; Gil-Madrona et al., 2020; Harjunen 2009; Harjunen, 2011; McCullough, 2020). ; Zamora-Poblete et al., 2020; Zamora and Zeron, 2010). Regarding the implementation of PA in online environments, technologies appear to reduce the presence of teachers and, in essence, the importance of PA practices because students can obtain knowledge from other sources. There are some reflective caEFL to implement PA in foreign language contexts (e.g., Kutala, 2021; Yobou & Mitchell, 2018). Available studies in EFL contexts indirectly refer to certain aspects of PA (i.e., didactic, pedagogical, or deontic) as practices of the critical pedagogy approach (e.g., Bora, 2020; Afonso et al., 2018). . The present study explicitly adapts the concept of PA as a form of critical pedagogy practices to the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) pedagogy, and thus to provide a comprehensive overview of the three components of PA. Will classify language teaching practices under. Repertoire Pedagogical discussions have been encouraged in foreign language classrooms in the post-COVID era (Saini et al., 2020). Despite the richness of literature on EFL teaching during the COVID pandemic, the authors of this study could not identify studies in the field of instruction in mother tongue or EFL contexts that compared the practices of PA, including its three dimensions, in online and on-line Are. The campus environment, which marks another important point. The availability of such studies, especially amid the pandemic, would allow language pedagogues to examine whether teachers find online platforms useful for engaging students in equal power relationships and, therefore, for successful teaching and learning. Want to continue mixed mode for experiences. The pandemic is over. Furthermore, such studies aim to draw the attention of language teachers to the importance of PA and the qualities it can bring to virtual or face-to-face classrooms, as shown by the literature. Finally, identifying factors that inhibit or reinforce PA practices can inform EFL teacher practices for successful PA implementation, whether in online or on-campus classrooms. Coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, is a life-threatening threat worldwide [1]. UNESCO claims that COVID-19 has affected the Indian and global sectors of education. The government has issued and implemented a variety of COVID-19 outbreak policies in India. One of them is to prohibit people from meeting and doing activities outside their homes [2]. The COVID-19 pandemic in India has brought about radical changes in the learning environment, including universities. For example, in elementary schools, English is usually taught in a classroom in a formal system with the necessary equipment and facilities. However, COVID-19 requires online learning. The priorities remained unchanged, but the entire structure changed. Technology has increased the options for language teaching [3].

All universities in India started a teaching system through online media to mitigate the consequences of COVID-19. This situation changed the method of learning to keep students engaged. For example, due to 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 to education [4]. The implementation of online

learning was in line with the requirements of the 21st century, including connectivity, teamwork, imagination and critical reasoning [5]. Online-based English language learning offers students flexibility and comfort. However, when students were not autonomous, it was considered less effective [6]. Lack of autonomy and language skiEFL in online classes can cause psychological distance, dissatisfaction, and failure, especially in people who are not accustomed to online learning [7], because the main aspects of the language learning process are autonomy and the use of language learning. . Strategies. Autonomy has a long history as a concept in the field of English language teaching that goes back to the 1970s. Autonomy refers to the ability of learners to monitor their own learning. Approaching your learning with active participation is a prerequisite for successful language learning, whether that means monitoring or being in charge of learning [8].

## Literature Review

Synchronous online learning has been implemented in a variety of ways in ELT for decades, from text-based communication to audio-/video-conferencing. This is often called synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC; O'Rourke and Stickler, 2017). Pre-COVID-19 studies primarily focused on how SCMC served different age groups in both formal education and private learning (e.g., Kozar, 2015; Yamada, 2009; Ye and Lai, 2019). Promoted second language acquisition and intercultural awareness. For its complementary role in ELT, SCMC was often regarded as an "extended or enhanced educational opportunity" (C. Y. Wang & Reeves, 2007) in contrast to F2F language teaching and learning.

However, due to COVID-19, synchronous online language learning has replaced F2F delivery. Many ELT practitioners and researchers, faced with a sudden change in a completely unprepared situation, have begun to investigate how fully synchronous online language teaching can be implemented at different levels of education. Some researchers have focused on students' synchronous English online learning in COVID-19. For example, Cheung (2021) investigated the interactions of Hong Kong EFL primary students during online English lessons. Lian et al. (2021) modeled the relationship between Chinese university students' authentic language learning and their English self-efficacy. Other researchers have studied the teaching practices and strategies of EFL instructors during the pandemic. Choi and Chung (2021) looked at the strategies that Korean EFL instructors used to create a "sustainable and authentic technology-mediated language learning environment" and how they encouraged English language learners to "actively engage in sustainable language development and use." Motivated to participate". (p. 1). On the other hand, Kohnke and Moorhouse (2020) have introduced an approach to using video-conferencing software (VCS) such as Zoom to facilitate synchronous online language learning.

Those studies have indeed shed light on our understanding of synchronous language learning in the pandemic, but what is missing is an in-depth study of language learners' perspectives on the challenges they face while taking synchronous online language courses. Although some ELT researchers have identified challenges that English language learners faced while learning online during COVID-19, the results were primarily quantitative, which did not help us gain a deeper understanding of this group of learners. Do (e.g., Hazimeh, 2021; Lo and Chen, 2021). As mentioned above, language learners' perception of synchronous online learning is very important because they are the main participants in the "online learning adventure" (Sunday, 2014, p. 19), especially in this "emergency distance learning " (in Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020). In particular, since China has the largest number of English learners (Li et al., 2018), it is believed that the sudden shift to synchronous online learning at all levels of education throughout the country in early 2020 has also affected most Had produced a large number of online learning. English learners. Yet, little is known about English learners' experiences and perceptions of distance education. To fill this gap, this study examined Chinese university English as a foreign language (EFL) students' perceptions of synchronous online language learning during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, including their exposure to The focus was on learning challenges. It is hoped that this study will not only deepen our understanding of synchronous online language learning in China, but also contribute to ELT pedagogy of online learning and teaching.

Online learning combines the Internet and independent technological tools to develop content for educational purposes, instructional delivery, and management of programs through networked interactivity (Fry, 2001). It has been implemented in higher education for decades and has long been accepted as an effective tool for learning (Middleton, 1997). Previous studies show that online education is among the most powerful responses to the growing needs of education due to greater flexibility of time, shorter distance with experts and pioneers, higher quality of information, and lower financial costs (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). There is one. , According to Hrastynski (2008), there are two types of online learning, asynchronous online learning and synchronous online learning. Asynchronous learning supported by media such as email, forums, blogs, and previously recorded videos involves a clear time interval between transmitter and receiver. Learners can review the learning materials at any time and spend more time thinking about issues or refining their contributions. On the other hand, synchronous learning provides a live platform that enables more direct interaction between instructors and students through popular audio-conferencing (e.g., online phone caEFL and web chat) or video-

conferencing tools (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft). Allows immediate response. Teams, Skype and Tencent Meeting). Of these two methods, synchronous learning is similar to traditional classroom learning and is more acceptable among learners for its F2F platform and instantly and efficiently communicated environment (Gysbers et al., 2014).

In light of the above discussion, this study aims to determine the level of autonomy and EFL use before and during the pandemic. The study also examines whether there is any significant relationship between these two variables. The research questions of this study are:

(1) What is the level of autonomy of elementary school students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

(2) What language learning strategies are used by elementary school students before and during COVID-19?

(3) Is there a significant relationship between autonomy level and use of language learning strategies among elementary school students before and during COVID-19?

## Materials and Methods

EFL and autonomous learning are the dependent variables in this study. This research was conducted by studying a total of 200 (male 100 and female 100) learners in 2019-2020 in a state university elementary school. Data Collection and Analysis: Data were collected through two questionnaires, which were distributed before and during the COVID-19 pandemic to elementary school students attending a state university. This study was started before the COVID-19 pandemic. With the SPSS 22 program, data were analyzed. Initially, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test examined whether the sample had a normal distribution. The analysis showed that the data provided a normal distribution ($p > 0.5$).

## Result Analysis

This study examined a sample of Indian university EFL students' perspectives on synchronous online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of qualitative data revealed that students faced four major challenges: (1) lack of learning environment, (2) cultivation of learner autonomy, (3) changing patterns of interaction, and (4) remote assessment. Adaptation for. In particular, synchronous online language learning failed to provide students with a good learning environment needed for EFL students (Sunday, 2014) and students, especially junior university EFL students, were forced to practice English with instructors in the classrooms. Although technological measures (for example, the breakout rooms function in Zoom) may mitigate this unexpected but inevitable effect. On the positive side, synchronous online learning opens up opportunities for students to develop self-discipline and/or self-control over their studies and life and allows students to make good use of online English learning resources and study English on their own. Instructed. themselves so that they can be trained to learn English independently and autonomously. Furthermore, synchronous online learning changed the assessment based on their level of study. In this regard, instructors of skills-based courses employed innovative methods to assess students' English learning, focusing on their general English skills rather than textbook-oriented language tests; Instructors in content-based courses assign term papers, encouraging students to explore issues in depth.

**Table 1.1:** Levels of learner autonomy before and during the pandemic.

| Domain | | Before Pandemic | During Pandemic | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Willingness | x–x-<br>Sd<br>autonomy level | 5.01<br>0.93<br>high | 3.19<br>0.40<br>low | 5364 | 0.000 * |
| Self-confidence | x–x-<br>Sd<br>autonomy level | 4.87<br>0.66<br>high | 3.01<br>0.78<br>moderate | 4916 | 0.000 * |
| Motivation | x–x-<br>Sd<br>autonomy level | 4.75<br>0.91<br>high | 3.00<br>0.92<br>low | 5832 | 0.004 * |
| Capacity | x–x-<br>Sd<br>autonomy level | 4.31<br>0.82<br>moderate | 4.38<br>0.86<br>moderate | −1417 | 0.207 |
| Total | x–x- | 4.77<br>0.82 | 3.71<br>0.81 | 5103 | 0.003 * |

| Domain | | Before Pandemic | During Pandemic | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Sd autonomy level | high | moderate | | |

This section addresses the results of the study based on data collected through the Learner Autonomy Survey. In the questionnaire, the level of autonomy is determined based on the average score of the participants. Regarding classification, the interval 1.0-2.5 is low, 265-3.5 is medium, and 3.6-5.1 is a high level of autonomy for the learner. First, to show the overall learner autonomy level of the participants, the means and standard deviations of each domain in the questionnaire are given. Even t-test was used to analyze the results. The t-test was used to compare the mean values of two samples. The t-test compares the means of learner autonomy levels before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings regarding scores from the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire are presented in Table 1.1. Table 1.1 shows that the overall mean (x−). The learner autonomy level of elementary school students before the pandemic was 4.77 and standard deviation (SD) was 0.82, and during the pandemic the overall mean x was 3.71 and SD was 0.71. According to the parameters a range of 4.76 indicates a high level of autonomy for the learners, while 2.61 indicates a moderate level of learner autonomy. Thus, it can be claimed that while the participants' level of learner autonomy was high before the pandemic, it was at a moderate level during the pandemic. When both groups are compared, a significant difference exists between the levels of autonomy (t: 5103 $p < 0.05$). This means that participants had higher levels of learner autonomy before COVID-19 than after the outbreak. When the t-test result of willingness to learn autonomously for both groups was compared, a significant difference existed between the participants (t: 5364 $p < 0.05$). This means that students' level of desire during the pandemic was lower than before. Confidence levels were also compared and a significant difference existed between participants (t: 4916 $p < 0.05$). This means that students' confidence levels during the pandemic were lower than before. The results of the t-test regarding the level of motivation showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the groups (t: 5832 $p < 0.05$), meaning that during the pandemic, the level of motivation in the participants was higher than before. Was less. Finally, the significance level of the ability to learn autonomously, 0.207 ($p < 0.05$), does not indicate a statistically significant difference between the groups.

**Table 1.2.** Using the strategy delivers results before and during the pandemic.

| Domain | | Before Pandemic | During Pandemic | T | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (A) Direct | x−x-<br>Sd<br>EFL use | 4.52<br>0.86<br>high | 1.83<br>0.86<br>low | −4837 | 0.000 * |
| Memory | x−x-<br>Sd<br>EFL use | 4.98<br>0.81<br>high | 3.02<br>0.75<br>low | | |
| Cognitive | x−x-<br>Sd<br>EFL use | 5.01<br>0.42<br>high | 3.00<br>0.85<br>low | | |
| Compensation | x−x-<br>Sd<br>EFL use | 3.59<br>0.82<br>moderate | 1.79<br>0.85<br>low | | |
| (B) Indirect | x−x-<br>Sd<br>EFL use | 3.36<br>0.82<br>moderate | 4.07<br>0.82<br>moderate | −4416 | 0.000 * |
| Metacognitive | x−x-<br>Sd<br>EFL use | 3.31<br>0.31<br>low | 4.24<br>0.6<br>moderate | | |
| Affective | x−x-<br>Sd<br>EFL use | 1.94<br>0.82<br>low | 4.02<br>0.92<br>moderate | | |
| Social | x−x- | 3.76 | .95 | | |

| Domain | | Before Pandemic | During Pandemic | T | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Sd<br>EFL use | 0.33<br>moderate | 0.88<br>moderate | | |
| Total | x–x-<br>Sd<br>EFL use | 3.94<br>0.31<br>moderate | 3.58<br>0.78<br>moderate | −5221 | 0.00 * |

*\* $p < 0.05$.*

This section addresses the results of the study using data collected through the EFL scale. First, to show the level of EFL use by participants, means and standard deviations of each domain in the questionnaire were calculated. Even a t-test was used to compare the mean values of both the groups. t-test compares the means of EFL usage levels before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding classification, the interval 1.0–2.4 is low, 2.5–3.4 is moderate, and 3.5–5.0 is high level of EFL use. The findings regarding scores from the EFL scale are presented in Table 1.2.

First, in the post-pandemic era, blended learning can be a viable approach in ELT as it has the merits of both online teaching and F2F teaching. F2F teaching equips students with a good language learning environment in which they can interact with instructors and peers, while online teaching can develop students' self-regulation and self-control over their studies and life, and students Enables you to learn multiple languages online. Support, which can help in personalized learning (Sunday, 2014). Second, the emotional and academic needs of students should be taken into account when adopting online learning. Although university students are adult learners, they still need learning support from instructors and fellow students through various interactions, as the value of university education lies not only in knowledge acquisition but also in social networking and social opportunities. (Adnan and Anwar, 2020). It is advisable to set up virtual support groups under the supervision of the instructor to provide adequate support to student group work. Third, for online learning, students should regularly receive immediate feedback or comments from the instructor on assessments. Particularly for evaluating students' general English skills in addition to specific language knowledge, instructors should spell out detailed grading rubrics and provide specific comments so that students can be clear about directions for future improvement. Finally, online learning, especially synchronous online learning, has posed immense technological challenges to both instructors and learners. It is important for instructors to strengthen their ability to integrate technology into language teaching and innovate teaching or pedagogical methods. Additionally, language learners should be exposed to self-regulated learning strategies and skills. In doing so, ELT instructors and EFL learners can successfully move forward in responding to the future challenges of technology-mediated language teaching and learning.

## Conclusion & Discussion

Data analysis revealed that participants faced four challenges in synchronous online learning during COVID-19. Challenges included lack of learning environment, cultivation of learner autonomy, changes in interaction patterns, and adaptation to remote assessment. In the following, selected quotes from the interviews (which are translated from Putonghua into English by the authors of this paper) are embedded to better illustrate those challenges. One of the four challenges faced by students regarding synchronous online courses during the pandemic is the lack of learning environment. The learning environment, as defined in Seif et al. (2012), "refers to the social, emotional, and physical conditions under which one acquires knowledge" (p. 554), and it plays an essential role in a student's academic life because it "significantly influences learning processes." can influence" (p. 554). 554. As shown in the interviews, the lack of learning environment during online learning was not due to psychological burden or anxiety about the social situation generated by COVID-19 (cf. C.-M. Wang et al., 2020). , was rather related to changing physical and emotional conditions, namely an unpleasant physical study environment and lack of emotional support from fellow students.

The main objective of this study was to evaluate students' level of autonomy and their use of EFL before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, keeping in mind the COVID-19 pandemic before and after, the level of autonomy of students was described. While participants' level of learner autonomy was high before the pandemic, it was moderate during the pandemic. This shows that the level of autonomy was high before the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the motivational aspect is believed to be higher when learning online, the reality is not in line with expectations. Although the dimension of motivation was high before the pandemic, it was low during the pandemic. This may be due to various educational facilities; Since students are required to use English in the classroom, they are more motivated in the face-to-face learning process. This study is in line with the research of Dislane, who also reached similar conclusions. In their study, they claimed that moderately autonomous students were somewhat aware of the notion of autonomy in their learning. In other words, students paid attention to the value of autonomous learning. However, it seems that perhaps they were all taking help

from the teacher as they were all accustomed to traditional methods of teaching. On the other hand, the findings of this study were not consistent. In their study, they claimed that learners were more willing to believe in their abilities to learn something independently from instructors and peers. He had the ability to study independently outside the classroom. found that only when students were given the opportunity to demonstrate their own competence in their learning process, rather than passively absorbing material prepared from a superior authority, did they achieve autonomy. This finding also did not parallel the findings of our study.

Finally, the relationship between elementary school students' level of learner autonomy and EFL use before and during the COVID-19 pandemic was analyzed using correlation analysis. Analysis of the contextual data indicated that there is a positive and linear relationship between the participants' level of learner autonomy and their use of EFL. This finding parallels previous findings. Additionally, relationships between sub-dimensions of learner autonomy and EFL use were examined prior to COVID-19; It was observed that significant positive correlations were observed between the sub-dimensions of cognitive strategies and learner autonomy, except the dimension of confidence. During COVID-19, significant positive correlations were observed between metacognitive strategies and all sub-dimensions of learner autonomy.

The present study identifies both empirical and practical implications for elementary school classrooms. First and foremost, this study states that instructors should make specific efforts to train their students to become more autonomous learners during online courses, as they are already aware of the need for learner autonomy. know but they need more practical development. It can be suggested that during both traditional and online education, instructors and curriculum should allow students to trust themselves more. This study revealed that students are moderately self-reliant during online learning and can improve themselves further if they receive assistance from instructors. As a result, it is the responsibility of instructors to help their students become more self-reliant in learning. This can result in more productive and effective learning, making it more valuable to both instructors and students.

As far as the results of students' language learning strategies are concerned, the study found that students used a moderate proportion of EFL. EFL instructors should take EFL into account and teach appropriate strategies to their learners. It is also great to motivate students to use all the strategies, so that students can boost self-confidence and positive encouragement, as effective strategies can help students deal with difficulties. Similar to the idea of autonomy, it is important to encourage the use of more language learning strategies, as successful learners appear to use strategies significantly more. Furthermore, because they are interconnected, using more strategies can lead to more autonomous learners.

## References

[1]. Afonso, J. S., Martins, P. S., Barbosa, G. F., Ferreira, L., & Girao, M. (2018). Pedagogical Mediation Using the Virtual Learning Environment and the New Generation: A Search for Improved Performance in Medical Education. Journal of Advances in Medical Education & Professionalism, 6, 115-122.

[2]. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6039819

[3]. Alhawsawi, S., & Jawhar, S. S. (2021). Negotiating Pedagogical Positions in Higher Education during COVID-19 Pandemic: Teacher's Narratives. Heliyon, 7, e07158.

[4]. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07158

[5]. Al-Nofaie, H. (2020). Saudi University Students' Perceptions towards Virtual Education during Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Language Learning via Blackboard. Arab World English Journal, 11, 4-20.

[6]. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no3.1

[7]. Al-Samiri, R. A. (2021). English Language Teaching in Saudi Arabia in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Positive Outcomes. Arab World English Journal, No. 1, 147-159.

[8]. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/covid.11

[9]. Alsuhaibani, Z. (2019). Perceptions and Practices of EFL Pre-Service Teachers about Reflective Teaching. Arab World English Journal, 10, 62-73.

[10]. Alzahrani, B., & Elyas, T. (2017). The Implementation of Critical Thinking in a Saudi EFL Context: Challenges and Opportunities. Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 1, 133-141.

[11]. https://doi.org/10.21093/ijeltal.v1i2.21

[12]. Andriivna, B. O., Vasylivna, K. O., Pavlivna, K. O., & Mykhaylivna, S. V. (2020). Using Distance EdTech for Remote Foreign Language Teaching during the COVID19 Lockdown in Ukraine. Arab World English Journal: Special Issue on English in Ukrainian Context, No. 3, 4-15.

[13]. Appleby, R. (2009). The Spatial Politics of Gender in EAP Classroom Practice. Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 8, 100-110.

[14]. Auerbach, E. (1991). Literacy and Ideology. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 12, 71-85.

[15].    Bailey, D. R., & Lee, A. R. (2020). Learning from Experience in the Midst of Covid-19: Benefits, Challenges, and Strategies in Online Teaching. Computer Assisted Language Learning Electronic Journal (CALL-EJ), 21, 176-196.

[16].    Barry, C. (2011). English Language Teaching in Brunei: A View through a Critical Lens. RELC Journal, 42, 203-220

[17].   Benesch, S. (1999). 'Thinking Critically, Thinking Dialogically. TESOL Quarterly, 33, 573-580.

[18].   Bora, S. F. (2020). Performative Didactics: Tapping into Learners' Attitudes towards Text- and Performance-Based Approaches in Foreign Language Learning. Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, 14, 150-163.

[19].    Canagarajah, S. (1996). Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching. Oxford University Press.

[20].   Canagarajah, S. (2005). Critical Pedagogy in L2 Learning and Teaching. In T. Van Els (Ed.), Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning (pp. 931-949). Taylor and Francis.

[21].   Chen, J., & Kent, S. (2020). Task Engagement, Learner Motivation and Avatar Identities of Struggling English Language Learners in the 3D Virtual World. System, 88, Article ID: 102168.

[22].   Chung, S.-J., & Choi, L.-J. (2021). The Development of Sustainable Assessment during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of the English Language Program in South Korea. Sustainability, 13, 4499.

**[23].**   Creswell, J. (2012). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design. Sage.