

# Learner Autonomy among General English Students in Universiti Sains Malaysia

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## Introduction

It is frequently suggested by researchers that students are required or expected to adopt autonomous learning behaviours from the outset of entering university and it is also a trait highly prized by employers. Railton and Watson (2005) maintain that university students should be made aware that the development of autonomous learning is directly associated with their levels of achievement. Despite having received most of its research attention only since the 1980s, Little (1995) asserts that within formal educational contexts, learners who are successful have always been autonomous learners.

Past studies involving surveys suggest that Malaysian English language learners at the tertiary level are predominantly teacher-centred (Thang 2009; Thang & Azarina Alias, 2007). This study attempted to investigate learner autonomy levels of General English (LSP 401/2) registered at the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation (PPBLT hereafter) in USM. Preliminary interviews elicited comments which indicated that students exhibit passive and teacher-centred learning behaviours.

## Understanding Learner Autonomy

Although researchers opine that consensus for the definition of learner autonomy has yet to be reached on what it means to be an autonomous learner, Holec's (1981) foundational definition of learner autonomy has proven to be the most widely cited definition: "the ability to take charge of one's own learning, ...to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3). Seeking to characterise autonomous learners within the realm of language education, Littlewood (1999, p.71) found students shouldering the "responsibility for their own learning" was usually the central feature of how it has been defined in literature. Little (1991, p. 3), another major proponent of learner autonomy, argues that "essentially, autonomy is a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action".

Littlewood (1999) proposes that there are two different types of autonomy: proactive autonomy and reactive autonomy. When discussed in the West, autonomy usually refers to proactive autonomy and many consider it to be the only kind, as it fits into Holec's (1981, p.3) conception where students 'take charge' of their own learning and 'establish personal agenda'

(Little, 1994, p.431). However, Littlewood (1999) suggests that there is another type of autonomy where learners may not set the directions, but 'once a direction has been initiated, it enables learners to organise their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal' (p.75) where it stimulates, for instance, self-initiated vocabulary learning, doing previous examination papers or students organising themselves into study groups and he termed such learning activities as 'reactive' autonomy.

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## Methodology

The present study employed a mixed methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2009). Data were collected using the 51-item Language Learning Autonomy Survey (LLAS henceforth) adopted from Spratt et al. (2002) which was distributed to 91 students from PPBLT. The questionnaire comprised three segments, with the first segment aiming to examine students' perceptions of their English Language learning responsibility. The second segment aimed to analyse students' perceptions of their abilities and the third segment surveyed students' engagement in/outside class learning activities. As the segments utilised different Likert scales, all items were re-coded into a scale of 20. The present study also found sound reliability for the LLAS (Cronbach Alpha value of 0.922). Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Packages (SPSS) using descriptive statistics. On the other hand, the qualitative component employed semi-structured focus group interviews. Four interview sessions were conducted, each comprising six student volunteers. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was the chosen approach for qualitative data analysis.

## The Level of Learner Autonomy among General English Students

Of the three segments within the LLAS, students scored highest in their perceptions of their own responsibility in learning English ( $M = 15.03$ ) and viewed most learning responsibility as 'mainly' their own. Choosing 'mainly' instead of 'completely' indicates that students

still find themselves requiring guidance and support from teachers. This renders support to previous studies which claimed that the capacity for learner autonomy is not inborn but “must be acquired either naturally or by formal learning” (Sidhu, Kaur & Chan, 2011, p.218).

**“...despite students’ general perceptions that they should hold more responsibility in their own English learning process, students remain doubtful in their abilities to learn English autonomously.”**

The segment with the second highest average mean score was students’ self-reported engagement in autonomous English learning activities (M = 14.60) in which students report that they ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ engage in the activities. The results thus indicate that students do learn English autonomously, performing a multitude of autonomous activities, which is also supported by qualitative data.

Lastly, students scored lowest in reporting their perceptions of their own abilities to learn English (M = 13.79) with most students perceiving themselves as being ‘Ok’ in most abilities. A comparison of the mean scores between students’ perceptions of their responsibility and abilities revealed a disjuncture, suggesting that despite students’ general perceptions that they should hold more responsibility in their own English learning process, students remain doubtful in their abilities to learn English autonomously.

Overall, the total average mean scores for all items from the LLAS was 14.47 in a scale of 1 to 20. Thus, this indicates that the General English students have attained moderate levels of learner autonomy with regards to English language learning.

The quantitative data were further substantiated by the complementary qualitative data. Five themes in relation to learner autonomy were drawn from the focus group interview data. The first theme ‘Internet’ demonstrates students’ tendency to seek learning materials which are more interactive as can be seen in the interview excerpt below:

*I think we can use the YouTube. We can see the tutorial or the teacher that record the video, and we can see, learn from YouTube. (Interview 4, Respondent 5)*

The second theme ‘Social’ encompasses learning from friends and practising English communication with friend which coincides with Sinclair and Thang’s (2009) claim that there exists a social dimension in learner autonomy, as shown in the interview excerpt below:

*OK, for me, she is my roommate, so we try to speak, to communicate with English. (Interview 3, Respondent 6)*

The third theme ‘Environment’ covers learning English in informal environments and manipulating the environment to create opportunities to learn English as exemplified by the interview excerpt below:

*English, I think you have to, put ourselves a chance to speak English with the, with people. (Interview 2, Respondent 6)*

The fourth theme ‘Entertainment’ includes learning English and English pronunciation from entertainment as demonstrated in the excerpts below:

*For me also, when we watch movie, we can also learn the pronunciation. (Interview 4, Respondent 4)*

*I learn from entertainment, like shows online in Internet. Just a subtitle in English, I reading, I hear and I speak like them. (Interview 3, Respondent 4)*

The fifth theme ‘English Materials’ involve reading English materials, practicing grammar exercises and also via other content subjects taught in English as illustrated below:

*We need to study about Geography... but it’s in English. So, we have our own initiative, whether we don’t know the meaning, we need to google it, we need to ask our friends, so with that, we can learn English, 2 in 1. (Interview 4, Respondent 1)*

The present study thus found supporting evidence as indicated by the focus group interview data that students do learn English autonomously.

**“...the success of language learning lies in the concerted efforts of all stakeholders which include the students, teachers and management level.”**

## Conclusion

While seemingly at odds with accounts from PPBLT teachers who lamented that most students are teacher-centred and passive, the General English students demonstrated the kind of learner autonomy akin to what Littlewood (1999) termed as ‘reactive autonomy’ where although the students themselves do not set the agenda of learning, they are still able to work independently on tasks. To conclude, findings of the present study have shown that General English learners in USM are moderately ‘reactively’ autonomous in their English language learning process. As discussed above, reactive autonomy refers to the situations where although students do not set the agenda of the learning, they are still able to work independently on tasks. This suggests the need for university teachers to be more explicit in stating the learning objectives or agenda behind each lesson to clearly set students in the right directions. In addition, past literature have stressed the

need to guide learners and a plethora of approaches have been proposed, notably, language portfolios, strategy training and learning contracts.

University ESL teachers as well as tertiary institutions also need to realise that the success of language learning lies in the concerted efforts of all stakeholders which include the students, teachers and management level. It requires synchronisation of visions in what leads to effective language learning, giving teachers greater 'space' to manoeuvre in their daily classroom teaching, and above all else, realistic expectations on how much responsibility Malaysian tertiary students are willing to shoulder in their language learning process.

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