



Students' Perception of Autonomous English Learning

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Abstract

This study explores Indonesian EFL students' perceptions of autonomous learning within the context of the English Language Study Program at Universitas Jambi. Situated within national education reforms such as Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM), which emphasize learner independence and flexibility, the research investigates how autonomy is understood and practiced by students in a system traditionally bound by rigid curricula and teacher-centered approaches. Employing a mixed-methods design, the study surveyed 45 students using a validated autonomy self-assessment questionnaire and conducted follow-up interviews with selected participants. Quantitative results reveal that students demonstrate moderately high levels of autonomy, particularly in understanding instructional objectives and setting personal study plans. However, challenges remain in aligning personal learning goals with formal syllabi and sustaining independent learning beyond curricular demands. Qualitative findings enrich these insights, highlighting students' proactive behaviors in time management and self-directed learning, yet also uncovering a reliance on teacher direction and gaps in leveraging institutional resources. The study identifies both strengths and limitations in students' autonomous learning development. It proposes targeted strategies—including autonomy-oriented teacher training, curriculum flexibility, learner self-assessment tools, and reflective practices—to enhance learner agency. The findings contribute to the growing body of localized research on learner autonomy in Indonesia and offer actionable implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers aiming to foster lifelong learning skills in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Perception; Students; Autonomous English learning

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INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia's education policy towards global impact, universities are expected to equip and develop the skills, expertise and autonomy of students. Promoting the independent learning ability of students is a priority of English language teaching, which is reflected in university curricula. However, both Indonesian teachers and students cannot choose or control their learning content because they have to follow and implement institutional and national curricula (Huang and Benson (2013)). Teachers also stand in their comfort zone, while students do not know why they are studying. Thus, this phenomenon has become a tradition of Indonesian teachers and students in teaching and learning, because Karea, (2016) stated that Indonesia has a big problem in implementing the curriculum, while teachers have problems with behavior problems. Therefore, (Kleinsasser et al., 1995) state that a teacher with broader knowledge and deeper awareness of different components and dimensions of teaching, such as learning autonomy, is better prepared to make appropriate judgments and decisions in teaching.

In the Indonesian context, the challenges of teaching English have led to many government efforts to improve its quality and many changes in the curriculum (Dardjowidjojo (2000) in (Karea, 2016) Hamied, 2011 in Karea, (2022); Kirkpatrick, 2007 in Karea (2022); (Khotimah et al., 2019), 2008). Although the concept of student autonomy is not directly mentioned in the educational discourse, this concept exists on a conceptual level and attempts are made to promote it in the classroom (Cirocki et al., 2019). The concept is included in the upper secondary school curriculum of 2013, which indicates that it aims to create competent lifelong learners who are proactive and independent to face local and global challenges, and the teaching-learning aims to promote critical thinking, problem solving, communication, creativity, innovation and student collaboration (Kemdikbud, 2017). As noted by Benson (2001) and Marjanovikj (2014), there are many reasons for the emergence of learner autonomy. These include: the concept of lifelong learning, the explosion of information, which includes the increase in the quantity and quality of learning, the increase in the number of students, which requires the search for alternative educational methods for people with different needs, opportunities and preferences.

The commercialization of education, where private language schools see the needs of students as consumers, educational technology as development, where students no longer have to attend classes, but also the increasing importance of languages in education in general with internationalization business and education. At the university level, students are forced to become independent and make conscious efforts to learn the language outside the classroom simply because exposure to the target language is limited in university classes, as noted by Bryde and Milburn 1990; Chemers, Hu and Garcia 2001; Stephenson and Laycock (1993) that university studies require students to be independent learners. Students must develop their skills and strategies and perform the tasks, activities and processes necessary to participate in communication events effectively. Thus, learner autonomy plays an important role in developing and improving language skills. Students can learn by themselves and study independently. They can learn much more without limitations.

English Language Study Program, FKIP Universitas Jambi (hereinafter referred to as English UNJA) is an academic unit of the Faculty of Teacher Education and Training (FKIP) Universitas Jambi in Indonesia, whose main purpose is to educate and train future teachers, junior researchers. and entrepreneurs. . in English language education and related fields. With +40 faculty members and an enrollment of +500 students per year, the English Graduate Program offers a BA in English Language Education (Sarjana Pendidikan). The English-language degree program is currently accredited to category A by the National Council for Accreditation of Higher Education (BAN-PT no. 5937/SK/BAN-PT/Akred/S/IX/2020 23.9.2020). The latest curriculum of the English curriculum of Universitas Jambi is Curriculum 2021, which is given to students from 2021 and beyond, it is implemented according to the policy of Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) initiated by the Ministry of Education and culture (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan) in 2020. The main programs of MB-KM are: the ease of opening new study programs, changes in the higher education accreditation system, the ease of state universities to become state universities of a legal entity, and the right to study for three semesters outside the curriculum.

Students are given the freedom to take credits outside the course, three semesters designed as 1 semester opportunity to complete studies outside the course and two semesters for study activities outside the university. In addition, there are different forms of study outside of higher education, including internships/work experience in industry or other workplaces, implementing social work projects in villages, teaching in units, participating in student exchanges, doing research, doing business, doing studies/independent project and following humanitarian programs. All these activities must be done under the guidance of a lecturer. Independent campuses should provide industry-context experiences that improve the student's general skills, job readiness or create new jobs. Therefore, some reform steps must be taken in introducing the autonomy of the foreign language. In addition, this study presents EFL students' perceptions of implementation of autonomous learning of the English language.

This study provides a significant contribution to the growing body of literature on learner autonomy, particularly within the Indonesian EFL context, where empirical research remains limited. While learner autonomy has been widely studied in global language education, its implementation in

Indonesia faces unique cultural, institutional, and pedagogical challenges, such as rigid curricula, teacher-centered practices, and limited learner agency. This study stands out by offering quantitative insights supported by qualitative reflections from EFL students at a major Indonesian university, thus bridging a critical gap in localized evidence on students' readiness for autonomous learning.

The conception of autonomy

The concept of autonomy entered the field of language teaching and learning for the first time through the Modern Languages Project of the Council of Europe established in 1971 (Benson, 2011). One of the achievements of the project was the establishment of the Center de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy in France (Holec, 1981), which soon became the focus of research and practice in the field. . Holec's project report (1981) to the Council of Europe is a prime early document on the autonomy of language learning and teaching. Holec (1981) defined autonomy as "the ability to take responsibility for one's learning." This widely cited definition has served as a framework for research and practice in language teaching and learning. To Holec (1981), "taking charge of one's language learning" involves determining learning objectives, learning content, and learning progression, selecting learning methods and techniques, monitoring acquisition, and evaluating learning outcomes

Moreover, to mark autonomous learning, according to Hasim and Zakaria (2015), learners are autonomous either individually or in groups; they focus on being independent and collaborative in autonomous language learning; they learn to take responsibility for their learning; and they learn to be self-directed and make decisions about their learning. Furthermore, Nunan and Lamb (2001) say that the aims of learner autonomy in the context of language classroom are to achieve language goal and learning process goals. (Manivannan, 2018) says that learner autonomy relates to learner responsibilities and learner motivation. Learner's strong motivation and desire to learn, to explore the world of English, and to learn new vocabulary usages, and knowledge of their own is very important. Furthermore, (Boonma & Swatevacharkul, 2020) states that for public speaking classroom, it is believed that learner autonomy can be applied depend upon the students' responsibility and capacity to manage their learning in preparation and rehearsals of their speeches in and out of classes.

In addition, Littlewood (1999) describes the characteristics of autonomous learning. He proposes two main characteristics of learner autonomy. These are (1) students must take responsibility for their learning, because all learning can in any case only be done by the students themselves, and also because they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the formal education ends. (2) "Taking responsibility" means that students take over (partially or fully) many of the processes that traditionally belonged to the teacher, such as deciding learning objectives, choosing teaching methods and the evaluation process. In addition, the criteria of a good language learner are related to an independent learner. Furthermore, Dickinson, L (1992) states that in many areas of learning, effective students are active and independent. They define goals, formulate their own goals and modify goals according to their learning needs and interests. They use effective learning strategies and try to control their learning.

The Level of Learner Autonomy

The degree of learner autonomy can be seen from a lower to a higher level (Benson, 2011). Learners with a high level of autonomy can control their learning activity as well as determine its directions. Meanwhile, learners with a low level of autonomy can only perform some specific activities of learner autonomy. Littlewood (1996) elucidated three levels of autonomy. At the communicative level, students can make choices about the practice of language and appropriate strategies when communicating in certain situations and tasks. At the learning level, students are expected to use appropriate learning strategies independently. On a personal level, students can make choices about language learning in a broader context. Littlewood then introduced proactive and reactive autonomy in 1999. Proactive autonomy indicates that students have complete autonomy, while reactive autonomy means that students work after receiving instruction from teachers.

Nunan (1997) proposed five levels of promoting student autonomy. According to his model, the

first level is consciousness. Here the students become aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the material used. The second is participation; learners are engaged in choosing their goals from the available options. The third is intervention; students are involved in designing and adapting the objectives and content of the study program. The fourth is creation; learners create their own goals and objectives. Moreover, finally, transcendence; Littlewood (1999) mentioned two main characteristics of autonomy. First, to be an independent learner, students are expected to take responsibility for their learning, and second, taking responsibility requires students to take responsibility for their learning. Therefore, it is clear that independent learners are actively involved in their learning and are able to learn outside the classroom.

Meyer (2001), Carr (1999), Derrick (2001), and Ponton (1999) developed and validated instruments that assess dimensions of student "desire," "invention," "initiative" and "persistence." Meyer's framework consists of three elements: basic freedoms (understanding situations and expression problems), power management (group identity, growth and balance, and love issues), and change skills (basic communication skills and basic change behaviors). Carr (1999) states that resourcefulness for an autonomous learner means to gather and assess the internal and external resources needed for a learning experience. (Ponton & Rhea, 2006)) defined initiative as active goal-directedness in problem solving and initiating an action. Derrick, (2002) conceptualized persistence as the sustained maintenance of three behaviors: volition, self-regulation, and goal-directedness. Volition represents the motivation to sustain an intended behavior. Self-regulation refers to maintaining activities that coincide with one have integrated self (Ponton et al., 2004) while goal-directedness is the behavior of establishing goals which help to enhance motivation of the learners for action (Confessore and Park, 2004).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, specifically an Explanatory Sequential Design, with a quantitative-dominant orientation supported by qualitative insights. The research began with the collection of quantitative data through structured questionnaires, followed by qualitative interviews aimed at further explaining and contextualizing the statistical findings. The overarching goal of this methodology was to explain and explore university-level English students' perceptions of their autonomous learning behaviors.

Research Target / Subject

The population targeted for this research comprised undergraduate students enrolled in the English Language Study Program at FKIP Universitas Jambi, Indonesia. A total of 235 students were considered, with a sample of 45 students selected to complete the questionnaire. A subset of these participants, selected purposively, also took part in follow-up interviews to provide deeper insights into the quantitative results. The sample reflected diverse backgrounds, including students from various academic cohorts (2018/2019 to 2022/2023), both male and female, and those from both urban (Jambi city) and rural areas.

Research Procedure

The research followed a structured process. First, the questionnaire instrument was adapted from the work of Xu, Peng, and Wu (2004), covering five key constructs of learner autonomy: understanding teaching objectives, setting personal learning goals, employing learning strategies, monitoring strategy use, and evaluating the learning process. A pilot test was conducted to ensure the reliability and clarity of the instrument, yielding Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.746 to 0.768, indicating acceptable reliability. The main data collection phase involved distributing the questionnaire to 45 students, followed by qualitative interviews with a selected group. Ethical protocols were strictly observed, with participants providing informed consent and being assured of anonymity and voluntary participation throughout the study.

Instruments

The primary research instrument was a structured, Likert-scale questionnaire based on the framework by Xu, Peng, and Wu (2004), designed as a self-assessment checklist to measure various aspects

of learner autonomy. This instrument demonstrated high internal consistency in the main study, with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.787 to 0.912. A supplementary semi-structured interview guide was also used to collect qualitative data, with questions developed based on key dimensions of learner autonomy and patterns identified in the survey responses.

Data Collection Techniques

Quantitative data were gathered through the distribution and collection of questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained via interviews with selected participants. The interviews were either noted or audio-recorded for accurate transcription and thematic analysis. While the mode of questionnaire administration (online or in-person) was not specified, both options remain viable depending on logistical considerations.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics through SPSS or a similar statistical software package. This included calculating mean scores, standard deviations, and frequency and percentage distributions. The reliability of the questionnaire was further assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and corrected item-total correlations, with values above the 0.300 threshold considered acceptable. For the qualitative component, manual thematic analysis was employed. Interview transcripts were coded based on themes aligned with the five learner autonomy constructs and used to further explain or elaborate on the quantitative findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

. Since the questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale, with 5.00 as the highest and 1.00 as the lowest, the result suggests that the students in the English study program generally reported moderately high levels of autonomous learning. Students' perceptions of autonomous English learning were divided into two categories: their understanding of instructors' teaching objectives and requirements, and their ability to set personal learning objectives and study plans.

Table 1. Students' Level of Understanding of Instructors' Teaching Objectives and Requirements

Statement	Mean	Level
Understand the course requirements and class expectations.	3.72	High
Can transform the teacher's teaching objectives into my learning objectives.	3.35	High
Recognize the importance of studying hard according to the course objectives.	4.17	High
Understand why the teacher uses specific activities to improve my English.	4.00	High
Feel I can keep up with the course's progress.	3.73	High
Overall	3.79	High

Adapted questionnaire from Xu, Peng, and Wu (2019)

Note. Responses were based on a Likert scale (assumed 1–5, unless otherwise specified).

As shown in Table 1, the overall mean score for students' understanding of instructors' teaching objectives and requirements is 3.7915, indicating a high level of comprehension. Specifically, students rated their understanding of the course and class requirements at 3.7179, and their ability to align their learning objectives with the teacher's goals at 3.3461. They also recognized the importance of studying according to course objectives (mean of 4.1659), understood the rationale behind specific teaching activities (3.9957), and felt they could keep up with the course progress (3.7319).

These results suggest that the participants adopt autonomous learning principles in various ways. The data reveals that students are highly aware of the course requirements and the importance of their efforts. However, they reported less success in fully internalizing the instructors' teaching objectives. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the learners in this study are in an early stage of autonomy,

demonstrating awareness of the importance of understanding course requirements and objectives. However, they are gradually internalizing them and adjusting to the instructors' class activities.

Respondents' feedback supports these conclusions. One participant, Everin, stated that to understand the instructors' teaching objectives and requirements, she first needs to know the learning goals. Sadrin mentioned that instructors typically outline their plans for the semester during the first meeting, and she observes their teaching style and assignments to adapt accordingly. However, Cema admitted that she does not prioritize understanding the instructors' requirements but asks for clarification whenever needed. Safi noted that observing the instructor's approach helps her understand the teaching objectives and requirements. Finally, Elis emphasized the importance of instructors being well-prepared with a clear syllabus, effective communication, and relevant contextual information.

The triangulation of quantitative data with qualitative insights reveals a nuanced understanding of students' engagement with instructional strategies and course structures. A high mean score of 3.7179 for understanding course expectations is well-supported by student testimonies like Sadrin's, who noted the clarity of early course planning, and Elis, who emphasized the value of clear syllabi and structured communication. This foundation sets the stage for the highest-rated area: recognizing the importance of studying according to objectives (mean 4.1659). Everin's and Safi's reflections underline the significance of intentional learning and teacher guidance in aligning effort with course goals. However, a slightly lower score (mean 3.3461) in transforming teaching objectives into personal ones suggests room for growth in learner autonomy. Cema's reliance on reactive clarification rather than proactive engagement exemplifies this developmental area.

Meanwhile, a strong score of 3.9957 for understanding instructional rationale is echoed by Safi's attentiveness to instructor behaviour, indicating an appreciation of pedagogical intent. Lastly, students' ability to keep up with course progress (mean 3.7319) appears consistent with broader qualitative themes of adaptability to instructional styles, despite no direct qualitative reference. Collectively, these findings highlight a generally strong but still evolving capacity among students to internalize and act upon course expectations and pedagogical strategies.

Triangulated Conclusion

The convergence of quantitative and qualitative data illustrates that learners in this study are developing autonomous learning behaviours. They understand course expectations, value instructional goals, and can largely follow course progress, though full internalization and transformation of teaching objectives into personal goals remain in progress.

This suggests that while learners are not yet fully autonomous, they are on the path toward greater independence, guided by structural clarity from instructors and growing metacognitive awareness.

Table 2. Students' Level of Setting Personal Learning Objectives and Study Plans

Statement	Mean	Level
Besides class tasks and assignments, I will make my English study plan.	3.76	High
Make my study objectives according to my situation.	3.83	High
Adjust my study plan if necessary.	3.78	High
Make a time plan to study English.	3.82	High
Set my English study objectives according to the syllabus.	3.36	High
Overall	3.71	High

Adapted from Xu, Peng, & Wu, 2019

Note. Responses were rated on a Likert scale. Adapted from Xu, Peng, and Wu (2019)

As shown in Table 2, the overall mean score for students' level of setting personal learning objectives and study plans is 3.7100, indicating a high level of perceived capability in this area. Students reported high levels of engagement with statements such as "I will make my English study plan," "I make my study objectives," and "I adjust my study plan if necessary." These results reflect students' ability to

create and adjust their learning plans independently, demonstrating some level of autonomous learning. However, the lower mean score for the statement "I set my English study objectives according to the syllabus" suggests that students may not fully rely on the syllabus when planning their studies, potentially indicating gaps in syllabus comprehension or effective time management.

Based on the mean values from Table 2, it can be inferred that students generally felt capable of managing their study plans and adjusting them as needed, suggesting a moderate degree of autonomy in their learning. However, the lower score for time management and syllabus-based study objectives implies that students may face challenges in organizing their time efficiently and in fully utilizing the syllabus to guide their learning.

Respondents' feedback further supports this conclusion. Everin, for example, emphasized the importance of writing down and remembering her learning goals. Sadrin detailed her study schedule, typically running from 10 AM to 3 PM, with breaks in between, and preparing assignments ahead of time. Cema, a self-identified planner, creates daily to-do lists before starting her day. Safi mentioned her tendency to adapt her activities based on need, while Elis emphasized the importance of setting specific goals, allocating time, and staying motivated. Eldin, similarly, noted that she follows the syllabus to guide her study, using the learning module as a reference to achieve the learning objectives.

Triangulated Insights on Study Planning: Merging Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings presents a nuanced understanding of students' initiative and adaptability in study planning. Quantitative data indicate strong proactive behavior, with high mean scores (3.7596–3.8290) reflecting students' tendency to set goals and structure their learning. Qualitative insights substantiate this: Everin's written goals, Cema's daily to-do lists, and Sadrin's time-structured routine all exemplify purposeful, self-regulated planning. Similarly, a mean score of 3.7801 for adaptability is echoed in students like Safi and Elis, who highlight the importance of flexibility in maintaining motivation and goal alignment. However, a notable disparity emerges with the syllabus as a planning tool, reflected in the lower average score of 3.3617. Eldin's reference to using the syllabus is rare among peers, suggesting that while students excel in self-directed strategies, many may lack understanding or motivation to align their plans with formal course structures. This triangulated analysis reveals a dual strength in initiative and adaptability, but also a strategic gap in leveraging institutional resources highlighting an area for instructional support and scaffolding.

Triangulating the data suggests that students are increasingly autonomous in their learning behaviors especially in planning, adjusting, and staying motivated. Nonetheless, autonomy could be further developed through better integration of institutional tools (like the syllabus) into personal study routines. Teacher guidance on how to align personal objectives with formal course structures may support this next step in their autonomous learning journey.

The quantitative findings indicate that students in the English study program demonstrate a positive attitude toward understanding instructors' teaching objectives, setting personal learning objectives, and creating study plans for autonomous learning. This conclusion is further reinforced by the interview data, which shows that while autonomous learning is utilized, it is not consistently applied across all subjects in the program.

In terms of online learning, many activities were conducted through platforms like Zoom, indicating the integration of autonomous learning methods in virtual environments. Despite this, the motivation to learn independently was high among students, yet this did not always align with expected autonomous learning behaviors. Independent group work, performed outside the assigned coursework, was rare, suggesting that while students were motivated, their efforts were largely focused on completing course requirements rather than engaging in deeper, independent learning. In general, students seemed to adopt an externally motivated approach that prioritized meeting curriculum demands over pursuing more active language learning.

CONCLUSION

Given the findings on students' perceptions of their independence in language learning, and considering the limitations inherent in the curriculum structure at Jambi University, it is critical to implement strategies that foster greater learner autonomy. Below are actionable recommendations tailored for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers to address identified gaps and enhance independent learning in English language education:

To effectively promote learner autonomy in language education, it is essential to integrate a comprehensive framework that supports both teachers and students through targeted initiatives. A key step is to equip teachers with autonomy-oriented training, providing professional development opportunities such as workshops on self-directed learning, collaborative teaching strategies, and student-centered instruction. These programs empower educators to create environments where students can take charge of their learning. Complementing teacher development, the integration of learner self-assessment tools—including journals, checklists, and goal-setting templates—helps students reflect on their progress and establish personal learning objectives. Additionally, giving students a voice in curriculum design through feedback loops, choice boards, and project-based learning fosters a sense of ownership and engagement. Structured support in goal-setting and study planning, such as SMART goals workshops and personalized check-ins, further encourages responsible learning habits. A flexible and personalized learning environment, enabled by blended learning, differentiated instruction, and varied assessment methods, ensures students can learn at their own pace and in ways that suit their needs. Building a culture of reflection and self-improvement through portfolios, post-lesson reflections, and metacognitive strategy instruction helps students internalize their growth process. Finally, policy-level adjustments that allow for curricular flexibility and support pilot programs are critical to sustaining and scaling these autonomy-supportive practices across educational systems. Together, these measures create a dynamic, student-centered ecosystem that cultivates lifelong, self-directed language learners.

By implementing these actionable recommendations, English language education in Jambi can foster greater student autonomy, allowing learners to take more control over their educational journey and develop the skills necessary for lifelong learning. Importantly, the study aligns with current national education reforms under the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy, which emphasizes student independence and flexibility in learning. By assessing students' perceptions of their autonomy across five key dimensions, this research not only offers a diagnostic tool for educators but also contributes to the practical enhancement of English language teaching in Indonesia. It informs both policy and practice by identifying strengths—such as students' ability to manage learning plans—and areas needing support—such as integrating syllabus-based objectives—thereby offering actionable insights for developing autonomy-supportive learning environments.

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