

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' BELIEFS TOWARDS AUTONOMOUS LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The concept of autonomous language learning is now playing an important role in the education system. This implies that learners are able to work at their own pace, set a specific goal and try to achieve these goals by taking opportunities both in and out of class. Autonomous language learning has also been highlighted as a way to improve language proficiency among students. Although much has been written on the concept and development of autonomous learning, limited studies have been conducted to examine undergraduates' beliefs towards autonomous language learning in Malaysia. Thus, this study aims to examine TESL undergraduates' beliefs towards autonomous language learning and at the same time examine their language learning behavior outside of class. The study is conducted through a survey form. A total of 30 second year undergraduates were selected using convenient sampling and a 5 point Likert scale questionnaire was employed to gather data. The findings revealed that undergraduates do have a positive response in their beliefs towards autonomous language learning. For undergraduates' language learning behavior outside class, the findings indicate that undergraduates took effort in improving their English language through movies, online reading, communication and much more.

Keywords: learner autonomy, language learning, autonomous learning, belief, undergraduate students.

INTRODUCTION

In today's education, strategies in delivering knowledge are more focused towards a new form that enables learners' to direct their own learning (Orawiwatnakul, W., & Wichadee, S. 2017). The term "Autonomous learning" has been extensively used in education (Hedge, 2002), and Holec (1996) also defined the core concept as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. Lee (1998) states that taking charge of one's own learning involves selection of one's own learning content and steps to achieve one's goal. This indicates learners are able to progress at their own pace and know when, why, what, where and how to learn (Lee, 1998). Smith (2008) also states that learners have the power and right to learn for themselves. Lastly, Gardner and Miller (1996) state that autonomous language learner's ability is to be able to commence planning and carry out their own learning program. These learners set specific goals and targets to achieve by taking opportunities available both in and out of the classroom (Gardner and Miller, 1996). Learners are pushed from "unconscious performance of a task to fully self-organized learning" (Orawiwatnakul, W., & Wichadee, S. 2017).

However, Benson (2008) states that both teachers and students perceive autonomy from two different perspectives. From a teachers' perspective, they tend to evaluate autonomy within institutional and classroom learning arrangements because from the teachers' perspective, prospective students do not question the underlying legitimacy (Benson, 2008). Benson (2008) thinks that both teachers' and students' views are tangential with each other. Teachers play a central role to ensure that students develop the 'psychological attributes and practical abilities involved in learner autonomy' (p.396) through classroom activities (Smith, 2008).

According to the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB 2013- 2025), Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) has been highlighted as it is used to improve language proficiency among students. Yunus and Arshad (2014) state autonomous learning as a crucial element that is missing from English language classrooms because of it exam-oriented systems, and at the same time traditional teacher-centred approaches that are widely used in Malaysia. Students are fairly commonly observed to be passive learners in the process of learning by waiting for teachers to provide them with information and examination tips (Dwee, C Y., and Anthony, E. M.2017). In turn, students become devout rote learners in memorizing facts in order to pass examinations and not for long-term knowledge or skills gain (Dwee, C Y., and Anthony, E.M. 2017).

As Malaysia strives to become a developed nation by 2020, the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) in 2015 outlines 10 shifts to spur continued excellence in higher education where shift number nine (9) pushes for the need for globalized online digital learning and shift number four (4) focuses on developing a nation of lifelong learners in a bid to develop holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates to fulfil the needs of a high-income economy (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Hence, almost all universities and educational organisations, including the Ministry of Higher Education set lifelong learning as an important goal for undergraduates (Sidhu, G. K., Kaur, S., & Fook, C. Y. 2016). Hence, students in today's technology-driven environment need to be flexible to change, reflective and inquiring in practice, autonomous and self-managed learning so as to leave tertiary institutions as lifelong learners (Sidhu, G. K., Kaur, S., & Fook, C. Y. 2016).

However, empirical studies by local researcher have found that Malaysian students are not ready for learner autonomy, especially in learning English (Ng, 2009; Thang, 2009; Junidah, 2007; Thang & Azarina, 2007; Thang, 2005; Thang, 2001). These studies show that university students preferred teacher-centered approach, they expect their teachers to motivate, point out their mistake and guide them. Thang (2001, 2003 & 2005) studies found that students of the National University of Malaysia (both on- campus

and distance learners) shown to be very teacher-centered. Thang et al. (2011) studies, later on, shows that Malaysian undergraduates, in general, ascribe their success most frequently to the desire to achieve good grades and teacher influence.

Although much has been written on the concept and, development of autonomous learning among university students, university students, in general, are believed to be teacher-centered and students from the National University of Malaysia are considered to be the most teacher-centered. Limited studies have been conducted to examine undergraduates' specifically TESL undergraduates' beliefs towards autonomous language learning in Malaysia. Therefore, it is important to examine 21st-century undergraduates' beliefs towards autonomous learning in their learning process as UKM aims to develop independent learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

LEARNER AUTONOMY AND OUT-OF-CLASS LEARNING

An autonomous learner could be described as someone who is able to manage and take responsibility for his or her own learning (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). As learning often happened in social context, an autonomous learner should be able to assume responsibility and cooperate effectively with other members of a group (Smith, 2008). Holec (1981) also stated that autonomous learners should possess the ability and responsibility to decide the aims of learning, define the learning content and progress, choose the appropriate methods to learn, monitor their learning process, finally, evaluate the learning outcome.

Three pedagogical principles facilitated the development of autonomy in language learners. These were: (a) Learner reflection - helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning (the metacognitive dimensions); (b) Learner involvement - engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process (the effective and the metacognitive dimensions); (c) Appropriate target language use - using the target language as the principal medium of language learning (the communicative and the metacognitive dimensions) (Little, 2006, p.2). In conjunction with this, Holec (1981) also stated that autonomous learners should possess the ability and responsibility to decide the aims of learning, define the learning content and progress, and choose the appropriate methods to learn, monitor their learning process, and finally, evaluate the learning outcome. Smith (2002) describe two types of autonomy: Strong version and weak version. In strong version, teachers initiate activities and students are given the responsibility to make decisions. Learners might be involved in "taking charge of classroom-based learning" (p.6), in the following areas: "Determining the objectives, defining the content and the progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition" (Smith, 2002, p.6). This type of autonomy is similar to Littlewood (1999) proposed proactive type of autonomy and is common in Western education system where students initiate the activities and select objectives and materials.

According to Smith (2002), the second, weak version of autonomy is associated with technological and strategic based language learning. This version of autonomy "poses little threat to traditional pedagogies of dependence" and which can be "easily packaged" and "sold in various contexts" (p.8) (Smith, 2002). As this approach deals with technology based language learning, strategy training courses and self-access language learning in self-access centers, teachers as the expert and knower are less affected in this approach.

Although developing autonomous learners meant a shift from teacher-centred classrooms to learner-centred classrooms, teachers were still required to play the primary role in facilitating students' learning (Little, 2006). Little (2007) states that autonomy does not mean working in isolation and both teachers and learners shared responsibility in preparing learners for autonomy results in the teaching/ learning process. According to Aoki (1999), educators in an autonomous classroom setting possess certain types of roles. These are (a) "giving authority" to the students. Teachers should help students to feel that they are autonomous. (b) The development of autonomy requires practice, students should be involved in the decision making process in their learning. (c) The development of autonomy needs and interaction between the teacher and the learner in the classroom where it differs from their traditional relationship in which the teacher is the sole decision maker in the classroom. (d) The teachers' "acknowledgment of the student" role as an individual in the language learning process and lastly, (e) Teachers' support for students practicing autonomy. (Aoki, 1999)

For learners, out-of-class learning played an important or major role in developing learner autonomy (Benson, P. 2011b, Oxford, R. L., 2003) and improving language proficiency (Norton, B., and Toohey, K. 2001, Reinders, H. and Loewen, S., 2013). There were three types of out-of-class learning that could be categorized as "self-instruction" (for language learning only); "naturalistic learning" (with minimal attention to language learning); and "self-directed naturalistic learning" (creation of communication opportunities with the intention of language learning) (Benson, P. 2011b, Benson, P. 2011).

According to Benson, P. (2011b), Benson, P. (2001), self-directed naturalistic learning was considered common because it allowed learners to enjoy interest-based activities and learn the language simultaneously. Hence, English-medium popular culture and social networking in globalized online space (e.g. video/picture sharing sites) had attracted researchers' attention (Chik, A. 2015, Chik, A. 2011, Benson, P., and Chan, N. 2010).

PAST STUDIES

Bekleyen, N., and Selimoglu (2016) conducted a study to investigate learners' behaviors and perceptions about autonomous language learning at a university level in Turkey. It was found that learners regard their teacher as more responsible for the language learning process even though they considered themselves responsible for some areas of language learning and shared the responsibility with their teachers in some cases. The findings also suggested a significant difference between autonomous language learning activities of the students with high and low levels of perceived motivation.

A similar study was conducted by Orawiwatnakul, W., and Wichadee, S. (2017) conducted a study to examine how undergraduate students believed about autonomous language learning in a university setting and to find out whether some factors were related to their beliefs. The findings revealed that on average, students showed a high level of belief towards autonomous language learning while language learning behaviours outside class were at a moderate level. The study also showed a relationship between beliefs on autonomous language learning and factors comprising of English proficiency, gender, attitude towards studying English, and language learning behaviours outside class. Lastly, the findings highlighted the need to increase language-learning environments where responsibilities were shared between teachers and students.

On the other hand, Ramamurthy, V., and Rao, S. (2015) conducted a quantitative study of 70 Smartphone users in the age range of 18 to 26 years old. The aim of the study was to find out learning skills gained by using Smartphone in ESL classroom, whether Smartphone promoted autonomous learning; the extent learners relied on lecturers in addition to the usage of Smartphone and learning satisfaction gained by ESL learners when using Smartphone. The findings indicated that Smartphone boosted learners' critical thinking, creative thinking, and communication as well as collaboration skills. Learners were found to gain great satisfaction in the learning process through Smartphone and although learners moved towards autonomous learning, they were still reliant on their teachers to achieve their learning goal.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of the study was to examine undergraduates' beliefs towards autonomous language learning and examine their language learning behaviour outside class.

The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. What are undergraduate students' beliefs towards autonomous language learning?
2. What are undergraduate students' language learning behaviours outside class?

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a quantitative research design. The survey methodology was utilized to collect the data of the study. A questionnaire was administered to 30 students to examine their beliefs towards autonomous language learning and their language learning behaviour outside class. The data gathered from the respondents were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants for this study were second year UKM TESL undergraduates. A total of 30 participants were selected through a convenient sampling method. Prior to their study at UKM, these students had gone through STPM, Matriculation and Foundation studies where respondents were anticipated to be exposed to autonomous learning in the form of a semester-based learning environment. The respondents were selected from the same class: this was to determine that the respondents' levels of English proficiency were overall on the same level. Demographic characteristics of the sample were presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of undergraduates

	n	%
Gender		
Male	7	23
Female	23	77
Previous school or Institutes		
STPM	11	37
Matriculation	8	27
Foundations	11	37
Languages(s) usually used among friends		
Mandarin	3	10
Bahasa Melayu	25	83
English	2	7
Overall proficiency in English		
Good		
Fair	16	53
	14	47
Attitude towards studying English language		
Positive	29	97
Not in particular	1	3

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The questionnaire used to collect data focused on two major components: (a) the beliefs of autonomous language learning and (b) the language learning behaviours outside class. The questionnaire was adapted from Sakai et al (2010) learner autonomy questionnaire and readapted by Orawiwatnakul, W., and Wichadee, S. (2017) research on investigating undergraduate students' beliefs about autonomous language learning. Section A in the questionnaire consisted of respondents demographic information items, section B consisted of 10 items seeking to uncover students' beliefs on autonomous language learning and section C consisted of 17 items seeking to investigate students' behaviors outside class. Their language learning behaviors were evaluated

based on activities that respondents did voluntarily in order to improve their English language since their enrollment in the University. For section B, respondents were required to answer each statement based on a Likert scale as follows: 1 - the least; 2 - little; 3 - to some extent; 4 - much; and 5 - the most. Section C also required respondents to rate their replies on a Likert scale as follows: 1 - never; 2 - seldom; 3 - sometimes; 4 - often; and 5 - usually.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaire was distributed to the respondents and later collected by the researcher. All respondents were told that participation was voluntary and they were informed that they could refuse to take part in the survey if they felt uncomfortable. All respondents' identities were kept anonymous and their responses would not affect their grades. The data was processed using an SPSS program, in which a frequency analysis was performed and displayed in table form based on the respondents gathered.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results shown in Table 2 answered the research question 1 on "What are the undergraduates' beliefs towards autonomous language learning?" Table 2 showed the highest frequency and the percentage of the responses chosen by students who believed towards autonomous language learning.

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of beliefs towards autonomous language learning

Statement	Frequency	Percentage
1. Deciding your goal of study in one semester	15	50
2. Checking how much progress you make	13	43
3. Deciding the textbook and materials to be used in class	11	37
4. Deciding topics you learn in class	12	40
5. Deciding the pace of the lesson in one lesson	15	50
6. Deciding the type of classroom activities, such as individual, pair and group work	12	40
7. Deciding the amount, type and frequency of homework	13	43
8. Deciding ways of assessment, such as attendance, writing tasks and self- evaluation	13	43
9. Assessing your study	12	40
10. Evaluating the course	10	33

The results in Table 2 indicate that statement 1 "deciding your goal of study in one semester" and statement 5 "deciding the pace of the lesson in one lesson" showed the highest frequency out of the 10 statements. Statement 1 showed that most students chose the response of 'much' with a frequency of 15 or 50% while statement 5 showed that most students chose the response of 'to some extent' with a frequency of 15 or 50%.

The second groups with the highest frequencies were statement 2 "checking how much progress you make", statement 7 "deciding the amount, type and frequency of homework" and statement 8 "deciding ways of assessment, such as attendance, writing tasks and self- evaluation". These three groups chose the response of 'much' and obtained the same frequency of 13 or 43%.

The third groups with the highest frequencies were statement 4 "deciding topics you learn in class", statement 6 "deciding the type of classroom activities, such as individual, pair and group work" and statement 9 "assessing your study". Statement 4 showed a frequency of 12 or 40% on 'to some extent', statement 6 showed a frequency of 12 or 40% on 'the most' and statement 9 showed a frequency of 12 or 40% on 'much'.

The findings revealed that overall students had a positive belief towards autonomous language learning. It could be seen that majority of students gave responses of 'as much' and 'the most' towards statements that promoted autonomous learning such as "deciding your goal of study in one semester" or "deciding the type of classroom activities, such as individual, pair and group work". The result was supported by Tally (2014), where students showed positive response towards learners' autonomy. Orawiatnakul, W., and Wichadee, S. (2017) further supported the finding, as students showed a high level of overall beliefs about autonomous language learning in a university setting.

Local education institutions conditioned students to take part in classroom activities and some activities required students to complete projects outside the classroom. Through these activities, students' responsibilities were being fostered and at the same time their collaboration and social interaction were being promoted. Students' positive response towards beliefs on autonomous language learning suggested that they had accepted this new form of learning as students were given the opportunity to have control or learning responsibility in their own study continually.

The students' language learning behaviours outside class were also presented in frequency count and percentage in Table 3. This answered the second research question on "what are the students' language learning behaviours outside class?"

Table 3: Frequency and percentage of language learning behaviours outside class

Statement	Frequency	Percentage
1. Attending an English course and seminar provided by the university	13	53
2. Meeting with your teacher in order to discuss your work in English	12	40
3. Practicing English in an English conversation school	10	33
4. Learning English vocabulary words	16	53
5. Practicing speaking English with your friends	14	47
6. Talking to foreigners in English	13	43
7. Learning English grammar	17	57
8. Keeping a diary in English	10	33
9. Preparing for proficiency test such as TOEIC, TOEFL or MUET	15	50
10. Writing e-mails in English	17	57
11. Watching English learning programs on TV	15	50
12. Reading magazines and books in English	16	53
13. Watching TV and listening to radio programs in English	17	57
14. Watching English movies without subtitles	10	33
15. Reading English newspaper	10	33
16. Reading web pages in English	17	57
17. Listening to English songs	21	70

The findings showed that statement 17 “listening to English songs” had the highest frequency count of 21 or 70% of the students’ response towards ‘usually’ in this statement. The second highest statements were statement 7 “learning English grammar”, statement 10 “writing e-mails in English”, statement 13 “watching TV and listening to radio programs in English”, and statement 16 “reading web pages in English”. Although all 4 statements obtained the frequency count of 17 or 57% for each statement, the frequency scales for each statement are mostly different. Statement 7 showed a frequency of 17 or 57% of students’ response towards ‘often’ in this statement. Statement 10 showed a frequency of 17 or 57% of students’ response towards ‘often’ in this statement. Statement 13 showed a frequency of 17 or 57% of students’ response towards ‘usually’ in this statement and lastly, statement 16 showed a frequency of 17 or 57% of the students’ response towards ‘usually’ in this statement. The third group with the highest frequency count were statement 1 “attending an English course and seminar provided by the university”, statement 4 “learning English vocabulary words”, and statement 12 “reading magazines and books in English”. Although all three statements obtained a high frequency of 16 or 53% of students’ response for each statement, the frequency scales for each statement were different. Statement 1 showed 16 or 53% of students’ response towards ‘sometimes’ on this statement. Statement 4 showed 16 or 53% of students’ response towards ‘often’ on this statement and statement 12 showed 16 or 53% of students’ response towards ‘usually’ for this statement.

The lowest groups out of the 17 statements were statement 3 “practicing English in an English conversation school”, statement 8 “keeping a diary in English”, statement 14 “watching English movies without subtitles”, and statement 15 “reading English newspapers”. Although these 4 statements obtained the same frequency count of 10 or 33%, the frequency scale for each statement was different. Statement 3 has a frequency count of 10 or 33% of the students’ response towards ‘often’ on this statement. Statement 8 had a frequency count of 10 or 33% of students’ response towards ‘never’ on this statement. Statement 14 had a frequency count of 10 or 33% of the students’ response towards ‘usually’ on this statement and statement 10 had a frequency count of 10 or students’ response towards ‘sometimes’ on this statement.

The results in Table 3 also showed that overall students also displayed positive language learning behaviour outside the class as most of the students would often converse in English with their lecturers or friends in English and they often write emails in English. The findings supported similar results by Bekleyen, N and Selimoglu, F., (2016) study on learners’ behaviours and perceptions of autonomous language learning. Both findings indicated that students preferred to listen to English songs, watch English movies and TV programs as a way to improve their English. The reasons for students’ choice towards these activities may be the fact that these were easily accessible for students (Bekleyen, N, and Selimoglu, F., 2016). The findings in this study also underlined an interesting fact that besides usually reading magazines and books in English, students also often read web pages in English.

Students were engaged in online activities through digital media such as social networking (e.g. instant messaging, blogging, Facebook), online games, text sharing platforms (e.g. YouTube, Instagram) that used English or code-mixing form (Chik, A (2015), Chik, A. (2011), Benson, P., and Chan, N (2010)). These digital forms offer students authentic and interactive forms to use and learn English (Benson, P., and Chan, N. 2010). Therefore, students might read online materials especially from native speakers as a way to improve their English. Lastly, findings on students’ language learning behaviours outside class showed that students were aware of ways to increase their exposure towards English language and they did take charge in finding ways to expose themselves to English language media forms.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the study results, the following conclusions could be drawn: majority of the students showed a positive belief towards autonomous language learning and a high frequency to improve their language learning behaviours outside class. This indicated that students are moving towards being independent learners and being responsible towards their language learning process.

However, being an autonomous learner in UKM is still considered foreign as most students still relied on their teachers to provide for them. As students are surrounded by technology driven environment in their learning process, teachers should initiate classroom task where students are encourage to commence planning and carry out their own learning program (Gardner and Miller, 1996) by slowly transforming from “unconscious performance of a task to fully self- organized learning” (Orawiwatnakul, W., & Wichadee, S. 2017). Students’ autonomous language learning process should be the responsibility of both the teacher and students (Little, 2007) and not students working in isolation throughout the learning process (Little, 2007).

As Malaysian policy makers’ work to implement a less exam- oriented curriculum which promotes more autonomous and critical thinking learning among students through the National Higher Education Action Plan 2007- 2010 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007) and Pelan Strategik Interim Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia 2011- 2020 (Ministry of Education Strategic Interim Plan 2011-2020) Ministry of Education, 2010). Future studies should be done in area of developing a modul program which centres on developing students’ autonomous learning should be developed but it should be planned very carefully and be part of the overall curriculum of UKM. As suggested by Railton and Watson (2005) ‘autonomous learning should be explicitly conceived as a skill that can be acquired in the same way as other academic skills and that practices which encourage the development of this skill must be embedded within the learning, teaching and assessment strategy’ (2005, p.192). In conclusion, this study can serve as a starting point for further discussions on learner autonomy as it is in line with current learning which is 21st century learning.

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