

## Examining Learner Independence in the Online Classroom for Improved Learning Outcomes

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### Abstract:

Autonomous learning is increasingly recognized as an effective approach to knowledge acquisition, with extensive research focusing on its components and roles in education. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the relevance of this topic. This study aims to examine students' potential in self-directed learning strategies during E-learning. A quantitative method was employed, utilizing a questionnaire format for data collection. Descriptive statistics were applied to analyze the data. The findings reveal that participating students held well-formed opinions regarding the benefits of autonomous learning. The data strongly supports the existence of autonomous behaviors among students engaged in distance learning. Specifically, students perceive learner autonomy as a valuable technique for enhancing their learning experiences in the current online environment. They expressed a strong interest in taking initiative in their education, including planning classroom activities and assignments. To foster learner independence and motivation, educators need to consider students' preferences and needs regarding pedagogies and activities. The research emphasizes the importance of students having sufficient time to improve their language skills and enhance general communication before actively contributing to the online learning process. Furthermore, a majority of the surveyed students expressed a desire to incorporate collaborative learning approaches, such as group projects and online discussions, in their future academic endeavors. Scholars suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic may act as a catalyst for the widespread adoption and improvement of online education. Understanding student preferences and providing opportunities for collaborative learning can further enhance engagement and motivation. These findings underscore the potential of online education as a viable and impactful mode of learning.

**Keywords:** autonomous learning, self-directed learning, E-learning, COVID-19, online education, learner independence.

### Introduction

The spread of the COVID-19 virus has had far-reaching effects on society and culture at large, and the educational system in particular (Jogezai et al., 2021). The global pandemic of influenza A (COVID-19) has caused significant changes in the way that schools operate, with an emphasis on e-learning, in which students access course materials and receive teaching via digital mediums. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, all educational institutions throughout Asia had to be shut down, leading to an unexpected surge in the popularity of a hitherto unheard-of kind of education: web-based learning. The spread of the epidemic necessitated the widespread use of e-learning programs in our universities and colleges. As a result, the government of Asia has mandated that all sectors work together in a unified framework to control the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Asia agreed with the Ministry of Health's suggestion to end all classroom instruction. The Ministry of Education is in a bind due to the current academic transformation. To maintain

order, though, they may launch a novel, web-based approach to education that is both officially sanctioned and inventive. The first step toward this dramatic change was the launch of a system that would allow for on-going schooling. Virtual education, often known as e-learning, seems to have grown ubiquitous and influential among educators as a result of the widespread availability of the Internet and digital devices. Many scholastic aims were greatly aided by the invention of new technologies (Klimova, 2021). Teachers would benefit from this since it would help them increase their understanding of the educational material they teach. Online learners often outperformed their classroom-only counterparts, especially in the area of language instruction. Since the introduction of the Internet, widespread use of technology has increased in the classroom (Liao et al., 2018). A variety of online resources made it possible for students of English as a foreign language to have instantaneous access to relevant language resources and engage in real-time conversations with native English speakers. It's important to remember that despite English's status as a worldwide language with many native speakers, the language is not universally recognized or spoken (Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

Many instructors, although acknowledging the benefits of technology in the classroom, have yet to fully embrace its use. At this stage, educators should begin planning how they will implement their chosen instructional strategy in the classroom. Teachers of languages who use the communicative method of instruction are responsible for creating a safe and comfortable learning environment for their pupils (Li, 2021). Students had to study English from afar and had significant challenges during this epidemic. The implementation of e-learning at institutions with little or no experience with it was certain to fail. As an added complication, teachers are struggling to master internet tools (Hasan & Bao, 2020). Inadequate infrastructure, inadequate integrating ICT, a lack of focus and training, and restricted access to the Internet, sources, and materials are all examples of the problems that need to be addressed. Learner autonomy research, in particular, suffered from a lack of funding and attention during the Covid-19 era (Zhang & Yang, 2022). Therefore, further study is needed to reveal people's problems with introducing technology into the classroom, especially when teaching the English language. With that in mind, the goal of this research was to examine how much control students have over their own education while using e-learning strategies during the 2019 COVID.

### **Literature review**

Autonomy is described in many ways, but its basic idea is that students must take responsibility for their own academic success (Uslu & Durak, 2022). The term "independent learning" has been taken on many different meanings by many people. Since the 1980s, when the idea of a student-centered classroom first began to gain traction, this concept has evolved into a central focus in education (Tseng et al., 2020). The term "autonomous learning" refers to students who take charge of their own education. Tseng et al. (2020) defined learner autonomy as the ability to engage in self-directed learning, which requires students to take charge of their education by determining what they want to learn, how they want to learn it, what strategies and methods they will use to learn it, and how they will monitor and evaluate their own learning. (Orakç, 2020) made a similar argument, arguing that true independence requires the capability to steer one's own academic and professional development.

Although E-learning allows students to take charge of their own education and study English at their own pace, they are still dependent on external cues like as textbooks, learning objectives, course materials, and so on in order to become proficient speakers (Orakç, 2020). Technology-assisted learning (TEL), distance education (DI), and self-directed study (SDS) are all examples of learner autonomy or self-directed learning (Kim et al., 2021). Given that not all students have the skills necessary to operate freely with technology, it is the role of the instructor or lecturer to act as the coach and mentor to foster learner autonomy (Stathopoulou et al., 2019).

Relatedness is another factor that encourages independent learning. Helping those in need, engaging with others, and having an interest in joining the organization are all necessary conditions. Learners' desires for independence and social acceptance are at the heart of the relatedness concept. The relationship between the teacher or lecturer and the students in a classroom is crucial. According to (Nguyen et al., 2021), having a sense of freedom is also crucial for maturing independence. A student's success in a conventional classroom setting depends on more than just his or her ability to react to the lecturer's input. Three factors need to be controlled for development of autonomy (Tseng et al., 2020). In the first place, you need to assume command of the LMS. This shows that students have a firm grasp on how, where, and when to study their target language. Second,

control should be exercised over all instructional materials. Each learner has the freedom to choose for themselves which materials best serve their own needs. Instead of relying exclusively on the information presented by the teacher, students should explore other resources. To sum up, it's a sort of cognitive process management for mental performance, suggesting that students have some say over the ideas, attitudes, and motivation that play a role in their academic achievement.

Teachers would have significantly more resources to carry out a wide variety of learning activities, prepare the students to continue to be active, and generate chances for student-centered learning if ICT were included into the framework of Asia ELT. In addition, smart phones are excellent tools for encouraging independence in the classroom. Whenever a class is not in session, students may be given homework that requires them to study on their own.

Media use has been touted as a means to promote student agency in EFL classrooms. Through the use of digital education, media may help to enhance education not just in traditional classroom settings, but also in the wider world. Media, according to (Lawrence & Tar, 2018), may provide a wealth of linguistic and non-linguistic information by adopting an unconventional strategy for teaching new languages. This suggests that e-media and other forms of technological advancement had a significant role in enhancing the participants' linguistic abilities. Because they could use their own time and gadgets at home, language learners were encouraged to become more self-reliant. They were bolstered by the fact that they could save time using online resources compared to traditional, in-person education. (Al-Emran et al., 2020) used the same e-media learning technique, email, to perform a cross-cultural study with future ESL teachers who were fluent in several languages. Students acquired a wider range of cultural knowledge and needed less hand-holding when corresponding with their pre-service teachers through email.

The focus of teacher-based tactics is shifted from students' actions to those of their teachers, and it is linked to the training and education of educators to better understand students' growing need for independence in the classroom and develop methods to foster that growth. This context places a premium on professional development opportunities for educators. In this way, educators should be able to modify long-held notions about what constitutes good teaching practice. They will be knowledgeable about how to encourage activities that foster student initiative in the classroom. This implies students need to understand not just student autonomy but also teacher autonomy. In fact, "depending on the person and learning," there are a number of approaches that may be used to encourage learner autonomy.

Learner-centered approaches that value collaboration, learner engagement, and student participation provide the backbone of activities shown to foster student autonomy. On the other hand, the teacher technique that is prevalent in Asian classrooms has been criticized for its lack of emphasis on group work. Numerous recent studies on the subject have been made accessible thanks to experts in Asia (Al-Emran et al., 2018). Investigations like this suggest that teachers' knowledge transfer is still widely used in ESL classrooms. Learning has been made compulsory, and this has resulted in a shift in how lectures are presented and the materials covered in class. Learners' reliance on self-directed study has increased in the last few of years.

It is to be expected that not all students in a language class would learn at the same pace due to differences in starting point, aptitude, and exposure to the language. It is well known that giving students the choice of working together with others or alone is crucial to fostering more learner autonomy. During the time when school was cancelled, teachers nevertheless managed to get their lessons out to students by sending and uploading them to different online sites. Some publications also have student-run forums and a group study space. Another theory that backs up the benefits of employing e-media in mobile learning is that it is extremely effective in boosting autonomous learning in language acquisition (Dolawattha et al., 2018). There are several good reasons for this, including the fact that mobile learning gives students more freedom to study at their own speed and in their own environment. Student-teacher and student-student collaboration, as well as peer-to-peer learning, are also strengthened. In addition, (Judy Shih, 2021) argued that a learner's independence is crucial for a functional linguist. Proficient individuals have both the autonomy that comes from internal processing and the competence that is developed via interaction with others. Language instruction has recently been a focal point for the intersection of learner autonomy and self-directed learning.

Some educators were shown to be unaware of the concept or to have misconceptions about it, such as seeing it as an inborn skill or as having the potential to reduce teacher load by enabling students to study

independently. Even more concerning is the fact that some pupils were shown to be too dependent on their instructors. Because of this, students continued to be unfamiliar with the concept and unprepared to act as self-directed learners. This required students and teachers working together to build learner autonomy in the classroom to be aware of the concept of learner autonomy and its many interpretations. Furthermore, the inflexible framework for learning has been linked to difficulties and obstacles in building student autonomy in English language acquisition. Time is of the essence in terms of completing the academic goals of the program. The prevalence of classroom practices that explicitly prepare students for standardized tests like STEP and IELTS is strikingly low. Therefore, although the concept of learner autonomy was seen as beneficial, its execution has been called into doubt. Many unexpected changes and new learning opportunities have arisen in the classroom as a result of the covivirus-H19 pandemic. Students who previously made little to no use of their mobile devices for educational purposes are now legally obligated to do so. Educators who previously would not have considered adopting a digital tool for lesson planning, student assessment, or general student-teacher communication are now required to familiarize themselves with such tools. Learners who are able to think on their own should develop a habit of taking part in and making the most of learning opportunities that are not facilitated by a teacher. For the last two years, all students have been required to complete their coursework online, and in certain circumstances they have even been given all of the necessary readings and assignments to do so. The purpose of this research is to examine how students feel they have control over their own learning while using online resources. The following questions are the subject of this research:

- When implementing E-learning, what do students often do, and on what platforms?
- How do the students feel about the prospective learners' ability to think for themselves, and how successful do they think it will be?

## Methodology

A questionnaire was used in this study's quantitative methodology. In order to find or assess people's unique concepts, views, opinions, attitudes, and qualities, researchers often utilize questionnaires to gather quantitative data, which is then analyzed statistically (Strijker et al., 2020). A total of 89 people took part in the research. They were your typical first-year Asian students. Everyone has equal access to the internet in the digital realm since they all have access to fast connections. They also tended to reside in places with a decent to excellent internet connection, accounting for 91.06 percent of the total. Students were asked to take out a survey over WhatsApp for the research. Google forms were used to make the survey. Taking cues from the research, we designed a questionnaire that would be most useful for the study's target audience. In order to confirm the questionnaire's relevance, it was sent to four professionals in the industry for review.

They looked at everything and made recommendations for improvement. Their suggestions were incorporated and communicated to the population. Participants got 10 days to fill out the surveys before they were due back. Although 113 students were initially contacted, only 89 answered to the survey. The students' responses were first calculated in Excel before being imported into SPSS for analysis. The questionnaire was found to have a reliability of .81 prior to any data analysis being undertaken, making it a credible source.

**Table 1.** E-learning procedures and environments

<b>No</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Platform or App Used</b>	
1	Web-based Education Tools	Laptop/PC and smartphones interchangeably	33.1%
		Smartphone frequently	31.9%
		Only smartphones	32.9%
		PC or Laptop only	4.1%
2	Learning platforms and software	Blackboard	39.1%
		Teams	8.5%
		Google Meet	19.1%
		WhatsApp	28.9%
		Others (MOOC, Zoom, etc.)	6.5%
		Combination of WhatsApp and BB	25.1%
		Combination of Teachers' online and recorded lessons	63.1%

3	Learning Resources	Books and notes suggested by the teacher	17.9%
		Material from various websites	12.9%
		Learning App	6.1%
4	Educating Process	Video Lesson followed exercises	48.1%
		Teachers' led instruction for all exercises	33.8%
		Other Tasks	19.1%
5	Activities	Individual task on all four skills	26.2%
		An individual task only (Assignment/Home Work/short Quiz activities)	32.8%
		Use of Discussion board on BB	32.8%
		Group activities	8.2%

Methods, tools, resources, procedures, and exercises used to facilitate and assess student learning were all subjected to analysis. The findings showed that the vast majority of students (31.9%) relied predominantly on their smartphones while engaging in online education, however a sizable proportion (33.1%) used both their cellphones and computers on a rotating basis. It seems that several instructional methods were used. 50% or more of the class said that their teacher solely gave lectures through WhatsApp (28.9%) or Blackberry (39.1%). Nearly half of the remaining pupils, however, reported learning English via a variety of digital mediums.

Equally diverse was the range of student participation in the instructional activities. There was a sizable proportion of students (63.10 percent) who had access to a variety of learning tools, such as online resources, teacher-created materials, textbooks, and mobile apps. As well, students depended on the teacher-uploaded video or online education (33.1% each) within the allotted class time. According to this, students didn't focus on self-study and depended instead on their instructors. However, many students went elsewhere for help with their specific assignments and projects (19.1%). Some 32.8% of students did non-academic tasks as part of their homework or for assignments. Many responders (26.2%), in fact, received separate exercises for all four language abilities.

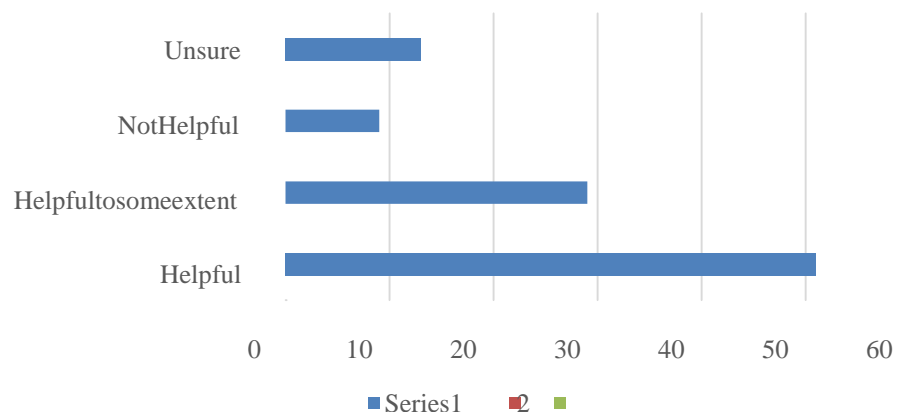
Similarly, 32.8% of students reported using discussion boards, a crucial component of the BB that facilitates students' discussions, interactions, and practice with professors and peers. The majority of students who responded said they had good communication with both their professor and classmates. The majority of students (35.21%) found that chatting with teachers on the platform they were using was the most convenient way to have their questions answered, although students also acknowledged using WhatsApp to contact teachers when they ran into difficulties. The possible degree of student independence during online instruction is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Potential independence of students

	Items	M	SD
1	I would like to have a choice of learning options during online learning	3.92	0.76
2	I am capable to locate my weakness in EFL during online learning	2.93	0.67
3	I want to have a choice of selection of tasks and assignment	3.62	0.71
4	I would like to sort out other learning resources rather than suggested by the teacher during online learning	2.13	1.31
5	I enjoy being asked for my thoughts on the learning process during online learning	3.55	0.73
6	I want to take part in choosing learning process during online learning	3.99	0.71
7	I am capable to recognize my strength during online learning	3.61	0.73
8	I set targets in my learning during online learning	3.62	0.83
9	I can choose what to study next during online learning	3.59	0.79
10	I like to be part in decision making on learning targets during online learning	3.57	0.77
1	I am confident in planning my learning during online learning	3.48	0.82

1			
1	I am capable of setting target of my learning during online learning	3.51	0.74
2			
1	I can propose tasks for classwork during online learning	3.71	0.76
3			
1	I want to be a part of decision making on choosing learning activities	3.99	0.71
4			
1	I am capable of evaluating my learning during online learning	3.33	0.98
5			
1	I can complete the activities on my own without teacher instruction	2.71	1.08
6			
1	I would like to learn independently after the online schedule of learning	3.29	0.90
8			
1	I can prepare and access my task during online learning	2.12	0.99
9			
2	I can study independently without much association with the teacher during online learning	3.01	1.11
0			

Based on their responses to the questionnaire's section measuring their capacity for independent study, the vast majority of students (61%) had a strong potential for learning on their own. Only seven of them, but that's 7.8%, showed a lot of skill to figure things out on their own. While 15 pupils (16.8%) showed modest potential for independent learning, no students have been found to have no aptitude for studying on their own. Learners are almost in agreement on the items presented to them to measure their prospective learning autonomy, with a mean score of more than 3.7 on items relating to making a decision, identifying a problem, having the freedom of choice, and being active in planning the learning process. With a mean score of 3.99, learner agreement was highest on the option to choose one's preferred mode of instruction. While studying online, students reported ( $M = 2.13$   $SD = 1.13$ ) less ability to filter among materials not recommended by the instructor. In a similar vein, their ability to assess their own learning developed at a more fundamental stage. Learners' views on the value of independence in the classroom are shown in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1.** Perceived usefulness of learner autonomy

Over half of the students polled ( $n = 52$ ) felt that learner autonomy aided their academic progress, making this a critically important finding. Similarly, almost one-third ( $n = 29$ ) of the students find it useful in some way while studying online. Some students ( $n = 9$ ) found it counterproductive to their education, while others ( $n = 13$ ) were skeptical of the benefits it would bring to their education.

## Discussion

Taking into account the findings, the current research demonstrated a possible development in the learner's autonomy. From the perspective of the learners, there are a variety of situations in which learner autonomy

might be used. The poll's average ranking of 3.7 for autonomous traits indicates that respondents generally agree with the comments made in the survey. In addition, students gave higher ratings to areas that related to their desire for autonomy in learning and task completion, easy access to educational materials, and input into the educational decision-making process. These features serve as indicators of learner autonomy and are thus essential for it. The results go counter to earlier studies that found most pupils relied heavily on their teachers and lacked the skills necessary to study independently. This discrepancy may be due to the smaller sample size in the current research. According to a research conducted by Al-Sharari and Alshurideh (2020), it was discovered that many students confused the term "learner autonomy" with the idea of complete freedom to choose how, when, and where they learned. And many students saw learner autonomy as a type of personal agency. In addition, the epidemic had ensured that all students had at least some exposure to the subject matter, if not complete familiarity. The examination of the data showed that students' perceptions of their own study autonomy are affected by the amount of interaction they have had with the material. Because of this, the conclusion presented here was disregarded. According to their definition, an independent learner is someone who is "self-determined, willing to take responsibility for their learning, setting learning goals, contributing to in setting learning directions, identifying individual strengths and weaknesses, understanding when, why, and how learning specific knowledge can be used, as well as what learning materials can be used," is "able to adapt to a study environment, using relevant interventions, monitoring their learning development, working collab" Because participants were only asked to respond to a single item on the questionnaire, many of these traits could not be identified. They also were not evaluated adequately in terms of how these qualities were actually used. Therefore, although there was some indication of autonomy among the students, it is more accurate to call it a reactive autonomy rather than an active one.

The conditions with no option of the schooling as a consequence of the epidemic were also an important part of this self-directed growth. As a result, without an educator hovering over their shoulders, students developed the habit of seeking out novel approaches to self-directed study to ensure they got everything done. The present research addresses a particular worry voiced by youngsters attending an online learning expo: that this method would become more demanding than annoying for learners who have gotten used to having their teacher there. Learners need to be encouraged to develop their own sense of autonomy by being given opportunities to express their own opinions and suggestions, to have their work reflected upon and critiqued by others, to have their points of view acknowledged, to have their rate of learning quantified, and to engage in meaningful interactions with others. Autonomous motivation has the potential to alleviate students' anxiety, boost their interest, and foster a feeling of competence among them while they study. Teachers and students have only recently begun to embrace the idea of learner autonomy, which challenges the traditional educational model that emphasizes students' passive observation rather than collaborative learning. When seen through the lens of cultural development, it becomes clear that traditional methods of teaching often leave students confused and their aspirations, in terms of the elements of which they have control, may be too lofty. Some students may not thrive when left to their own devices, thus their success will likely depend on the amount of help they get from instructors and peers.

## Conclusion

The study's findings provide strong evidence for the existence of autonomous behaviors during distance learning. In general, the results show that when asked about the efficacy of learner autonomy in the context of the current online environment, students identified it as a helpful technique for advancing their learning. Students expressed a strong interest in taking initiative in their own education and planning classroom activities and assignments. It is crucial to take into account students' needs and preferences for activities and pedagogies if we want to boost their independence and motivation to study. Students understood that they would be unable to contribute to the online learning process until they had enough time to improve the language and strengthen general communication in improving language abilities. The majority of students surveyed said they want to include group projects, online discussions, and other forms of collaborative learning into their future academic endeavors. The covid-19 pandemic, according to some scholars, might pave the way for the widespread adoption and improvement of online education. Students' ability to take charge of their own education has also been highlighted by this circumstance (Kim & Park, 2021). These results provide more support to this theory. Both teachers and students are warming up to this new approach to education, despite the fact that online, E-learning, or re- mote learning has several significant drawbacks owing to the loss of human connection. The methods used in the classroom are getting more diverse, and students find that using various electronic applications to

enhance their education is very fascinating. Though the results are intriguing, they need to be processed thoroughly. Participants in this research were coerced into choosing the online learning condition. A positive note, however, may be that the vast majority of individuals have a strong capacity for independent study. The results of the current study illuminate the potential for identifying, engaging with, and fostering autonomy in online learning, particularly in the context of Asia EFL but also in the context of online teaching across other subject areas in Asia education. The study's sample size was low, and the extent to which learner autonomy was quantified was limited. Explicitly exploring learners' autonomous action and viewpoints in relation to E-learning and Learners' autonomy requires further study with a bigger sample size. The focus of this study is on the concept of learner autonomy from the point of view of male students in Asia. To further develop the results of this effort, more study on learner autonomy in Asian female situations might be conducted. Currently, researchers are doing a separate investigation on whether or not there are any discernible disparities in the levels of independence felt by male and female students in online and group-based settings.

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