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Independent Learning in Higher Education: Perspectives and Challenges from EFL Students

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Article History	ABSTRACT
	Background: In learning other languages, higher education students' perceptions of independent learning, including their motivations, challenges, strategies, and impacts on achievement, are crucial to investigate. **Purpose:** This research seeks to elucidate EFL students' motives, obstacles, tactics, and the effects of independent learning from their perspective. **Method:** A qualitative research design is used in this research. Data is collected through an open-ended questionnaire. The participants are ten first-year postgraduate students enrolled in the Higher Education Study Skills course. Then, open and selective coding are performed to analyse the data. **Results and Discussion:** The findings show different motivations from participants in their motivations, challenges, strategies, and impact from independent learning. This research also provides the mechanism on how the students manage their challenges to help them achieve learning goals. Various findings related to students' perceptions invites contention among students. The most noticeable findings, for instance, were found impacts in academic achievement and teachers' role in independent learning by having 10 (ten) participants agreed on them. There are positive and negative impacts that come from independent learning. **Conclusions and Implications:** Revealing EFL higher students' perspectives can be ended up by conclusion that there are some students' socio background that can affect their perspectives. These findings implicate postgraduate students, lecturers, and future researchers to fill the blank information from the lecturers' perspectives, different gender perspectives, or add more statistical data to support the newest research about independent learning in higher education level.
	ABSTRAK

Latar Belakang: Dalam belajar bahasa lain, persepsi mahasiswa pendidikan tinggi tentang belajar mandiri, termasuk motivasi, tantangan, strategi, dan dampak mereka terhadap prestasi, sangat penting untuk diselidiki.

Tujuan: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan motivasi, tantangan, strategi, dan dampak pembelajaran mandiri siswa bahasa Inggris dari sudut pandang mereka.

Metode: Desain penelitian kualitatif digunakan dalam penelitian ini. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terbuka. Partisipan terdiri dari sepuluh mahasiswa pascasarjana tahun pertama yang terdaftar dalam program Studi Keterampilan Pendidikan Tinggi. Kemudian, pengkodean terbuka dan selektif dilakukan untuk menganalisis data.

Hasil dan Pembahasan: Temuan penelitian menunjukkan adanya motivasi, tantangan, strategi, dan dampak yang berbeda dari siswa dalam pembelajaran mandiri. Penelitian ini juga memberikan mekanisme tentang bagaimana siswa mengelola tantangan mereka untuk membantu mereka mencapai tujuan pembelajaran. Berbagai temuan terkait persepsi siswa mengundang pertentangan di antara siswa. Ada dampak positif dan negatif yang muncul dari pembelajaran mandiri.

Kesimpulan dan Implikasi: Mengungkap perspektif siswa bahasa Inggris di perguruan tinggi dapat diakhiri dengan kesimpulan bahwa ada beberapa latar belakang sosial siswa yang dapat memengaruhi perspektif mereka. Temuan ini melibatkan siswa pascasarjana, dosen, dan peneliti masa depan untuk mengisi informasi yang kosong dari perspektif dosen, perspektif gender yang berbeda, atau menambahkan lebih banyak data statistik untuk mendukung penelitian terbaru tentang pembelajaran mandiri di tingkat pendidikan tinggi.

Kata Kunci	*Pendidikan Tinggi; Tantangan-Motivasi-Strategi Siswa; Pembelajaran Mandiri*

INTRODUCTION

In the higher education realm especially college, teachers are attempting to foster the ability to learn independently for their students. The implementation of independent learning certainly aims to develop students' awareness to take responsibility for their learning process. Basically, this learning concept aims to give greater responsibility to students so that they can actively participate in teaching and learning activities both inside and outside the classroom.[1] Independent learning has received significant attention since it is a lifelong learning skill as many educations practitioners also implement it. Independent learning encourages students to have more flexible learning styles and encourage students to be lifelong learners.[2] Students who apply independent learning are expected to explore topics of their interest, pursue learning opportunities beyond formal coursework, and conduct independent research. These are expected as autonomous learning strategies that have been shown to significantly increase students' independence and critical thinking skills, which are crucial for academic success and professional development.[3]

Furthermore, encouraging self-directed learning helps students develop a proactive approach to their education as well as making them more adaptable and resilient to face of new challenges.[4] The benefits of independent learning certainly encourage educators in higher education to assist the students to implement better learning methods so that it can be used to prepare themselves in the complexities of the modern world. However, in implementing self-directed learning or independent

learning, students can find difficulties or challenges. In this case, students need to cope with their problems by themselves. Finding the solution or seeking for help can be one of the ways to overcome from the challenges.[5] Moreover, students' learning motivation also can be one of the affective factors during implementation of independent learning along with teachers' motivation.[6] t is therefore, the higher students' learning motivation, the more independent learning becomes effective to be implemented.

This research addresses a significant gap in the existing literature by exploring the perspectives of higher education EFL students on independent learning, a topic that remains underexplored, especially from the students' own point of view. Most existing studies tend to focus on learning strategies, teacher perceptions, or institutional support, but rarely examine how students themselves understand and experience independent learning after being introduced to it through formal academic instruction. This study offers a fresh perspective by focusing on students who have specifically studied independent learning as part of their Higher Education Study Skills classes. By doing so, it provides valuable insights into how students conceptualize and apply independent learning principles in their academic lives. The novelty of this study lies in its attention to a group of learners who have received explicit guidance on independent learning, allowing for a deeper understanding of how such instruction influences their learning behavior, motivation, and autonomy. Eventually, this research aims to reveal EFL students' motivations, challenges, strategies and impact in implementing independent learning from their perspective. By gaining a deeper understanding of student perspectives, educators and policymakers can develop more effective strategies to promote and support independent learning in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Independent Learning

In independent learning context, the personality of each learner is unquestionably taken into consideration. Independent learning also can be defined as capacity of learners to take initiative, establish goals, and actively manage their own learning process without the need for direct supervision or assistance from the instructor.[7] In the process of learning, this particular learning approach offers a number of advantages. Additionally, independent learning is characterized by the active involvement of learners in the process of obtaining, assessing, and synthesizing knowledge, as well as reflecting on their own learning experience.[8] This allows students to have a better understanding of what they require and desire. Moreover, students can be more active, effective, and independent in their studying when they are given the opportunity to examine by their own autonomy.[9]

The concept of self-directed learning has certainly been the subject of a great deal of research. There are some of the studies that have been conducted on the topic of the significance of independent learning in the development of critical thinking abilities, self-regulation, and self-directed learning habits among students.[10][11][12][13] Students are able to experience the advantages of independent learning.[14] This is due to the fact that when students take on a larger level of responsibility for their own education, they will cultivate a sense of ownership, which ultimately results in a more profound comprehension and the retention of information.

Self-directed learning has been shown to have a favorable relationship between student engagement and their academic performance in college.[15] Because of the existence of this association, it is demonstrated that students who are self-directed learners and have initiative are able to identify areas in which they are lacking in their learning and, as a result, are able to increase their knowledge on their own. In addition to this, emphasizing the importance that autonomous motivation plays in improving the learning results of students.[13]

The Challenges in Implementing Independent Learning

Despite of many advantages, there are clearly obstacles to overcome when putting self-directed learning into practice. Before a student can develop a sense of responsibility, they must first have an awareness of self. This is necessary for the development of an independent learning mindset. Once the implementation is complete, it is necessary for students to be able to arrange themselves in the context of independent learning. Students may encounter challenges such as difficulties in managing their time, a lack of self-discipline, and difficulties in gaining access to resources that are suitable for their needs.[16][17] Furthermore, students who are accustomed to a learning strategy that is more regimented and led by the instructor may find it challenging to shift to a format that emphasizes self-directed learning.[18]

The Impacts of Implementing Independent Learning in EFL Context

Despite the challenges of independent learning for EFL students, implementing it also affects several elements in educational field. Related to students' motivation, students who implement independent learning have their confidence increased,[19][20] and also it helps schools to increase their graduates' quality.[21] It can be concluded that implementing independent learning is not only beneficial for the students, but also helps schools or education institution get better results. In this case, all elements such as students, teachers, principles, school staffs, and school stakeholder should take their role in the implementation of independent learning. Then, as the main role, students are needed to be prepared and will to conduct independent learning.[22] Combining all those educational aspects can help EFL students to achieve the learning goal by implementing independent learning. Therefore, in EFL context, implementing independent provides positive impact for the students and teaching-learning process.

Over the past few years, there has been a growing interest in gaining a better understanding of the viewpoints that students hold regarding independent learning and the role that it plays in their overall academic experience.[22][23] Qualitative research has yielded significant insights into the ways in which students perceive the concept of independent learning.[1][24] Nevertheless, there is still a need for additional research to investigate the intricacies of students' experiences and perspectives in this field, particularly with regard to the knowledge of students' motives, problems, and tactics to engage in independent learning.

METHOD

Regarding the purpose of this study, the researchers adopted a qualitative research design to explore the perspectives of EFL students in higher education regarding independent learning. Understanding students' voices particularly those of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is essential because their experiences, challenges, and strategies may differ significantly from those of native speakers or students in other disciplines. In order to gain thorough understanding on such experiences, descriptive qualitative research design under a qualitative research approach was valued suitable to dig deeper how they approach independent learning. Further, by focusing on graduate students enrolled in a higher education study skills course during their second semester, this study aims to capture rich, first-hand insights into how these learners perceive and engage with self-directed learning practices. These insights can inform teachers and curriculum developers in designing more supportive and effective learning environments tailored to the specific needs of EFL learners. Further, an open-ended questionnaire consisting of ten questions was utilized as the study instrument. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gain an understanding of the individual's motivations, tactics, problems, and perceived rewards of independent learning. The questions, sparked in the motivation and challenges aspect, were *"What motivations prompted you to engage in independent learning activities during your college-level studies?", "What were some of the main challenges you faced when attempting to study independently at college level?".*

Ten graduate students were selected using purposive sampling to participate in the data

collection process. All participants were currently enrolled in higher education institutions and had prior experience with independent learning. The inclusion criteria required that participants had taken a higher education course and had engaged in independent learning activities, such as self-directed research, project work, or study beyond formal classroom instruction.

The data collection was conducted online using a Google Form containing a series of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences and perspectives on independent learning. To ensure the validity and clarity of the instrument, the questionnaire was reviewed through expert judgment. Based on the feedback, several refinements were made to improve the clarity and focus of the items that ensured the instrument would effectively elicit meaningful responses from participants. Following this validation process, the final version of the questionnaire was distributed to the participants. An interactive method of analysis was then employed to review and interpret the qualitative data gathered from the responses. The study adopted a qualitative research approach guided by the interaction cycle model, which encompasses the stages of data reduction, data presentation, drawing conclusions, and verification, as outlined by Miles and Huberman.[25]

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

After conducting data collection and data analysis, in this section the researchers present the results of the open-ended questionnaire that has been filled in by 10 graduate students who took the Higher Education Study Skills course as respondents. There are four main findings reported here, namely, (1) Students' perceptions of their motivation to engage in independent learning activities, (2) Students' perceptions of the main challenges faced when attempting to learn independently, (3) Students' perceptions of strategies used to overcome challenges when learning independently, and (4) Students' perception of the perceived impact of independent learning. The following table presented the results of open-ended questionnaire.

Table 1. Results of Open-ended Questionnaire on Independent Learning

Category	Subcategory	Frequency of students
Motivations	Pressure to achieve high academic performance	7
	Clear career goals	7
Challenges	Time management	7
	Understanding the material	5
	Distracting	3
Strategies	Following discussion forum	5
	Making to-do list for schedule	5
Impacts (academic achievement)	Increased understanding and mastery of the material	10
Impacts (emotional)	High feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction	3
	Increased confidence and motivation	5
	Increased feelings of stress and anxiety	7
Impacts (skills beyond academic)	Time management skills	9
	Communication skills	4
	Problem-solving skills	8
Impact (environment through independent learning)	Quiet and organized physical environment	5
	Availability of digital and technological resources	6
	Interaction with peers	2
	Not feeling the impact of the environment	2

Impact (success in independent learning)	High academic achievement	7
	Development of personal skills and competencies	6
	Personal satisfaction in the learning process	6
Impact (positive or negative)	Positive experiences that influenced academic achievement	9
	Negative experiences that caused stress and anxiety	6
Teachers' role in independent learning	Provides guidance and additional resources	10
	Provides constructive feedback	7

Students' Perceptions of Their Motivation to Engage in Independent Learning Activities

In response to the first question in the questionnaire on what motivates students to engage in independent learning activities during their studies at university, 70% of students responded that the pressure they feel to achieve high academic performance. Then, one of the main motivations driving students to engage in independent learning activities comes from the need to meet high academic standards set by themselves or external expectations, such as from family or competitive peers. As stated by P1 that:

"The motivation that encouraged me to be involved in independent learning activities during my studies at university was the target to complete academics on time".

The academic pressure experienced by Participant 1 (P1) primarily originated from within herself, rather than from external sources such as family, teacher, or peers. This internal source of pressure reflects a form of self-imposed motivation, which aligns with the principles of self-determination theory which is a crucial element in fostering academic achievement. In P1's case, her desire to meet personal standards and goals served as a key motivator in her academic efforts.[26] P2 added,

"The pressure to achieve high academic performance comes from the expectations of my parents and family who want to see me succeed academically".

This is in line with a previous study, which showed that family expectations can significantly affect students' academic motivation and engagement.[27] In addition, having clear and well-defined career goals can serve as a powerful source of motivation for students to engage in independent learning. For instance, Participant 3 (P3) explained that her strong preference for studying independently was largely driven by her personal career aspirations.

"I want to develop my skills to achieve higher career".

Similarly, P8 stated the same thing about his motivation,

"I engage in self-directed learning to gain expertise that will set me apart in the job market".

This is supported by previous research indicating that students who possess well-defined career aspirations are more likely to engage in proactive learning behaviors. Such students tend to take initiative in managing their own learning, seek out additional resources, and set personal goals that align with their future career plans. The clarity of their professional ambitions provides a sense of direction and purpose, which in turn fosters greater motivation and autonomy in the learning process.[28] This indicates that independent learning is effective to be used when the students want to achieve better career and gain more knowledge and finish their study faster.

Students' Perceptions of the Main Challenges Faced when Attempting to Learn Independently

In spite of the motivations that drive students to independent study, students also face several

challenges when attempting independent learning at the college level. Time management emerged as a major issue, with more than one-half of students having difficulty balancing their study schedules. P4 said,

"The main challenges I faced when studying independently at the college level were managing time effectively".

This finding is in line with two previous research, which highlighted that poor time management skills can hinder academic performance and increase stress levels.[16][29] The other issue of understanding complex material without direct guidance from lecturers was also a significant challenge, often leading to feelings of overwhelm and confusion in completing assignments. A statement from P5:

"I am not very good at understanding the material, so when working on material it takes me longer to complete the task".

That problem also appeared to P9 and P10. They felt that the materials are difficult, they cannot understand the lessons easily and need some helps to finish or to understand them. Several studies make a similar point indicating that students often need scaffolding and support to effectively engage in self-directed learning.[22][30][31] Distractions from the surrounding environment, such as gadget notifications and other interruptions, further exacerbate this difficulty. P9 mentioned,

"I am often distracted by things around me when studying independently, like gadget notifications."

This is supported by a previous study, which found that digital distraction significantly reduced students' attention and productivity.[32] These distractions can hinder students' ability to concentrate during self-directed study sessions, ultimately affecting the quality of their independent learning. In addition to digital distractions, a lack of intrinsic motivation and the absence of a well-structured study schedule are commonly cited as barriers to effective independent learning.

Students' Perceptions of Strategies Used to Overcome Challenges when Learning Independently

Students apply various strategies to overcome challenges in independent learning. There are half of the total students making a structured study schedule as a common approach that can help them to manage their time and stay focused. As stated by P6 about the strategy she uses in independent learning is making to do list or timeline. This is underpinned by research showing that structured schedules can significantly improve time management and academic performance.[16] The next strategy is participating in study groups or discussion forums. This also provides valuable support and motivation. P5 stated,

"Studying with friends helps me understand difficult material".

This strategy is reinforced by social constructivist theory,[33] which states that learning is a social process and students can achieve higher levels of understanding through interaction with peers. These strategies collectively help students navigate self-study difficulties and improve their academic performance. In other words, work in pair or doing peer feedback with friends can help student to understand the lesson better.[34] By creating a to-do list or doing peer review, students can manage their time on tasks and reduce distractions. Meanwhile, if students participate in discussion forums, it will help them deal with their difficulties in understanding the material.

Students' Perception of the Perceived Impact of Independent Learning

Positive impacts of engaging in independent learning activities

Of the nine students who responded, there were several positive experiences that significantly

affected their academic performance. The first is that students felt an increased understanding and mastery of the material. Students reported that engagement in independent learning helped them better understand and master the subject matter. P1 stated:

"It is a significant increase in understanding and mastery of the material".

In addition, P7 gave her opinion that "by giving more time, I could understand more". This deeper understanding allows students to explore topics in more depth and learn at their own pace, which contributes to higher academic achievement. This is strengthened by research showing that self-directed learning promotes deeper understanding and retention of information, which is critical for academic success.[35]

The second positive impact is that students feel a high sense of achievement and satisfaction as a result of self-directed learning. P3 stated:

"I understand the material I feel confident and satisfied".

This feeling arises because students are able to achieve their academic goals and master challenging material. This can also have an impact on increasing motivation to continue learning. In line with previous study that found students who frequently experience feelings of academic fulfillment are more likely to remain motivated and committed to their studies which leads to sustained academic improvement.[36]

Third, the increase in confidence and motivation of students is one of the most important factors in their development. Fifty percent of respondents reported that self-study increased their confidence and motivation. P1 stated:

"I have increased self-confidence and motivation because I feel I have a better understanding of the material".

This suggests that success in managing their studies independently gives them the confidence to face academic challenges such as having to understand the material. This finding is in line with previous study that highlighted that the autonomy provided by an independent learning environment helps build students' confidence in their abilities.[37] When they feel satisfied with the results, it motivates them to continue achieving.

The next positive impact that students had was that independent learning influenced their skill development. More than half of the students stated that independent learning helped them develop important personal skills and competencies, such as time management skills, communication skills, and problem-solving skills. This is proven by P4's answer:

"Yes, I believe that independent learning can improve skills beyond academics, including time management, communication, and problem-solving".

Time management skills help students in prioritizing the tasks that must be done first. With this, students are also able to make a to do list to organize their learning activities. Stated by P2 "I have to schedule and prioritize my own study time". In line with previous study revealed that students who develop strong time management skills will be better equipped to handle the demands of higher education.[38] The improvement in communication skills was felt by students when they were involved in the discussion forum. P10 stated:

"Communication skills can improve too, as you might engage in online forums or study groups to discuss your learning".

Students who regularly engage in collaborative learning environments show significant improvements in their communication skills, which are critical for academic and professional success.[39] Meanwhile, their problem-solving skills also improved due to self-learning. P5 stated,

"My ability to solve problems in learning can be handled well",

indicating that self-regulated learning promotes the development of problem-solving skills by requiring students to independently identify problems, seek resources and implement solutions.[40]

Negative impacts of engaging in independent learning activities

Although many positive experiences were reported, some students also experienced negative impacts of self-directed learning, namely increased feelings of stress and anxiety. Less than all respondents reported that self-directed learning increased their feelings of stress and anxiety. This was often due to the responsibility of managing their own learning without direct support from lecturers or peers. As P8 stated:

"I felt so stressed trying to keep up with the material without any guidance".

The lack of guidance in understanding the material greatly affects the stress felt by students. In line with P5 "I felt was that I had difficulty understanding the material". A significant increase in feelings of stress and anxiety greatly affects students' emotional and psychological well-being. Sometimes students feel motivated and excited in doing individual assignments, but it turns out that this also causes them to feel anxiety. Evidenced by the statement from P7:

"I put effort on studying, but I become stressed".

This finding is supported by previous study which found that self-directed learning can lead to higher stress levels if students are not provided with sufficient support.[41] Their study highlights that without proper guidance, feedback, or access to learning resources, students may feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of managing their own learning. This can result in anxiety, reduced academic performance, and a decreased sense of motivation, particularly among learners who are not yet fully equipped with the skills needed for effective self-regulation.

Based on the analysis of the students' questionnaire answers, it shows that while independent learning can provide many benefits in terms of improved academic performance and personal skill development, there are also significant challenges that need to be addressed to minimize the negative impact on student well-being. Additional support or feedback from lecturers or peers and a conducive learning environment are essential to help students manage the stress and anxiety that may arise from independent learning.[34]

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research explores the motivations, challenges, strategies, and impacts associated with self-directed learning as experienced by tertiary students. The findings indicate that while self-directed learning offers several positive outcomes such as enhanced comprehension of academic material, increased self-confidence, and the development of essential personal skills, it also presents notable difficulties.

In terms of motivation, students reported that the pressure to meet high academic expectations and future career goals served as the primary drivers for engaging in independent learning. However, they also encountered several challenges, particularly in managing stress and anxiety, as well as in understanding complex subject matter without the benefit of direct instructional support. To address these challenges, students employed various strategies, including the use of structured study schedules and collaborative learning techniques such as study groups and online discussion forums. These approaches were found to be effective in improving time management, reducing distractions, and enhancing comprehension through peer interaction.

Despite these efforts, the findings highlight a persistent issue: the emotional and psychological strain caused by the lack of direct support from educators. Although self-directed learning fosters

autonomy, it may also increase students' vulnerability to stress that suggests the need for a more balanced and supportive approach.

In light of these insights, it is recommended that educators and policymakers implement targeted support systems to help students navigate self-directed learning more effectively. Providing structured guidance, accessible resources and emotional support can foster students' self-regulation and resilience. Finally, such efforts will better prepare students to meet the demands of contemporary academic and professional environments. Future research should examine personalized strategies that accommodate diverse student personalities and learning styles. Using this way, it will help ensure that the transition to self-directed learning is both effective and sustainable for a wider range of learners.

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