



Has the Covid-19 Pandemic Brought Our Students Closer to be Autonomous Learners? A Post-pandemic Analysis in Higher Education

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Abstract. This research explores how the shift in the teaching and learning processes during the pandemic has affected the way students manage their learning for the past couple of years. When the world came to a halt due to the virus, education came to a staggering situation where everything is shifted to online. It has been two years since the world announced that it is in a pandemic. As countries are recovering right now, so is the education sector. What is interesting to see is how this past situation has trained our students to be. Has it made our students more flexible, reflective and venturesome? Have our students been more responsible and critical when they face problems during online learning? These questions are tried to be answered in this research. The sample of this study are the students at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar from three different departments. Through a questionnaire, the researcher analyses their responses to see whether being in an online learning for the past two years has led them to be more autonomous and independent toward their learning.

Keywords: autonomous learners · covid-19 · higher education

1 Introduction

Being hit by a pandemic all across the globe, the learning process in formal and non-formal education faced a major change. What used to be a chattery classroom now shifted to a virtual meeting room. The markers, whiteboard, pen and paper now transformed into several collaborative platforms and interactive applications. It all happened due to the massive effect of COVID-19. Though no one can say that the virus has gone forever, the impact it has brought to the world of education lingers.

Online learning system has been the only answer to teaching students during the pandemic. The time and effort that teachers and students invested in online learning shed a perspective of learners being independent and autonomous. Since the interaction among teachers-students, and students-students are limited, it is up to the learners themselves to figure out any hindrance they find during the learning process.

The notion of autonomous learning is not brand new in the realm of education. The term self-directed learning refers to the learners' initiative in diagnosing and formulating learning needs, identifying learning source, choosing and applying learning strategies

as well as evaluating the result of learning. In further development, Holec [1] believes that learners' autonomy involves taking control of one's learning, determining the objectives, defining content and progressions, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring progress and also evaluating outcomes. In addition, Dickinson [2] believes that autonomy is essentially seen as an attitude toward learning rather than a methodology. To achieve the state of autonomy, a long and deliberate process is required.

Further Dickinson [2] reiterates that the essential quality of autonomous learners is active and independent involvement toward their learning process. An autonomous learner to Dickinson should be able to identify what is being taught, formulate their own learning objectives, select and implement appropriate learning strategies, as well as monitor and evaluate their own use of learning strategies. In line with the aforementioned statement, Little [3] argues that learner autonomy includes the process of planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating their own learning.

Though the general definition of self-directed learning and learner autonomy might be overlapping, Budianto and Mason [4] believe that the two terms are different. The difference lies in the source of learning initiative. To them, the learning initiative in an autonomous learner does not necessarily come from within the learner himself, rather it is established from the teacher. In contrast, the learning initiative in self-directed learning emerges internally from the learner's learning motivation. In their research, moreover, they highlight the four key features in autonomous learning, namely: willingness to accept responsibility, dedication in planning, effective strategies usage, and progress monitoring.

Research in the field of autonomous learning is abundant. The majority of them are in the field of language learning [4–7], though there is another in the field of higher mathematics [8] and some other in the area of teacher training [9] and interpreter training [10]. As the popularity of learner autonomy grows, some researchers also tried to develop instruments to measure learners' autonomy [11, 12].

During the pandemic where activities are restricted, teachers and students are physically restrained and not being able to do meetings in a classroom. As a result, teachers make use of technologies and media to make learning possible [13]. This is what is popularly known as online learning. There are ample resources dealing with the challenges during online learning [14–16]. However, there is only limited research trying to see what these challenges brought us about. Thus, this research tries to see to what extent the students have developed the traits of autonomous learning during the two years implementation of online learning.

2 Method

This is descriptive quantitative research. The data was gathered through questionnaire and observation and interview. The samples of this research were the students taking English class from three departments at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar. The questionnaire was in two sections, the first section questions the attributes of autonomous learners in general and the second section was particularly about learners' autonomy in English learning. The responses in the questionnaire were in the form of Likert scale where 1 indicates that the respondents strongly disagree with the statement, and 5 which indicates that the respondents strongly agree with the statement.

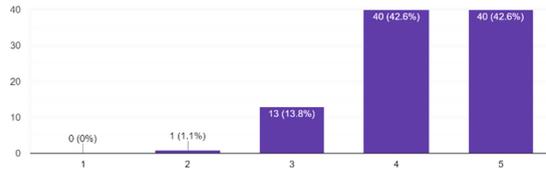


Fig. 1. The responses regarding to formulating learning goals

The data were then analysed quantitatively to clearly see how the students perceive their learning during the pandemic based on the attributes of autonomous learners. The result indicates the personal judgement of the students' learning process during the pandemic.

There were 95 students responding to the questionnaire. They came from different disciplines namely language education, agriculture technology, and business management. One thing they have in common is that they are all learning English as foreign language.

3 Findings and Discussion

This section presents the responses gathered from the samples regarding the four major characteristics of autonomous learners, namely formulating learning goals, choosing learning strategies, monitoring their learning progress, reflecting and evaluating learning results. Further, the questionnaire also asks whether they feel that they are more independent in their learning through online.

The following charts are how the students feel in general learning online during the pandemic, seen from the aspects of autonomous learners.

3.1 Learners' Autonomy in General After the Implementation of Online Learning

The first questionnaire was about several statements about online learning in general. The respondents were asked to respond to the statements which have been formulated regarding the attributes of autonomous learners, namely formulating learning goals, choosing learning strategies, monitoring learning progress, and evaluating or reflecting on their learning process.

3.1.1 Formulating Learning Goals

When being asked whether they plan their learning goal in their learning process during the pandemic, equally 42.6% respondents chose 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' which means that they do plan their learning goal beforehand. They set specific targets/goals that they want to achieve (Fig. 1).

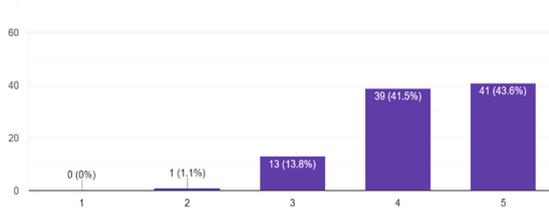


Fig. 2. The responses regarding to choosing learning strategies

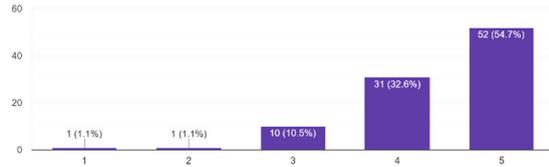


Fig. 3. The responses regarding to managing learning strategies

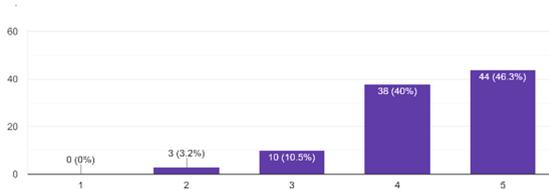


Fig. 4. The responses regarding to monitoring learning progress

3.1.2 Choosing Learning Strategies

85.1% of respondents claimed that they have specific strategies in achieving their learning goal during online learning. While 14.9% are either undecided or disagree with the statement (Fig. 2).

Furthermore, online learning gives them the flexibility of managing their time and strategy for their learning process. It can be seen from the responses to the statement of whether or not online learning makes them easier to manage their learning strategies.

More than half of the respondents confirm that through online learning it is easier for them to manage their learning process. Whereas only less than 11% of the respondents were not really sure and only 1.1% respondent answered disagree and strongly disagree (Fig. 3).

3.1.3 Monitoring Learning Progress

When being asked whether it is easier for them to monitor their learning progress during online learning, most of the respondents agree that in online learning they have easy access to their learning progress. The fact that during online learning, educators and institutions used Learning Management System (LMS), makes access more viable to the students anywhere and anytime (Fig. 4).

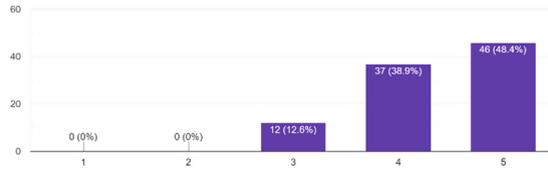


Fig. 5. The responses regarding to reflecting learning progress

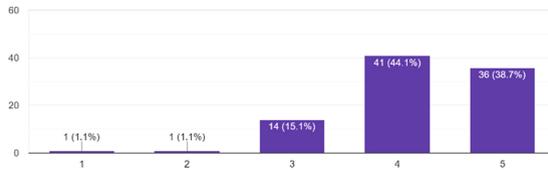


Fig. 6. The responses toward learning independence

3.1.4 Reflecting on Learning Progress

It can be clearly seen that most of the respondents agreed that they do reflect on their learning progress and see whether they met their learning goal or not. If the goal is not reached then they did a reflection on what things they should improve. Doing reflection indicates that students are aware of their current ability and fully responsible for what they should do next (Fig. 5).

3.1.5 Becoming More Independent During Online Learning

Finally, when being asked whether or not online learning makes them more independent in their learning, 44.1% chose to agree and 38.7% chose the option strongly agree. Only 15.1% of them were undecided and around 1% disagreed and strongly disagreed. Online learning lets them take control of their own learning and be more independent in making decisions (Fig. 6).

3.2 Learners' Autonomy in English Language Learning

Table 1 summarises the responses given by the respondents particularly about their autonomy in English language class. The question comprises the aspect of autonomy in terms of identifying learning objectives, selecting learning strategies, monitoring their own progress, evaluating their result, and working away to solve problems that they find during the learning process.

From the table we can see that the majority of the respondents are aware of the learning objectives in every meeting, and they set up strategies to meet the learning goals. They monitor their learning progress and revisit the materials when needed. Furthermore, when they encounter a problem during their learning process, they argued that they can solve it by themselves. Despite the mode of delivery of the lesson through online platform, the respondents believed that they tried to participate actively in the classroom and around 86.7% of them are satisfied with the result of their English learning.

Table 1. Responses on autonomy in English language learning

Statements	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Undecided (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
I know the objectives of the lesson in every meeting.	0	0	12	50	37
To achieve the learning objectives, I have my own learning strategies.	0	1.1	17.4	42.4	39.1
During the English learning process, I always do and hand my assignment on time.	0	0	14.1	30.4	55.4
I revisit the materials taught in English class during online learning.	1.1	1.1	15.4	41.8	40.7
When I'm having difficulties in learning English, I can overcome it by myself either by asking or looking for the information.	0	3.3	13	39.5	47.8
I have my own way to monitor my progress in learning English.	0	1.1	20.7	47.8	30.4
I always try to actively participate in an online English class.	1.1	2.2	15.4	39.6	41.8
I am satisfied with the result of this semester English class.	1	1.1	12.2	37.8	48.9

Both results of the questionnaire indicate that students develop a degree of learner's autonomy through the process of online learning during the pandemic. Behind all those numbers, when being delved deeper the pros and cons about online learning are still there. Through a follow up question, the respondent stated that even though online

learning gives them flexibility, some technical drawbacks, like the internet connections and gadget specification, still pose challenges.

What should be kept in mind is that autonomy is not primarily a matter of the physical setting of the learning process [2]. During the pandemic, teachers and students are physically in different places. What makes the learning take place is the instruction given by the teachers.

It is true that during the early time of the pandemic, both teachers and students struggled through the fast changing from offline to online learning [14, 15]. Access to the internet, supportive gadgets, time and money, as well as the curriculum contribute to the major hurdles of online learning.

As time passed by, teachers and students managed to survive the challenges. Though several problems persist, the process of online learning to some extent leads the students to be more independent and fully in charge toward their own learning.

Furthermore, when being asked whether they think that online learning is suitable for higher education, their answers vary. Directly quoting their personal answer toward the questions are these statements:

“Dengan adanya pembelajaran online saya sebagai mahasiswa menjadi lebih tertarik untuk belajar dan mencari tau lebih dalam tentang materi-materi yang sudah di pelajari”

“Pembelajaran online selama pandemi membuat mahasiswa lebih mandiri dalam belajar dan memahami materi secara mendalam.”

“Pembelajaran online saat masa perkuliahan membantu saya dalam berbagai hal seperti saya yang menjadi mandiri saat masa kuliah berbeda dengan saya yang waktu SMA bisa bertemu teman dan teman selalu membantu, jika kuliah online saya lebih mandiri karena tidak bertemu teman dan mulai melakukan tugas atau ulangan jarang dibantu teman...”

It translates to the claim that online learning makes them more independent in learning and understanding the materials and so does during the test. It encourages them to find things on their own and also do things on their own. That it is different from the high school time where everything can be done with the help of a friend. Some other statements also agreed that this online learning is suitable for working students. Students with a part time job can get the most of this online learning.

However, different perspectives states by some other students:

“Menurut saya belajar online kurang efektif karena saya sering terhalang sinyal saat melaksanakan zoom meeting atau google meet”

“Pembelajaran online kurang efektif karena bnyak kendala dan kurang konsentrasi dan pemahaman kurang intinya harapan kuliah offline.”

“Menurut pendapat saya, saya lebih suka untuk belajar offline karena lebih memahami materi yang disampaikan, jika belajar online kendala yang saya hadapi adalah di bagian jaringan”

From those statements, the major concern about online learning is still on the internet access. Other than that, students still expect to experience campus life and meet their friends directly.

4 Conclusions

Despite all the challenges in online learning during the pandemic, the silver lining is that our students are working toward becoming autonomous learners. From the attributes of learners' autonomy, the majority of the students agreed that they do plan their learning goal, choosing the right strategy to achieve the goal, monitor their own learning and do reflection toward the whole process of learning.

In higher education, adult learners are faced with responsibilities dealing with their studies. Working students are not only academically responsible for their studies but also financially. Online learning thus gives them the flexibility in managing their time. However, the availability of information in the internet does not automatically make our students autonomous, it is the work of the teacher in preparing materials, formulating objectives, designing tasks and evaluating students that will enlighten the tunnel to learners' autonomy.

While it is up to the institution of higher education to provide online or offline learning post pandemic, this research gives insight that online learning nurtures learners' autonomy, which further lead them to be long life learners.

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