



# Non-ELT Students' Cognitive Autonomy in Choosing and Attending Applied Linguistics Course

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**Abstract.** This study investigates undergraduate students' experience on their enrolment to the elective Applied Linguistics course in an English Department in Indonesia. The focus of the course is on the practical application of research findings in linguistics to the teaching and learning of ESL, which is suitable for the ELT cohort. However, students of non-ELT cohorts—the linguistics and the literature ones—also enrolled in the course, and a final enrolment of 44 non-ELT students was in class. Based on the teacher's personal evaluation of their class performance, she suspected that the non-ELT students did not make sufficient effort. One main reason was that students might not choose the elective course based on their cognitive autonomy, of which the five multi-faceted components were: evaluative thinking, voicing opinions, making decisions, self-assessing, and comparative values. Set within this context, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how students practiced the five elements of cognitive autonomy in choosing and attending the course. An in-depth open-ended questionnaire was distributed to all 44 students via email after the final assessment of the semester. Another research tool of one-on-one in-depth written interview using WhatsApp was utilized to probe and ask follow up questions. The findings revealed that most non-ELT students did not optimize their cognitive autonomy, except for few who had aspired to build their career in language teaching. This indicates that students need more guidance to decide what elective course to choose for their individualized career choice. For those who are already registered in the course, they need to start with improving their academic literacy skills and goal-directed behaviour, in order that they can independently and successfully exercise their cognitive autonomy.

**Keywords:** cognitive autonomy · elective course · applied linguistics

## 1 Introduction

Applied Linguistics is an elective course in the undergraduate program offered to all the three cohorts in a reputable English Department in Indonesia: English Language teaching, linguistics and literature. It is offered as a two-unit course for two-hour lecture—out of the about 130 credits to graduate from the program—with the description stated below:

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*This course provides students with adequate knowledge of the relationships between linguistics, especially its research findings, and second/foreign language teaching and learning, especially English Language Teaching (ELT). More particularly, students are required to understand a basic knowledge of how they can solve problems related to language in general and problems in ELT. By the end of this course, students should be able to apply a knowledge of linguistics to problems related to language in life and those in ELT; to propose solutions to problems related to language in life and those in ELT; and to analyze theoretical issues in applied linguistics as a basis to deal with problems related to language in life and those in ELT.*

Applied linguistics course is more relevant for the English language teaching (ELT) cohort; however, students of non-ELT cohorts seemed to show special interests in taking the course. In the second semester of the year 2020–2021 a final enrolment of 44 students was in the course. This might indicate that non-ELT students also believed that the course was promising for career opportunities. Although most of them aspire to fill a variety of roles in non-teaching fields, such as translation services companies, content writing services providers, journalism, creative industries, it seemed that they might also be aware that their knowledge of English could still prepare them to land a teaching job, which was believed to be in high demand, when they missed the more desirable job opportunities.

Cognitive autonomy is basic for independence, complex thinking, and making decisions. It is important for course choice, as good course choice is crucial for developing students' autonomous skills in learning for their achievement outcome and future career. However, in practice the decision to register in an elective course is not always based on students' cognitive autonomy for their personal career prospects. According to Bednar and Fisher's analysis, their choice may be based on their perception of the difficulty level of the elective course, the risk to fail, and parents' or peers' influence [1].

Little has been conducted to investigate students' behaviour and seriousness in attending elective content courses in English Departments, especially in online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study detailed the students' use of their cognitive autonomy in the pandemic learning environment, particularly on how they reflected on their course choice of applied linguistics, in terms of their efforts, their own ability and their achievement [2, 3]. Thus, the implication of this study is to help students improve their use of cognitive autonomy in their online applied linguistics course during the pandemic. Based on the reflection, teachers can also help students with more preparation, especially in re-structuring the learning environment and pedagogical practices.

Set in this context, the purpose of this study is to provide an overview of the empirical evidence of the students' cognitive autonomy; specifically, to pursue the answer of the following question: "How do students practice the five elements of cognitive autonomy in choosing and attending the applied linguistic course?".

## **2 Literature Review**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students should be more autonomous in their online learning and received more support to develop and exert their autonomy [4–6]. This

condition also happened to the students under study. They were already in their second semester of being deprived of face-to-face instruction since the outbreak of the pandemic.

## 2.1 Cognitive Autonomy: Facilitating Students' Autonomy

In its general term autonomy means self-rule, self-regulation, self-governance, or self-reliance. Learning autonomy means the students' ability to be responsible for what they learn and how to learn with their own learning styles and strategies. In other words, they are ready to learn without being supervised. It does not mean, however, that teachers are unnecessary, as teachers have a new role as a counsellor and manager on how to learn autonomously. In fact, according to constructivism, the learner autonomy is an integral part of all meaningful learning as learners, and there are at least three ways to facilitate students' autonomy: organizational, school content, and cognitive [7].

Autonomy itself consists of three facets. The first is the behavioural autonomy. The second is the emotional autonomy; the third is the cognitive autonomy, which is the focus of investigation in this study. Cognitive autonomy is essential for developing students' independence, deep thought, self-reliance for problem solving, and use of good judgment for their future capacity rather than instinct, especially in various life domains such as employment opportunity and pursuing a career [8, 9].

It takes more time for cognitive autonomy to mature compared to behavioural autonomy, usually until students' mid-twenties [10]. It is because of human cognitive autonomy, the socio-cultural world is not an external force that can influence their beliefs and actions. Their thoughts and minds do not passively accept other people's beliefs and actions. Instead, they can actively and creatively make their own discovery [11]. Their decisions are based on their own values, rather than simply accepting the standards of others or values with which they were raised [12].

Cognitive autonomy is multi-faceted with five components: evaluative thinking, voicing opinions, making decisions, self-assessing, and comparative values. Evaluative thinking is the ability to set goals, evaluating the negatives and positives of options to achieve the determined goals; voicing opinions is the ability to express and clarify desire, beliefs and opinions; making decisions is the ability to judge probability, think analytically, or consider ideas in the abstract [13], to think independently based on own experiences; self-assessment is the ability to reflect on own actions and evaluate the process of the actions, reasons for actions taken or not taken, evaluation of success achieved in actions taken, own abilities, own strengths, and talents [9, 10]. Comparative validation is how much one compares oneself to others for acceptance or for a measure of success.

## 2.2 Understanding Cognitive Autonomy from the Neurobiological Perspective

There has been little research conducted to young adults or college students considering their cognitive autonomy, but research conducted to adolescents has demonstrated that their brain has not fully developed, and they suffer from dilemmas in an either-or-choice. They tend to misperceive certain choices as less risky and can be overly optimistic on another [15], because decision-making, planning and self-control, are the last part to mature. This area of the brain does not fully develop until they were 25 [9, 16–18]. As students under this study were still in about 21 years old, their brains were not

totally developed. They were still in their late or just left their adolescence, a period noted of maturational changes in the brain function of decision making [19]. Also, one's cognitive autonomy may not consistently rise for maturity, but it may go down, before going up again. Particularly for self-assessment, for example, longitudinal studies have shown a decline at age 11, a low between ages 12 and 13, and then gradual, systematic improvements in self-assessment through age 18 [20].

Based on the neuroscientific evidence, it is the frontal lobe, part of the brain's cerebral cortex, that controls planning and judgment, but it remains immature during the period of the adolescent years [17]. In fact, prefrontal cortex is fundamental for top-down processing of cognitive control and goal-directed behaviour. It is responsible for complex thinking, organization, working memory, and controlling impulses. It is the largest section of the brain and the slowest to develop [21].

The prefrontal cortex (PFC), according to the executive control theory (ECT) organizes multiple levels of desires in the brain, specifically for coordinating behaviour. As PFC is the most fully developed region in humans, it influences other brain regions. There are, at least, two orders of desire. The lower order is tightly associated with physiological needs and reflexive emotions, such as hunger and resentment. Autonomy is a higher order desire, as it enables one to reflect critically upon one's first-order desires or preferences with his values. Satisfying physiological needs are often unconscious and for immediate rewards, while higher-order desires are more likely to be represented in conscious awareness, and more intended for long-term outcomes, and stored as long-term memories [15].

PFC with its functional connectivity provides an ideal substrate for forming the associations between actions, values, and somatic markers in decision making. Regarding this, it is hypothesized that decision making is improved by emotional responses at some specific networks in the brain [22], including the amygdala that processes fear. Thus, the connectivity of PFC and amygdala is essential for a higher tolerance of risk-taking [23] in exercising cognitive autonomy.

### 3 Method

This qualitative study benefited from the interpretive research method to explore and analyse students' perception about their own cognitive autonomy associated with their undergraduate performance in the applied linguistics course. An in-depth semi structured questionnaire was distributed to all 44 students through email after the semester ended and after students received the transcript of the semester. They aged 21–22 years, and studied full time. Their participation was completely voluntary, and were recruited through class WhatsApp Group. They were assured that they did not have to participate in the activity, and 27 students who were really willing to participate returned the completed questionnaire through email. They could send a WhatsApp message to the instructor if they had questions to ask.

#### 3.1 Applied Linguistic Course Activities

Students were provided with assigned reading, handouts, videos. The function of the handouts was:

- (a) to summarize the reading and write it in an easy way
- (b) to highlight important points
- (c) to deepen important points
- (d) to relate the theoretical materials to students' instructional context

Every week they had an individual task for exploring and deepening their knowledge on the weekly discussion. They were also given the group tasks, including making their own videos. As their mid-term examination, students were given a reflective task for analysing and evaluating their English language learning from their childhood based on the ELT approaches and methodologies they learned in the course. The task for their final examination was to write a review paper. Students summarized the currently published articles on a preferred topic of the course, especially on its recent progress with justified analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

## **4 Findings**

### **4.1 Students' Preferred Career Paths**

Almost all students reported that they wanted to pursue diverse range of career paths in creative industry. For examples, six students wanted to be content writers, three students specifically say that they wanted to be anchor persons, two wanted to be creative creators. The other options were diplomat, businessmen, officers in the ministry of law. Only two students wanted to become teachers. Five students said that if they could not find any other opportunities as job seekers, they would consider teaching jobs. One student who wanted to become teacher reported that they were drawn to the English linguistics Department instead of English language teaching department, because she was afraid not to get an admission, because of the low acceptance rate of the ELT program.

### **4.2 Students' Practice of Cognitive Autonomy**

#### **4.2.1 Evaluative Thinking**

##### **4.2.2.1 Before Taking the Course**

All students said that they took the course because it was open for enrolment and listed in the university academic system. They were not sure whether the course could prepare themselves for working life. They did not care about the relationship between their dream career and what would actually happen after graduation in the labour market. Only one student said that the course would be useful for her as she wanted to be an English teacher, and another one said that he wanted the course because he thought that it was easy. Still another one said that he already took Introduction to Linguistics, and believed that Applied Linguistics would be good for him to know more about linguistics.

##### **4.2.2.2 After Taking the Course**

Although students took the course without critical judgment, they discovered that the course was worth taking. Only one student expressed that it was a wrong course for her as she did not want to be a teacher and found the course was very intimidating, while the rest found that the course was important for them. The rest 26 students said that they:

- (a) valued the assignments which made them think critically and analytically (8 students);
- (b) liked the way the course was presented and found a lot of new knowledge (4);
- (c) perceived that they became aware of the various issues of second language learning, the theories, the research and the instruction (4);
- (d) believed they would benefit from the course in the future (3);
- (e) found that the reflective task which required them to evaluate the teaching methods they had experienced in their English language learning was very useful for their thinking process (2);
- (f) were equipped with new knowledge for a new job opportunity (2);
- (g) proved it very useful for their joining the *Kampus Mengajar* program in which they taught English to children (2);
- (h) were aware that being an English teacher is not a soft option. It is always enlightening to get new knowledge (1);
- (i) learned more about linguistics (1);
- (j) could use it to help their siblings learn English (1).

All students inclined not to read book chapters or articles in session lists either before or after class as they found that they were difficult to read. The teacher's effort to solve the problem was to provide the students with handouts as the simplification of the reading materials. Five students also used the search engines to find more resources easier to read to help them understand the assigned reading materials.

About their reading, students reported that they read:

- (a) the handouts only, and nothing else (8 students);
- (b) the handouts and found more information from search engines (8);
- (c) the handout and the assigned reading materials, although their comprehension of the latter was only about 50 percent (7);
- (d) the handouts and watched YouTube (3);
- (e) the handouts and the assignment reading material without any comprehension problem (1).

#### 4.2.2 Voicing Opinions

Students were tactful in voicing their opinions and fluently communicated their thoughts. They said that the teacher had a high expectation for the students to achieve their best, but their expectation was only between 70 and 90 percent of the teacher's, as they did not really want to become teachers. They also said that they liked the handouts distributed for every lesson, as they were comprehensive and easy to read. Twenty students said that they were bored, confused, and failed to make sense of the applied linguistics journal articles or book chapters read.

What made them like the course was that the teacher:

- (a) provided handouts which were comprehensive and easy to read (8);
- (b) read the students' every work, provided feedbacks and asked students to make correction (6);

- (c) used a very good method and strategy, also gave feedback (5);
- (d) paid attention to every student (2);
- (e) gave direct replies when students texted her (2);
- (f) encouraged the students to be more disciplined, more critical, analytical, and creative (2);
- (g) trained the students to be punctual in submitting their work; she also chased those students who had not submitted their work according to the assigned schedule (1);
- (h) did her best to make the students understand and like the lesson (1);
- (i) cared about the students; even during the synchronous session, she wanted to know who were absent and who came late to class, and who left the class before the class ended.

Concerning students' suggestions to improve the course, only one student said that the teacher had done her best and no more to say. The rest voiced their opinion as follows:

- (j) they preferred synchronous sessions than the asynchronous ones (5 students);
- (k) they should improve their reading skill to understand the course content without being frustrated (4);
- (l) they wanted the teacher to give more guidance in doing their midterm and final papers (3);
- (m) they wanted less study load (2);
- (n) they needed more fun in the course (1);
- (o) students should be more serious (1).

### 4.2.3 Making Decisions

All students reported that they were almost perfectly independent and did the individual task by themselves. Google and YouTube helped them (44). However, they also gave more information when they needed their capable classmates' help, as follows:

- (a) clarifying the instructions of the assignments related to the conceptual understandings of the materials (8 students);
- (b) outlining a paper and making a direction for their exploratory learning (5)
- (c) understanding the teacher's feedbacks and revising the assignments (1);
- (d) obtaining more reference materials and new ideas (1);
- (e) expressing ideas clearly and correctly in writing (1)

### 4.2.4 Self-Assessment

All students thought that they were independent, smart, and refused to copy their friends' work. They were curious to know more, but their only problem was their limited time to gather information, to study, and write well.

Concerning students' learning target, they reported that they wanted to get good grades, but the targets they set for themselves were lower than the target the teacher set for them. Only four students set their target like the teacher's expectation, while the rest was from 60 to 90 percent of the expected target. In average their target was only about 75 percent of the target set by the teacher.

All students said that they hardly had any problems to do assignments on new conceptual knowledge of applied linguistics, but they found a lot of challenges when they were supposed to write their own reflection paper, supported with good reasoning and references concerning the approaches, methodologies, and strategies they already experienced.

They had difficulties with and should spend more time to read journal articles and book chapters in the reading lists. Therefore, they preferred to read the handouts and to Google easier reading materials to find more examples and details. A WhatsApp group was created for discussions, collaborations, and sharing new information and important resource materials to their friends. They also used exemplary papers when they did their assignments. The course pushed them to improve their reading, writing, and study skills, especially how to search relevant background information. They said that they were confused in doing the assignments as they did not know how to improve their work when the teacher returned their assignments with feedbacks. They had to ask their classmates to help them, ask the teacher for more explanation, or read their friends' assignments as exemplary papers.

#### 4.2.5 Comparative Values

Concerning comparative values, students' report is as follows:

- (a) being ordinary people, they performed as average students, and they could not read fast (4 students);
- (b) unwillingly comparing themselves to others, they said that they worked seriously and honestly (4);
- (c) being twice better than the others, she could make good analysis for every task, gave good examples and argument (1);
- (d) comparing her grade with her classmates', she was better (1);
- (e) having done her best although failing to perform highly because of her problem in understanding journal articles and her mental issues (1);
- (f) working equally hard as others (1)
- (g) comparing her papers to the instructor's answer keys, she said that she was not always the best but she could do her task better than the others (1).
- (h) comparing to others, she said that she was not outstanding, and did assignment close to the deadline. Once she did a wrong assignment because she did not pay attention to the instruction, but she was more responsible when she had to do a group task (1).
- (i) performing poorly when doing analytic and evaluative papers, but performing well for descriptive essays (1).
- (j) being lower than the average students (1).
- (k) not giving her best compared to the others, and making herself do a lot of revision that distressed herself further (1).



## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Unsatisfactory Cognitive Autonomy in Choosing Applied Linguistics Course

Students performed unsatisfactory evaluative thinking, as they chose the elective applied linguistics course without initially seeking for information how the prospect of the course for their future career, especially how the course could provide them with the trending skills sought for in the dream job market. Actually, this is not surprising. First, as already mentioned in the literature review, neurologically students might still be in the inconsistent developmental level for their career decision-making, planning and self-control.

Second, cognitive autonomy involves a critical thinking skill that students could not instinctively have without special training or habit formation. Critical thinking is a key component of evaluation capacity and it needs high-quality evaluation practice. It is a skill that makes learners become reflective practitioners, with commitment and expertise of evaluative know-how and evaluative attitude [24].

Third, cognitive autonomy also expects students to develop their critical sense of responsibility for their possible career path. Students have the responsibility to critically know what their goals and needs are to identify what courses can help them reach those goals. Responsibility is also a value which needs various activities to inculcate, even starting from pre-school. In other words, students must be aware –even from training– that choosing a right course is a responsibility [25] instead of a game of chance.

### 5.2 Students' Cognitive Autonomy Level in Attending the Course

Regarding the students' cognitive autonomy level in attending the course, their performances in the five components of cognitive autonomy overlap and relate to one another.

#### 5.2.1 Students' Faulty Perception on their Cognitive Autonomy: Good for Simpler Tasks Only

Students' expression on the Voice Opinion Component could disguise their true level of cognitive autonomy. They fluently wrote as much as possible when they were requested to voice their opinions about the way they attended and completed the course. They self-evaluated themselves as independent and hard-working that made them decide not to rely on their friends' help. However, those judgments about themselves were only for simpler tasks when the instructor asks them to answer questions based on the handouts distributed to them. Handouts were intended for students to get engaged and to plugged in, before reading the journal articles, textbooks, and book chapters in the reading lists.

The problem was that students stopped at using the handouts without moving forward to achieve the appropriate literacy level for reading original materials. Instead of trying to overcome the challenge, they avoided the tasks. Therefore, faulty perception occurred when students thought that they were smart and independent. They were also willing to say that they were lost, confused, bored and frustrated to read the materials in the course reading list, and when they were working on papers they required them to write analytically with complex ideas, supported with much reading containing a lot of academic and

technical vocabulary. Being college students in the English Department, however, it was essential for them to strengthen their cognitive autonomy for true independence, complex thinking and making decision to gain better employment opportunities. They need to be familiar with the relevant reading strategies to critically gain insights and search details; deepen, broaden, and consolidate their knowledge from the original research work, and broadly focused texts, that have their own academic convention and styles.

Students' perception of their own level of ability and "hardworkingness" can diverge from the true expected level. This erroneous view is called by Carter and Dunning (2007) as faulty self-assessment; students need some training to use the correct data and to understand teachers' feedback for accurate self-assessment, especially when teachers give them gentle feedback that may lead to bias [26].

### **5.2.2 Students Need Supportive Environment and Critical Thinking Training for Improving their Cognitive Autonomy**

According to Immanuel Kant true autonomy is only possible when one has skills, knowledge, and external freedom [28]. Although students were conversant in voicing their opinion, the opinion they brought up was dominantly on how they favoured what the instructor had done in the learning process such as the instructor's material delivery, strategies in facilitating students' learning, conveying caring, and promoting thinking skills and good discipline.

Aside from not mentioning instructor's weak areas, the opinions they voiced did not critically provide new directions or new suggestions for the improvement of the course content; for example, how the applied linguistics course for non-ELT students could have been more meaningful and relevant for their dream careers and aspiration. Instead, they adjusted their learning to the course and believed that it would be useful for them in different ways.

One reason that students did not provide their constructive criticism was because they were aware of their status. Research shows that even critical thinkers do not express their critical opinion in all situations [27]. Culturally, students were aware that as undergraduates they might not be qualified enough to provide negative criticism to their English Department, as it might also be too harsh for the instructor, whom they reported had worked hard and had high expectations for them. They also knew that their success expectation for themselves was much lower than the instructor's.

Considering all the interpretation above, if students had been sure that they had really been high-performing, and in supportive environment for constructive criticism, they may have become better evaluative thinkers and could have expressed a better objective evaluation for the course. Another point is that being able to provide a good evaluation, students need some training, because delivering critical opinion effectively has its own structure and technique.

### **5.2.3 Cognitive Autonomy was for Future Career: But Students' Focus was on Grades**

Students with high cognitive autonomy know what decision to make in taking a course for their future career. However, as previously described, the students in this study did

not care about their literacy difficulties; they were heavily satisfied with the simplified materials. They also did not mind with the content of the course whether it would be relevant or not with their future. This section attempts to highlight that students firmly reported that they focused on passing the course and obtained good grades. It seems that they believed that they were employable and successful if they had good grades, and they did not need to worry about the knowledge they gained. It seems that grades and academic degree were more concrete for the students than learning.

This may imply that, first, students did not expect too much from the applied linguistic course they took for their career path in the future. Second, students might not be well-prepared to habituate themselves in Second, cognitive autonomy involves a critical thinking skill that students could not instinctively have without special training or habit formation. Making a more serious decision in choosing an elective course [28].

## 6 Conclusion

Understanding the students' experiences and reflecting on the five components of the cognitive autonomy, this study provides some light that non-ELT English Department students did not adequately develop and use their cognitive autonomy in both choosing, and attending the applied linguistic course. There might be four reasons behind this. First, neurologically students might still be in the inconsistent developmental level. The second and the third were respectively critical thinking skills and sense of responsibility that need training and habit formation to develop. The fourth was that they might believe that the university should have a good reason to design and offer applied linguistics course, and the content should have been well tailored to suit their future professional needs, alongside their linguistics and literature courses.

When they were already in the course, they did not try to evaluate or critique the syllabus or the content of the course from their non-ELT dream career perspective, because they might believe that as students they had a duty to abide by all the prescribed learning objectives and the requirements set forth in the course. The first reason could be cultural; the second could be their status as undergraduate students, and the third was their focus on earning good grades and graduating from the programs, regardless what and how they learned. Culturally, there was an ethical boundary to criticize a course and an instructor. When students were not confident enough how to respectfully articulate their own thoughts that could be unfavourable, they might avoid the risk of speaking their minds.

Students' fluent and informatorily response when they were requested to voice their opinions had disguised their true level of cognitive autonomy. They confidently articulated how they were independent and competent. They responded confidently because when they attended the course, they mostly relied on their handouts instead of the original college-level materials, because they lacked academic literacy skills. Basically, they were successful to carry out simple tasks that they could rely on handouts only. In fact, handouts were given to engage them and let them plug in, but they were satisfied with this basic start and did not move forward to be equally successful in completing the true college-level designated tasks. They got lost when they had to use journal articles, textbooks, and book chapters to write term papers which required the combination

of college-level academic literacy, more advanced logic, critical thinking, and directed behaviour.

In order that students can exercise effective cognitive autonomy, they need to have more training and learning in academic literacy, critical thinking, sense of academic responsibility, and the skill of how to respectfully voice their critical opinions. Students should also be made convinced that they were in a supportive academic environment in which they could be free to communicate their ideas, as long as order and politeness are still maintained.

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