

Assessing the e-Learner Autonomy among ESL (English as a Second Language) Learners in Higher Education Institutes, Sri Lanka

WS Sudusinghe^{1#} and WGC Kumara²

¹*Department of Languages, Faculty of Management, Social Science and Humanities, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka*

²*Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka*

#sudusinghews@kdu.ac.lk

Abstract— Learner autonomy (LA) is defined as the readiness to assume responsibility for learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. LA entails one's capacity and willingness to act independently and cooperate with others as a socially responsible person. There is a dearth of studies conducted on e-learner autonomy among ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in Sri Lanka. Hence, this cross-sectional study aimed to assess the e-Learning Autonomy (e-LA) of ESL learners in higher education institutes in Sri Lanka. An online questionnaire that consisted of two sections, i.e. the socio-demographic data and e-learning autonomy scale, were shared in social media for two weeks and responses were received. Data were analysed using SPSS 23.0 version. Shapiro-Wilk test revealed that the data are not normally distributed on the e-LA score. The descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation), Mann-Whitney U test, Kruskal-Wallis test were performed to find the associations. During the given two weeks, 154 participants responded to the study, and the majority were females (62.3%). The mean e-LA score of the study sample was 31.10 ± 2.78 , which was lower than the original study. There was a statistically significant association between the level of e-LA and the academic stream ($p < 0.05$). However, e-LA had no statistically significant associations with gender difference, academic years, and satisfaction with internet facilities or satisfaction with the instructor/lecturer support ($p > 0.05$). The lecturers' necessary interventions and the students' commitment are crucial in improving e-LA among ESL learners in Sri Lanka.

Keywords— *e-learner autonomy, English as a Second Language, ESL learners*

I. INTRODUCTION

There has been a clear paradigm shift in language pedagogy, shifting from teacher-centred pedagogy to a learner-centred approach. In the modern context,

professional teachers admire independent learners and encourage Learner Autonomy (LA) as the primary goal, where learners are self-directed, taking responsibilities for their learning (Harmer, 2007). Holec first introduced the LA approach to language teaching through his work 'Autonomy and foreign language learning', published by the Council of Europe in 1979 (Holec, 1979).

E-learning plays a vital role in promoting LA and generally defined as the acquisition and usage of science that is dispersed and enabled by electronic media (Warni et al., 2018). The commonly used mediums that facilitate e-learning are mobile devices, laptops, tablets, personal computers and personal digital assistants (PADs) (Georgiev et al., 2004). In addition, the high levels of flexibility of space and time provided by the e-learning enable each student to have better management in their studies based on their own needs (Goulão and Menedez, 2015).

Distance education is based on the concept that the students will learn on their own unrestrained by temporal and spatial boundaries (Firat, 2016). Hence, it is evident that one of the crucial competencies required for the success of distance learning is learner autonomy. Therefore, learner autonomy is a core aspect in gaining success via distance learning (Lynch and Dembo, 2004), and an autonomous learner is a lifelong learner with a high level of independence (Betts, 2004).

The core idea of being autonomous is when the learner becomes responsible for his or her success in learning. Moreover, Holec has also pointed out that autonomous learning can also be identified as self-directed learning. It frequently occurs with the type of learning done with technology or Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), distance education, and personal access learning (Holec, 1979). Being autonomous means achieving the success of self-learning both theoretically and

practically (Smith, 2008), and when it comes to the autonomy of ESL learners, they can control and monitor their learning process without being enforced. Freedom of choice plays a dominant role in developing autonomy (Andrade and Bunker, 2009). In a standard classroom setting, the general practice is that the students heavily depend upon the input of their lecturers rather than depending on the choices of their own. The core necessity for a learner in his or her decision on selecting the style or the mode of learning is not about being governed by the instructors as the decision-makers, but when he or she is nurtured with the supportive guidance to discover the choice on his own (Andrade and Bunker, 2009). The capacity owned by the ESL learners in practising autonomous language learning is a key to successful learning (Muhammad, 2020).

Benson (2011) stated that to encourage learner autonomy, there should be proper control of three dimensions. Initially, there has to be a control of learning management which means that the learner is aware of when, where, how to learn the targeted language (Huang et al., 2019). Secondly, it is vital to control the materials used in learning, which means that rather than heavily depending on the materials recommended and given by the lecturers, the students attempt to explore new sources of knowledge. Thirdly, there has to be a control over the cognitive process. It will facilitate the learners to better control their psychological aspects (i.e. their belief, emotions, and motivation) that determine the success of their learning (Benson, 2011). For the learners to have better control in their learning, it is necessary to reason and create reflections on their language learning (Little, 2009).

LA has represented an answer to the challenges facing 21st century education (Blidi, 2016) and is a significant learning outcome of higher education across many nations globally (Henri et al., 2018). Indeed, LA has been considered a vital element in English language teaching and learning for approximately forty years, with an increasing number of publications on LA (Ahmed et al., 2011; Benson, 2009; Chuying, 2017; Little, 2020). Moreover, research has shown that LA is the key to vocabulary development (Almusharraf, 2018).

LA may have particular relevance in developing countries, where a dissonance often exists between what formal education offers and what many learners want or need (Smith et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there is a likelihood that in Sri Lanka, it is not a familiar concept, and thus, several studies are

conducted on LA among English language learners (Alfred, 2015, 2015; Dayananda and Yapar, 2020; Premawardhena, 2008). However, there is a dearth of studies conducted on e-learning autonomy on ESL learners in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the e-Learning Autonomy of ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in higher education institutes in Sri Lanka.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A study conducted among the students from Indonesia and Queensland has proven that e-media played an influential role in improving the language ability of the students (Hoven, 2001). Further, learning English via distance education can increase the students' motivation to be more autonomous. The students are allowed to use their personal computers and other electronic equipment at home when learning English. Liaw (2010) has carried out a cross-cultural e-mail project with bilingual or ESL pre-service teachers in the United States (Liaw, 2003).

Another study conducted by Sung, Chang, and Yang (2015) claims that mobile phones can increase learners' autonomy in learning a language (Sung et al., 2015). When the students get engaged in language learning via mobile devices, they can control their learning. For example, they can decide the convenient time, pace and place. Moreover, this enhances the students' motivation to interact and engage in cooperative learning with their lecturer and peers. In addition, the students can investigate more knowledge from the internet while they learn via electronic devices. Further, the researchers have highlighted the importance of the guidance given by the teachers and lecturers in improving the e-LA in language learning. The main reason behind this is that there is a high tendency among students to get distracted when they use electronic sources (Muhammad, 2020).

A qualitative study was carried out at the English Education Department of State Islamic University Mataram concerning twenty-five students in a Discourse Analysis class. The study's findings revealed that many shy and backwards students in the face-to-face language classes had become very expressive and confident in the online classes. This has proven that distance education has improved the students' confidence and has become autonomous learners. Further, in that study, the students were given the freedom to choose the most convenient mode for learning (Muhammad, 2020).

Murray, 2014 revealed that collaborative learning and the students' interaction help develop autonomy in learning (Murray, 2014). Another significant factor that leads to increased learner autonomy when learning English via distance education is the freedom given to the students to choose the best mechanism of learning based on their preferences. They can use any electronic device that they prefer to modify and adjust their English language learning (Sung et al., 2015). When the students become independent in their decision making, they gain the ability to accomplish autonomously in their language learning (Huang et al., 2019).

A research study was conducted in Turkey to assess the perceptions of learner autonomy among students following a Massive Open Online Language Course (MOOLC). The findings of the study revealed that the English MOOLC students had high levels of autonomy. They were also willing to be more accountable for their learning. Further, there was an optimistic inclination among the students regarding autonomy. The mixed-method was used to assess the perception of the study population regarding learner autonomy. Moreover, a Learner Autonomy Questionnaire developed by Joshi (2011) was used as a data collection tool (Joshi, 2011). The Autonomous Learning Activity Scale (ALAS), comprised of seven dimensions, was used to analyze the data (Misir et al., 2018).

A study was carried out in Bangladesh to examine the teachers' usage of learner autonomy in English Language teaching. It was designed as an exploratory study grounded on a mixed-method model. The quantitative data and the qualitative data were collected using a self-report Likert scale questionnaire and semi-structured telephone interviews, respectively. The results of the study revealed that there is a deficiency of learner autonomy among the students. Therefore, the study has revealed that the teachers have not fully implemented learner autonomy. Further, the study has suggested conducting further investigations through research on this field and facilitating the teachers' necessary guidance to implement the learner autonomy in English language classes at the tertiary level (Jamila, 2013).

Research carried out in Indonesia to assess the students' perceptions of using technology to learn English outside the classroom concerning the development of students' autonomy capacity in learning English. The study sample comprised of students of a private Senior High School in South

Tangerang. The quantitative data and the qualitative data were collected using questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, respectively. The study has revealed that technology usage in learning the English Language has become an encouraging source in developing learner autonomy among the students. Further, it has strengthened the process of learning, level of enthusiasm, metacognitive awareness, self-esteem and social skills among the students.

III. METHODOLOGY

The data collection was carried out during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. An online questionnaire developed in English was shared on the social media networks (i.e., Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber) for two weeks to receive the completed questionnaires. The study sample comprises ESL learners of higher education institutes in Sri Lanka who study via distance education. The informed consent for attending the study was also taken online from the participants, once the purpose and the objectives were explained through an online statement before the questionnaire. The questionnaires did not consist of any sensitive questions that would create psychological embarrassment/ trauma. Furthermore, the participants were informed that they could leave the study at any time, and departure from the study does not affect academic activities.

Moreover, all participants were informed that their participation is voluntary, and there are no incentives or rewards for their contribution to the study. Furthermore, the participants were empowered to ask the queries on the questionnaire by providing them with the contact details of the researchers. The researchers assured the participants that all personal information gathered from the participants would be kept confidential and will not be released in public under any circumstance. The soft copies of all the data were stored and protected with a unique password, and hard copies generated were stored and kept locked in a secure place. After five years, all the data will be deleted to secure the participants' privacy and confidentiality.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections (Section A and B). Section A composed of questions regarding demographic information and distance education. A pilot study was conducted on section A among ten ESL learners to determine the difficulty level of the items, ease of understanding of concepts in the items, any discomfort when responding, and the

appropriate length of the questions before the data collection. The students who participated in the pilot study were not allowed to participate in the main study. Section B consisted of the e-Learning Autonomy Scale (e-LAS), which measures the e-Learning Autonomy of Distance Education Students. Cronbach's α coefficient was found to be $\alpha = 0.952$, proving that the scale is very reliable (Firat, 2016). In addition, the response to each item was scaled on a Likert scale of one to five (1- Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3-Neutral, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly Agree). The written permission to adopt and use the scale was obtained from its developer (Firat, 2016).

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 to obtain descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics. As the distribution of the e- LA score were not normal in Shapiro Wilk test, non-parametric tests were used to study the relationships between the socio-demographic variables and the e-LA score. The Mann-Whitney U test for two independent samples was used to compare variables like gender with e-LA. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used with pairwise comparison like academic year and the academic stream. Statistical significance was established at the 0.05 level.

IV. Results

A. Socio-Demographic Data

During the given two weeks, 154 participants had responded to the study. According to the data, the participants' mean (\pm SD) age was 22.43 (\pm 3.68). The majority of the participants were females (62.3%, $n=96$), and 67.5% of the study population were from the Law stream. When considering the academic years, 41.6%, 22.7%, 16.2%, 19.5% were from the first, second, third and fourth academic years. Furthermore, 66.2% stated that distance education is a good way of acquiring knowledge as a university undergraduate, and 69.5% were satisfied with the support given by the instructors/lecturers in distance education. On the other hand, 50.6% were not satisfied with the internet facilities available to them for distance education, and only 20.8% preferred distance education over face-to-face learning (Table 1).

Table 01. Socio Demographic data

Demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	Mean=22.43 SD \pm 3.68 Range = 18 -39 years	
Gender	Female 96 Male 58	62.3 37.7
Academic stream	Law 104 Computing 23 Engineering 14 Medicine 7 Management 4 Social Science & Humanities 2	67.5 14.9 9.1 4.5 2.6 1.3
Academic year	1st year 64 2nd year 35 3rd year 25 4th year 30	41.6 22.7 16.2 19.5
Distance education is a good way of acquiring knowledge as a university undergraduate	Yes 52 No 102	33.8 66.2
Satisfied with the support given by the lecturers in distance education	Yes 107 No 47	69.5 30.5
Satisfied with the internet facilities available for distance education	Yes 76 No 78	49.4 50.6
Prefer distance education over face-to-face learning	Yes 32 No 122	20.8 79.2

Sample (n= 154)

B. e-Learner Autonomy

The mean e-LA score of the study sample was 31.10 ± 2.78 , and the majority of the participants (59.1%) had a low level of e-LA. The e-LA had no statistically significant association between the two genders, and among academic years ($p > 0.05$). Further, the satisfaction to internet facilities or satisfaction on the instructor/lecturer support had no significant associations with e-LA ($p > 0.05$). However, e-LA had a statistically significant difference between the academic stream ($p < 0.05$). (Table 2).

Table 2: Association between socio-demographic data and level of e-LA.

Variables	P value
Gender	0.951
Academic stream	0.035
Academic year	0.223
Distance education is a good way of acquiring knowledge as a university undergraduate	0.058
Satisfied with the support given by the instructors/ lecturers in distance education	0.227
Satisfied with the internet facilities available to you for distance education	0.093
Prefer distance education over face-to-face learning	0.533

V. DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to assess the e-LA of ESL learners in Higher education institutes in Sri Lanka. The mean e-LA score was 31.10 ± 2.78 and it was lower than the study (37.97 ± 8.54) conducted among the students from Anadolu University, Turkey by the developer of the scale (Firat, 2016). This shows that Sri Lankan ESL learner has a comparatively lower e-LA than the previous study conducted on the same scale. Therefore, necessary measures should be taken to increase the e-LA among ESL learners in Higher educational institutes, Sri Lanka.

The e-LA had no statistically significant association with gender in the current study, similar to the study conducted in Turkey (Firat, 2016). Further, the level of satisfaction on the internet facilities had no significant association with the e-LA score. However, a similar study conducted by the developer on the e-LA Scale found out that e-LA score is directly proportional to the level of ICT use (Firat, 2016).

Moreover, another similar study has noted that using e-media from mobile learning is quite effective in enhancing learners' autonomy in language learning (Sung et al., 2015). Furthermore, in the current study, LA had no significant association with satisfaction and the instructors/lecturers' support received in distance education. In a similar study, it was suggested that the teacher role in guiding and assisting students to use the appropriate mobile platform is essential to gain better autonomy since the mobile platform is the only machine or software that does not automatically improve autonomy; thus, the students will be distracted with unrelated sources (Sung et al., 2015).

VI. CONCLUSION

The majority of the ESL learners in the study population were having comparatively low e-LA than the previous study conducted on e-LA using the same scale. Hence, the necessary interventions and commitment on both parties: teachers' and students', are crucial in enhancing the e-LA among ESL learners. Further, curriculum updates should address the e-LA of the ESL learners engaged in distance education.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, A., Cane, G., Hanzala, M. (Eds.), 2011. Teaching English in Multilingual Contexts: Current Challenges, Future Directions, Unabridged edition. ed. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne.
- Alfred, R., 2015. Analyzing the Applicability of Technology in Learner Autonomy in TESL Context in Sri Lanka.
- Almusharraf, N., 2018. English as a foreign language learner autonomy in vocabulary development: Variation in student autonomy levels and teacher support. *J. Res. Innov. Teach. Learn.* 11, 159–177. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIT-09-2018-0022>
- Andrade, M., 2014. Course-embedded student support for online English language learners. *Open Prax.* 6, 65–73. <https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.6.1.90>
- Andrade, M.S., Bunker, E.L., 2009. A model for self-regulated distance language learning. *Distance Educ.* 30, 47–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587910902845956>
- Benson, P., 2011. Teaching and Researching: Autonomy in Language Learning, 2nd edition. ed. Routledge, Harlow, England ; New York.

- Benson, P., 2009. Making sense of autonomy in language learning. *Maint. Control Auton. Lang. Learn.* 13–26.
- Betts, G., 2004. Fostering autonomous learners through levels of differentiation. *Roeper Rev. J. Gift. Educ.* 26, 190–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783190409554269>
- Blidi, S., 2016. Collaborative Learner Autonomy: A Mode of Learner Autonomy Development. Springer.
- Chuying, O., 2017. A Review on Language Learner Autonomy Research in China (2006-2016): Based on 12 Key Domestic Journals. *Engl. Lang. Teach.* 10, 76. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n11p76>
- Dayananda, P., Yapar, O., 2020. English language instructors' perceptions of learner autonomy: a case study at a state university in sri lanka. *Educ. Sci.*
- Firat, M., 2016. Measuring the e-Learning Autonomy of Distance Education Students. *Open Prax.* 8. <https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.8.3.310>
- Georgiev, T., Georgieva, E., Smrikarov, A., 2004. M-learning—a new stage of e-learning. pp. 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1050330.1050437>
- Goulão, M.D.F., Menezes, R.C., 2015. Learner Autonomy and Self-regulation in eLearning. *Procedia - Soc. Behav. Sci.* 174.
- Harmer, J., 2007. *The Practice of English Language Teaching with DVD*, 4th edition. ed. Pearson Longman ELT, Harlow.
- Henri, D.C., Morrell, L.J., Scott, G.W., 2018. Student perceptions of their autonomy at University. *High. Educ.* 75, 507–516. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0152-y>
- Holec, H., 1979. Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning.
- Hoven, D., 2001. Networking and communication: Technological applications and implications for the learning of Indonesian and EFL. undefined.
- Huang, J., Lock, K.Y.N., Teng, F., 2019. Autonomy in English Language Teaching: A Case Study of Novice Secondary School Teachers in Hong Kong. *Chin. J. Appl. Linguist.* 42, 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1515/CJAL-2019-0001>
- Jamila, M., 2013. Use of Learner Autonomy in Teaching Speaking by Tertiary Level English Language Teachers in Private Universities of Bangladesh. *IOSR J. Humanit. Soc. Sci.* 18, 29–43. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-1842943>
- Joshi, K.R., 2011. Learner Perceptions and Teacher Beliefs about Learner Autonomy in Language Learning. *J. NELTA* 16, 12–29. <https://doi.org/10.3126/nelta.v16i1-2.6126>
- Liaw, M.-L., 2003. Cross-Cultural E-Mail Correspondence for Reflective EFL Teacher Education. *TESL-EJ* 6.
- Little, D., 2020. Language learner autonomy: Rethinking language teaching. undefined.
- Little, D., 2009. Language learner autonomy and the European Language Portfolio: Two L2 English examples. *Lang. Teach.* 42, 222–233. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444808005636>
- Lynch, R., Dembo, M., 2004. The Relationship Between Self-Regulation and Online Learning in a Blended Learning Context. *Int. Rev. Res. Open Distrib. Learn.* 5. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v5i2.189>
- Mısır, H., Koban, D., Koç, E., 2018. An Analysis of Learner Autonomy and Autonomous Learning Practices in Massive Open Online Language Courses. *Arab World Engl. J.* 4, 24–39. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/call4.3>
- Muhammad, M., 2020. Promoting Students' Autonomy through Online Learning Media in EFL Class. *Int. J. High. Educ.* 9, 320. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v9n4p320>
- Murray, G., 2014. Exploring the Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning, in: Murray, G. (Ed.), *Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, pp. 3–11. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137290243_1
- Premawardhena, N., 2008. From dependent learning to learner autonomy through web based teaching.
- Smith, R., 2008. Learner autonomy. *ELT J.* 62, 395–397. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccn038>
- Smith, R., Kuchah, K., Lamb, M., 2018. Learner Autonomy in Developing Countries, in: Chik, A., Aoki, N., Smith, R. (Eds.), *Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching: New Research Agendas*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, pp. 7–27. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52998-5_2
- Sung, Y.-T., Chang, K., Yang, J.-M., 2015. How Effective are Mobile Devices for Language Learning? A Meta-Analysis. *Educ. Res. Rev.* 16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2015.09.001>
- Warni, S., Aziz, T.A., Febriawan, D., 2018. The Use of Technology in English as a Foreign Language

Learning outside the Classroom: An Insight into Learner Autonomy 12.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I gratefully acknowledge the participants of the study for their contribution and for their genuine feedback given to fulfil the objectives of this study.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPIES



Wasana Sudusinghe is currently undertaking her Master in Linguistics and further she is serving as a Tutor in English at the Department of Languages, Faculty of Management, Social Sciences and Humanities, KDU. Applied Linguistics and Educational Psychology are her major research interests.



WGC Kumara is a lecturer attached to the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka. Educational Psychology and Medical Education are his major research interests.