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## **Beliefs and Practices of Learner Autonomy in Developing English Language Skills: The Case of Dilla University Students' Learning Experiences Outside the Classroom**

Wendiyfraw Wanna<sup>1</sup> and Adane Paulos<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract:** Despite the introduction of the Communicative Language Teaching Methodology to language learning classrooms and the subsequent advocacy of learner needs and learner autonomy, some learners seemed to ardently stick to the age-old belief that the teacher was the sole provider of knowledge and wisdom. On the other hand, most ELT courses given in universities advocated the primacy of learner autonomy and thus learners were exposed to this advocacy for a long time. Even so it might not be clear how learners believed and practiced learner autonomy unless the issue is systematically investigated. This study investigated the subjects' beliefs of learner autonomy with regard to its contribution to develop their English language skills and their predisposition to practice it. The population of the study comprised all students in the Department of English and Literature. As the size of the population was manageable, all 89 students were taken as a sample and the entire population participated in filling out the questionnaire. However, 9 students (i.e., 3 students from each year) were selected for the interview through quota sampling. Simple random sampling was employed in each group to provide equal chance for the interviewees. In the presentation and analysis of the data obtained through the tools, quantitative and qualitative methods were applied. The results indicated that though the subjects realized that learner autonomy was important to enhance their English language skills, their practices and use of opportunities to develop these skills on their own showed lack of commitment and motivation. Therefore, recommendations were given in light of what the stake-holders should do in order to raise learners' motivation and commitment.

**Key words:** *learner autonomy, beliefs, practices, language skills*

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<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Arba Minch University. Email: [wendets@gmail.com](mailto:wendets@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Dilla University. Email: [adanep2009@gmail.com](mailto:adanep2009@gmail.com)

## Introduction

Learner autonomy appears to be one of the slippery and elusive concepts in language teaching and learning (Han, 2014). In spite of this, Holec (1981, p.3) attempted to define it as an *ability to take charge of one's own learning*. Benson (2001), on his part, defined learner autonomy as the capacity to take control of one's own learning, largely because the construct of 'control' appears to be more open to investigation than the construct - 'charge' or 'responsibility'. While learners control the learning activities, they are engaged in planning, organizing and evaluating their progress. In other words, learner autonomy is manifested by the ability to initiate, monitor and evaluate learning process (Little, 2003).

In order to realize learner autonomy, learners need to bring their own experience and world knowledge to bear on the target language of the task at hand (Candy, 1991). In this case, autonomous learners are those that take the proactive role in the learning process: generating ideas and availing themselves of learning opportunities rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992). In the same vein, Gardner (1999) claims that learner autonomy is the process of taking personal responsibility for one's own progress, and thus it requires self-assessment in order to determine one's level of knowledge and skills. In this process, learners are perceived as decision-makers while developing the capacity to select the tools and resources appropriate to the task (Holec, 1985; Dickinson, 1995). Despite the presence of different definitions of learner autonomy, the main theme of all is the same: learners build knowledge on their own.

In this way, the construct, learner autonomy, is overly associated with learning in isolation, outside the classroom and without a teacher. Little & Dam (1998), however, claim that learner autonomy does not entail abdicating teacher's role. Rather, there is much need for the teacher to give guidance for autonomous learners. In other words, the teacher's task is to help his/her students to become more autonomous in their

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language learning. Thus, the teacher may help promote self-organized and self-regulated learning in the language classroom. The teacher can achieve this by giving encouragements and designing appropriate tasks. This may increase student performance and stimulate motivation and self-esteem which, in turn, boosts achievement rates. Hence, helping learners to become autonomous is one way of maximizing their chance of success in the rapidly changing world.

### **Learning Strategies, Motivation, and Beliefs in Autonomous Learning**

Autonomous learners are more likely to use learning strategies while learning a new language and regulating their efforts, Wenden (1991). Similarly, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) state that learning strategies are important for learners as they may help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information. Among many strategies mentioned by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), cognitive and metacognitive strategies are directly related to autonomous learning. Cognitive strategies operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning. Learners, particularly autonomous ones, can apply cognitive strategies like imitating, resourcing, contextualizing, inferencing, deducing, note-making and note-taking to learn at their own pace. Besides, autonomous learners can apply metacognitive strategies. These are skills that are used to plan, monitor and evaluate the learning activity (Wenden, 1991).

In order to implement different strategies, learners primarily need to have strong motivation for language learning. In this regard, motivation plays a great role in autonomous learning, and it helps L2 learners sustain their efforts in the learning process (Dornyei, 1998). Noting the close relationship between autonomous learning and intrinsic motivation, Fazey and Fazey (2001) assert that students are less likely to self-regulate or take responsibility for learning when the motivation comes

from an external source. In this way, learner autonomy includes the notion of willingness without which learners may not take responsibility for their learning (Dam, 1995).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Traditional English language teaching methodologies mainly followed a trend that takes learners as passive recipients of new information. That is to say, learners were regarded as those who were unable to develop the necessary skills to learn, assess, and control their own progress by themselves (Holden and Usuki, 1999). For example, learners' roles were made subservient to that of teachers' in teaching methodologies (i.e. Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method, Audiolingual Method) that were dominant prior to the Communicative Language Teaching. Learners, thus, were supposed to acquire knowledge from the teacher and should often imitate the teacher.

With the advent of Communicative Language Teaching methodology, however, learners were exposed to the advocacy that emphasized the primacy of learner needs, learner autonomy, and learner-centered instruction over teacher centered-approach to language teaching. Specifically, research outputs and published ELT books were instrumental in advocating the importance of learner autonomy as an essential approach to learning a language. Learner autonomy seemed to have developed out of the practice of teacher-researchers at the University of Nancy in 1970. Henri Holec, the Director of the research centre, coined the term to refer to people's ability to take charge of their learning. Hence, learner autonomy might have its roots in CLT.

Besides, learner autonomy may have importance in modifying learner behavior and learning outcomes. Wenden (1991) associated the concept with the characteristics of good language learners who were aware of their learning styles and strategies, knew their strengths and weaknesses, and willing to use the target language in every opportunity. Thus, autonomous learners were those who made decisions about the

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contents of their learning, the strategies they should use to accomplish their aims, and assessed the success or failure of the learning process. At the same time, learner autonomy helped learners to cope with changing economic needs and circumstances (Benson, 2000). Similarly, Cotterall (1995) and Camilleri (2007) claimed that learner autonomy improved the quality of language learning, promoted democratic societies, prepared individuals for life-long learning, and allowed learners to make the best use of learning opportunities in and out of the classroom.

Despite this far-reaching advocacy about the importance of learner autonomy, most of the learners in Dilla University still seemed to lack the conviction to be in charge of their own learning. Mostly, they limited themselves only to teacher-given notes and photocopies of a few pages from their course materials. Thus, they appeared to stick ardently to the age-old role (i.e., learners as passive recipients of information). Besides, they perceived the teacher as the only source of knowledge and wisdom. When students preferred to become dependent on the teacher, the knowledge they acquired might not be sufficient. This might have constrained them from becoming efficient users of the language in different communicative events.

In this regard, Trim (1988, p.1) argued that *...no school or university can provide its students with all the knowledge and the skills they will need in their active adult lives*. In addition, Barnes in Nguyen and Ho (2012) added that school knowledge which teachers provided for students would remain to be teachers' knowledge unless students made their own contributions. This suggested that learners had to exert their efforts to add more into what teachers provided them.

On the other hand, some students in Dilla University seemed to take interest in using the Internet as a source of knowledge. They were often

preoccupied with their mobile phones for several hours, most probably chatting with their friends elsewhere or surfing the Internet for information. At the same time, a few of them appeared to have shown interest to participate in ELIC (English Language Improvement Center) which was run under the auspices of the Department of English Language and Literature. Hence, we could realize that these learners might have been somehow exercising learner autonomy.

Nowadays, access to technological amenities seems to have contributed greatly to realization of learner autonomy. These facilities include: the internet, e-mail, different social media, and self-access centers. The availability of these facilities could encourage learners to be engaged in communicating with people all over the world on a daily basis. As a result, this situation might have created opportunities for learners to exercise learner autonomy. Thus, learner autonomy in the educational world, particularly in the field of language teaching and learning, has attracted academics' attention and there has been a significant interest in the theory and practice of it (Benson, 2001, 2006).

Consequently, a number of research findings indicated that learners needed to be autonomous and independent in order to be efficient communicators in their daily lives (Swarbrick, 1994:82). Little (2007), however, showed that few researchers seemed to take interest in the relationship between learner autonomy, the process of language learning, and the development of proficiency in the target language. Although learner autonomy had been considered as one of the ultimate goals in contemporary EFL education, the relationship between learner autonomy and the development of language skills appeared to have received less attention (Benson, 2009). On top of that, not much was known about what learners believed concerning learner autonomy and what effect that the use of technological devices and other activities had on the development of language skills. Hence, the current research undertaking tried to investigate the following related issues:

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- How do students exercise learner autonomy outside the classroom so as to develop their English language skills?
  - What beliefs do students hold about learner autonomy in developing their English language skills?
  - How do learners conceptualize autonomous learning and the autonomous learner?

### **Research Design**

The design of the current study was a case study. An attempt was made to describe learners' beliefs and practices of learner autonomy outside the classroom without the teacher's involvement.

#### *Study population and Sampling*

The population of the current study included all students who joined the Department of English Language and Literature in Dilla University in 2016/17 academic year. As their number was manageable, census sampling method was used. Hence, the total number of subjects who made up the sample was 89. All of the samples, thus, selected participated in filling out the questionnaire. However, quota sampling method was used to determine the number of subjects to be selected from each year (i.e., 3 subjects were selected from each year - 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year). Then, simple random sampling was used to select those 3 subjects from each year. Hence, a total of 9 subjects were allowed to take part in the interview sessions.

## **Methods of Data Collection**

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was believed to be the most reliable and efficient instrument if designed with caution and sufficient knowledge about its strengths and weaknesses. Questionnaires constructed in this way might prove to be most suitable to collect data about facts, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs of respondents (Dornyei, 2007). As a result, the questionnaire of the current study was aimed at collecting data about learners' beliefs and practices of learner autonomy in developing their English language skills. Towards this end, the questionnaire included items dealing with activities that students were often engaged in out of the classroom in order to develop their English language skills. Specifically, these included: watching various audio and video recordings, reading different texts written in English and using the social media. In addition, the questionnaire was concerned with the resources that learners used and their predisposition towards learner autonomy, and the challenges they faced. The two parts of the questionnaire had two sets of Likert Scale. The first scale was concerned about measuring the frequency of learners' practices; it ranged from 5 indicating high frequency (i.e., every day) to 1 showing the absence of the activity (i.e., never). On the other hand, the second scale was aimed at identifying learners' beliefs about the activities that might make learners autonomous. This second scale ranged from 5 indicating strong agreement to 1 showing strong disagreement. As the researchers were offering courses to the respondents, they had no difficulty in distributing and collecting the questionnaire without any loss. Hence, the researchers took turns to give out the questionnaire to first, second and third year learners on separate occasions.

### *Interview*

The interview is a flexible tool which helps to obtain information that cannot be obtained through a questionnaire or other tools. Selinger &



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Shohamy (2004) stated that the interview is quite useful to get data on respondents' attitude, motivation, knowledge, and preference. Consequently, the interview in the current study might help the researchers to get data about learners' beliefs and practices of learner autonomy and preferences for specific resources while exercising their learner autonomy. In addition, the data obtained from the interview might help the researchers to counter-check the validity of the data collected through the questionnaire. The interview protocol was composed of 9 items of which the first four items dealt with learners' beliefs while the rest five were concerned about learners' practices so as to develop their English language skills autonomously.

#### *Methods of Data Analysis*

Deductive approach was used to analyze the qualitative data. That was to say, the researchers used predetermined categories (i.e., beliefs and practices) derived from the research questions. In addition, an attempt was made to show the presence or absence of the belief or practice by organizing positive and negative responses. Narratives were used to reveal the reasons behind the presence or absence of the beliefs and practices. Regarding the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire, frequencies and percentages were worked out in order to identify the extent of students' beliefs about learner autonomy and whether he or she practiced different language learning activities autonomously.

## Results

### *Findings from the Questionnaire: Practice*

**Table1: Responses of participants about what they do to develop their English skills**

Item no	Item	5*	%	4	%	3	%	2	%	1	%
1	Watching TV	7	7.9%	5	5.6%	21	23.6%	31	34.8%	25	28.1%
2	Listening to radio	0	0.0%	5	5.6%	12	13.5%	30	33.7%	42	47.2%
3	Reading fictions	11	12.4%	14	15.7%	12	13.5%	24	27.0%	28	31.5%
4	Reading reference books	18	20.2%	23	25.8%	22	24.7%	13	14.6%	13	14.6%
5	Reading English newspapers and magazines	11	12.4%	13	14.6%	20	22.5%	19	21.3%	26	29.2%
6	Surfing the internet	24	27.0%	14	15.7%	17	19.1%	21	23.6%	13	14.6%
7	Communicating through e-mail	11	12.4%	11	12.4%	8	9.0%	18	20.2%	41	46.1%
8	Chatting with friends on the internet	24	27.0%	10	11.2%	16	18.0%	20	22.5%	19	21.3%
9	Communicating with friends	23	25.8%	16	18.0%	23	25.8%	22	24.7%	5	5.6%
10	Communicating with teachers	22	24.7%	23	25.8%	22	24.7%	16	18.0%	6	6.7%
11	Participating in English clubs	9	10.1%	4	4.5%	16	18.0%	25	28.1%	35	39.3%
12	Participating in ELIC	8	9.0%	9	10.1%	15	16.9%	25	28.1%	32	36.0%

\* **5** = every day (very often) **4** = 4-6 days a week (often) **3** = 2-3 days a week (occasionally) **2** = once a week (scarcely) **1**= not at all (never)

### *Using Resources to Develop Listening Skills*

As shown in Table 1, item 1 and 2 were directed towards identifying learners' use of resources in order to develop their listening skills. Specifically, item 1 was about watching English TV broadcasts. As in the data, quite a few learners (7.9%) very often and (5.6%) often watched English broadcasts on TV while a sizeable proportion of learners (23.6%) occasionally watched English broadcasts on TV. However, the majority

of learners (34.8%) scarcely and (28.1%) never watched English broadcasts on TV. This suggests that most of the learners might have low level of listening skills since they lacked motivation to watch the TV broadcasts in English. Item 2 was about listening English broadcasts on the radio. Like in item 1, we could observe a similar picture in item 2. According to the data, only quite few learners (5.6%) reported that they often listened to radio English broadcasts whereas some learners (13.5%) occasionally listened to radios broadcasting in English. Nevertheless, the majority of learners (33.7%) scarcely and (47.2%) never listened to broadcasts in English on the radio. This implies that most of the learners lacked motivation to use resources that might have significant effect on their listening skills. This lack of motivation might not be attributed to their lack of access to the resources mentioned above since the particular university had provided them with TV sets around their dormitories and recreation centers. Neither could we question about their access to the radio as most learners possessed mobile phones which had radio applications.

#### *Using Resources to Develop Reading Skills*

There is somewhat a different image when the data in items 3-6 of the questionnaire are carefully observed. In item 3, some learners (12.4%) very often and (15.7%) often read fictions in English and a similar proportion of learners (13.5%) occasionally read fictions in English. Like in 5.1.1, a large number of learners (27%) scarcely and (31.5%) never read English fictions. Therefore, it might not be surprising if the majority had low level of reading skills because of their lack of motivation to read English fiction. On the other hand, a slightly different picture is observed in item 4 which deals with learners' motivation to read reference books. A relatively high number of learners (20.2%) very often and (25.8%) often read reference books. Similarly, almost equal proportion of learners (24.7%) occasionally read reference books. However, some of

the learners (14.6%) scarcely and (14.6%) never read the reference books. This might suggest that learners attached more importance to reading reference books than fiction. The data in item 5 have some similarity to that of item 3. Item 5 is concerned with reading English newspapers and magazines. The data show that a few learners (12.4%) very often and (14.6%) often read English newspapers and magazines while a relatively high proportion of learners (22.5%) occasionally read English newspapers and magazines. Nevertheless, the majority of learners (21.3%) scarcely and (29.2%) never read English newspapers and magazines. This suggests that most of the learners might have low level of reading skills. Unlike the items discussed so far, item 6 appears to have somewhat a different picture. Item 6 is about using the Internet for different purposes. As the data show, a sizeable proportion of learners (27%) very often and (15.7%) often used the Internet whereas some learners (19.1%) occasionally used the English websites. At the same time, a moderate number of learners (23.6%) scarcely and (14.6%) never used English websites. This might have some implications on learners' level of reading skills.

#### *Interacting with Others to Develop the Writing Skills*

The items 7 and 8 in the questionnaire are concerned with whether learners used the Internet to develop their writing skills. As in item 7, a relatively few learners (12.4%) very often and (12.4%) often used the Internet to communicate with their friends through e-mail. Similarly, quite few learners (9%) occasionally used the Internet to e-mail their friends who lived elsewhere. However, the majority of learners (20.2%) scarcely and (46.1%) never had interest to communicate with their friends through the Internet by e-mailing. This may suggest that most of the learners might have low level of writing skills. Item 8 of the questionnaire is about chatting with friends on the Internet. When the learners chatted with their friends, they were more likely to use short sentences, phrases, or simply words to communicate their ideas. According to the data in item 8, a relatively large proportion of learners (27%) very often chatted with their friends on the Internet while few learners (11.2%) often chatted with their

friends living elsewhere. At the same time, a sizeable proportion of learners (18%) occasionally chatted with their friends on the Internet. Nevertheless, a large number of learners (22.5%) scarcely and (21.3%) never chatted on the Internet with their friends living elsewhere. This may imply that most of the learners might not have developed their writing because of their lack of motivation to use this opportunity to write to their friends.

#### *Interacting with others to Develop the Speaking Skills*

Items 9 and 10 of the questionnaire are concerned with students' interaction with their teacher and classmates so as to develop their speaking skills. In this case, interaction could be one-to-one or one-to-many. As in item 9, a relatively large proportion of learners (25.8%) very often and (18%) often communicated orally with their friends. Similarly, a large number of learners (25.8%) occasionally communicated orally with their friends. However, a sizeable number of learners (24.7%) scarcely and (5.6%) never used oral communication with their friends. This may suggest that some learners might have low speaking skills as they lacked the motivation to exercise oral communication skills with their friends. However, we could observe a somewhat different picture in item 10. As in the data in item 10, a large number of learners (24.7%) very often and (25.8%) often reported to have practiced oral communication with their teachers. At the same time, a large proportion of learners (24.7%) occasionally communicated orally with their teachers. On the other hand, an average number of learners (18%) scarcely communicated orally with their teachers while quite a small number of learners (6.7%) had no motivation at all to communicate orally with their teachers. This indicates that some learners might not have developed their speaking skills because of their lack of interest to use this opportunity to communicate orally with their teachers.

### *Learners' Use of Opportunities*

Items 11 and 12 in the questionnaire are about the situations in which learners can exercise their learner autonomy. As in item 11, a small number of learners (10.1%) very often and (4.5%) often participated in English clubs while an average proportion of learners (18%) occasionally participated in English clubs. However, the majority of learners (28.1%) scarcely and (39.3%) never took part in English clubs. This may suggest that most of the learners may have low level of oral or written communication skills as they had no motivation to participate in English clubs in which they could have performed dramas or written letters to each other. As the data in item 12 indicates, a small proportion of learners (9%) very often and (10.1%) often participated in ELIC whereas an average number of learners (16.9%) occasionally participated in ELIC. Nevertheless, the majority of learners (28.1%) scarcely and (36%) never participated in ELIC. This implies that most of them lacked oral and written communicative skills that they could have acquired if they had the motivation to take part in ELIC.

### *Findings from the Questionnaire: Beliefs*

**Table 2: Respondents' Beliefs about Activities that might Help them Improve their Language Skills**

Item no	Beliefs	5*	%	4	%	3	%	2	%	1	%
1	Students should be responsible for their learning	41	46.1%	39	43.8%	1	1.1%	6	6.7%	2	2.2%
2	Teacher is responsible for students' learning	7	8.0%	8	9.1%	9	10.2%	29	33.0%	35	39.8%
3	Teacher and students are responsible	26	29.2%	33	37.1%	10	11.2%	10	11.2%	10	11.2%
4	Autonomous learners take charges	20	22.7%	37	42.0%	11	12.5%	14	15.9%	6	6.8%
5	Autonomous learners are good achievers	23	25.8%	40	44.9%	9	10.1%	12	13.5%	5	5.6%
6	Autonomous learners are self-motivated	16	18.0%	45	50.6%	12	13.5%	9	10.1%	7	7.9%
7	Autonomous learners are life-long learners	18	20.2%	41	46.1%	12	13.5%	10	11.2%	8	9.0%
8	Autonomous learners are better speakers	27	30.7%	38	43.2%	7	8.0%	5	5.7%	11	12.5%
9	Autonomous learners are better readers	25	28.1%	38	42.7%	12	13.5%	12	13.5%	2	2.2%
10	Autonomous learners are better listeners	15	17.0%	40	45.5%	15	17.0%	10	11.4%	8	9.1%
11	Autonomous learners are better writers	24	27.0%	35	39.3%	11	12.4%	13	14.6%	6	6.7%

\*5= strongly agree    4= agree    3= undecided    2= disagree    1= strongly disagree

### *Beliefs about Taking Responsibility for Learning*

Items 1-3 are about learners' beliefs about who should be responsible for the development of their language skills. Specifically, item 1 is aimed at getting data about what students believed about their role in learning. As in the data, the majority of learners (46.1%) strongly agreed and (43.8%) agreed that they had to take responsibility for their own learning while quite few learners (6.7%) disagreed and (2.2%) strongly disagreed with the idea that they should take the responsibility for their learning. Item 2 is about whether the teacher should be responsible for students'

learning. As in the data, a few learners (8%) strongly agreed and (9.1%) agreed that the teacher should be responsible for students' learning whereas a few learners (10.2%) were uncertain of teacher's taking the responsibility for students' learning. However, the majority of learners (33%) disagreed and (39.8%) strongly disagreed with the idea that the teacher should be responsible for students' learning.

### *Beliefs about Autonomous Learners' Behavior*

Items 4-7 are aimed at getting data concerning learners' beliefs about how autonomous learners behaved during autonomous learning situations. In this regard, item 4 tries to establish if learners took autonomous learners as ones who were responsible for their own learning. Accordingly, a large number of learners (22.7%) strongly agreed and the majority of them (42%) agreed that autonomous learners usually took responsibility for their learning. At the same time, some learners (12.5%) had no idea and almost an equivalent number of learners (15.9%) disagreed with the idea and quite a small number of them (6.8%) strongly disagreed with the belief that learners should take responsibility for their own learning. Item 5 is about the relationship between being autonomous learner and getting good grades in examinations. In this regard, the data shows that a large proportion of learners (25.8%) strongly agreed and the majority of learners (44.9%) agreed with the proposition that autonomous learners were good achievers in their examinations. However, a few learners (10.1%) had no ideas at all. Besides, a few of them (13.5%) disagreed and quite few learners (5.6%) strongly disagreed that autonomous learners were good achievers in their examinations. Item 6 is about the relationship between autonomous learning and self-motivation. As in the data, some learners (18%) strongly agreed and the majority of them (50.6%) agreed that autonomous learners were self-motivated. Nevertheless, a few learners (13.5%) had no ideas while few of them (10.1%) disagreed and quite a small number of them (7.9%) strongly disagreed with the idea that autonomous learners had self-motivation. Eventually, item 7 is about if autonomous learning entails life-long learning. As can be observed, a



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sizeable proportion of learners (20.2%) strongly agreed and the majority of them (46.1%) agreed with the belief that autonomous learners would likely be life-long learners. On the other hand, a few learners (13.5%) had no ideas at all and few of them (11.2%) disagreed and quite a small number of them (9%) strongly disagreed with the belief that autonomous learning and life-long learning were closely related.

*Beliefs about Autonomous Learning and Development of Language Skills*

Items 8-11 are concerned with autonomous learning and the development of language macro-skills. Specifically, item 8 is about if autonomous learning helps learners attain the ability to speak English fluently. As in the data, a large proportion of learners (30.7%) strongly agreed and the majority of them (43.2%) agreed with the idea that autonomous learning could entail fluent speaking of English. However, few of the learners (8%) had no ideas and quite a small number of them (5.7%) disagreed and a few of learners (12.5%) strongly disagreed with the belief that autonomous learning could bring about fluency in speaking English. Item 9 tries to establish relationship between autonomous learning and improved reading ability. As the data show, a large number of learners (28.1%) strongly agreed and the majority of them (42.7%) agreed that autonomous learning would help learners to have improved reading ability. Nevertheless, a few learners (13.5%) had no ideas at all and the same proportion of them (13.5%) disagreed and quite insignificant number of them (2.2%) strongly disagreed with the belief that autonomous learning would help learners to have improved reading ability. Item 10 is about the relationship between autonomous learning and listening ability. As in the data, a few learners (17%) strongly agreed and the majority of them (45.5%) agreed that autonomous learning would help learners to achieve improved listening ability. However, an equivalent number of learners (17%) had no idea at

all. A few learners (11.4%) disagreed and quite a small number of learners (9.1%) strongly disagreed that autonomous learning would help to have improved listening ability. Lastly, item 11 deals with the relationship between autonomous learning and writing skills. As the data show, a large proportion of learners (27%) strongly agreed and the majority of them (39.3%) agreed that autonomous learning facilitated improvement of the writing skills. On the other hand, a few learners (12.4%) had no ideas about the issue. At the same time, an equivalent number of learners (14.6%) disagreed and quite a few of them (6.7%) strongly disagreed that autonomous learning might bring about improved writing skills.

### *Findings from the Interview*

#### *Beliefs*

It appears that all of the interviewees believed that learning English was important for them. The subjects might have developed this belief mainly because of their understanding about the far-and-wide use of English in every sphere of human activity. In other words, they might have realized that English is the language of politics, diplomacy, aviation, commerce, and education.

Three of the interviewees were not interested to learn English independently because they strongly believed that the teacher was the resourceful individual to whom they turned when they faced difficulties during learning. When the subjects were asked who should be responsible for developing their English skills, nearly half of them had the tendency to be reliant on their teachers. This might be due to the effect of previous learning experience which gave the teacher to assume central position in the teaching and learning process and partly students' lack of confidence to undertake independent learning. At the same time, the other half reported that their teachers and the students themselves should equally be responsible for developing the English language skills.

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*Practices*

Those respondents, who believed that they could learn English independently on their own, mentioned that they used resources like social media. Specifically, they chatted on Facebook to write messages and share ideas. In addition, they also communicated with their pen pals by emails. They also pointed out that both chatting on the social media and writing emails helped them develop their writing skills tremendously.

In addition, the respondents also reported that they had developed the habit of watching TV broadcasts in English and films and they believed that this enabled them to learn spoken English particularly pronunciation, accent, and intonations. These resources also provided them opportunities so that they could guess meanings of words and expressions in the given contexts. Regarding radio broadcasts, none of them were interested to listen to English broadcasts. But some of them showed interest to listen to music on their mobiles.

Students were more drawn to their cell-phones than they could be to their radios and TVs. Nowadays, nearly all students had mobile phones. The reason for students' liking of their mobile phones could possibly be their portability and user-friendliness. The students could easily take them to sites where they could find Internet. Most of the participants informed that they downloaded audiovisual learning materials from the Internet to practice spoken English. On the other hand, the others reported to have liked downloading mostly music and sometimes films.

Regarding membership in English clubs in the university, only few of them reported to have participated in ELIC. The students believed that participating in ELIC could have tremendous contributions particularly for the improvement of their oral and reading skills. During training in the center, the students were exposed to role-plays, drama, games, music,

simulations, and debating on controversial social issues. At the same time, the students revealed that they borrowed books, short stories, and even novels to enjoy reading stories and thus enrich their cultural experiences. Eventually, this might have some contributions to develop their reading skills.

### **Discussion**

There appears to be contradictions in the interview and questionnaire data concerning the purpose of watching TV. In the interview session, the respondents reported that they had developed the habit of watching TV broadcasts in English and films that they thought enabled them to learn spoken English particularly pronunciation, accent, and intonations. This seems to be more related to developing speaking skills than listening skills. On the other hand, item 1 in the questionnaire shows that the majority of learners were not motivated to watch TV so as to develop their listening skills. Similarly, the majority of learners (33.7% & 47.2%) scarcely or never listened to broadcasts in English on the radio. The possible explanation for the discrepancy could be those few learners who had the habit of watching TV and listening to the radio could have been those who were randomly selected for the interview. Although the majority of learners (45.5%) had the belief that autonomous learning helped to improve their listening ability, they lacked motivation to watch TV or listen to radio English broadcasts which might have significant effect on their listening skills.

Even though the majority of learners (28.1% & 42.7%) believed that autonomous learning helped improve reading ability, a large number of them (21.3% & 29.2%) scarcely or never read English newspapers and magazines and the same number of them (27% & 31.5%) scarcely or never read English fictions. On the contrary, the interviewees reported that they borrowed books, short stories, and even novels to enjoy reading stories and thus enriched their cultural experiences. As stated in the preceding paragraph, this contradiction could be attributed to

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selecting the same learners who could have already developed liking for reading fictions.

Despite the majority of learners' (27% & 39.3%) belief that autonomous learning facilitated improvement of the writing skills, the same proportion of them (20.2% & 46.1%) scarcely or never had interest to e-mail and at the same time (22.5% & 21.3%) of them scarcely or never chatted on the Internet with their friends living elsewhere. However, the interviewee reported that chatting on the social media and writing emails helped them develop their writing skills tremendously. As in the preceding paragraphs, these interviewees could have been those who liked to use the Internet so as to develop their writing skills.

In the questionnaire, a large proportion of learners (30.7% & 43.2%) believed that autonomous learning could entail fluent speaking of English. Unlike the findings in the preceding paragraphs, learners' belief was reflected in their practice. According to the data in item 9, a relatively large proportion of learners (25.8%) very often and (18%) often communicated orally with their friends. Similarly, in item 10 it was reported that a large number of learners (24.7%) very often and (25.8%) often reported to have oral communication with their teachers. However, a small number of learners (10.1% & 4.5%) very often and often participated in English clubs and the same proportion of learners (9% & 10.1%) very often and often participated in ELIC. In the interview, it could have been these learners who expressed their belief that participating in ELIC could have tremendous contributions particularly for the improvement of their oral skills as they participated in role-plays, drama, games, music, simulations, and debating on controversial social issues.

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## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

### *Conclusion*

The first research question was aimed at finding out how learners exercised learner autonomy to develop their language skills. As in the data, even though they were few in number (7.9% and 5.6%), they watched TV and the same number of them (5.6%) listened to the radio in order to develop their listening skills. This may suggest that the majority of the learners lacked the motivation to use these resources to develop their listening skills.

Regarding the reading skills, the data show that a relatively high number of learners (20.2% and 25.8%) read reference books, some learners (12.4% and 15.7%) read fictions in English, a few learners (12.4% and 14.6%) read English newspapers and magazines, and a sizeable proportion of learners (27% and 15.7%) used the Internet to get information or broaden their knowledge. This may imply that the majority of learners refrained from using these resources to develop their reading skills.

With respect to writing skills, the learners' use of resources appears to be quite limited. According to the data, a relatively few learners (12.4% and 12.4%) used the Internet to communicate with their friends through e-mail. Similarly, a relatively large proportion of learners (27%) chatted with their friends on the Internet. This suggests that the learners lacked opportunities or situations that required them to write in English. Consequently, these learners might have low or undeveloped writing skills.

Similarly, the learners seemed to have used quite limited resources to develop their speaking skills. A relatively large proportion of learners

(25.8% and 18%) communicated orally with their friends and the same number of learners (24.7% and 25.8%) reported to have oral communication with their teachers. However, a small number of learners (10.1% and 4.5%) participated in English clubs and the same proportion of learners (9% and 10.1%) participated in ELIC. This suggests that learners were not committed to develop their speaking skills using different resources.

The second research question was concerned with the beliefs that students held about learner autonomy in developing their language skills. Regarding speaking skills, a large proportion of learners (30.7% and 43.2%) believed that autonomous learning could entail fluent speaking of English. Similarly, the same number of learners (28.1% and 42.7%) held the belief that autonomous learning helped to have improved reading ability. With regard to listening skills, we could notice a little difference in the number of learners (17%) who strongly believed the role of autonomous learning in developing the listening skills. Of course, we did see also a large number of learners (45.5%) who shared the same belief. Concerning the writing skills, a large proportion of learners (27% and 39.3%) believed that autonomous learning facilitated improvement of the writing skills. This implies that the learners had realized the importance of learner autonomy so as to develop the language skills.

The last but not least research question was about how the learners conceptualized autonomous learning and autonomous learner. With regard to the requirements for autonomous learning, the majority of learners (46.1% and 43.8%) believed that they had to take responsibility for their own learning. At the same time, a few learners (8% and 9.1%) had the belief that the teacher should be responsible for students' learning. However, half of the interviewees took an intermediary position and thus both the teacher and learners should equally be responsible for developing the English language skills. Despite having two extreme views, the data suggest that the learners recognized the contribution of



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the teacher in autonomous learning although they had to take the lion's share in the learning process.

Regarding the characteristics of autonomous learners, a large number of learners (22.7% and 42%) believed that autonomous learners usually took responsibility for their learning. Similarly, the same number of learners (25.8% and 44.9%) supported the proposition that autonomous learners were good achievers in their examinations. At the same time, some learners (18%) and the majority of them (50.6%) believed that autonomous learners were self-motivated. Furthermore, a sizeable proportion of learners (20.2%) and the majority of them (46.1%) expressed their belief that autonomous learners were life-long learners. This implies that the learners were well-aware of the qualities that autonomous learners should have in the process of self-learning situations.

#### *Recommendations*

According to the findings, the learners seemed to have strong belief that they should take responsibility for their learning and realized that autonomous learning would help to develop their language skills. Nonetheless, they lacked commitment or opportunities to use the resources. On top of that, they were not motivated to participate in English clubs and ELIC. Therefore, the following recommendations were forwarded:

- Dilla University should establish language laboratories and self-access centers and make them available for learners to exercise learner autonomy at their spare times.
- The Ministry of Education should provide financial support so that universities could build self-access centers, enrich language

laboratories, and equip ELIC and libraries with periodicals and newspapers.

- The Department of English Language and Literature should raise learners' awareness about the importance of using audio-visual materials and participating in English clubs and ELIC in order to develop their language skills.
- The instructors who are giving writing and speaking courses should design appropriate tasks and provide assignments so that the learners could exercise writing and speaking skills out of the classroom.

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