

Indonesian students autonomous learning activities to support English mastery in the era of Merdeka Belajar

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has received greater attention in Indonesian educational system after the concept of Merdeka Belajar or the freedom of learning was introduced in 2020 by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia. In the past, Indonesian society believed that the higher of the educational level of the learners, the more responsible they will be in pursuing the knowledge. This is described by the beliefs that elementary school teachers are required to transfer 100% knowledge to students and the percentage of knowledge transfer will decrease gradually as students enter a higher level of education, about 75% in senior high school and 50% in junior high schools. At university level, the lecturers will require the students to work more independently in discovering the knowledge as the knowledge transfer will only be done for about 25%. Combining the philosophy of Merdeka Belajar and this local belief, the writers were interested to reveal university students' autonomous activities in learning English outside of the classrooms. The data were taken from the self-report written by Pekalongan University students. The findings reveal students' various autonomous learning activities in which listening to English songs and watching English movies become the most frequently performed activities to improve their mastery of English.

Keywords

Autonomous learning, Learner autonomy, Merdeka Belajar, Learning activities

Introduction

Learner autonomy received greater attention in Indonesian educational system after the concept of Merdeka Belajar of freedom of learning was introduced in 2020 by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Learner autonomy is seen as an important aspect to create independent and lifelong learners which have become an important part of the goals of the national Education in Indonesia. Introduced initially at higher educations, the concept of Merdeka Belajar is recently also introduced in the lower levels namely

Published:
April 15, 2025

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the 6th BIS-HSS 2024 Committee

high school and elementary school levels. The aims of Merdeka Belajar policy cover restoring the educational system in Indonesia “by giving space and freedom to school residents, principals, teachers, and students, free to innovate and learn independently and creatively” (Setyoningrum et al., 2023).

In Indonesian context, however, the concept of learner autonomy was not very popular in the past. A classroom was regarded as a good classroom when it consisted of obedient students who were attentive to the teacher’s explanations. The teachers often became the most dominant party in the classroom and the students were expected to follow what the teachers ordered them to do. This practice has been implemented from generation to generation and it underwent changes when the 2013 curriculum was introduced. In the 2013 curriculum, the teachers’ role shifted from the transmitter of the knowledge into the learning facilitators and thus a fertile ground for the growth of learner autonomy was available (Agustina et al., 2022). With the introduction of Merdeka Belajar concepts and curriculum, the development of learner autonomy in Indonesia apparently gets greater support. According to Simarmata and Mayuni (2023), Merdeka Belajar curriculum brings the changes within the learning methods, namely, from learning mainly within the classrooms into learning outside of the classroom which infers the more control of the students in their learning.

Although the introduction of the Merdeka curriculum seems to bring positive changes in the development of learner autonomy in learning, Mustofa et al., (2023) found out that not all Indonesian teachers felt optimistic about the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. This was revealed from their research on teachers’ beliefs on the reform policy especially when the freedom of learning curriculum was implemented. In addition, Rusman et al., (2023) found out that not all teachers understand and have the ability to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. This suggests that teachers perceived doubts and inabilities in themselves at putting the Merdeka curriculum into practices. Even so, the current curriculum seems to be the culmination of government focus on developing learner autonomy in Indonesian educational institutions. With a greater focus on learner autonomy development, it can be said that a new history within the educational systems in Indonesia is built. This is so as independence and freedom of learning become the basis for Merdeka Curriculum (Fuadi & Aswita, 2021; Sulistyono et al., 2020).

Learner autonomy itself is defined by Holec (1979) as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning.” Another definition is proposed by Little (1991), in which learner autonomy is seen as the capacity for “detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action.” Other definition is offered by Dickinson (1995) who states that learner autonomy is “a capacity for active, independent learning.” From those definitions, learner autonomy can be summarised as learners’ capacity to take control of and responsibility for their learning and to use this skill to conduct independent learning. In this current study, the term autonomous learning and independent learning are used interchangeably.

Within the concept of Merdeka Belajar, university students are given more control in developing their autonomy. They are given the chance to learn not only in their home universities but also outside of their home universities. Not only that, they are also given freedom in taking the subjects they are going to learn. In total, they are given three semesters to learn either from other departments or from other universities. The freedom in learning is given so that they experience more learning activities outside of their home universities. They can take subjects in other universities or they can join the internship programs or many other relevant activities which supports the development of their competency and skills in a particular area including English.

In English learning, the freedom is similarly given both inside and outside of the class. According to Little (2007) there is a very close relationship between developing learner autonomy and enhancing English proficiency. This is because autonomous learners are likely to make use of opportunities for learning English in their environment such as reading English texts or making conversation with foreigners (Paiva, 2013). The development of autonomy is also supported when students acquire the skills to become competent English speaker by exploiting linguistic and other resources in an effective and creative way (Illés, 2012). Within this digital era, the unlimited access to online English materials is highly relevant to the support the development of learner autonomy in learning English.

With the implementation of Merdeka Belajar curriculum, the teaching and learning activities done in English classes also undergo significant changes. Students are given more control over the place of learning, the sources of learning, styles of learning, modes of learning and the use of learning media. They can use any media they like and they are free to learn from any sources they prefer to use. Outside of classrooms, they have equal freedom, or even greater freedom in conducting their autonomous or independent English learning activities.

Thus, within the period in which learner autonomy is truly supported by the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in higher education in Indonesia, the writers were interested to study how students actually conduct autonomous learning outside of the classrooms especially in the era of Merdeka Belajar (freedom of learning).

Method

This study belongs to survey research. A survey is described by Antonius (2003) as an appropriate method to obtain wide-ranging surface level data. Wiersma and Jurs (2009) also add that survey is really relevant to help researchers in collecting data related to people's opinions, attitudes and perceptions. Employing a survey was also an efficient way to capture a lot of data with minimal expense and efforts (Muijs, 2004). In this study, the writer conducted a survey by using a questionnaire. The questionnaire was then distributed to the students majoring in Accounting in the Faculty of Economics and Business of Pekalongan University in 2022. There were 38 students participating in this survey. The survey was in the form of self-reports and the students were free to

complete it by using their own words. After the data were collected, they were analysed by using content analysis in which codes, categories and themes were developed related to the types of autonomous learning activities to improve the English mastery done by Pekalongan University students majoring in accounting.

Result and Discussion

The study finds that almost all accounting students (94.74%) at Pekalongan University conducted independent or autonomous English learning activities while the other 5.26% reported that they never conducted autonomous learning activities. Further, this study reveals that there were various learning activities conducted by these students as being described in the [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Autonomous learning activities of accounting students at Pekalongan University

No	Types of Autonomous Learning Activities	Responses	%
1	Listening to English songs	11	28.95
2	Watching English films	10	26.32
3	Learning from the internet	6	15.79
4	Watching English YouTube Channel	6	15.79
5	Using google translate	5	13.16
6	Learning from social media	4	10.53
7	Learning from Platform or free apps in Handphone	3	7.89
8	Reading books	3	7.89
9	Learning with private teachers	2	5.26
10	Learning from more capable peers	2	5.26
11	Learning From Games	2	5.26
12	Dictionary	2	5.26
13	By Listening to Podcast	2	5.26
14	Reading English vocabulary	1	2.63
15	Watching English adds	1	2.63
16	Making Personal Summary of English	1	2.63

Based on [Table 1](#) above there were a wide range of activities done independently or autonomously by students especially to improve their English mastery. The activities included listening to English songs, watching English films, learning from the internet, watching English YouTube channels, using google translate, learning from social media, learning from platform or free apps in hand phone, reading books, learning with private teachers, learning from more capable peers, learning from games, using dictionary, learning by listening to podcast, reading English vocabulary, watching English adds and making personal summary of English. With those various activities, listening to English songs and watching English movies became the most frequently done autonomous activities. The next popular activities were using internet, You tube and google translate. Even if some other activities were only done by a few numbers of students, this study finds that the students show a great control over the learning activities. There are at 16 activities in total which infer that the students have the true freedom in choosing the materials or the sources of the English learning. In Chart, the comparison of the activities is shown at [Figure 1](#).

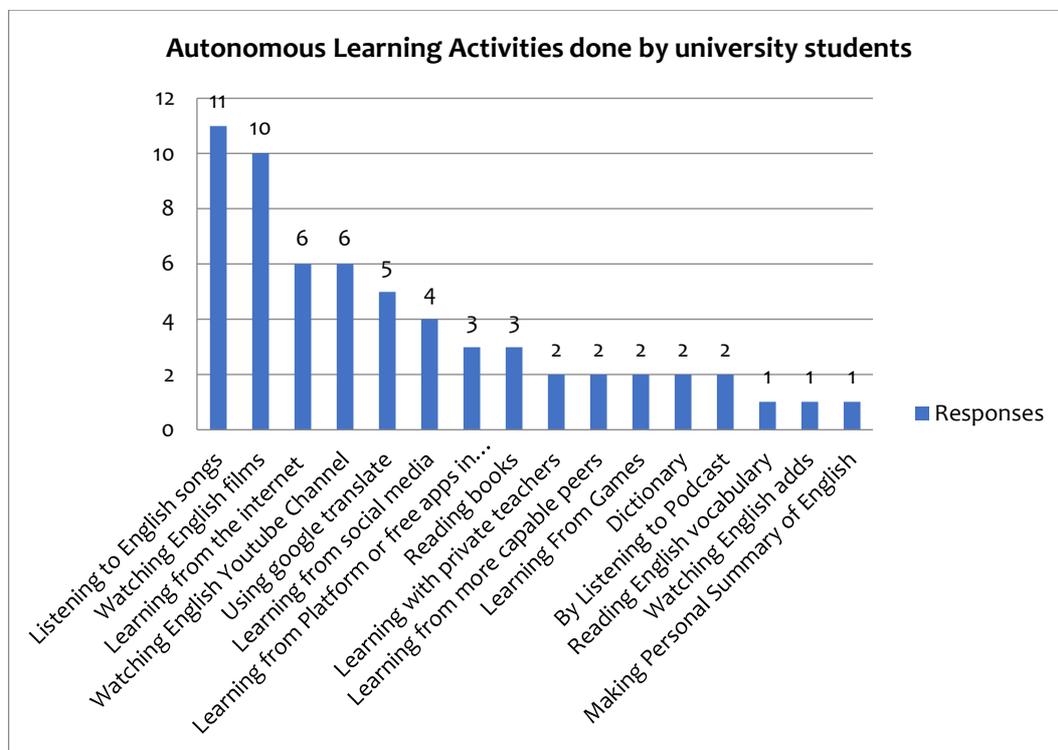


Figure 1. Autonomous learning activities done by Pekalongan University students

These findings of this current study were in line with Mehdiyev's (2020) findings in which students did many learning activities independently such as making foreign friends, watching foreign movies and listening to foreign music, playing video games, and attending drama courses. The findings were also very similar to Alolaywi's (2023) findings in which students watch movies frequently to improve their English. However, interestingly, other previous studies such as Liando et. al. (2018), Giang (2020), and Murshidi (2020), have shown that even when there was no Merdeka Belajar curriculum, students already used movies in their English learning. This suggests that the activities done before and after Merdeka Belajar were still the same, signalling that the impact of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum on the types of activities was not high.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study has revealed that university students majoring in Accounting at Pekalongan University conducted various autonomous learning activities. The most popular activities were listening to English songs and watching English movies. However, these activities were very similar to the activities done far before the Merdeka curriculum was introduced, signalling the small impact of Merdeka curriculum to the students' independent activities in learning English. Even so, there were two students who never learnt independently outside the classrooms. Thus, the writers would like to suggest the lecturers at Pekalongan University to encourage students to learn autonomously and to offer some training and guidance for doing autonomous learning so that every single student can learn English independently. Lastly, the writers would like to suggest future researchers to address the limitation of the study since this current study only used

small data from an English classroom in Pekalongan University. Thus, the findings may not be fully representative to the whole Indonesian learners' autonomous learning activities conducted in the era of Merdeka Belajar. More studies in the same topic can be done by involving larger samples so that the findings are more generalizable.

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