

AUTONOMY IN ONLINE GRAMMAR LEARNING: EFL STUDENTS' REPORTED PRACTICE AND PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

Often perceived as a challenging subject among many tertiary EFL students, grammar may present more difficulties to the learners when delivered online, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within such a situation, autonomous learning, which earlier literature has suggested to be crucial in helping students with grammar learning, would be even more imperative for their success. Hence, this study attempts to investigate whether EFL tertiary students in Indonesia practice autonomous learning and how they perceive learning autonomy for their online grammar class. As many as 82 Indonesian students who had taken an online intermediate grammar course in a respected private university were involved in this study. A questionnaire with close and open-ended questions was used for the data collection. The findings indicate that although students mostly had positive views towards autonomy in online grammar learning and claimed to practice it, the autonomy level tended to be low. Factors such as fatigue from online learning, distractions, overwhelming assignments, and lack of study skills, seemed to have contributed to the difficulties in practicing learner autonomy.

Keywords: autonomous learning, grammar learning, online grammar learning, online learning

Introduction

The current global pandemic has brought great changes in education where all teaching and learning activities have been shifted from the traditional face-to-face learning into online learning. This has inevitably included isolated grammar classes, which are often run to enhance students' understanding of grammatical concepts and noticing of forms at tertiary EFL programs. As grammar is crucial in effective communication, it is imperative to ensure that students can learn the language aspect successfully. However, as Pawlak (2017) points out, since its learning constitutes various substantial tasks in language acquisition beyond understanding rules, learning autonomy is vital for its mastery. This is especially the case in contexts where exposure to the target language is limited (Pawlak, 2017). Given that such autonomy is essential to determine students' success in

offline grammar learning (Pawlak, 2017; Jarvis & Szymczyk, 2010), it should play a more significant role within online grammar learning, which has often become the only option during the COVID 19 pandemic. As there is limited opportunity to do real interactions with the instructor(s), students are expected to be able to take charge and manage their own learning. Isti'anah's (2017) and Jarvis and Szymczyk's (2010) studies, respectively using LSM and paper-based materials for students' self-study in blended grammar learning, demonstrate that autonomous learning may promote students' grammar abilities. However, reported research on learner's autonomy in a fully online setting seems to be non-existent. Earlier studies within such contexts only illustrate the relation between online classes and autonomy (Eneau & Develotte, 2012; Hartnett, 2015). As online learning may still continue after the pandemic, it is necessary to examine students' online learning practice and their perceptions toward autonomy in their online learning experience. This research is expected to provide insights for language teachers and course designers in helping students to practise their autonomy in online grammar learning.

As grammar is "the structural glue, the "code" of language, [which] is arguably at the heart of language use" (Purpura, 2013, p. ix), it plays a crucial role in communication. Despite this, its learning is not always easy for EFL students. Factors such as grammar features, learners, pedagogical arrangements, and teachers may contribute to challenges in grammar learning (Grauss & Coppen, 2015). In line with this, Pawlak (2017) believes that one common problem in grammar learning is the limited classroom time with many objectives and materials to be covered while the teacher might not be able to address all the different proficiency levels of the students. Therefore, he suggests that autonomy is crucial in grammar learning in order to develop competence. If students can manage their own learning and do not rely on classroom meetings with the teacher, then students would benefit greatly from their grammar learning.

Autonomous learning can be defined in many different ways, but for the purpose of the research, it refers to "[the] ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3, as in Pawlak, 2017). Therefore, autonomous learning can also be called "independent learning" (Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014, p. 55), where students are expected to take more control in managing and doing their own learning outside the classroom. It may be linked to "self-regulation" which can be defined as "the ability of learners to control the factors or conditions affecting their learning" (Dembo, Junge & Lynch, 2006, p.188, as in Andrade & Bunker, 2009). Independent learning and self-regulation represent very similar concepts, but "self-regulation" focuses more on *how* learners can manage their own learning process effectively without being dependent on the teacher by taking into account the elements which affect their learning (Andrade & Bunker, 2009). The concepts of self-regulation and autonomy are in line with most of the teachers' belief in Borg and Al-Busaidi's study (2012) that autonomy allowed students to be more independent and responsible for their own learning. It is crucial for students to learn grammar autonomously because only the students themselves can establish the best time for the most effective learning situation and atmosphere (Pawlak, 2017).

Within a fully online setting, autonomy is essential in students' learning. It constitutes one key aspect in Moore's theory of transactional distance (Moore,

1972, 2007, as in Andrade & Bunker, 2009), a renowned theory in remote learning. There are three essential aspects in such learning: (1) dialogue, which refers to learners' and teacher's interaction in the distance learning classroom, (2) structure, which relates to whether the course objectives, goals, and evaluation are relevant with learners' preferences and needs, and (3) learner autonomy. With this in mind, it is paramount to investigate the implementation of autonomy in grammar learning during the fully online distance learning setting.

Even though earlier studies on autonomy in grammar classes have not focused on the fully online learning setting, previous research has shown how autonomous learning is crucial in distant learning. Involving French language students from different countries, Eneau and Develotte's study (2012) found that the online learning could promote students' autonomy because it required students to manage their own learning and work alone or in a group to improve their understanding of the materials.

On the other hand, research also shows that there are challenges students faced. Besides poor internet connection, one common difficulty is limited classroom time, which Indonesian students and teachers have commonly encountered in their online classes (Gunawan, Suranti, & Fathoroni, 2020). On the other hand, Hartnett (2015) found that limited opportunity to do interaction with the teacher (dialogue) and the relevance of the classroom goals and objectives with students' preferences and needs (structure) can also be a problem for the students in distance learning. However, Hartnett's study, which involved students of a pre-service teacher education program in New Zealand, showed that "high workload" was the most common factor the students felt to be hindering their autonomous practice (p. 90). As students had to manage their own learning for their online class besides their other assignments and responsibilities, they felt that they had no control over much of the learning process and became reluctant to learn independently.

With the potential challenges students have to face in their grammar learning and the difficulties in implementing the fully online distance learning setting within the current pandemic context, autonomy will have an essential role in students' learning. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how students perceive autonomy and to what extent they practice autonomous learning in their fully online grammar class.

Method

Context of the Study

This qualitative research aims to investigate learner autonomy in grammar learning among undergraduate EFL students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. To obtain a deeper perspective of the issue, it will also address students' general perception of the online grammar learning. Accordingly, the study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are tertiary EFL students' general perceptions of online grammar learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Do the students practice autonomy in their online grammar learning?
3. How do they practice learning autonomy in their online grammar learning?

4. How do they perceive autonomy in their online grammar learning from home during the period?

The research was conducted in an English Language Education Program of a private university in Salatiga, Central Java. The program had two different levels of grammar courses (basic and intermediate), which had been run fully online since March 2020 following the government's social restrictions due to the Covid 19 pandemic. The classes were conducted twice a week with a two hours' face-to-face online meeting each.

Use of Terms

This research uses the term “learner autonomy” which refers to students’ ability to manage, control, and do their own learning outside the classroom meetings (Holec, 1981, as in Pawlak, 2017). While the term “autonomous practice” in grammar learning is a part of learner autonomy where students practice grammar by themselves and do independent study (self-study) from the materials that they have learned in class (Pawlak, 2017). The term "independent learning" is also used which has an interchangeable meaning with "autonomous learning" (Najeeb, 2013). Whereas the term "online learning" here refers not only to learning in a fully online setting, but also as an improved setting which resembles many similarities with “distance learning” (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011)

Participants of the Study

The participants of this research were 82 students from the English Language Education program who had just taken the intermediate or basic grammar course online. The 4 credit grammar courses were pre-requisites to the academic writing course and involved a one-hour class-meeting to discuss the importance of grammar for communication. Furthermore, the student participants were recruited through a convenience sampling. Generally coming from a language teaching background that did not pay attention to grammar, the students' grammar proficiencies fell below the faculty's standards and they normally needed to work hard to pass the courses.

Data Collection

The data collection was done through a questionnaire consisting of open-ended, multiple responses, Likert-scale, and close-ended questions. The instrument was administered in Indonesian through Google Form. The items for the first research question, except the essay question, and for the second research question (no 1 and 2) in the questionnaire were adapted from Jarvis and Szymczyk’s (2010) research. The questionnaire was used to discover: (1) how students perceive their online grammar class, (2) whether the students practice autonomy outside their online classes, (3) their reasons for doing or not doing independent grammar learning, and (4) how they perceive autonomous learning for their online grammar class. The questionnaire was piloted before being administered to the actual participants.

Data Analysis

The responses from the questionnaire were logged into Microsoft Excel. The data from the close-ended, multiple responses, and Likert-scale items were coded, converted into percentages, and analyzed. For the multiple response items, the participants could choose more than one answer, so the responses' total percentages could exceed 100%. On the other hand, the answers from the open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis where the data were classified into specific themes through frequent careful reading. To ensure the accuracy of the analysis, the classification was conducted by a team member and was later crosschecked by a second member. Different perceptions in the categorization were solved through mutual reviews.

Findings and Discussion

Students' General Perception on Their Online Grammar Learning

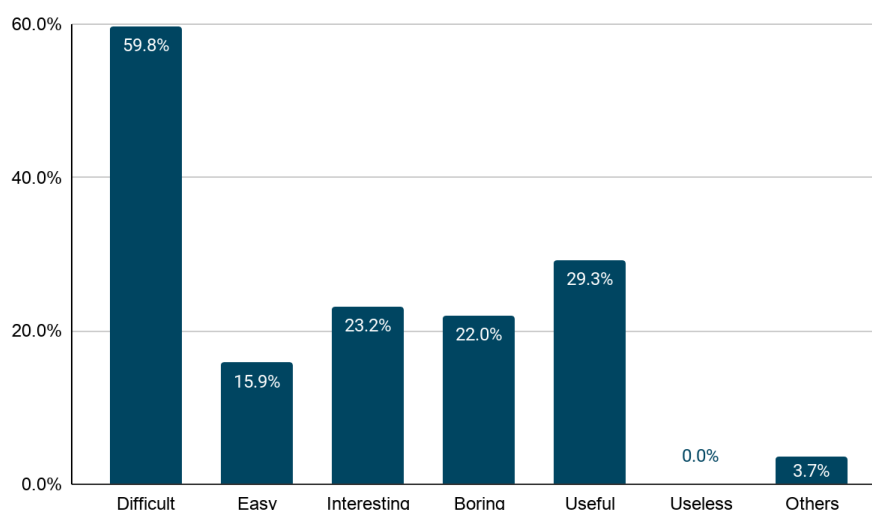


Figure 1. Percentage of students' perception of their online grammar learning

Based on a multiple response question, Figure 1 shows that over half of the students negatively perceived online grammar learning. They believed it was difficult (49 out of 82 students, 59.8%) and/or boring (18 students, 22%). In other words, the online mode of learning grammar was generally considered challenging. However, there were some students who thought positively by choosing 'useful' (24 students, 29.3%), 'interesting' (19 students, 23.2%), and/or 'easy' (13 students, 15.9%).

Furthermore, several reasons for the students' negative views were revealed in their responses to an accompanying open-ended question. Most students thought the online grammar learning was difficult because they found it harder to understand the materials (19 students, 23%), because of poor internet connection (17 students, 20.7%) and/or a very limited opportunity to interact with the teacher (15 students, 18.3%). On the other hand, some students saw that the grammar online course was boring because they preferred other ways of learning and/or and they could not have face-to-face interaction with mates and teachers (13 students 15.9%).

The poor internet connection echoes Gunawan et. al. (2020)'s finding that the internet issue and limited internet data plan became one of "the most common difficulties which are likely to emerge" (p. 69) for both students and teachers in Indonesia during the online learning. In addition, as Moore's theory of distance learning has suggested (Moore, 1972, 2007, as in Andrade & Bunker, 2009), the problem of the limited teacher-student interaction was shown to be a central issue in online learning. With such restricted interaction, students may have found it more challenging to understand the subject matter and less socially motivated to learn.

Furthermore, those who responded positively expressed various reasons for their answers. From the total participants (82 students), 13.2% perceived online grammar learning as beneficial because of three reasons, namely, obtain more grammar knowledge (4.9%), establish relevance of the classroom goals and objectives with students' preferences and needs (1%), and develop their English communication skill (7.3%). In addition, among the total participants, 8.1% felt that their online grammar learning was interesting because of two main reasons, respectively, a new experience to them (2%) and the opportunity to explore many other sources available (both printed or online) to improve their understanding of the materials (6.1%). In addition, a small number of students, 1.4% out of the total participants, perceived online grammar learning as easy because of their interest in grammar.

Do Students Practice Learning Autonomy?

As shown in Figure 2, most of the participants (69 out of 82 students, 84.1%) reported practicing learning autonomy and only few of them (13 students, 15.9%) did not.

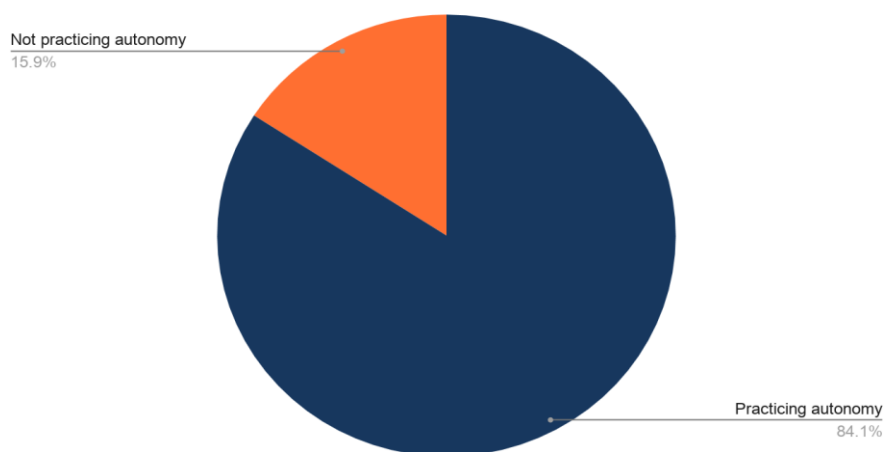


Figure 2. The number of students practicing and not practicing autonomy in online grammar learning

Practicing Autonomy in Online Grammar Learning

Frequency of Independent Study

While the majority of the participants claimed to practice autonomous grammar learning, over half of them (39 out of 69) did not report doing it often. Most of these students (29) reported doing self-study only once a week while 6

students did it less than once a week. In addition, 4 students chose others since they studied on their own only before having a test. There were only less than half of the students who reportedly studied independently more frequently. A total of 25 students studied by themselves two to three times a week and 5 said to do it more than three times a week. In other words, the learner autonomy level among the students in the online grammar course tended to be low.

Students' Strategies of Practising Autonomous Learning

Table 1. Students' strategies of practicing autonomous learning^a

Statements	N	Mean	SD	Always & often
1. I practice grammar independently by making a summary of the materials.	69	2.32	0.39	42.0%
2. I practice grammar independently by doing the exercises available in the course book.	69	2.65	0.45	55.0%
3. I practice grammar independently by analyzing the grammatical errors that I made when doing the exercise in the class and learn from them.	69	2.90	0.58	68.1%
4. I practice grammar independently by reading the upcoming materials in the course book.	69	2.68	0.49	58.0%
5. I practice grammar independently by finding more examples and materials on the internet.	69	2.68	0.46	56.5%
6. I practice grammar independently by finding online exercises on the internet.	69	2.32	0.38	42.0%
7. I practice grammar independently by watching grammar teaching videos from the internet.	69	1.83	0.26	27.5%
8. I practice grammar independently by trying to apply the materials that I have learned when completing other assignments (e.g. when composing my writings, practicing for my presentations, reading academic journals, etc.).	69	2.91	0.58	69.6%

a. Maximal value of 4 (Always=4; Often=3; Sometimes=2; Rarely=1; Never=0)

Table 1 demonstrates students' reported strategies in their learning autonomy based on frequencies. With the means generally between 2 and 3 and low SDs, the strategies generally received moderately positive responses. The most significantly applied ones were trying to apply what they had learned while completing other assignments (S8, means, aggregate) and through analyzing and learning from the grammatical errors that they made when doing the exercise in the class (S3, means=2.90, aggregate=68.1%). The considerable number of responses to S3 confirms Singh, Singh, Razak, and Ravinthar's (2017) study pointing out that grammar knowledge can be obtained not only through memorization of the rules but also students' awareness of making errors. The next commonly implemented strategies in students' independent learning were by

reading the upcoming materials in the course book (S4, mean=2.68, aggregate=58%), doing exercises in the course book (S2, mean=2.65, aggregate=55%), and by finding more examples and materials on the internet (S5, mean=2.68, aggregate=56.5%). With all these trends, students tended to focus more on what the teacher gave for/in their class. This echoes the students' responses to S6 and S7, in which they seemed to prefer to use the materials the course provided (e.g., exercises and teaching materials) than searching them on the internet. Likewise, learning grammar independently by watching grammar teaching videos on the internet was the least common way (S7, mean=1.83, aggregate=27.5%), and finding online exercises (S6, mean=2.32, aggregate=42%) were among those receiving the least positive responses from the participants. These results are consistent with Jarvis and Szymczyk's (2010), which shows that although the internet offered the students a vast number of materials and exercises to choose for their independent learning, students somehow still preferred materials such as coursebooks because they were more systematic and relevant with what the students' needed. The materials and exercises available online, in contrast, might make students overwhelmed or distracted when selecting the ones appropriate for them.

Reasons for Learning Autonomously (Doing Independent Grammar Learning)

Table 2 demonstrates students' responses to Likert statements aimed to discover the reasons of the students who claimed to learn grammar autonomously (69 out of 82 students).

Table 2. Students' reasons for practicing autonomy

Statements	N	Mean	SD	Strongly agree & Agree
1. Practicing grammar independently helps me to understand the materials better.	69	3.23	0.79	88.4%
2. Practicing grammar independently helps me to recall the teacher's explanation in the classroom.	69	3.30	0.85	92.8%
3. I find it difficult to comprehend the teacher's explanation from online classroom.	69	2.54	0.49	47.8%
4. I don't want to be dependent on my teacher.	69	2.58	0.48	52.2%
5. I can do exercises to improve my understanding about the materials.	69	3.03	0.68	78.3%
6. I need to study grammar independently to be able to use grammar in communication.	69	3.17	0.86	91.3%
7. There are plenty of grammar exercises and materials available on the internet.	69	3.22	0.79	88.4%
8. I need to practice a lot myself to be able to use the forms taught.	69	3.23	0.79	88.4%
9. I feel that the teacher's explanation in the online class is not enough to help me understand the materials.	69	2.39	0.37	44.9%
10. I like grammar.	69	2.59	0.50	47.8%
11. Having online grammar learning motivates me to learn more about grammar independently.	69	2.96	0.78	82.6%

Maximal value of 4 (strongly agree=4; agree=3; neutral=2; disagree=1; strongly disagree=0)

As shown in Table 2, with low SDs (below 1) and the means around 3, which is comparable to the value of ‘agree’, most students responded positively to S1, S2, S5, S6, S7, S8, S11. On the other hand, the results associated with the teacher’s explanation (S3, S4, S9) and interest in grammar were less positive. Regardless, the most frequent reason for practicing learning autonomy is to remember the teacher's explanation in the classroom (S2, mean=3.30, aggregate=92.8%). This reason may be linked to nearly half of the students’ beliefs that the teacher’s explanations in their online class were difficult to understand (S3, mean=2.54, aggregate =47.8%) and were not enough for them (S9, mean=2.39, aggregate e=44.9%). This is also relevant with the earlier findings that students found it harder to understand the teaching materials in online classes because of poor internet and limited interaction. Thus, it explains why most students reportedly did their independent learning in order to understand the materials better (S1, mean=3.23, aggregate =88.4%). Furthermore, other common reasons driving the students to learn grammar independently (S7, mean=3.22, aggregate =88.4%) were because there were plenty of grammar exercises and materials available on the internet. Nevertheless, as suggested earlier in the strategy section, less than half of the students made use of the resources significantly. Finally, it was a good sign that most students reportedly practiced autonomy to enable them to use grammar in communication (S6, mean=3.17, aggregate =91.3%, and S8, mean=3.23, aggregate =88.4%) despite their relatively low interest in grammar (S10, mean=2.59, aggregate =47.8%). This demonstrates the students’ awareness that grammar is for communication and the faculty’s success in developing such awareness.

Not Practicing Autonomy in Online Grammar Learning

A small number of the student participants (13 out of 82 students) reported that they did not do autonomous grammar learning because of various reasons. The reasons of these students for not learning grammar independently will be discussed in the sections below.

Reasons for Not Practicing Autonomy

Table 3. Students’ reasons for not practicing autonomy

Statements	N	Mean	SD	Strongly agree & Agree
1. I have understood the materials from the online class well.	13	2.31	0.51	38%
2. I do not have much time to practice grammar independently.	13	1.92	0.40	31%
3. I feel that having online classes from home is tiring enough for me.	13	3.00	0.60	69%
4. I feel that having online classes from home is stressful enough for me.	13	2.54	0.45	54%
5. I feel overwhelmed with other assignments that I have to do.	13	2.77	0.58	69%
6. There are too many materials to be studied by myself.	13	2.23	0.55	38%
7. Many of my friends do not study/practice grammar by themselves as well.	13	2.31	0.61	46%

8. I do not see how studying/practicing grammar by myself will benefit me.	13	1.69	0.33	23%
9. I do not know how to study/practice grammar by myself.	13	2.08	0.41	23%
10. I feel that studying/practicing grammar by myself is difficult to do.	13	2.31	0.33	38%
11. I never studied/practiced grammar before since I learned English at primary and/or secondary schools (elementary school/junior high school/senior high school).	13	2.00	0.44	46%
12. It should be my teacher who should help me to study grammar.	13	2.15	0.51	38%
13. It should be my teacher who should help me to practice grammar.	13	2.08	0.47	31%
14. It is difficult to choose study materials from the internet.	13	2.00	0.49	38%
15. I always got distracted with other things when I try to study/practice grammar by myself (e.g. with the notifications from my social media when I try to do online exercise from the internet, with the other things happening at my home, etc.)	13	2.77	0.70	77%
16. I don't like grammar.	13	1.62	0.45	31%
17. I need someone (e.g. a tutor) to help me study grammar outside classes.	13	3.15	1.04	77%
18. Having online grammar learning does not motivate me to learn more about grammar independently.	13	2.08	0.57	54%

Maximal value of 4 (strongly agree=4; agree=3; neutral=2; disagree=1; strongly disagree=0)

Most of the statements in Table 3 were presented negatively against learners' autonomy in the online grammar learning except Statement 1. The two most common reasons for not practicing autonomy were the need for someone to help them (S17, mean=3.15, aggregate=77%) and fatigue from doing online learning (S3, mean=3.00, aggregate =69%). Peer tutoring has been deemed beneficial to improve students' academic ability (Arco-Tirado, Fernández-Martín, & Fernández-Balboa, 2011; Asgari & Carter, 2016; Bowman-Perrott, deMarín, Mahadevan, Etchells, 2016). As peer tutor offers individualized learning, it fills any possible knowledge gaps created by the regular teaching (Mulatsih, 2018; Murtisari Salvadora, & Hastuti, 2020; Murtisari, Puspitasari, & Setiamunadi, 2020). Students also tend to be more open to the tutors (Topping, 1995, as cited in Sharif et al, 2012) because they find a comfort zone learning with those having similar learning experience (Zhang and Bayley, 2019). Furthermore, studies have also indicated that facilitating and guiding students through peer tutors could actually foster their autonomy (Stigmar, 2016; Bohórquez, Largo Rodríguez, Viáfara González, 2019). According to Humphreys and Wyatt (2014), students need guidance in practicing autonomy. They further suggest that such guidance helped them develop their skills in learning autonomously. This is especially the case with students who have difficulties in learning (Hurd, 1998a, as cited in Andrade & Bunker, 2009).

The next two common reasons for not learning autonomously were distraction (S15, mean=2.77, aggregate=77%) and feeling overwhelmed with assignments. Having to self-regulate their own study, students might find it difficult when there are distractions. Multitasking, including the use of smartphones, has been identified as a common distractor to students in online learning (Schmidt, 2020). Regarding this, Paul (as cited in Schmidt, 2020) has pointed out that even those belonging to the “digital native” generation suffer from the negative consequences of multitasking, lack of comprehension and memorization, and difficulty in transferring learning to new contexts. Such a downside of online learning may have contributed to the fact that over half of the students (54%) in the present study were unmotivated to learn grammar autonomously (S18, mean=2.08). Furthermore, the finding that students felt overwhelmed with other assignments seems to confirm Hartnett’s study result (2015) on high workload. This can be linked to the students’ belief that there were too many materials to be studied by themselves (S6, mean=2.23). Despite this, it is worth noting that there were only 31% of the students who reported not having much time to practice grammar independently (S2, mean=1.92). This means there may have been other factors apart from the amount of the tasks that made students feel somewhat burdened. The online mode itself reportedly had made over half of the students stressed out (S4, mean=2.54, aggregate =54%) and did not motivate them to learn independently (S18, mean=2.08, aggregate=54%).

Most of the other more significant reasons for not employing autonomous learning seemed to relate to the students’ lack of skills to do such learning. Based on their responses, for instance, students found it difficult to study by themselves (S9, mean=2.08, aggregate =23%) and select study materials from the internet, and were dependent on their teacher (S12, mean=2.15, aggregate =38%, and S13, mean=2.08, aggregate =31%). Nearly half of the students also expressed their agreement to the statement that they had never studied grammar by themselves since they were at school. It was also interesting that several students also did not seem to be aware of the importance of autonomous learning, as they did not know how such learning would benefit them. With only 38% of the students who believed they had understood the teaching materials, this group seemed to need much support from the faculty to assist them to be more independent.

Students’ perception on autonomous learning for their online grammar learning

To investigate the students’ perception of autonomous learning for their online grammar learning, a multiple response question was given which required the students to complete the sentence: “Learning grammar independently outside the classroom is for me”. A follow-up open-ended question was also given for the students to elaborate their answers.

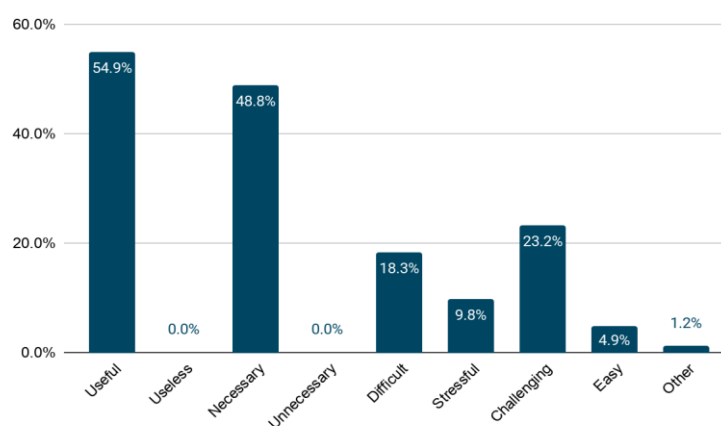


Figure 4. Students' perception of autonomy in online grammar learning

As shown in Figure 6, the majority of students perceived autonomous learning in the online grammar class positively where 45 students out of 82 (54.9%) chose “useful”, 40 students (48.8%) selected “necessary”, and 4 students (3%) chose “easy”. Most of these students believed that autonomy could help them understand the materials better (35%), which was also suggested earlier in section A, *Students' reasons for practicing autonomy*, as one of the reasons for practicing autonomy outside the grammar classroom. In addition, 11 (13%) indicated that learning grammar autonomously improved their grammar skills or knowledge.

However, a number of students responded negatively to autonomy in online grammar as they indicated that it was “difficult” (15 students, 11.4%) and “stressful” (8 students, 6.1%), and “challenging” (19 students, 23.2%). One reason for this was because grammar was considered to be a difficult subject for the students (4%). This may be the case because it “can be associated to some extent with correctness, rules or isolated sentences” (Pawlak, 2017, p. 5). The students might have difficulties in remembering the variety of grammar rules, which might discourage students from learning grammar by themselves outside the classroom. Despite this, none of the total participants saw learner autonomy as useless or unnecessary. Although several students seemed to be ambivalent (as they had indicated earlier that they did not know how autonomous learning would benefit them), it was still a positive sign.

Conclusion

The study reveals that most of the participants saw online grammar learning challenging. Difficulties in understanding the subject matter, poor internet connection, and limited interaction with the teacher were the major reasons for their negative views towards such a mode of study. Despite this, the students generally were positive about autonomous learning and saw that it was crucial in their online study. To most students, this was reportedly due to the difficulties they faced with the distant mode itself, especially in understanding the subject matter. Nevertheless, it was a positive finding that most participants also saw learner autonomy imperative because grammar is vital for communication. Such awareness is paramount to motivate students to study independently.

Regardless, although the majority of the participants claimed to do autonomous learning, many of them only practiced self-study only once a week, which indicates a relatively low level of autonomy. Here difficulties in practicing learner autonomy brought up by students who did not practice it, such as fatigue from online learning, distractions, overwhelming assignments, and lack of study skills, may have contributed. However, other factors such as lack of awareness of the need for more substantial learner autonomy may have played a role. Apart from this, the most common ways of their independent study were by applying what they had learned from their online class into other assignments and by learning from the errors they had made in class. With these strategies, the students did not seem to go far beyond their immediate environment to explore what were available for them outside.

Considering the importance of autonomous learning in an online grammar learning context, the faculty and teachers need to help students to enhance their independent learning. Based on the present research's findings, the faculty could provide more support in the form of peer teaching and training to improve students' study skills. In order to deal with distractions and fatigue, for instance, Paul (as cited in Schmidt, 2020) believes students need to develop their study skills at increasing cognitive ability, managing the distractions around and within them, and strengthening goals.

Since this study was based on convenience sampling and conducted in a limited context of online grammar learning in higher education, the findings are not generalizable. In addition, as the research involved participants who had taken different grammar courses, it may have influenced their responses to the questionnaire. Further research needs to investigate whether students' language proficiencies or academic achievement affect students' autonomous learning and how to improve students' capacities for such learning with differentiated participants.

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