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Exploring Self-Directed Learning Readiness among Undergraduates in ESL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

There has been a growing interest in self-directed learning, especially in the context of higher education. This is due to the fact that 21st century learning environments required students to engage in a wider range of learning activities, including online distance learning. To make online learning meaningful, students must exhibit a greater awareness of their responsibility to control and monitor their own learning. In light of this, self-directed learning calls for a variety of skills to ensure effective independent learning. This has been the impetus for the researchers of the present study to look into the self-directed learning readiness (SDLR) among undergraduates of UiTM Cawangan Pulau Pinang who have actively participated in online learning for their ESL classes. A quantitative research design is employed using a survey adapted from Fisher's self-directed learning readiness scale. 224 diploma students and 33 bachelor's degree students responded to the survey. Data is analyzed using SPSS v28 by means of descriptive and inferential statistics. It was found that the undergraduate students are able to manage themselves, have strong desire for learning and have good self-control. This information may aid in determining the value and current level of self-directed learning within the context. Additionally, it is necessary to put strategies into place that will assist students in becoming better prepared for self-directed learning in a wider range of learning activities.

Keywords:

Self-directed learning; ESL; readiness; higher education

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1. Introduction

The current frameworks for 21st century learning inevitably include the idea of self-directed learning, which is widely seen as essential component of autonomous and individualised learning experiences. For instance, one of the Life and Career Skills under Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) framework [1] is "initiative and self-direction" which highlights one's capacity for self-direction to establish learning goals, make plans for achieving those goals, self-manage, and independently assess the quality of learning. Another initiative had been taken by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) through developing "enGauge" [2], a web-based framework for effective use of technology for 21st century student learning. The "Inventive Thinking"

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section of the framework deliberately highlights “adaptability, managing complexity, and self-direction”. As per the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) [3] guidelines which direct the usage of technology in creating sustainable learning experience for students, the idea of self-directed learning has once again come to light by requiring students to organise and manage their own learning activities to complete a task. In brief, self-directed learning is an approach for getting students involved in independent, autonomous, self-paced, and accountable learning activities. In contrast to the traditional classroom settings whereby teachers adopt an autocratic role, in self-directed learning, students must develop and apply their own initiative and effort without the assistance of other people.

Although self-directed learning has been known for decades, the 21st century context has brought about significant changes to the field due to the prevalence of online learning, which offers more chances for personalised learning. In fact, technology makes teaching and learning convenient with easy access to information and resources, provides fun learning opportunities, and improves teaching and learning productivity and efficiency [4]. According to Sun *et al.*, [5], self-directed learning offers a more direct approach into examining the real dynamics of the relationships between learning and technology. On the other hand, Maphalala *et al.*, [6] argued that self-directed learning is in fact accelerated by online learning. The goal of regulating students’ self-direction is to encourage them to take charge of their education and finish their online courses while preventing barriers to online learning opportunities. With the use of technology, students have high possibilities to connect with other people. Besides, technology offers a wealth of information and resources for students to learn, especially asynchronously providing chances for students to access information and resources at their own pace and time [7].

Nonetheless, the drawback of these affordances is that students could find it more difficult to focus on their tasks or select relevant information because of the deluge of resources available. These obviously have significant implications for the development of self-directed learning which allow students for more freedom to choose information and resources they want to learn as well as approaches to gain knowledge.

Leong [8] indicated that self-directed learning is a core concept in higher education. In fact, learning how to acquire, organise, retain, use, transfer, and create new knowledge is essential for students in higher education. According to Asmawi and Mohd Jaladin [9], higher education plays crucial role in contributing to Malaysia’s development in terms of achieving educational goals that are consistent with Malaysia’s current growth. The Malaysian Higher Education system has undergone periods of reorganisation with the aim of achieving high standards of education. There are two higher education blueprints in line with the Malaysian National Education Blueprint (2013-2025): The National Higher Education Plan (NHESP) and the National Higher Education Action Plan (NHEAP) 2007-2010 [10]. The blueprints emphasise self-directed learning, in which flexible and personalised learning are the primary means of advancing higher education. Additionally, technology literacy is constantly evolving, thus it is necessary to adapt to new age education. Consequently, today’s higher education in Malaysia incorporates innovative tools, technology, and e-learning into the delivery of instruction. It is expected that students in higher education will benefit from better and more flexible learning environments that offer high-quality instruction that is comparable to international standards.

Many studies are currently being conducted to investigate the ways to cultivate or foster self-directed learning among students pursuing higher education [11-12]. In relation to that, research has also been done to discover how prepared higher education students are for self-directed learning [13-14]. It appears that the idea of self-directed learning is not new when it comes to higher education as well as the implementation of online learning within the context. This study aimed to

explore Malaysian undergraduates' self-directed learning readiness in the field of English as a second language (ESL) learning during online distance learning (ODL). To put it briefly, this study seeks to connect ESL and ODL with higher education students' self-directed learning. This initiative is similar to the study conducted by Subekti [15] in Indonesia which investigated the correlation between English students' SDL and their achievement in English online classes. This present study found that, in Malaysia, there are still limited research linking these three domains. It is necessary to close the research gap by measuring the current level of SDL readiness among Malaysian higher education ESL students and identify factors that require improvement specifically in ODL context (see Figure 1).

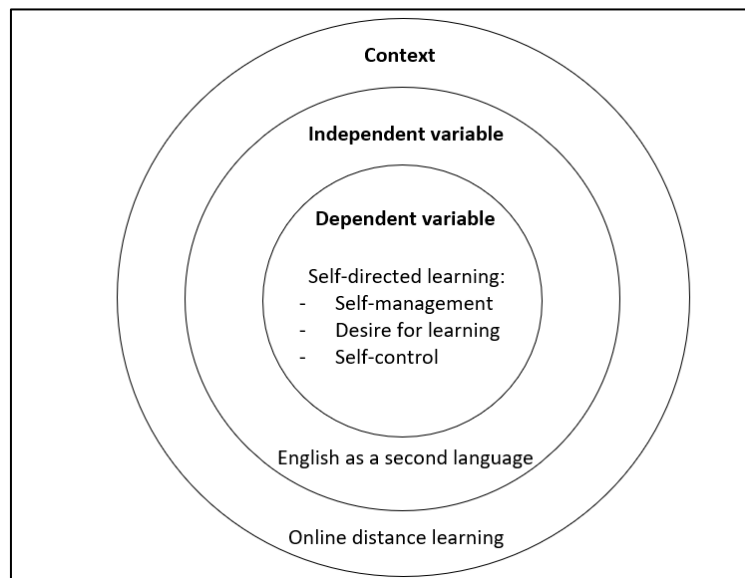


Fig. 1. Research framework - Correlation between self-directed learning (SDL), English as a second language (ESL), and online distance learning (ODL)

1.1 Online Distance Learning (ODL)

Distance learning refers to the courses that do not require attendance in person at a designated location. Rather, it emphasises human-machine interface, access and delivery, and students' control of time and pace [16]. Normally, distance learning courses have an online study component where students can access to online materials or resources. Hence, students who take part in ODL receive the course materials through online platforms which highly emphasises self-directed learning. It falls within the category of online learning, even though online learning is a more advanced form of distance learning that gives students better access to learning opportunities including interactivity and flexibility [17]. Moore [18] did point out that when the term "self-directed" is used, it frequently refers to distance learning where students have more autonomy over their learning. It may also be seen as independent learning with minimal interactions between students and instructors.

1.2 English as a Second Language (ESL)

English is widely accepted as the universal language worldwide because it is spoken by both native and non-native speakers all around the world. According to Graddol [19], there are three types of English speakers: (1) Native speakers; (2) Speakers who speak English as a supplemental or second language; and (3) speakers who learn English as a foreign language. In the Malaysian context, English is more of a second language than a foreign language because it is widely used as a medium of

instruction in both formal and informal settings [20]. The Malaysian government has made it a top priority for its citizens to become fluent in English because it is crucial to the country's development. [21].

The study of English as a second language acquisition is expanding, providing new opportunities for the study of language learning and acquisition. For instance, Mohd Nor *et al.*, [22] identified the challenges that higher education students encountered when learning English as a second language which eventually contribute to improving students' English language proficiency. Getie [23] emphasised the importance of identifying the factors influencing students' attitudes towards learning English which contribute to supporting students' language learning process. Furthermore, the influence of digitalisation has been revolutionary, leading to the integration of technological tools into ESL teaching and learning that expands the study of ESL in a whole new field [24]. The ongoing advancement of ESL research portends further valuable study in the related field. Thus, this present study is one of the attempts to advance the ESL profession.

2. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach by adapting Fisher's SDLR scale [25]. The revised scale assessed three key domains: self-management (SM), desire for learning (DL), and self-control (SC). Participants responded to 31 statements using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very untrue of me) to 6 (Very true of me). Five items (numbers 2, 15, 20, 22, and 31) were negatively worded and reverse-coded for analysis. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics, including standard deviations, were calculated to provide an initial overview of the data. As this is a preliminary study to the SDLR among students, bivariate correlation was employed as a starting point to explore the data before diving into more complex analyses. This will provide the basic relationships between variables and prioritize which ones might be worth investigating further using more sophisticated methods. Moreover, the results can help generate hypotheses about the underlying causes of the observed correlations.

2.1 Participants

A probability sampling technique, also known as random sampling, was employed to recruit participants for this study. This approach is recognized by Creswell [26] as being more likely to yield a sample that accurately represents the target population compared to non-random sampling methods. In other words, random sampling allows researchers to draw broader inferences about the population from the characteristics observed in the sample [26]. To determine the appropriate sample size, a web-based sample size calculator tool (<https://uk.surveymonkey.com/mp/sample-size-calculator/>) was utilized. The calculation considered the standard confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, as commonly employed in survey research [27]. The target population for this study comprised students enrolled in ESL courses at UiTM Pulau Pinang, with a total population size of 764. Based on these parameters, the sample size calculator recommended a sample of 265 participants. The survey was disseminated electronically to the student population. A total of 261 students responded to the survey and provided informed consent prior to their participation in the study.

3. Results

To evaluate the survey's reliability, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated and yielded an exceptionally high value of .955. This indicates excellent internal consistency, as higher Cronbach's Alpha values suggest increased reliability as suggested by Mohd Nor *et al.* [22].

3.1 Demographic Data

Table 1
 Demographic data

Variables	Categories	Sum	Percentage
Gender	Male	105	40.2
	Female	156	59.8
Faculty	FPHP	165	63.2
	PKA	36	13.8
	PKM	18	6.9
	PKK	3	1.1
	PKE	33	12.6
	HS	2	0.8
	PH	4	1.5
Level of Study	Diploma	228	87.4
	Degree	33	12.6

Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the participants of the present study. The majority of participants were female (59.8%), with males accounting for the remaining 40.2%. The largest proportion of participants belonged to the Faculty of Hotel Tourism and Management (FPHP) (63.2%), followed by Faculty of Civil Engineering (PKA) (13.8%), Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (PKM) (6.9%), and Faculty of Chemical Engineering (PKK) (1.1%). The remaining participants belonged to the Faculty of Electrical Engineering (PKE) (12.6%), Health Sciences (HS) (0.8%), and Pharmacy (PH) (1.5%). The majority of participants were diploma students (87.4%), with degree students comprising the remaining 12.6%.

3.2 Self-directed Learning Readiness Level

Table 2
 Mean and standard deviation for SM

Items	Mean	Std Deviation
I am self-disciplined	4.54	.834
I am disorganised	4.55	.658
I am systematic in my learning	4.34	.897
I know what I want to learn	4.70	.899
I set targets to achieve for each learning	4.71	.907
I set specific times for my study	4.42	.991
I prioritise my (home)work	4.50	.947
I can see the benefits for my work and personal development	4.74	.860
I am confident in my ability to search out new information	4.62	.893
I can be trusted to pursue my own learning	4.64	.833

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for ten items measuring Self-Management in the SDLR. The data suggests a generally positive outlook towards self-directed learning, with mean scores ranging from 4.34 to 4.74 on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = very

untrue of me, 6 = very true of me). The standard deviations range from 0.658 to 0.991, indicating moderate variability in the responses. This suggests that while there is a central tendency towards agreement with the statements, there are still individual differences in self-management behaviours among the participants.

It is noteworthy that items related to goal setting and planning ("I set targets to achieve for each learning," "I know what I want to learn") have the highest mean scores (4.70 and 4.71, respectively). This suggests that participants generally prioritize setting goals and identifying their learning objectives. Items reflecting time management ("I set specific times for my study," "I prioritize my (home)work") have slightly lower mean scores (4.42 and 4.50, respectively) compared to goal setting items. While there seems to be a positive attitude towards time management, there might be more individual variation in how effectively participants manage their study time. Items concerning self-belief and initiative ("I am confident in my ability to search out new information," "I can be trusted to pursue my own learning") show relatively high mean scores (4.62 and 4.64, respectively), indicating that participants generally believe in their ability to learn independently.

Overall, the results suggest that the participants tend to exhibit positive self-management behaviours in the context of learning. They prioritize goal setting, planning, and self-directed learning, although there might be some room for improvement in time management strategies.

Table 3
Mean and standard deviation for desire for learning (DL)

Item	Mean	Std Deviation
I want to learn new information	5.08	.829
I enjoy learning new information	5.06	.795
I have a need to learn	4.99	.839
I enjoy a challenge	4.72	.886
I do not enjoy studying	4.59	.737
I critically evaluate new ideas	4.20	.937
I learn from my mistakes	4.90	.874
I need to know why	5.06	.866
When presented with a problem I cannot resolve, I will ask for assistance	4.76	1.006
When I see something that I don't understand, I stay away from it	4.63	.725

Table 3 illustrates the descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for eleven items related to Desire for Learning (DL). The data suggests a generally positive trend. Items reflecting inherent curiosity ("I want to learn new information" (5.08), "I need to know why" (5.06)) and positive learning experiences ("I enjoy learning new information" (5.06), "I learn from my mistakes" (4.90)) show the highest mean scores, indicating a strong desire for knowledge acquisition and personal growth through learning. The standard deviations range from 0.725 to 1.006, suggesting moderate variability in the responses. This indicates that while there is a central tendency towards agreement, some individual variation exists in the strength of participants' desire for learning. Relatively high mean scores for items like "I enjoy a challenge" (4.72) and "When I see something I don't understand, I stay away from it" (4.63) suggest that while participants embrace challenges and are generally open to learning from new information, they might also exhibit some level of selective engagement based on initial perceived difficulty. Overall, the findings suggest a strong desire for learning among participants, characterized by an intrinsic motivation to acquire knowledge, positive learning attitudes, and a willingness to learn from mistakes.

Table 4
 Mean and standard deviation for self control (SC)

Item	Mean	Std Deviation
I am responsible for my own decisions/actions	4.94	.834
I am not in control of my life	4.66	.698
I have high personal standards	4.50	.999
I prefer to set my own learning goals	4.79	.848
I evaluate my own performance	4.64	.891
I am responsible	4.74	.909
I am able to focus on a problem	4.66	.870
I am aware of my own limitations	4.83	.891
I can find out information for myself	4.70	.918
I have high beliefs in my abilities	4.60	1.024
I don't work very well on my own	4.62	.732

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for eleven items measuring Self-Control (SC) within the context of learning. The data suggests a generally positive trend. Items reflecting personal responsibility and internal locus of control ("I am responsible for my own decisions/actions" (4.94), "I am not in control of my life" (reverse-coded - 4.66), "I am responsible" (4.74)) have the highest mean scores, suggesting participants generally take ownership of their choices, actions, and learning outcomes. The standard deviations range from 0.698 to 1.024, indicating moderate variability in the responses. This suggests that while a central tendency towards agreement exists, individual differences in self-control characteristics are still present within the sample. Relatively high mean scores for items like "I can find out information for myself" (4.70) and "I don't work very well on my own" (4.62) suggest that while participants value independent learning and finding solutions, they also acknowledge the potential benefit of seeking help when needed.

Overall, the findings suggest a generally positive self-control profile among participants, characterized by internal locus of control, responsibility for learning, and a willingness to seek support when needed.

3.3 Correlation between SM, DL and SC

To provide deeper insights into the three dimensions; SM, DL and SC, a correlation analysis between the items of the related dimensions were analysed.

Table 5
 Correlation between SM, DL and SC

Variable	DL (Want to learn new information)	DL (Need to know why)	SC (Responsible for decisions)	SC (Prefer to set own goals)
DL (Want to learn new information)	1	-0.02	-0.154	-0.712
DL (Need to know why)	-0.02	1	-0.487	-0.431
SC (Responsible for decisions)	-0.154	-0.487	1	-0.138
SC (Prefer to set own goals)	-0.712	-0.431	-0.138	1

Looking at table 5, we can see that there are some significant correlations between the variables. For example, there is a positive correlation between self-management (knowing what you want to learn and setting targets) and the desire to learn new information (0.482). This means that people

who are good at self-management are also more likely to want to learn new things. There is also a positive correlation between self-control (being responsible for your own decisions) and the desire to learn new information (0.468). This means that people who have good self-control are also more likely to want to learn new things.

There is also a negative correlation between self-control (not being in control of your life) and the desire to learn new information (-0.748). This means that people who feel like they are not in control of their life are less likely to want to learn new things. There is also a negative correlation between self-control (not being in control of your life) and the desire to learn for the purpose of understanding (need to know why) (-0.709). This means that people who feel like they are not in control of their life are also less likely to want to learn to understand something.

It is important to note that correlation does not equal causation. Just because two variables are correlated does not mean that one variable causes the other. It is possible that there is a third variable that is causing both of the variables to change. For example, it is possible that people who are more interested in learning new things are also more likely to prefer to set their own learning goals.

Overall, the correlation matrix suggests that there are positive relationships between self-management, self-control, and the desire to learn. There is also a negative relationship between feeling like you are not in control of your life and the desire to learn.

4. Conclusions

The results of this study revealed several key takeaways. First, the participants demonstrated positive self-management behaviours, prioritizing goal setting, planning, and self-directed learning. While time management strategies might require further development, the participants displayed a proactive approach to learning generally. Second, a strong intrinsic motivation to acquire knowledge was exhibited by the participants of this study. Positive learning attitudes and a willingness to learn from mistakes further characterize their learning approach. Third, it has to be noted that the overall self-control profile suggests an internal locus of control, a sense of responsibility for learning, and a willingness to seek support when needed. With regards to the correlation analysis, positive relationships between self-management, self-control, and the desire to learn were observed. Additionally, a negative correlation exists between feeling like you are not in control of your life and the desire to learn.

In summary, the data suggests that participants of this study possess a strong foundation for successful learning. Their positive self-management behaviours, combined with a high desire to learn and a strong sense of self-control, contribute to an overall positive learning mindset. However, there might be opportunities to further improve time management skills. Future research may explore specific strategies to enhance time management skills within this population and investigate any potential causal relationships between the identified variables.

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