

BUILDING TRUST TO PROMOTE AUTONOMOUS LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF ESP INSTRUCTION IN AN INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

English proficiency is a crucial skill in today's globalized world; however, non-English major students at universities often receive only two credits of English courses, which is insufficient to ensure their language mastery. This limitation presents a significant challenge for both students and lecturers, requiring innovative approaches to enhance students' learning experiences. One such approach is autonomous learning, which emphasizes students' responsibility and self-direction in the learning process. This study aims to explore lecturers' understanding of autonomous learning and how they implement it within the constraints of limited English instruction. A qualitative research design employing a case study approach was utilized. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 lecturers teaching English in non-English study programs at a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. The participants included lecturers with varied backgrounds in English language teaching, providing diverse perspectives on the implementation of autonomous learning. The findings reveal that despite the emphasis on autonomy, students still require an instructor's presence (teaching presence) to stimulate engagement and provide guidance in learning English. Two key themes emerged from the analysis: students' sovereignty and trust in students' exertion. Students' sovereignty refers to their freedom, independence, responsibility, and self-determination in identifying their learning needs and strategies. Meanwhile, trust in students' exertion highlights the importance of creating an atmosphere of acceptance, where students feel encouraged to take charge of their learning. This study underscores the need for a balanced approach between autonomy and instructional support to optimize English language learning. It is recommended that future research examine both lecturers' and students' perspectives to ensure that autonomous learning is a collaborative process rather than a unilateral expectation. Insights from this study contribute to the development of effective pedagogical strategies for promoting learner autonomy in higher education.

Keywords: Autonomous Learning, ESP, University Students

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian universities require students to acquire English language proficiency as part of their academic and professional development. However, the instructional strategies employed to achieve this goal remain insufficient. A key challenge lies in the time allocation for English language courses, particularly for non-English major students. At the university level, students are typically only allocated two credits for English courses, which significantly limits their exposure to the language and hinders their proficiency. A focus group discussion (FGD) conducted in 2019 with English lecturers teaching in various study programs at Jambi University confirmed that the limited time allocation poses a major challenge in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. With only two credits allocated across semesters, lecturers

struggle to deliver the necessary materials that align with both curricular demands and the university's vision and mission. Given these constraints, it is unrealistic to expect students to achieve English proficiency through such minimal exposure. Consequently, autonomous learning becomes a crucial strategy for both students and lecturers in addressing this gap.

Autonomous learning—a concept widely discussed in second language acquisition (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991)—refers to learners' ability to take responsibility for their own learning process. Autonomous learners actively engage in setting learning objectives, selecting learning strategies, and evaluating their progress (Benson, 2011). Within the context of English language learning in Indonesia, promoting learner autonomy is essential to compensate for the insufficient formal instruction time.

Despite the growing emphasis on English language proficiency in higher education, particularly in non-English-major programs, second language learning in Indonesian universities remains constrained by limited instructional time and support. In most institutions, English courses are allocated only two credits, which greatly restricts learners' opportunities to develop communicative competence. These structural limitations are especially problematic in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts, where the goal is to equip students with both general and discipline-specific language skills (Hakim et al, 2023; Kurniawan et al, 2024).

Although autonomous learning has long been recognized in second language acquisition literature as a key factor in promoting lifelong language development (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Benson, 2011), existing research has primarily focused on students' attitudes, beliefs, or readiness for autonomy. Less is known about the specific strategies lecturers use to actively shape and support learner autonomy, particularly in resource-limited environments such as those found in Indonesian higher education. This highlights a critical gap in both theoretical and practical understanding. Given this backdrop, it is necessary to explore how English lecturers address institutional and instructional limitations by cultivating learner autonomy. This study therefore aims to investigate the pedagogical strategies used by English lecturers to foster autonomous learning in classrooms where time and curriculum constraints limit formal instruction. By examining these strategies, this research provides insights into how lecturers empower students to take control of their English language learning beyond the classroom. Understanding these approaches is essential not only for improving language instruction in under-resourced settings but also for aligning with broader educational goals of producing independent, globally competent graduates.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach, following the framework outlined by Creswell (2013), who emphasizes that case studies allow researchers to explore a specific phenomenon within a real-life context. This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the strategies employed by English lecturers in fostering autonomous learning among non-English-major students. The case investigated is the lecturers' strategic efforts to promote learner autonomy in English language instruction. The bounded system is defined by a specific institutional context—English lecturers teaching general English or ESP courses to non-English-major students at Jambi University, within the academic structure that allocates only two credits for English instruction. This bounded environment provides a clear framework within which the case is examined. The case study method was chosen to provide

an in-depth understanding of lecturers' perspectives on autonomous learning in English language instruction for non-English study programs.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a public university in Jambi, Indonesia, focusing on English lecturers teaching in non-English study programs. The participants consisted of fourteen (14) English lecturers, selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015), ensuring that the respondents had relevant experience in English language teaching. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) based on their relevant teaching experience and institutional context. The inclusion criteria required that participants (1) be English lecturers actively teaching in non-English study programs, (2) have experience in delivering English language instruction within a two-credit system, and (3) demonstrate familiarity with efforts to promote learner autonomy. These criteria ensured that the participants were well-positioned to provide in-depth insights into the strategies used to support autonomous English learning under curricular constraints. Among the participants: (1) Four lecturers did not have an academic background in English language teaching as their primary field of study, yet they demonstrated English proficiency and were actively involved in teaching English; (2) Ten lecturers were specialists in English language education, each with over five years of teaching experience in higher education institutions. All participants demonstrated enthusiastic engagement throughout the study, providing rich qualitative data regarding the implementation of autonomous learning strategies in their classrooms.

Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, a widely used qualitative research technique (Creswell & Poth, 2018), allowing for a flexible yet systematic exploration of participants' experiences. Of the fourteen participants, thirteen were interviewed face-to-face, while one interview was conducted online due to the participant's scheduling constraints. This online format, however, did not diminish the depth or quality of the data obtained. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed responses about their teaching approaches, perceptions of autonomous learning, and the challenges they face in fostering student autonomy in English learning.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This approach ensured a systematic identification of recurring patterns and key themes related to lecturers' experiences and strategies in promoting autonomous learning. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), member checking was conducted, where participants reviewed the transcribed data to confirm accuracy and validity. Additionally, triangulation (Denzin, 2012) was employed by cross-referencing findings with other data sources, such as institutional documents and curriculum guidelines, to enhance the reliability of the study.

Based on the open and axial coding stages, the central theme that emerged was the *democratization of the classroom*, where English lecturers promote autonomous learning by

trusting their students’ capabilities and empowering them to take ownership of their learning. This includes giving them the freedom to define their learning needs, encouraging critical reflection, setting shared learning goals, and creating a supportive environment where mistakes are welcomed as part of the learning process.

Lecturers such as DL, IN, and RT consistently emphasized that autonomy is not the absence of guidance, but rather the shift of responsibility to the student while the lecturer remains a supportive guide.

Tabel 1.1

Sample of Thematic Analysis: From Open Coding to Selective Theme

Selective Theme	Axial Category	Open Code Example	Participant
Democratizing ESP Classrooms through Autonomy and Trust	Student	“Students know what they need...”	DL
	Sovereignty		
	Self-Regulation	“He knows what his target is...”	IN
	Trust in Learners	“None of the students are stupid...”	RT
	Supportive Environment	“No one mocked him even though he spoke haltingly...”	RT

The overarching theme “*Democratizing ESP Classrooms through Autonomy and Trust*” was developed through an inductive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework. After transcribing and carefully reading the interview data, I began the process of open coding by identifying recurring ideas, expressions, and beliefs shared by the participants regarding how they conduct their ESP classes. As the analysis progressed, two prominent patterns emerged: (1). First, many lecturers spoke about giving students the opportunity to determine their learning goals, take responsibility for their learning paths, and reflect on their progress. This set of ideas led to the sub-theme “The Students’ Sovereignty,” which captures the essence of learner autonomy as understood and enacted by the lecturers.; (2) Second, participants frequently emphasized the importance of trusting students' efforts—acknowledging not only their cognitive abilities but also their potential to grow when given encouragement, acceptance, and responsibility. This became the sub-theme “Trusting Students’ Exertion,” which highlights how trust fosters a more democratic, supportive classroom atmosphere.

Together, these two sub-themes reflect a broader conceptual understanding of democratizing the ESP classroom—where power and decision-making are shared, and both autonomy and trust function as core values. The combination of these ideas gave rise to the main theme: “Democratizing ESP Classrooms through Autonomy and Trust,” which encapsulates the lecturers’ collective efforts to shift from top-down instruction to a more participatory, learner-centered pedagogy.

FINDINGS

Democratizing ESP Classrooms through Autonomy and Trust

The central focus of this section is "participants’ understanding," which examines how the lecturers conceptualize autonomous learning within their classroom practices. Based on a thorough analysis of the transcriptions, various perspectives on autonomous learning were identified among the fourteen participants. These perspectives were then systematically

categorized into a set of sub-themes. Initially, two sub-themes were identified. These two themes encapsulate the lecturers' interpretations of autonomous learning and will be elaborated in the following discussion.

The Students' Sovereignty

In this study, students' sovereignty refers to their freedom, independence, autonomy, responsibility, commitment, and self-determination in identifying and addressing their own learning needs. This concept is reflected in a series of critical questions that students must consider throughout their learning process: What do they need in their learning process? What should be done? What kind of effort will help them accomplish their learning goals? What activities or learning styles suit them best? Why is this lesson important?

To navigate these questions effectively, students require the presence of an instructor who facilitates and stimulates their critical thinking. Teaching presence plays a crucial role in guiding students to develop a deeper understanding of their learning objectives and strategies. This theme emerged from participants' responses, which emphasized that autonomous learning is not merely about granting students freedom but also about ensuring that instructors actively support and inspire them in the process.

The concept of students' sovereignty aligns with participants' perspectives on learning autonomy. Many lecturers believe that autonomous learning involves giving students the opportunity to recognize their own learning needs and make informed decisions about their educational journey. As one participant, DL, stated:

" I have an understanding that Autonomous learning is a moment where students **know what they need**. As a lecturer, we can only give to them, especially we are also tied to their goal of learning English, which is very broad. It's not like I teach in English education. With the study program curriculum, which, they learn English because it is compulsory, they can't skip, they can't change with others" (DL)

This perspective underscores the interconnected relationship between students' autonomy and instructors' roles in fostering a meaningful and effective learning experience. By looking at the statements of my participant, who is during the interview very enthusiasm in expressing her opinion about her understanding of autonomous learning, I believed that my participant, DL, has enough knowledges regarding of autonomous learning. Based on her statement, for example "*I have an understanding that Autonomous learning is a moment where students know what they need*". This statement convinces me that DL knows her capabilities as a lecturer and how she should guide students

DL shared her experiences in teaching to ESP classes with a great eagerness. In addition, she gave a comparison that teaching in an English study program (her host faculty) is different from teaching in a non-English study program. According to her, students who study in the English language education study program have clearer goals than students who are not from non-English study programs, for which the purpose of learning English there is still too broad. Therefore, it is very important for lecturers to provoke students to think about what they need in learning English in the context of ESP.

Those statements are also in line with the argumentation from Intan (IN) who believes that autonomous learning means letting the students to know the target of learning. By looking at DL's statement before, Intan (IN) also shared experiences and opinions that were as

passionate as DL's statements. IN believes that autonomous learning means letting the students know the target of learning. By recognizing students' needs, the lecturers will be familiar with what they should do related to the students' needs and objectives, making them more focused on their respective goals. Moreover, autonomous learning also provides instructors organize better in their teaching to fulfill the students' needs. IN reported,

"Because an autonomous person is someone, that he knows **what his target is**, if he doesn't know what his target is since he doesn't know what to study for, he won't be able to regulate himself to achieve his goal" (IN)

In addition, IN felt strongly agree that autonomous learner is a student who is able to analyze "Why I cannot handle this problem?" when they have a problem in learning. The students should have an argumentation of "Why?" in every activity they are unable to do in the classroom.

Likewise, IN also reported, that autonomous learner here is a student who knows what she/ he wants over this study. That student may have some questions before they want to learn it to manage themselves to accomplish their goals. Through this process, they will meet various problems that can make them accustomed to solving their problems. Even though they cannot reach the objective, but they will critically identify the reason within it. She reported,

"Learning is when he collides with an assignment, he must be able to analyze why I can't, so even though the results are not perfect, he will be able to argue why, what makes him unable." (IN)

In reliance on the DL and IN point of view about autonomous learning, it can be inferred that autonomous learner is those who have the ability to know the target of learning in order to achieve their goals, and the one who can have a self-regulation to manage himself to embody the target of learning.

Based on DL and IN's point of view about this phenomenon, it can be inferred that autonomous learning is one who has the ability to know their own learning targets and one who has self-regulation to control themselves to realize their learning goals. An autonomous learner to achieve their needs must possess both abilities. Thus, as a student who applies the autonomous learning, they are required to be aware of not only their needs, but also their self-management since they are not able fully to rely on what the lecturers give. She expressed her thought,

"An autonomous person is a person **who knows what his goal** is to make a strategy to achieve his goal, then he can regulate himself so that the goal is achieved, sometimes if it is not possible, it will be done, the same as all those courses that mothers often say to children first. Wherever you teach, if you expect a lot from the lecturer, the squeeze is a wet towel, but if you don't have much juice in the quiz, the real essence might not be too much." (IN)

Similar feelings were also expressed by some single participants, RT. RT also revealed that autonomous learning means giving opportunities for students to study according to their desire. According to her, as lecturers, we engage the students to determine their learning outcomes. Because each student has a different perspective and learning model in gaining their goals. The collaboration between the lecturers and the students indicates that autonomous

learning is carried out here. Besides, it makes the students feel more appreciated for their purpose. She stated,

"If I teach them to open up opportunities, give them autonomy to come here to take courses. It's true that it is already listed in the curriculum, but what is in the course I set the common goals with them" (RT)

Additionally, she expressed that when she as a lecturer handed students a chance to choose, decide and design their own learning, the students felt embraced in learning, and the activities became even more passionate.

Furthermore, she also said that when she gave the students the chance to pick, decide, and plan their learning, the students feel embraced in learning, and the activities became increasingly excited. She reflected,

"So they were wow, so excited. People said they just didn't say anything, it turned out that when they were given this opportunity, and we wanted them to be more involved. And they seem to take things lightly, even if they make their mistakes. In the second meeting, I made a slide based on their answers in the first meeting, that's where we read. Reading English is ours, so they are our needs and we read in English. (RT)

Corresponding to RT's statements, the way how she communicated to students in providing some activities in the classroom included task or project that should be done by the students, offered a new atmosphere in learning. In addition to her comments, she mentioned the way she communicated to the students in giving an assignment or mission that could be worked out by the students; it provided a new learning environment. For example,

"Given the opportunity, variety, motivation. I didn't teach skills for skills, I asked them whether they could, they answered they could. I asked them what they wanted for the semester project. There are 2 choices too, so it's not just agribusiness. It could also be about how they learn. (Showing a video of student final assignments.)"

In summary, according to RT's view, students' sovereignty in this theme signifying intellectual freedom that brought up by the lecturer to students to choose, decide, and design their goals and learning activities. To sum up, based on RT's opinion, the students' autonomy in this theme is the academic sovereignty that led the lecturers to the students to select, determine, and design their priorities and learning activities. She expressed her thought,

"I open opportunities for them, give them autonomy to come here to take courses ..." (RT)

Trust Student's exertion (Creating an Atmosphere of Acceptance)

Aside from the students' sovereignty, another theme that aroused in this study is trusting to students' exertion. Trusting here means the lectures' beliefs of students' potential in learning and what the lecturers have to do are believing in their work, effort, and further not only focused on cognitive aspect only.

RT, a lecturer who taught in faculty of agriculture, explained that as a lecturer she persuaded all lecturers to see the potential of the students and never underestimate them, specifically by only judging them from their intellectual thought. She reported,

"So lecturers are not a source of everything, we can learn from students. Good lecturers do not only judge students from cognitive. Cognitive comes from the creator, but how do they optimize what God has given." (RT)

In the words of female participant, according to RT, it is important to see students' aptitude from multiple facets. For example, how the lecturers can assist the students to discover their best capacity is by showing how the process of learning functions in an educational environment. Apart from that, she also added that there are no stupid students. That thought should be ignored from lecturers perspectives when they come to the students' learning milieu. She stated,

"Yes, so it is debatable that people say that agricultural children speak a lack of English. None of the students are stupid, as long as they realize that they can't, they want to overcome their incompetence. Yes, so **give them autonomy as long as they need it**. There was even one child who failed last year, so I didn't go to our class. He's really quiet, doesn't say anything. And when **given the opportunity** to speak even though he haltingly, and no one mocked him. (Showing a video of one student who was initially quiet became able. (RT)

It is interesting to note that in my interview data, I found two emerging sub-themes relating to lecturers understanding of Autonomous Learning. They were: the students' sovereignty and trust students' exertion. To conclude that, autonomous learning is an atmosphere that created by lecturers to maximize the potential of the students by giving trust to every single activity, effort, action, and product completed by the students. The table below can be used to determine autonomous learning's diagnosis for lecturer that are obtained from the responses of the participants.

Table. 1.2

Autonomous Learning's Diagnosis for Lecturers

Theme	Indicator (s)
Students' Sovereignty	Students know what they need
	Students know the target of learning
	Students can analyze "Why they can't"?
	Students's reflection
	Students have opportunities
	Students-lecturers' collaboration
	Students' Intellectual Freedom
Trust to Student's Exerction	Maximizing the Students' potential
	Ignoring judgment: No stupid students
	Trusting students' effort, actions, activities.

DISCUSSIONS

Lecturers' Understandings of Autonomous Learning in ESP Context

The way lecturers interpret autonomous learning, which closely aligns with student-centered learning, significantly influences their instructional approach and engagement with students. Lengkanawati (2014b) asserts that when educators equip learners with effective learning strategies, they inevitably foster learner autonomy, leading to enhanced learning outcomes. She emphasizes the necessity for teachers to actively promote learner autonomy (LA) in language learning. Additionally, teaching styles and pedagogical methods directly impact student motivation, which can either facilitate or hinder learner autonomy (Littlewood,

1998; Cotterall, 2000). Consequently, lecturers' positioning within the learning environment directly affects student performance and engagement.

Based on the data, two key themes emerged concerning the first research question: *Students' Sovereignty* and *Trust in Students' Exertion*. Findings from the interviews indicate that lecturers perceive autonomous learning as a process where students identify their learning needs and understand their learning targets. From the participants' perspectives, autonomous learning involves granting students the freedom to make decisions about their learning experiences. This implies that students actively shape their learning pathways by determining the pace, methods, and objectives that align with their individual preferences and goals (Benson, 2007).

This understanding is supported by Chong and Reinders (2025), who, in their comprehensive scoping review, highlight that autonomy in English language learning is most effective when it is embedded in *real-life contexts* and integrated with learners' *personal learning goals*. Their review emphasizes that promoting autonomy requires more than providing learners with freedom—it involves intentional scaffolding, sustained feedback, and belief in learners' agency, all of which were strongly evident in the teaching strategies employed by the participants in this study. Lecturers such as RT and IN created classroom environments where students were encouraged to define their learning direction, demonstrating a student-centered approach aligned with current best practices in autonomy-supportive pedagogy.

In addition, Orakçı (2025) adds a compelling dimension to this discussion by emphasizing the mediating role of self-efficacy in autonomous learning. His study found that students who believe in their capabilities (i.e., high self-efficacy) are more likely to engage in autonomous behavior and develop *creative cognition*. This finding aligns with participants' perspectives in this study—particularly IN's view that students must be able to critically analyze their own learning obstacles, such as asking "*Why can't I do this?*". The encouragement of self-reflection and ownership described by participants suggests that lecturers are indirectly nurturing learners' self-efficacy, a crucial psychological foundation for autonomy. Taken together, these recent studies reinforce the present findings by highlighting that autonomy is not merely about giving students choice, but about developing their confidence, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive awareness. As observed in the ESP context of this study, where time constraints limit formal instruction, building learner autonomy through a combination of trust, strategic freedom, and cognitive support becomes not only beneficial but essential.

This notion aligns with Gibbons' (2002) theory, which contrasts teacher-centered and student-centered learning approaches. According to Gibbons, student-centered learning (SCL) fundamentally differs from teacher-directed learning (TDL) in terms of instructional roles, classroom interaction, and learner autonomy. The table below outlines these differences:

Tabel 1.3
The Differences Between TDL and SDL

Aspect	Teacher-Directed Learning (TDL)	Student-Directed Learning (SDL)
Role of Teacher	Authority figure, knowledge provider	Facilitator, guide, mentor
Role of Student	Passive recipient of knowledge	Active participant, decision-maker
Learning Approach	Structured, predetermined by teacher	Flexible, shaped by students' needs
Assessment Style	Exam-based, standardized	Performance-based, self-assessment included
Motivation Source	Extrinsic (grades, teacher approval)	Intrinsic (personal interest, self-growth)

Furthermore, Little (1991) argues that learner autonomy does not merely imply freedom from the teacher but rather the ability to take control of one's learning while interacting with guidance (Reinders, 2010). Benson (2011) highlights that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing concept; it exists along a continuum where learners exhibit different levels of control depending on the context.

Theoretical Perspectives on Autonomous Learning

Some scholars present contrasting perspectives on the feasibility of fully autonomous learning. Piaget's (1950) constructivist theory suggests that while learners can construct their own knowledge, they still require scaffolding—structured guidance from teachers—to bridge the gap between what they already know and what they need to learn. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emphasizes the importance of teacher mediation in fostering cognitive development (Camilleri, 1999). From this perspective, complete autonomy may not always be effective, particularly for learners who lack the necessary skills to regulate their own learning.

The shift from Teacher-Directed Learning (TDL) to Student-Directed Learning (SDL) highlights a transformation in educational philosophy, where students increasingly take charge of their own learning journeys (Murray, 2014). Unlike TDL, where the teacher adheres to structured lesson plans and dictates content delivery, SDL emphasizes learner agency in setting objectives, selecting learning strategies, and evaluating outcomes (Gibbons, 2002; Dam, 2011). In this context, Bhardwaj et al. (2025) assert that student-centered strategies not only foster academic growth but also support learners' *personal development, critical reflection, and emotional resilience*. These broader outcomes are often neglected in traditional TDL models, but become central when learners are trusted to participate actively in shaping their learning.

In parallel, Hasibuan et al. (2025) emphasize that adopting student-centered approaches in curriculum and course design enables the creation of *more adaptive, contextualized, and relevant learning experiences*, especially in higher education settings. This insight aligns with participants' views in the current study, particularly RT and IN, who supported students in recognizing and articulating their learning goals. Their experiences reflect that autonomy cannot be divorced from curriculum structure—instead, it must be embedded intentionally, allowing students to exercise control while remaining within a guided academic framework.

These recent studies reinforce the need for a balanced autonomy—where students are encouraged to become self-regulated learners, but within an environment where teachers provide strategic scaffolding and relational trust. Thus, autonomous learning in ESP contexts, especially those with limited formal instruction time, becomes most effective when autonomy is developed through *collaboration, flexibility, and responsiveness to student needs*—not through the complete withdrawal of teacher presence.

The Role of Democratic Learning Environments

Providing students with freedom in learning is also closely linked to the principles of democracy in education. Jacobs and Farrell (2010) argue that while schools and societies often advocate for democracy, classroom practices sometimes remain highly autocratic, preventing students from experiencing a democratic learning environment. If students are not accustomed to having agency in their education, they may struggle to function in autonomous, student-centered settings or even fail to recognize their right to self-directed learning (Aoki, 2000). Therefore, it is essential for lecturers to create democratic spaces in the classroom, where students are actively involved in the learning process. Hassaskhah (2005) supports this view,

emphasizing that language teaching should be democratic, allowing students to engage in decision-making regarding their learning.

Expanding on this, Omodan, Makhasane, and Tsoetsi (2025) highlight that effective democratic management in university classrooms requires more than just granting freedom; it demands an intentional structure that balances authority and participation. Their study reveals that while many lecturers acknowledge the value of democratic pedagogy, they often face institutional constraints, power imbalances, and traditional expectations that hinder its full implementation. Nonetheless, the authors argue that when students are given meaningful opportunities to express themselves and contribute to decision-making processes, they demonstrate increased engagement, responsibility, and self-regulation—qualities that are foundational to autonomous learning.

Thus, incorporating democratic practices is not only a philosophical stance but also a practical strategy to foster learner autonomy. It provides students with the experience of agency, nurtures critical thinking, and reinforces the idea that education is a shared responsibility. In the context of ESP courses, where time constraints limit prolonged instruction, building a democratic learning environment can empower students to take ownership of their learning beyond the classroom, making autonomy both achievable and sustainable.

Trust in Students' Exertion

The second theme that emerged from the data is *trusting students' exertion*. In this study, trust is conceptualized as lecturers' beliefs in their students' ability to learn independently, both inside and outside the classroom. Lecturers who trust their students provide them with greater responsibility and agency, fostering motivation and self-confidence. This is particularly important because the assumptions lecturers hold about their students shape classroom dynamics. If lecturers begin the learning process with negative assumptions, it will likely affect the student-teacher interaction and overall learning outcomes (Dickinson, 1995). This aligns with Wedell (2009), who states that teachers' beliefs influence their instructional choices, and any initiative aimed at fostering change in classroom practices must consider these underlying beliefs.

Recent research by Zou and Chen (2025) further supports this view, finding that teacher-expressed humility, when coupled with students' trust in teacher ability, significantly boosts academic self-efficacy, which in turn enhances learning motivation. Their study emphasizes that teachers' acknowledgment of students' potential and openness to students' input not only reduces power distance but also promotes a more empowering, student-centered environment. In other words, trust is not passive—it is enacted through respectful teacher-student interactions, which validate students' efforts and abilities. This directly mirrors the attitudes of participants in this study, such as RT and IN, who intentionally gave students opportunities to take initiative and expressed confidence in their capacity to engage meaningfully in the learning process.

From a student perspective, autonomy is a key characteristic of effective language learners. Brown (2001) identifies 14 characteristics of good language learners, one of which is the ability to find their own way and take charge of their learning (Breen & Mann, 1997). This strongly correlates with the concept of learner autonomy, where students take an active role in directing their own learning journey.

Autonomous learning is widely regarded as an essential component of student-centered education, yet the role of the teacher remains crucial. The challenge for educators is balancing the promotion of independence while still providing structured support to ensure students develop self-regulation without feeling entirely left on their own (Holec, 1981). These findings have significant implications for English language teaching, particularly in contexts where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Since autonomy in learning requires both motivation and self-regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), educators must design learning environments that encourage self-directed inquiry while still offering necessary guidance.

CONCLUSIONS

This study underscores a paradigm shift in educational approaches, transitioning from Teacher-Directed Learning (TDL) to Student-Directed Learning (SDL). This transformation highlights the importance of granting students greater autonomy and responsibility in the learning process, which not only cultivates independence but also enhances motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. Moreover, the implementation of autonomous learning strategies by lecturers plays a pivotal role in fostering a more democratic classroom environment. When students are encouraged to set their own learning goals, select appropriate strategies, and engage in self-assessment, they become active participants in their education and are better equipped to develop into lifelong learners. The findings also reveal that lecturers' trust in students' capacities significantly shapes their classroom management and pedagogical decisions. A belief in students' ability to learn independently leads lecturers to adopt more flexible, collaborative, and student-centered teaching practices. However, without a comprehensive understanding of lecturers' perceptions of autonomous learning, it is challenging to fully comprehend the rationale behind their instructional choices. Therefore, further research is recommended—particularly from the students' perspective—to gain a holistic view of how learner autonomy is experienced and to identify how lecturers' strategies can be further refined to effectively support autonomous learning.

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