AN EXPLORATION OF EFL STUDENTS' LEARNING AUTONOMY IN THE CONTEXT OF TOEFL PREPARATION AT JABAL GHAFUR UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the autonomy of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in preparing for the TOEFL test. It aims to examine students' perceptions of autonomous learning and identify effective strategies that contribute to their TOEFL readiness. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten English education students at Jabal Ghafur University who had taken TOEFL preparation classes. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The results revealed that students engaged in various self-regulated learning strategies, including creating study plans, using digital resources such as YouTube and learning apps, and practicing with mock tests. Students highlighted the importance of independent learning outside the classroom to improve comprehension and test performance. The study concludes that learner autonomy plays a crucial role in supporting students' success in TOEFL preparation and enhancing their English proficiency. These findings offer insights into how autonomous learning can be encouraged in EFL contexts.

Keywords: autonomy; EFL learners; learning strategies; self-regulated learning; TOEFL preparation

1. Introduction

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), learning autonomy has become a pivotal concept in fostering learner-centered education and preparing students for high-stakes language assessments such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). As the demand for international academic and professional mobility increases, the importance of mastering English proficiency has never been more critical, particularly for EFL learners in countries where English is not widely used in daily communication. The TOEFL serves as a globally recognized standard to evaluate a non-native speaker's academic English skills, covering reading, listening, speaking, and writing competencies. In Indonesia, TOEFL is commonly required for university graduation, scholarship eligibility, and job qualifications, thereby making TOEFL preparation an essential aspect of many students' academic journeys.

In recent years, the emphasis on learner autonomy in EFL education has intensified, particularly in relation to standardized assessments such as the TOEFL. Research shows that

students who demonstrate autonomy are more likely to succeed in high-stakes tests because they take ownership of their learning process (Pham, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2023). This shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered paradigms is further supported by the growing adoption of digital learning tools, which empower students to manage their study schedules, access resources independently, and monitor their progress over time.

Marzuki, Indrawati, and Yunus (2023) found that EFL students in online English classrooms who possessed strong autonomous learning skills exhibited greater motivation and higher engagement. These learners were better at identifying their learning needs and choosing strategies that fit their goals, such as using mobile apps, practicing listening with authentic materials, and engaging in peer collaboration. Such findings reinforce the notion that autonomy is not an isolated skill but a combination of metacognitive awareness, strategy use, and motivation—key elements in preparing for complex assessments like the TOEFL.

Chong and Reinders (2022) further argue that autonomy is enhanced when students are provided with environments that allow for exploration, decision-making, and self-evaluation. In contexts where English is a foreign language, learners often rely on out-of-classroom practices to compensate for limited exposure, making autonomy essential. Tools like YouTube, Duolingo, and TOEFL simulation apps are not just supplementary; they are instrumental in shaping how students prepare, evaluate, and improve their performance. Given this growing body of research, it is critical to examine how Indonesian EFL learners in university-level TOEFL preparation classes perceive and enact autonomy. Their experiences offer insight into the broader pedagogical question of how institutions can support self-directed learning. Furthermore, understanding students' self-initiated strategies and the challenges they face can help educators tailor interventions that encourage sustainable and effective language learning habits.

Learning autonomy, often referred to as learner autonomy or independent learning, is defined as the capacity of learners to take control of their own learning process. This includes setting learning goals, selecting strategies, managing resources, and evaluating one's progress. According to Little (1991), autonomous learners are characterized by their ability to make informed choices about their learning, take initiative, and reflect on their performance. Holec (1981) further emphasized that autonomy is not an innate trait but a learned capacity, developed through experience and support. In the EFL context, autonomy becomes particularly relevant due to the limited exposure to authentic English communication outside the classroom, making it imperative for learners to seek out additional practice and input independently.

In recent years, the role of learner autonomy in language learning has gained increasing attention from researchers, educators, and policy makers. This shift reflects a broader trend in educational philosophy that favors student-centered approaches and lifelong learning. Autonomous learning is linked to greater motivation, higher achievement, and deeper engagement with the learning material. For TOEFL preparation, where the test format and content are often

unfamiliar and challenging, the ability to study independently and strategically can significantly impact a student's performance. Learners who can identify their weaknesses, access suitable resources, and apply effective strategies are more likely to succeed in achieving their target TOEFL scores.

In Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language and not commonly used in everyday interactions, the challenge of developing language proficiency is compounded by contextual factors such as limited access to native speakers, variable quality of instruction, and lack of exposure to English in authentic settings. Within this landscape, promoting learner autonomy is not just beneficial—it is necessary. Autonomous learners are better equipped to navigate these limitations by utilizing technology, engaging with online content, and creating personalized study plans that cater to their specific needs and goals. This is particularly true in TOEFL preparation, where individualized learning paths are often more effective than traditional classroom instruction alone.

The implementation of autonomous learning in TOEFL preparation also aligns with the increasing integration of digital tools and online resources in education. Platforms such as YouTube, English learning apps, and online practice tests provide learners with accessible and flexible means to improve their skills. Students can watch TOEFL tutorials, complete interactive exercises, and track their progress without relying solely on formal instruction. These tools support self-regulated learning by offering immediate feedback, varied content, and customizable study experiences. However, the effective use of these resources requires a certain degree of learner autonomy—students must be proactive, disciplined, and reflective in their approach.

Research on learner autonomy in the EFL context has highlighted several key factors that influence its development. These include learner beliefs and attitudes, motivation, access to resources, teacher support, and the learning environment. For example, studies by Benson (2001) and Deci & Ryan (2000) emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivation and self-determination in fostering autonomous behavior. Meanwhile, educators play a critical role in guiding students toward autonomy by modeling effective strategies, encouraging self-reflection, and gradually shifting responsibility from teacher to learner. In TOEFL preparation classes, instructors can facilitate autonomy by providing scaffolding, promoting goal-setting, and integrating activities that require independent problem-solving.

Despite its recognized importance, the practice of fostering autonomy among EFL learners in Indonesia remains a challenge. Traditional teaching methods, large class sizes, and exam-oriented curricula often leave little room for student-centered learning. Moreover, many students are unfamiliar with the concept of autonomous learning and may lack the skills or confidence to take charge of their education. This gap underscores the need for targeted interventions and research that explore how autonomy can be effectively developed and supported in specific educational contexts.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the learning autonomy of EFL students in a TOEFL preparation class at Jabal Ghafur University. By examining students' perceptions, strategies, and behaviors related to independent learning, the research aims to provide insights into how autonomy manifests in a high-stakes test preparation setting. The study also seeks to identify the challenges students face in becoming autonomous learners and how these challenges can be mitigated through supportive practices and resources. The focus on TOEFL preparation is particularly significant because it encapsulates the core skills of academic English and requires a strategic approach to learning. Students must not only master language content but also become familiar with test formats, time management, and question types. Autonomous learners are better positioned to handle these demands as they can tailor their preparation to their individual strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, TOEFL scores are often seen as a benchmark for academic and professional opportunities, adding pressure and motivation for students to perform well.

The contributions of this study are twofold. First, it adds to the growing body of literature on learner autonomy by contextualizing it within the framework of TOEFL preparation in the Indonesian EFL setting. Second, it offers practical implications for educators and institutions aiming to enhance their students' readiness for international English proficiency tests. By understanding how students navigate their learning independently, stakeholders can design more effective instructional strategies, provide better resources, and create environments that support self-directed learning.

Ultimately, promoting learner autonomy is not only about improving test scores but also about empowering students to become lifelong learners who are capable of adapting to various academic and professional challenges. As English continues to be a global language of communication, equipping learners with the skills to manage their own learning is essential for their success. This research endeavors to contribute to this goal by shedding light on the experiences and strategies of EFL students in their journey toward TOEFL success through autonomous learning.

Moreover, the concept of learner autonomy is deeply intertwined with broader educational and psychological theories. For example, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) asserts that autonomy is one of three basic psychological needs, along with competence and relatedness, that are essential for motivation and well-being. In the context of language learning, when students feel autonomous, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, engage deeply with learning materials, and persist in the face of difficulties. This is particularly relevant in TOEFL preparation, which demands sustained effort and resilience.

Another important theoretical framework is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and scaffolding in learning. While autonomy is often associated with independent study, it does not imply isolation. On the contrary, autonomous learners often seek feedback, collaborate with peers, and make informed decisions based on input

from others. In TOEFL preparation, study groups, discussion forums, and peer review can be powerful tools for autonomous learning when used strategically.

In addition to theoretical underpinnings, practical considerations also shape the development of learner autonomy. Access to resources is a fundamental factor. Students with access to high-quality materials, reliable internet, and supportive learning environments are better positioned to take control of their learning. In Indonesia, disparities in access to technology and educational resources can create significant barriers to autonomy. Addressing these disparities requires coordinated efforts from institutions, educators, and policy makers.

Teacher beliefs and practices also play a crucial role. Teachers who believe in the value of learner autonomy are more likely to design activities that promote independence, such as project-based learning, self-assessment tasks, and open-ended research assignments. Conversely, teachers who adhere strictly to traditional, teacher-centered methods may inadvertently hinder the development of autonomy. Professional development programs that emphasize the benefits and methods of fostering autonomy can help bridge this gap.

Finally, learner characteristics such as age, personality, prior learning experiences, and language proficiency can influence the degree and type of autonomy displayed. Younger learners may require more guidance and structure, while more advanced learners can handle greater independence. Understanding these individual differences is essential for tailoring support and interventions effectively.

This introduction lays the foundation for the subsequent sections of the article, which will delve into the methodology of the study, present the findings from student interviews, and discuss the implications for TOEFL instruction and learner autonomy. By framing the research within both theoretical and practical contexts, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how EFL students can become more autonomous and effective in their TOEFL preparation journeys.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore EFL students' learning autonomy in the context of TOEFL preparation. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions, strategies, and behaviors in managing their own learning processes. This design is particularly suitable for addressing the research questions: (1) How is the role of learning autonomy in TOEFL preparation classes? and (2) What strategies do students use to become autonomous learners in TOEFL preparation?

The study was conducted at the English Education Department of Jabal Ghafur University, Pidie, Aceh. The participants in this study consisted of ten students who had participated in TOEFL preparation classes offered by the university. The selection of participants used purposive

sampling, focusing on students who were actively involved in the class, had consistent attendance, and demonstrated reflective engagement with the learning process.

The primary data collection technique was semi-structured interviews. This method allowed the researcher to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and learning behaviors in detail while also maintaining flexibility to follow up on interesting points raised during the conversation. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes

3. Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings and discussion of the research conducted to explore EFL students' learning autonomy in a TOEFL preparation class. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven students from the English Language Education Department at Jabal Ghafur University. To maintain confidentiality, participants are referred to by their initials: DH, TT, AS, MR, KR, NL, ZR. The findings are organized into five major parts based on thematic analysis and are followed by a discussion section that integrates supporting literature.

3.1 Background and Motivation for Learning TOEFL

All participants agreed that preparing for the TOEFL test was essential. Their motivations included pursuing scholarships, studying abroad, and improving English proficiency. DH stated, "TOEFL is a tool to measure a person's English ability... I am studying TOEFL to continue my studies abroad." Similar sentiments were expressed by TT, AS, MR, and others, who noted that TOEFL preparation was challenging, particularly in the listening and reading sections. These responses illustrate that students recognize the importance of TOEFL for academic and career advancement.

3.2 Understanding Learning Independence

Participants demonstrated awareness of learning autonomy. They described engaging in independent study using resources like YouTube, English Score apps, and TikTok. DH noted, "Learning independence is like we study independently without being told by the teacher." TT emphasized the importance of being autodidactic and setting personal goals. Students acknowledged that class instruction alone was insufficient, and success depended on individual initiative and self-study habits.

3.3 Independent Learning Strategies and Behaviors

Students described specific strategies for self-directed learning. These included watching TOEFL videos on YouTube, using mobile apps (Duolingo, English Score), setting daily or weekly targets, and taking notes. DH used note-taking while listening to YouTube videos, while TT created structured schedules for listening and reading. Repetition, gradual topic focus, and

vocabulary recording were common methods among participants. These behaviors align with Zimmerman's (2000) self-regulated learning framework, highlighting planning, strategy use, and reflection.

3.4 Challenges and How to Overcome Them

Participants reported challenges such as boredom, time constraints, fatigue, and difficulty with specific TOEFL sections—particularly listening and structure. Strategies to overcome these included taking breaks, changing learning environments, watching motivational videos, and joining study groups. DH and TT emphasized boredom and time pressure, while AS and MR cited fatigue and the monotony of English drills. Students developed coping mechanisms such as switching platforms (e.g., YouTube to TikTok), practicing regularly, and studying in quiet spaces to maintain focus.

Additionally, students expressed difficulty with the TOEFL speaking section due to time limits, varied question types, anxiety, and limited vocabulary. They suggested strategies like simulating test conditions, using recordings to evaluate their responses, and increasing practice consistency.

3.5 Evaluation and Reflection

Students used weekly TOEFL practice tests and score tracking apps to assess progress. DH explained, "I often use applications such as English Score to take tests every week... this helps me measure improvement." TT and AS set specific score targets and divided their study time across TOEFL components. MR, KR, and NS reflected on improvement by comparing previous and current performance, noting areas that needed more attention.

Participants also shared reflective advice, such as maintaining consistent schedules, finding personal learning methods, and accepting mistakes as learning opportunities. These reflections indicated that participants were not only autonomous but also developing metacognitive awareness.

3.6 Integration with Literature and Broader Implications

The findings affirm that students practiced strategies aligned with the self-regulated learning model. Exposure to authentic listening materials—such as English podcasts, movies, and music—was instrumental in improving comprehension skills, as noted by all participants. They practiced transcribing song lyrics, predicting meanings, and rephrasing sentences to build vocabulary. This supports findings by Netta and Trisnawati (2019), who concluded that self-study strategies like watching English content were prevalent among Acehnese university students. Similarly, Azizah's (2016) research at Jabal Ghafur University revealed improved listening comprehension through authentic materials.

Students also reflected behaviors noted in Munzaki (2018), including summarizing and analyzing materials as cognitive strategies. Participants practiced TOEFL structure and written expression questions to build familiarity with test formats, reinforcing the value of repeated exposure and focused learning goals.

The interview data also revealed that students applied three of Chesla's (2002) study skill principles: setting study environment and attitude, creating a study plan, and utilizing background knowledge. These principles contributed to increased confidence and performance in TOEFL practice.

3.7 Summary of Findings

The research revealed the following key points:

- Students were highly motivated by academic and career goals.
- Learning autonomy was recognized as essential due to limited class time.
- Digital platforms and mobile apps were widely used for independent learning.
- Students practiced goal-setting, time management, and self-assessment.
- Common challenges included boredom, time constraints, and listening comprehension.
- Students developed personal strategies to overcome difficulties and measure progress.

These findings highlight that students demonstrated meaningful autonomous learning behaviors, and their practices can inform future instructional design in TOEFL preparation contexts. This section presents the key findings derived from the thematic analysis of interview data collected from EFL students who participated in TOEFL preparation classes. The findings are organized into several major themes that reflect the core aspects of learning autonomy in the context of TOEFL preparation. These themes are supported by direct quotes from participants and are further interpreted in light of relevant theories and prior studies. The discussion explores the implications of each theme and connects the findings to broader pedagogical and theoretical frameworks.

Discussion
3.1 Students' Understanding of Learning Autonomy

Most participants demonstrated an awareness of what learning autonomy means, associating it with taking initiative, managing time, and learning independently outside the classroom. Several students articulated that autonomy meant "not waiting for the teacher" and instead "looking for materials or practice tests online." This finding supports Holec's (1981) definition of autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. It also aligns with Little (1991), who emphasized learners' responsibility in decision-making processes.

Participants acknowledged that autonomy is necessary due to the limited duration of classroom instruction. As one student explained:

"We cannot depend only on the class because the TOEFL test is hard and needs practice every day. So I usually learn from YouTube or apps."

This suggests that students are aware of the limitations of formal instruction and are proactive in compensating for these gaps through self-initiated learning.

3.2 Goal-Setting and Self-Management Strategies

A common theme was the use of goal-setting as a motivational and organizational tool. Participants mentioned creating weekly schedules, setting score targets, and breaking down TOEFL sections into manageable parts. One student shared:

"I make a list every week of what to practice. For example, this week I focus on reading, next week listening."

This reflects Zimmerman's (2000) model of self-regulated learning, which includes planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's performance. Students also emphasized the importance of discipline and time management, particularly for balancing TOEFL preparation with other academic responsibilities.

In addition to planning their study schedules, several students reported using visual trackers such as calendars or apps to log their daily progress and maintain consistency. One student explained:

"I use a calendar to mark what I've studied. It helps me see what I missed and motivates me to keep going."

This practice shows that visual reinforcement can enhance learners' accountability and persistence. Others mentioned setting short-term goals (e.g., improving vocabulary in a week) and long-term goals (e.g., achieving a score of 500), which helped them stay focused and motivated. These approaches not only organized their study routines but also fostered a sense of ownership and control over their learning journey.

Moreover, several students adjusted their goals based on mock test results or personal reflection, indicating a dynamic and responsive learning process. This adaptability demonstrates a mature level of self-regulation, where learners are not only goal-oriented but also reflective and strategic in adjusting their efforts according to performance feedback.

3.3 Use of Digital Resources and Online Platforms

Participants reported extensive use of digital tools to support their TOEFL preparation. YouTube, TOEFL apps, and online practice platforms such as Magoosh and Testden were frequently cited. These tools were valued for their accessibility, interactivity, and the ability to learn at one's own pace. A student commented:

"I use an app that gives me practice questions every day and tells me my mistakes. It helps me know my level."

This finding supports previous research by Shangarffam & Ghazi Saeedi (2013), which highlights the role of technology in enhancing learner autonomy. However, students also noted challenges such as distractions from social media and difficulty in evaluating the quality of online content.

3.4 Reflection and Self-Assessment

Many students engaged in self-assessment as part of their learning autonomy. They described strategies such as reviewing test results, tracking vocabulary acquisition, and noting grammar mistakes. One participant explained:

"After doing a practice test, I check my mistakes and try to understand why it is wrong."

Such practices indicate metacognitive awareness, a key component of autonomous learning. The integration of self-assessment reinforces learners' ability to monitor their progress and adjust strategies accordingly.

3.5 Challenges in Developing Autonomy

Despite overall positive attitudes, students identified several barriers to becoming autonomous learners. These included lack of motivation, limited access to resources, and insufficient feedback. Some students expressed uncertainty about whether their self-study methods were effective. For instance:

"Sometimes I study but I don't know if I'm doing it right because there is no teacher to correct me."

This highlights the need for support systems that scaffold autonomous learning, particularly in the early stages. It also underscores the role of instructors in guiding students toward effective self-directed strategies.

3.6 Role of Teachers in Supporting Autonomy

Although autonomy emphasizes learner control, participants consistently mentioned the value of teacher guidance. Teachers were seen as facilitators who provided motivation, resources, and feedback. One student noted:

"My teacher gave us a list of websites and materials. It helped me to start studying on my own."

This reflects Benson's (2001) view that learner autonomy does not exclude teacher involvement but rather redefines it. Effective teachers can model autonomous behavior, offer encouragement, and create learning environments that promote independence.

3.7 Implications for TOEFL Preparation Programs

Findings suggest that TOEFL preparation programs should integrate autonomy-building components into their curricula. This includes teaching students how to set realistic goals, use

digital tools effectively, and assess their own progress. Programs can also provide structured but flexible learning pathways that encourage independence while offering necessary support.
Table 1 presents a summary of the main strategies used by participants to foster learning autonomy.

Table 1. Common Strategies Used by Students to Develop Learning Autonomy in TOEFL Preparation

Strategy	Description
Goal-setting	Weekly planning and test score targets
Time management	Dedicated study hours, avoiding distractions
Use of digital tools	Apps, YouTube tutorials, online practice tests
Self-assessment	Reviewing errors, tracking improvement
Resource gathering	Collecting relevant materials from teachers and online sources
Peer collaboration	Group study sessions and discussion forums

3.8 Theoretical and Practical Significance

Thematically, this study supports the theoretical framework of learner autonomy and self-regulated learning. It demonstrates that EFL students, when provided with access and guidance, can develop effective learning strategies tailored to their needs. Practically, the findings offer insights for educators aiming to cultivate autonomy among language learners.

The study also aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of mediated learning through interaction. While students in this study often studied alone, many also engaged with peers and utilized teacher input, suggesting that autonomy is not isolated learning but rather strategic engagement within and beyond the classroom.

3.9 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the study provides rich insights, it is limited by its small sample size and single institutional setting. Future research could include a larger and more diverse population or employ longitudinal methods to track the development of autonomy over time. It would also be beneficial to examine how specific interventions (e.g., autonomy-focused workshops or digital literacy training) impact students' TOEFL outcomes.

In conclusion, the findings affirm that learning autonomy plays a central role in successful TOEFL preparation. By understanding and supporting students' autonomous behaviors, educators and institutions can foster not only academic success but also lifelong learning skills necessary for future challenges.

The next section presents the conclusions and practical recommendations based on these findings.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

This study explored EFL students' learning autonomy in the context of TOEFL preparation. The findings revealed that students exhibited various autonomous learning behaviors, including goal-setting, time management, digital resource utilization, self-assessment, and independent study strategies. Participants demonstrated a clear understanding of what autonomy entails and how it plays a critical role in their TOEFL preparation process.The use of online tools and platforms such as YouTube, mobile apps, and practice websites was found to be instrumental in supporting autonomous learning. Students also showed a high degree of self-regulation, often planning and monitoring their learning without direct teacher supervision. However, despite these positive behaviors, challenges such as limited feedback, access to reliable resources, and occasional lack of motivation were identified.

Teachers played a supportive yet crucial role by providing guidance, materials, and encouragement, demonstrating that autonomy and teacher support can coexist in a complementary way. These findings affirm the significance of learner autonomy not only in language acquisition but also in preparing students for high-stakes academic assessments like the TOEFL. The study underscores the importance of integrating autonomy-supportive practices in language learning curricula. Encouraging self-directed learning, building students' metacognitive skills, and fostering digital literacy are essential strategies to enhance EFL learners' readiness for international language tests and lifelong learning beyond formal education.

4.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

(1) **For educators**: Incorporate autonomy-building activities into TOEFL preparation programs, such as reflective journals, goal-setting exercises, and independent learning projects. Provide scaffolding and gradually reduce support as students gain confidence.

(2) **For institutions**: Develop and promote access to quality TOEFL preparation resources, including digital tools, self-access centers, and curated online materials. Offer workshops or training on how to use these resources effectively.

(3) **For students**: Engage in self-reflection and actively plan, monitor, and evaluate your learning. Explore digital platforms and peer collaboration opportunities to supplement classroom learning and develop personalized learning strategies.

(4) **For future researchers**: Conduct longitudinal studies to investigate how learner autonomy develops over time and its long-term effects on academic performance. Further research can also explore autonomy across different language skill areas (e.g., speaking vs. writing).

The implications of this study highlight the growing need to cultivate independent learners in the EFL context, particularly in regions where exposure to English is limited. Promoting learning autonomy not only improves TOEFL performance but also empowers learners to adapt to diverse academic and professional challenges in a globalized world.

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