

The Relationship Between Language Learning Autonomy Extent and Learning Styles in Malaysian Context

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Abstract: Little research has been done to investigate the relationship between autonomy and learning styles. This paper presents research findings that address the relationship of language learning autonomy with learning styles in eastern context. Data from 360 Form 6 students at Selangor, Malaysia were analyzed by descriptive statistics and Pearson Product-Moment. In addition, stepwise regression procedures were applied to explore the highest to the least contribution of different learning styles to language learning autonomy. The obtained quantitative results indicated that most Malaysian students are auditory learners. Besides, correlational analyses determined that students' language learning autonomy was significantly and positively related to each learning styles, except individual and group learning styles. Surprisingly, the highest contribution of learning styles to autonomy belonged to auditory and visual learning styles, suggesting that having auditory or visual learning styles do not necessarily limit students' autonomy extent.

Key words: Learner autonomy • Learner styles • Student-centered • Teacher-centered • Eastern context
• Collectivist culture

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the fact that limited number of educators will disagree with the importance of helping language learners become more autonomous [1], implementing autonomy in eastern context has been challenging for teachers and educators due to some preconceptions. Indeed, it is claimed [2] that Asian students belong to the "collectivist culture", which "promotes interdependence, respect for authority, hierarchical roles and relationships and group consensus" (p. 54).

In the argument of different cultures and authority of the teacher, [3] remarked that Asian cultures have a long tradition of obeying the authority unconditionally, in which the teacher is not seen as a facilitator, but a 'fount of knowledge' (p.5). In addition, research [4-7] have provided evidence to support the idea that most eastern students are auditory and visual learners who prefer to sit in the class and just listen to their teacher's instruction, read the notes presented by their teacher and rather have a passive role in the class. Enlightened by such findings,

it is said that eastern students come from 'Confucianism' societies where students are expected to respect their teacher's viewpoint and not to challenge their teacher's authority. This type of class reflects teacher-centered environment where all decisions are taken by the only authority, i.e. teacher. As such, students may find it difficult to take responsibility for their own learning and this raises serious problems for their academic achievement. If this conjecture is true, considering dominant teacher-centered approach and visual and auditory learning styles among eastern students, developing autonomy can be challenging for both teachers and students due to the mismatch between students' cultures and teacher's instructions especially those Asian students studying in western societies.

Although considerable research has been devoted to the influence of cultural factors on students' learning styles and autonomy, rather less attention has been paid to the relationship between language learning styles and autonomy in different context. Besides, varying findings of these few studies have resulted in confusion for

educators in appropriateness of applying autonomy in eastern contexts. Some researchers [8-10] suggest that autonomy or self-directed learning is related to all learning styles, while others [11, 12] propose that learning autonomy can be only related to specific learning styles.

[13] believes that the preconceptions about Asian culture should be re-assessed in order to investigate the real nature of the influence of culture on behavior and learning styles in these societies. Identifying students' learning styles will help English teachers to decide what kind of learning styles they need to emphasize in order to assist their learners to be more autonomous in their learning. Addressing this issue, the goal of the present research is to shed further light to the existing controversy and to investigate the relationship between students' language learning autonomy and learning styles in Malaysian context.

Review of Literature

Autonomy: Over the two centuries, autonomy in language learning has been widely discussed. While 'Communicative' and 'authentic' were the buzzwords of the 1980s, 'language learner autonomy', as the result of the shift towards communicative approaches in L2 teaching that emphasizes on the learner-centered learning process [1], became quite widespread among language educators in the 1990s onwards [14]. The earliest and most frequently cited definition of autonomy in the context of second and foreign language learning belongs to [15] as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (p.3). [15] further elaborated this concept as:

"To take charge of one's own learning is to have and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning,
i.e.: --determining the objectives,
--defining the contents and progressions,
-- selecting methods and techniques to be used;
-- monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.);
-- evaluating what has been acquired" (p.3).

[16] believes that autonomy, depending on the learning environment and learner personality, can take different forms. [16] further likens the autonomous learner to one who is decisive in all important decisions and is supervisor of the course of learning through his own management and organization.

Regarded teacher as an important figure in developing autonomy, [14] suggests that autonomy cannot be considered as a synonym for self-instruction; nor should it be limited to learning without a teacher. Following constructivism approach, teacher, in an autonomous learning environment, is a facilitator and guide, a more capable person whom students can freely refer to and get feedbacks; in the meanwhile, they are given opportunity to construct their knowledge by their own efforts. The teacher's role, as the one who has responsibility to equip students with the required skills and strategies, is significantly emphasized in this environment. Subsequently, in order to develop autonomy among students, teachers' role will be more understood in the realm of providing guidance and scaffolding for students' learning.

Generally, there is a consensus among researchers that learner autonomy develops from the individual learner undertaking responsibility for his or her own learning [15, 17]. According to [18], the term autonomy has been defined as:

- *Situations* in which learners study entirely on their own;
- A set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in institutional education;
- An inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education;
- The exercise of *learners' responsibility* for their own learning;
- The *right* of learners to determine the direction of their own learning (p.1).

Language Learning Styles: Learning styles are students' preferred approaches in learning a subject, acquiring a new language or dealing with a difficult task through which an instructional method can be effective and interesting for a student, while it will be ineffective and boring for others [19]. One of the most prominent definitions in English language learning is [20]'s where he defines learning styles as "natural, habitual and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills" (p. 34).

Researchers believe everyone has specific individual learning styles which are subjective to the individual's nature and culture. By identifying their learning styles, learners are able to find out what kind of learners they are and recognize their weaknesses and strengths in language learning, know why they lag behind other classmates in

learning and eventually endeavor to solve their problems by their own efforts. Thus, they will be more conscious about the process of learning, adjust and modify their learning, set their learning goals and most importantly, decide on their learning strategies based on their learning styles. This self-awareness of their own learning styles is believed to help students to be more autonomous in their own learning [21]. Identifying learner styles as mentioned by [22] not only benefit students to perceive and modify their experience in their own unique method, but also it may help teachers to foster independent learning. [22] stresses on the role of teachers in identifying students' learning styles and acknowledges if teachers identify their learners' styles, they may take it into account in designing and evaluating their teaching styles. He further points out to the problem some students face as the result of mismatches between their learning styles with their teacher's styles. Success in teaching, as [22] puts it, is highly attached to students' exposure to different teaching styles in different situations. Therefore, it is indispensable for teachers to consider their students' different learning styles when designing the curriculum [23]. Similarly, [20] recommended that it is inevitable to study diverse characteristics of learners to identify learner's attention, assist them to keep it for long-term memory.

Evidence has revealed that students whose preferred learning styles match instructional resources obtained higher test scores [24]. [25] believe that knowing students' learning styles will aid teachers in applying appropriate teaching approaches in order to assist student in their learning achievement.

In language learning, the preferences of perceptual learning styles are clearly explained by [5]. [5] presented five fundamental perceptual leaning channels as: Visual: learning more effectively through the eyes (seeing); Auditory: learning more effectively through the ear (hearing); Tactile: learning more effectively through touch (hands-on); Kinesthetic; learning more effectively through visible body experience (whole-body movement); Haptic: learning more effectively through touch and whole-body engagement.

Basically, research [5-7] shows that some students apply multiple learning styles in learning a second or foreign language, while culture has strong contribution in determining those style preferences. [5]'s study showed that language learners use multiple learning styles in their learning. Some non-native speakers of English including Chinese, Thai, Korean, Spanish and

Indonesians reported using kinesthetic and tactile learning styles more than native speakers of English. While some non-native speakers of English were unwilling to apply group learning, others such as Arabs and Chinese students preferred auditory and visual learning styles higher than other non-native and native speakers of English. Thai, Malay and Spanish learners of English reported having high auditory style preferences, whereas Japanese learners reported having lower preference for auditory.

In line with this, the findings of a study by [7] revealed that students' higher preference styles were greatly attached to students' native language or their origin culture. In this study, Chinese and Vietnamese students from eastern countries, preferred visual, tactile, kinesthetic and group learning styles; whereas, Spanish learners reported auditory learning as their preferred learning style. These results are consistence with [5] ' findings. Likewise, [26] 's findings revealed that Arabic students were more interested in applying auditory and visual styles and showed higher performance in interactive and extroverted styles. On the contrary, [27] found out that American students preferred independent and individual learning rather than collaborative learning.

Similarly, [4] investigated Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) English major students' learning styles. The results of this study showed that the majority of English major students were moderate to strong sensing learners. These students were reported as visual learners who preferred instructions with pictures, diagrams and graphs. However, the result of this research cannot be generalized to Malaysian students due to the limited number of respondents (n=60) and also ignoring students' background factors such as ethnicity and age. As recommended by these researchers, these factors should be considered in further studies as they may affect the results of study.

Relationship between learner autonomy and learning styles: As discussed earlier, learner autonomy has been taken synonymous with self-directed learning by some researchers. As this research aims to investigate the relationship between learner autonomy and learning styles, therefore self-directed learning research can also be taken into account in order to make a clear image of this relationship. However, a few studies have examined the relationship between learner autonomy and learning styles.

[28] links autonomy to the intelligence in learning styles and strategies. Intelligence in learning styles

suggests awareness in choosing learning styles. It has been argued that most students are not aware of their learning styles and are unable to start learning in their own way [29]. By identifying the most suitable learning styles, learners can optimize learning and identify their strengths and weaknesses. Self-awareness in learning styles makes the learner aware of different available techniques and methods in learning a second language, makes learning more effective and long-lasting and consequently it can assist language learners to develop autonomy in their own learning. According to [30], knowledge of learning styles can contribute to metacognition, i.e., awareness in thought and learning process. [31] is among the researchers who proposed the concept of flexibility and adaptability in order to relate learning styles to self-directed learning. Further [10] suggested that autonomous learners are flexible in choosing the best appropriate learning styles, thus self-directed learning is related to all of the learning styles not specific ones. This is consistent with [15] and [1] definition of autonomy where they emphasize on learner's control over the learning which include responsibility to determine the objectives, defining the contents, selecting methods, monitoring the procedure of learning and finally evaluating the materials. [15] based on constructivism theory and scaffolding approach proposes that learning is personalized where learners should determine their own methods of learning based on their educational needs and learning styles. Consequently, learning styles here are flexible in which learners should choose the best one which supports them in autonomous learning.

The research in the relationship between learning styles and independent learning shows different results. Some researchers such as [11] and [12] claimed that self-directed learning is related to some specific learning styles, while others [8-10] believe that learners are flexible and in the meanwhile, are able to use different learning styles and still be self-directed in their learning.

The results of a correlative and causal-comparative study by [32] showed that self-directed learning readiness occurred among all four learning styles- diverger, accommodator, assimilator and converger. This study revealed that self-directed learning readiness is more of an amalgamation of learning styles. The results of this study is consistent with [33] experiential learning theory of growth and development, which indicated that there is a relationship between self-directed learning with all four learning styles.

Unlike the mentioned findings, the results of a study by [12] showed there was a strong inverse correlation between the ability of abstract randomness and self-directed learning readiness, however no other significant relationship between other learning styles and self-directed learning was found. The research results contradict [32]'s findings. However, as the sample size (n=84) was not adequate to make generalization; therefore, a larger sample can compensate the limitations of this study.

In line with this, [34] did a study among both degree and higher diploma students enrolled in blended distance learning programs in Malaysia. Correlation analysis of each of the learning styles and autonomy extent revealed the positive and moderate correlation between learner autonomy and all of learning styles, except Avoidance. The findings also revealed a positive and moderate relationship between the number of learning styles and level of learner autonomy.

With the limited studies that have been conducted on autonomy in different contexts, it is difficult to conclude whether autonomy is applicable in eastern context. There is also paucity of research in eastern context to understand which learning styles can assist language learners develop autonomy.

Thus, in order to extend the research on autonomy, the following research questions are addressed in this study:

- What kinds of perceptual learning styles do ESL students employ higher and lower than others when learning English?
- Is there any significant relationship between the total score of students' autonomy extent and the total score of learning styles of secondary school students in Malaysia?
- Is there any significant relationship between each learning style and language learning autonomy extent?
- Which learning styles are more predictive of language learning autonomy?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample of this study comprised 360 Form Six students at Selangor, Malaysia. The instruments included a questionnaire in autonomy developed by [35] and *Perceived Learning Style Preference Questionnaire* developed by [36].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Highest to the Lowest Applied Learning Styles:

Table 1 shows the results of descriptive analysis. The obtained data (Table 1) shows that the highest to lowest learning style belonged to Auditory style ($M= 4.345$, $SD= .596$), Kinesthetic Style ($M = 3.823$, $SD= .652$), Group Style ($M= 3.687$, $SD= .887$), visual Style ($M= 3.601$, $SD= .619$), Tactile Style ($M= 3.600$, $SD = .749$) and Individual Style ($M= 3.125$, $SD = 1.014$) respectively.

Following teacher-centered approach where the teacher plays a more active role than students in the class, the results revealed that majority of students prefer listening to the teacher lecture, doing the assigned tasks in the class and leaving. The results could be explained by the fact that students, as the result of cultural influences, prefer not to challenge their teachers and most likely are not given any opportunity to express and share their ideas with their teachers. The result of this study is consistent with a research by [4].

The Relationship Between Students' Autonomy Extent and Each Learning Style: Based on the Pearson product moment correlation results (Table 2) there was a low and positive relationship between autonomy and total score of learning styles ($p < .05$).

The results (Table 2) also showed there was a moderate and positive relationship between autonomy and auditory style ($p < .05$), low and positive relationship between autonomy and Kinesthetic style ($p < .05$), low, but positive relationship between autonomy and visual style ($p < .05$) and low and positive relationship between and Tactile style ($p < .05$).

However, the findings of the relationship between individual and group learning styles with autonomy extent showed no relationship ($p > .05$). It implies that whether students work individually or in groups, they may have the same chance in developing autonomy.

More Predictive Categories of Learning Styles:

Multiple Regression was applied to identify the most parsimonious set of predictors of language learning styles that are most effective in predicting language learning autonomy. The results of this analysis is shown at Table 3.

The adjusted R^2 column (Table 3) indicated that the first and most important style (auditory style) explained 9.0 percent of the variation in language learning autonomy extent. It has a p -value of .001, with higher auditory style associated with higher language learning autonomy

extent. The next predictor, the beta (β) value for the visual style shows some effect on language learning autonomy extent ($\beta=0.132$, $p=.009$). Multiple regression analysis showed that only these two learning styles collectively explained 10.5 percent of the variance of language learning autonomy extent. This indicated that 10.5 percent of the variance in language learning autonomy can be predicted from two styles: Auditory and Visual.

A number of researchers [36, 37] liken autonomy to student-centered learning. [36] emphasizes student centered learning "gives students greater autonomy and control over choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study" (p.23). [37] also believe that student-centered approach contributes to more autonomy in learning and results in accepting greater level of responsibility in actively choosing goals and managing learning. Therefore, in order to engage in a student-centered approach, the responsibility should shift from the teacher to the students. On the other hand, teacher-centered approach has traditionally been dominated among most East Asian countries. This approach has resulted in monopolizing some specific learning and teaching styles. Considering this knowledge, [38] have regarded Chinese culture as an impediment to autonomy among Asian societies. In East Asia, knowledge is seen as something which should be conveyed by the teacher, whereas students are perceived as receivers of knowledge. In this context, students are often quiet, reserved and shy in language classes. Likewise, Chinese students reported 'listening to teacher' as their favorite experience in senior school English classes [3].

Unlike the mentioned platitude about eastern students, the finding of the current study disclosed that auditory style and visual style had the highest contribution to language learning autonomy extent. The results of this study refute the allegation that sitting quietly in the class, listening to the lecture and being teacher-centered associate with low autonomy. In fact, the results support the assertion that being silent in the class and listening in the class due to respect to the teacher does not inevitably bring about low autonomy in learning. In other words, Confucianism, as the dominant culture among Asian societies, shall not be considered as a serious threat to students' autonomy extent. In spite of the obtained results, further research is needed before any generalizable conclusions can be drawn. The findings of this study conform to [35]'s findings which have found that teacher-centeredness, passivity, lack of classroom participation, rote memorization do not necessarily suggest students' lack of autonomy.

Table 1: Mean and Standard deviation of learning style categories

Learning Style category	N. of Items	M	SD
Auditory	5	4.345	.596
Kinesthetic	5	3.823	.652
Group	5	3.687	.887
Visual	5	3.601	.619
Tactile	5	3.600	.749
Individual	5	3.125	1.014

Table 2: Correlation Coefficients of Learning Styles to Learning Autonomy

Learning Styles	Correlation to Learner Autonomy	p-Value
Auditory	.304	.010
Kinesthetic	.143	.007
Group	.014	.789
Visual	.165	.001
Tactile	.106	.045
Individual	.021	.688
Overall learning style	.136	.010

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Regression analysis of language learning autonomy extent on learning styles

Independent Variable	B	Beta	t	Sig.	Adjusted R ²
1. Auditory style	.188	.289	5.753	.001	9.0
2. Visual style	.083	.132	2.632	.009	1.5
Constant	1.375		7.954	.001	
Total					10.5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to extent the literature on the relationship between language learning autonomy and different learning styles in eastern context. On the basis of what we have discussed so far, there is no doubt in the importance of developing autonomy for effective language learning and teaching. The findings of this study led to some implication for ESL educators, future pedagogy and further research in language learning autonomy. The data reported here acknowledged that students' autonomy could be predicted by multiple learning styles. By the same token, different learning styles may not limit students' acceptance of autonomy. Given this knowledge, educators and instructors can canalize their efforts to enhance their students' autonomy extent by applying different teaching styles. Besides, the notion that only individual or group learning styles in different contexts are related to learning autonomy is not supported in this study. In other words, it is shown that autonomy extent is not related to individual or group learning, while can be enhanced by all kinds of learning styles. An insight into these findings may lessen the perplexity instructors experience in developing autonomy when teaching eastern students. Consequently, when

teachers are aware of the importance of developing autonomy among language learners and are assured that students' learning styles cannot be considered as impediment to developing autonomy, they may get more confidence in assisting their students.

Ultimately, being teacher-centered or student-centered among different cultures may not affect students' autonomy extent, as autonomous students are able to adjust themselves to different teaching styles and approaches. Nevertheless, student-centered learning is believed to provide more opportunity for students to choose what they learn and how to learn it according to their learning styles, implying that they are actively involved in their own learning. As such, learning will be more useful and meaningful to them and most probably will predict higher autonomy. Thus, it would be interesting if the differences between these two approaches in developing autonomy among language learners are investigated.

One of the allegations about Asian learners of ESL or EFL relates to students' unwillingness to participate in discussions, give response, or ask questions due to some certain attributes of Asian societies [39]. In fact the reason of Asian students' reticence and passivity as argued by [39] can be related to teacher methodology and students' language proficiency level rather than cultural attributes. Creating an appropriate environment for students to construct their own knowledge, play a part in decision-making process and finally take more responsibility for their own learning, are all in the hand of instructors. Therefore, effective teachers are those who are aware of students' learning styles and needs and know that students need to be equipped with the skills in order to cope with their learning when they are not around.

Although the results of this study acknowledged that student-centered approach does not contribute to lower autonomy among Malaysian students, its application might change when it comes into practice in different educational and cultural contexts [40]. Thus, further research should be conducted to draw more concrete conclusions for eastern students.

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