

AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN GRADUATE ENGLISH EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM INDONESIA AND THAILAND

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Abstract

Autonomous learning is widely recognized as essential for graduate students, empowering them to take responsibility for their learning. However, practical understanding of how autonomous learning is sustained in higher education contexts remains limited, particularly at the graduate level. This study explored autonomous learning among graduate students enrolled in English language education programs in Indonesia and Thailand. The study involved 25 graduate students, comprising 17 students from Indonesia and 8 students from Thailand. Data were collected using an adapted Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) and open-ended questions to examine students' learning experiences, strategies, and challenges. Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis. The findings revealed relatively moderate levels of autonomous learning, with an overall mean score of 3.11, indicating developing responsibility, learning independence, and intrinsic motivation. However, challenges persisted in learning habits, particularly in time management and overcoming procrastination. Students also adopted diverse learning strategies, including utilizing digital resources, participating in peer discussions, and engaging in self-directed learning practices. The findings suggest that learner autonomy should be understood as a dynamic and continuously developing process requiring not only cognitive independence but also sustained behavioral regulation and motivational consistency in higher education contexts. This study enriches scholarship on learner autonomy by offering cross-contextual insights and underscoring the importance of sustained development in higher education.

Keywords: *autonomous learning; learner autonomy; graduate students; Indonesia; Thailand*

1. Introduction

Autonomous learning is a key element of adult education and has become increasingly significant in higher education as students assume responsibility for their learning (Saleh, 2025). Learner autonomy is crucial in English language education, empowering students to engage in meaningful independent learning beyond the classroom. In recent years, the development of digital technology has further supported autonomous learning, enabling students to engage in self-directed learning beyond the classroom (Ahmed et al., 2020; Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023; Ubaedillah & Pratiwi, 2021). Digital technologies enhance performance and language proficiency while fostering student-centered learning

environments (Cripps, 2020; Mahmud & Nur, 2018; Pratiwi et al., 2021). However, although digital environments provide greater flexibility and access to learning resources, several studies also suggest that excessive reliance on digital platforms may contribute to distraction, procrastination, and inconsistent self-regulation among students. This indicates that technology may simultaneously support and challenge the development of autonomous learning practices. Especially at the graduate level, where learning requirements are more demanding, students are increasingly required to exhibit higher levels of independence, critical thinking, and self-directed learning.

Despite the emphasis on autonomy, many students continue to face challenges in developing and sustaining independent learning practices, particularly when it comes to setting their own learning goals. At the graduate level, where independence is highly expected, students often struggle with issues such as procrastination, lack of consistency in study habits, and difficulty managing their time effectively. These challenges indicate that the development of autonomous learning is not always fully realized in practice, even among higher education students.

Extensive scholarship has examined learner autonomy, with foundational definitions provided by Holec (1981), Benson (2011), and Littlewood (1996). Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy as the ability to take control of one's own learning. Furthering this definition, Benson (2011) emphasized that autonomy involves various dimensions, such as technical skills, psychological readiness, and learning strategies. Furthermore, Littlewood (1996) asserts that autonomy encompasses both the ability and the willingness to act independently. These perspectives suggest that autonomous learning extends beyond independent study practices and is closely related to students' motivation, self-regulation, and behavioral consistency in sustaining learning activities over time. Previous studies have shown that although students recognize the importance of autonomous learning, they often struggle to consistently apply learning strategies, particularly regarding self-regulation and study habits. This indicates that learner autonomy should not be understood as a fixed individual ability, but rather as a dynamic process influenced by cognitive, motivational, behavioral, and contextual factors.

Despite growing interest, gaps remain in the literature, particularly regarding diverse educational contexts and graduate-level autonomy. Previous studies on learner autonomy have predominantly focused on undergraduate students and frequently relied on quantitative approaches within single educational contexts. A scoping review of 61 empirical studies on EFL learner autonomy found that over half employed a quantitative survey design, while only four studies utilized qualitative research methods (Chong & Reinders, 2022). Empirical evaluation of how student autonomy progresses has been largely confined to undergraduate populations, with limited attention to how autonomy develops across different stages of higher education (Henri et al., 2018). Consequently, limited attention has been given to how graduate students experience and negotiate autonomous learning practices across different sociocultural and higher education settings. This issue is important because graduate students are generally expected to demonstrate higher levels of independence, self-regulation, and responsibility in managing academic learning demands. In addition, the Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) is widely used to assess autonomy in higher education, and when combined with qualitative data, it provides a comprehensive view of students' behaviors and challenges. Such efforts capture the complexity of autonomous learning in authentic educational contexts.

This study therefore aims to explore autonomous learning among graduate students in an English language education program by examining their level of autonomy, learning strategies, and the challenges they face. Adopting an exploratory mixed-method approach integrating the Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) and open-ended responses, this study provides insights into the students' learning practices. Furthermore, by involving participants from Indonesia and Thailand, this study provides a cross-contextual perspective based on a small sample, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of how autonomous learning is experienced in different educational contexts. While not designed for direct comparison, the study offers exploratory insights into autonomy across two contexts.

To guide this study, the following research questions are formulated:

- a. What levels of autonomous learning do graduate students demonstrate, as measured by the ALS?
- b. What strategies and behaviors characterize their autonomous learning practices?
- c. What strategies and behaviors characterize their autonomous learning practices?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Learner Autonomy

Building on the importance of autonomous learning in higher education, this section reviews key theoretical perspectives and empirical studies related to learner autonomy and the Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS). Learner autonomy is broadly understood as the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981), with autonomous learners reflectively engaging in their learning process (Benson, 2001; Little, 1995). This definition underscores that learning extends beyond teacher guidance, requiring active student engagement and decision-making.

In terms of graduate education, learner autonomy is growing in importance. Students are expected to engage in self-directed learning, manage complex academic tasks, and develop their understanding beyond the classroom. As such, learner autonomy is closely linked to the development of critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and lifelong learning.

Learner autonomy also acknowledges individual differences in learning styles, capacities, and needs. Holec (1981) emphasized that students need to be given the opportunity to make decisions based on their individual learning styles, capacities, and needs. This suggests that the effectiveness of learning depends heavily on students' ability to understand and manage their own learning process.

Viewed from a broader perspective, learning can be understood as a process of constructing meaning, not merely receiving information. Students are encouraged to engage with meaningful issues and develop their own understanding, rather than simply memorizing or repeating information (Dilnoza et al., 2019). When students are involved in making decisions related to learning—such as determining the pace, sequence, and content—the learning process becomes more purposeful and meaningful (Dilnoza et al., 2019; Little, 1995).

Nevertheless, learner autonomy cannot be understood as learning in isolation. Benson (2011) explains that autonomy encompasses not only technical skills but also psychological and social aspects. This multidimensional view situates autonomy within broader frameworks of learner identity and social interaction. Recent perspectives also emphasize that learner autonomy entails both behavioral involvement and cognitive control in overseeing the learning process (Saad & Abdullah, 2025). Additionally, learner autonomy

can also be understood in terms of how effectively students maximize their learning process by utilizing both their own resources and those available through others. In this sense, the degree to which learners are able to make strategic use of personal efforts, external resources, and social support reflects their level of functional learner autonomy (Ng et al., 2011). Functional autonomy refers to learners' ability to strategically combine personal effort, external resources, and social support. These perspectives collectively suggest that learner autonomy involves not only independent decision-making, but also sustained behavioral regulation, metacognitive monitoring, and strategic engagement with learning environments.

Autonomous students are able to manage their learning process, make informed decisions, and utilize available learning resources, including interactions with others. In addition, the integration of digital technology further supports the development of learner autonomy by reshaping the role of teachers in the learning process. While digital tools provide flexible access to resources, scholars caution that technology alone does not guarantee autonomy; it must be integrated with pedagogical support. Rather than acting solely as knowledge transmitters, teachers increasingly function as facilitators who guide and support students' independent learning. In this context, digital technology is considered one of the most effective tools for fostering autonomous learning, as it provides flexible access to resources and encourages learners to take greater responsibility for their learning (Ling et al., 2020; Sadaghian & Marandi, 2020). However, recent studies also indicate that digital learning environments may contribute to distraction, fragmented concentration, and inconsistent self-regulation when students struggle to manage digital engagement effectively. This suggests that digital autonomy involves both opportunities and challenges within self-directed learning processes.

Moreover, Littlewood (1996) draws a distinction between the ability and the willingness to act autonomously. Although students possess the skills to learn independently, they are not always able to apply them consistently. This indicates that autonomy is influenced not only by competence but also by motivation and learning habits. This perspective further reinforces the view that learner autonomy should be understood as a dynamic and continuously developing process rather than as a fixed individual trait.

The development of learner autonomy is also influenced by contextual factors, such as educational culture and prior learning experiences. In many Asian contexts, including Indonesia, teacher-centered learning approaches are still commonly used, which can limit students' opportunities to develop autonomy (Lengkanawati, 2017). In Indonesia, teacher-centered traditions constrain autonomy, while Thailand's educational reforms emphasize collaborative learning, creating different challenges for graduate students. Contextual and cultural factors also have an impact on the development of learner autonomy, suggesting that autonomy is shaped by particular educational environments rather than being experienced uniformly (Kharroubi & Mediouni, 2024). Consequently, students may demonstrate only partial autonomy and still face challenges in maintaining consistency in their learning behaviors.

2.2 Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS)

The Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS), developed by Macaskill & Taylor (2010), is a widely used and reliable instrument for measuring learning autonomy in higher education. The ALS focuses on two main dimensions—learning independence and learning habits—

which reflect both students' capacity to learn independently and their ability to maintain consistent learning practices.

The independence dimension reflects students' ability to initiate learning and make decisions regarding their learning strategies, which is closely related to the concept of autonomous learning proposed by Holec (1981) and further developed by Benson, (2011). Meanwhile, learning habits include aspects such as time management, organization, and persistence, which are closely related to regular, self-directed learning (Zimmerman, 2002). The ALS dimensions of independence and learning habits align with Holec's (1981) notion of control and Benson's (2011) multidimensional framework. These dimensions also reflect important aspects of self-regulated learning, particularly students' ability to monitor, organize, and sustain learning behaviors over time.

Previous research on learning autonomy indicates that college students generally exhibit moderate to high levels of autonomy (Boonma & Swatevacharkul, 2020; Tuan, 2021). Empirical studies report autonomy scores ranging from moderate to high, though consistency in study habits remains problematic. However, challenges often arise in maintaining consistent study habits, particularly regarding time management and self-regulation. This suggests that although students possess the necessary skills for independent learning, they still struggle to apply them consistently in practice. A similar pattern has also been observed in the Indonesian context, where students demonstrate developing autonomy but still face challenges in self-regulation (Lengkanawati, 2017), underscoring the influence of contextual factors on the development of learning autonomy.

Overall, previous studies suggest that learner autonomy is shaped not only by students' cognitive abilities, but also by motivation, self-regulation, behavioral consistency, and sociocultural learning environments. However, limited research has explored how graduate students experience autonomous learning across different educational contexts by integrating quantitative autonomy measures with qualitative exploration of learning behaviors and challenges. Therefore, the present study extends previous research by combining ALS findings with qualitative insights to examine graduate students' autonomous learning experiences in Indonesia and Thailand.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory mixed-method design to explore graduate students' autonomous learning in depth (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Quantitative data obtained from the Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) were used to provide an overview of students' autonomy levels, while qualitative data from open-ended questions were used to explore students' learning behaviors, strategies, and challenges in greater depth. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data enabled a more comprehensive understanding of autonomous learning by combining descriptive patterns with participants' lived learning experiences. This approach also supported methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility of the findings.

3.2 Participants

The study involved 25 graduate students enrolled in English Language Education programs, consisting of 17 students from Indonesia and 8 students from Thailand. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, determined by accessibility and voluntary participation. All participants had completed a minimum of one semester of

graduate study, ensuring prior exposure to independent learning practices in higher education contexts.

The inclusion of participants from Indonesia and Thailand was intended to provide broader contextual insights into autonomous learning practices across different educational environments. However, the study did not aim to conduct direct cross-national comparisons, but rather to explore students' experiences of autonomous learning within a small-scale cross-contextual perspective.

3.3 Instruments

The study utilized two instruments. The first instrument was the Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) developed by Macaskill and Taylor (2010), which was used to obtain an overview of students' levels of autonomous learning. The ALS consists of 12 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The ALS measures two dimensions: learning independence and study habits, reflecting both decision-making capacity and behavioral consistency.

The ALS was selected because it has been widely used in higher education contexts and demonstrates satisfactory psychometric properties. Macaskill and Taylor (2010) reported an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .81, indicating acceptable internal consistency of the instrument. In the present study, reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency. The analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .71$, indicating acceptable reliability within the current study context. Negatively worded items were reverse-coded prior to reliability analysis.

The second instrument consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore students' autonomous learning experiences in greater depth. Open-ended items probed students' experiences with time management, procrastination, motivation, learning strategies, and independent learning practices. The open-ended questions were reviewed through consultation with the research supervisor to ensure clarity and relevance to the research objectives. The open-ended responses enabled participants to explain their learning experiences, challenges, and strategies in their own words, providing richer contextual insights into autonomous learning practices.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire comprised ALS items and open-ended questions distributed through online platforms. Responses were collected voluntarily and organized for descriptive statistical analysis and thematic coding. Prior to participation, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the ALS were analyzed using descriptive statistics to provide an overview of students' autonomous learning levels. Descriptive statistics were computed at item, subscale, and overall levels to assess autonomy scores. The results were interpreted using three categories: low (1.00–2.49), moderate (2.50–3.49), and high (3.50–5.00). These categories were developed based on common Likert scale interpretation ranges and reviewed through consultation with the research supervisor.

Qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions were analyzed following Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, and interpretation of patterns related to the research questions. Codes and themes were reviewed repeatedly to ensure consistency and alignment with participants' responses. Themes were organized into two overarching categories, learning strategies and learning challenges, providing a structured account of autonomous learning practices. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled a more comprehensive interpretation of students' autonomous learning experiences.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

4.1.1 The Level of Autonomous Learning

The result of the Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) provided a comprehensive overview of the level of Autonomous Learning demonstrated by graduate students. Overall, the findings indicated that the students show a moderate to high level of autonomous learning, with an overall mean of 3.11, which falls within the moderate category based on the predefined classification.

Table 1.

Overall Autonomous Learning Score

Dimension	Mean	Category
Independence of Learning	3.17	Moderate
Study Habits	3.04	Moderate
Overall	3.11	Moderate

The overall score indicates a moderate level of autonomous learning among graduate students. The Independence of Learning dimension ($M = 3.17$) suggests that students generally demonstrate the ability to take responsibility for their learning, make learning decisions, and engage in self-directed learning practices. However, the score remains within the moderate category, indicating that students' independence in learning may still be developing rather than fully established.

Similarly, the Study Habits dimension ($M = 3.04$) also falls within the moderate category, suggesting that students experience difficulties in maintaining consistent learning routines and regulating their study behaviors. This finding indicates that, although students demonstrate awareness of effective learning practices, sustaining these practices consistently over time remains challenging. In particular, difficulties related to time management, consistency, and procrastination suggest that students' behavioral regulation may not yet fully support their cognitive and motivational readiness for autonomous learning. Overall, these findings suggest that students demonstrate emerging autonomous learning characterized by responsibility, motivation, and independent learning engagement, yet they continue to experience challenges in sustaining consistent self-regulated learning behaviors.

Table 2.
Item-Level Autonomous Learning Scores

Dimension	Item	Mean
Perseverance & Responsibility	I tend to be motivated to work by assessment deadlines.	3.76
	I take responsibility for my learning experiences.	4.12
	Even when tasks are difficult, I try to stick with them	3.8
Motivation	I enjoy being set a challenge	3.88
	I enjoy finding information about new topics on my own	4.12
Openness to Learning	I am open to new ways of doing familiar things	3.48
	I enjoy new learning experiences	3.72
Time Management	I plan my study time effectively.	2.8
	My time management is good.	2.68
	I am good at meeting deadlines.	3.64
Procrastination	I frequently find excuses for not getting down to work.	2.68
Ability to work alone	I am happy working on my own.	4.08

At the item level, several important patterns emerged. Items related to responsibility and motivation showed relatively high mean scores. For example, students reported high agreement with statements such as “I take responsibility for my learning experiences” (M = 4.12) and “I enjoy finding information about new topics on my own” (M = 4.12). These findings indicate that students demonstrate strong motivational engagement and a willingness to participate actively in their learning process. Similarly, students also reported perseverance when facing learning difficulties, as reflected in the item “Even when tasks are difficult, I try to stick with them” (M = 3.80). These findings suggest that students possess positive attitudes toward independent learning and demonstrate readiness to engage in self-directed academic activities.

However, lower mean scores were observed in items related to time management and behavioral regulation. The items “I plan my study time effectively” (M = 2.80) and “My time management is good” (M = 2.68) indicate continuing difficulties in organizing study routines and maintaining learning consistency. In addition, the procrastination-related item (M = 2.68) suggests that students still experience challenges in initiating and sustaining academic tasks consistently.

These findings reveal an important contrast between students’ motivational autonomy and their behavioral regulation. Although students demonstrated responsibility, initiative, and openness toward learning, they continued to experience difficulties in sustaining consistent study habits and regulating their learning behaviors over time. This suggests that autonomous learning among graduate students should not be understood solely as the ability or willingness to learn independently, but also as the capacity to

maintain consistent self-regulated learning practices. In this study, students appeared to demonstrate stronger cognitive and motivational autonomy than behavioral consistency, indicating that the development of autonomous learning remains an ongoing and dynamic process rather than a fully established condition.

4.1.2 Strategies and Behavior in Autonomous Learning

The students' responses to the open-ended questions provided deeper insights into how autonomous learning was practiced in daily academic activities. The findings revealed that students employed multiple learning strategies rather than relying on a single approach. Through thematic analysis, recurring patterns were identified and grouped into several key themes, including time management, the use of learning resources, peer discussion, and problem-solving behaviors. These strategies are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

Theme of Strategies in Autonomous Learning

Theme	Representative Behaviors
Time Management	Planning, scheduling, prioritizing tasks
Learning Resources	Use of digital tools and external materials
Peer Discussion	Learning through interaction with peers
Problem Solving	Strategies to overcome learning difficulties

4.1.2.1 Time Management Strategies

Time management emerged as one of the strategies most frequently reported by students in organizing their learning activities. Many students described conscious efforts to manage their academic responsibilities through planning, prioritization, and scheduling. For example, some students stated that they "make a to-do list and try to complete tasks based on priority" or "arrange study time based on deadlines and assignments." These responses indicate that students recognize the importance of organizing their learning activities and demonstrate awareness of basic time management strategies.

However, deeper analysis suggests that this awareness does not always translate into consistent practice. Several students acknowledged that their learning behavior was strongly influenced by external pressures, particularly assignment deadlines. This tendency is reflected in statements such as "I only study seriously when the deadline is close," suggesting that learning activities are often delayed until they become urgent. Such findings indicate a pattern of reactive learning, in which students respond to immediate academic demands rather than maintaining stable and proactive study routines.

The presence of planned strategies and reactive behavior suggests that students possess knowledge of effective learning management but continue to struggle with sustaining these practices consistently over time. This gap between strategic awareness and actual practice indicates that students' autonomous learning may still be developing, particularly in terms of behavioral regulation and consistency.

4.1.2.2 The Use of Learning Resources

Another important strategy identified in students' responses was the use of learning resources, particularly digital tools and online materials. Students frequently reported seeking additional information beyond classroom instruction to deepen their understanding of academic content. For instance, students mentioned that they "search Google or watch YouTube to better understand the material" and "read journals or look for additional materials online." These responses indicate that students actively expanded their learning beyond formal instructional settings and demonstrated initiative in addressing gaps in their understanding independently.

The use of various learning resources reflects a shift from passive to active learning behavior. Rather than depending solely on lecturers or assigned materials, students engaged in self-directed exploration by selecting and utilizing resources that supported their individual learning needs. This behavior reflects an important aspect of autonomous learning, in which learners take responsibility for expanding and deepening their knowledge through independent effort.

At the same time, the extensive use of digital resources also reflects the complex nature of autonomous learning in contemporary educational contexts. While digital environments provide flexible access to information and support independent learning opportunities, they may also contribute to fragmented learning patterns and inconsistent concentration, particularly when students struggle to regulate their engagement effectively. This suggests that digital learning environments may simultaneously support and challenge the development of autonomous learning practices.

4.1.2.3 Peer Discussions

In addition to individual learning strategies, students also reported frequent engagement in peer discussions as part of their learning process. Students stated that they "discuss with peers when they do not understand the material" and "ask classmates to explain concepts in simpler terms." These responses suggest that students actively seek support from peers to clarify concepts, confirm understanding, and gain alternative perspectives.

These findings indicate that autonomous learning does not necessarily occur in isolation. Instead, students integrate social interaction into their learning strategies as a means of supporting their understanding and problem-solving processes. Through peer discussions, students are able to negotiate meaning, exchange ideas, and construct shared understanding, which may strengthen their overall learning experiences.

Furthermore, students' reliance on peer support suggests that autonomous learners are capable of making strategic decisions regarding when and from whom to seek assistance. This indicates that learner autonomy involves not only independence in learning but also the ability to effectively utilize available social resources to support academic development. This aligns with social constructivist perspectives, which view peer interaction as integral to autonomy development.

4.1.2.4 Problem-Solving Behaviors

Another important theme emerging from the findings was students' engagement in problem-solving behaviors when encountering learning difficulties. Rather than avoiding academic challenges, students reported actively attempting to overcome them through various strategies. For example, some students explained that they "tried reading the

material again and looking for other sources” or “repeated the lesson until they understood it.” These responses demonstrate persistence and effort in addressing learning problems independently.

The findings also indicate that students engaged in reflective learning processes by monitoring their understanding and adjusting their learning strategies when difficulties occurred. When students recognized gaps in their understanding, they attempted corrective actions such as reviewing materials, seeking alternative explanations, or repeating learning activities. Such behaviors reflect active engagement in self-monitoring and self-evaluation, which are important characteristics of autonomous learners. Students employ persistence strategies such as re-reading, consulting alternative sources, and repetition, reflecting self-monitoring and evaluation.

Overall, the strategies identified in this study indicate that students actively attempted to regulate their learning through cognitive, technological, and social approaches. However, the effectiveness of these strategies appeared to depend largely on students’ ability to apply them consistently over time. These findings suggest that autonomous learning among graduate students involves not only the use of learning strategies but also the ongoing regulation of learning behaviors in response to academic demands and learning challenges.

4.1.3 Challenges in Autonomous Learning

The students’ responses to the open-ended questions indicated that, despite employing various strategies to support their learning process, they continued to experience several challenges in sustaining autonomous learning practices. These challenges were often interconnected and influenced students’ ability to maintain consistent engagement in academic activities. Through thematic analysis, recurring patterns were identified and organized into four major themes: procrastination, time management difficulties, distractions, and motivation fluctuation. These challenges are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4.

Theme of Autonomous Learning Challenges

Theme	Representative Challenges
Procrastination	Tendency to delay tasks and rely on deadlines
Time Management Difficulties	Difficulty organizing and balancing time
Distractions	Interference from digital and environmental factors
Motivation Fluctuation	Inconsistent motivation affecting engagement

4.1.3.1 Procrastinations

Procrastination emerged as one of the most frequently reported challenges affecting students’ autonomous learning practices. Many students acknowledged delaying academic tasks until deadlines became urgent, despite being aware of their academic responsibilities. This tendency is reflected in statements such as “I often delay assignments until the last minute” and “sometimes I feel lazy and only start working on assignments when the deadline is near.”

Findings reveal a clear gap between students' intentions and their actual learning behaviors. Although students demonstrated awareness of effective study practices and expressed responsibility toward their academic work, sustaining consistent engagement remained difficult. This suggests that autonomous learning does not automatically guarantee effective behavioral regulation. Instead, students may possess cognitive awareness and learning strategies while continuing to struggle with maintaining consistent self-regulated learning behaviors over time.

It also shows that procrastination appears to be influenced by both internal and external factors. Some students attributed procrastination with tiredness, fluctuating motivation, or feelings of laziness, while others related it to academic workload and perceived task difficulty. This indicates that procrastination should be understood as a multifaceted challenge involving motivational, emotional, and behavioral dimensions rather than merely poor study habits.

4.1.3.2 Time Management Difficulties

Difficulties in time management also emerged as a major challenge in sustaining autonomous learning. Students frequently reported problems organizing study schedules and balancing academic responsibilities with personal or social commitments. For example, several students reported difficulty balancing assignments with other activities, suggesting that competing priorities often disrupt their learning routines.

Although many students attempted to plan and organize their study activities, these plans were not always implemented consistently. This finding suggests that effective time management involves not only planning but also maintaining discipline and behavioral consistency over time. The inconsistency between planned schedules and actual learning behavior further reinforces the idea that students may understand effective learning strategies without being fully able to sustain them in practice.

The findings also reflect broader challenges in self-regulated learning. Students may intend to follow structured learning routines; however, academic demands, personal responsibilities, and environmental factors frequently interfere with their ability to maintain consistent engagement. As a result, learning activities may become reactive and disorganized rather than proactive and systematically regulated.

4.1.3.3 Distractions

Another significant challenge identified in students' responses was the presence of distractions, particularly those related to digital devices and the surrounding environment. The students frequently mentioned that they were "distracted by cell phones and social media," which reduced their concentration during study sessions. These distractions can reduce concentration and make it difficult for students to maintain focus on academic tasks. Even when students make time for studying, external distractions can limit the effectiveness of that time.

These findings highlight the dual role of digital environments in autonomous learning. While digital tools and online platforms support flexible access to learning resources and independent exploration, they may simultaneously increase the risk of distraction and fragmented concentration. This suggests that autonomous learning in contemporary educational contexts involves not only access to learning opportunities but also the ability to regulate attention and manage environmental influences effectively.

Digital distractions highlight the paradox of technology as both a facilitator and inhibitor of autonomy

Moreover, the influence of distractions indicates that autonomous learning should not be understood solely as an internal individual process. External learning environments and technological conditions also play an important role in shaping students' ability to maintain consistent academic engagement.

4.1.3.4 Motivation Fluctuation

Fluctuations in motivation are another major challenge that affects students' independent learning. Some students report experiencing changes in their motivation levels, as seen in statements such as "sometimes I feel motivated, but sometimes I don't want to study." Variations in motivation produced irregular learning patterns, undermining sustained autonomy.

These findings suggest that motivation plays a crucial role in sustaining autonomous learning. Even when students possess effective strategies and adequate resources, a lack of motivation can limit their ability to consistently apply those strategies. This highlights the importance of psychological factors in either supporting or limiting autonomous learning practices.

In addition, these findings suggest that learner autonomy should be understood as a dynamic and continuously negotiated process rather than as a stable individual characteristic. Students may demonstrate autonomy in certain situations while simultaneously experiencing motivational and behavioral difficulties in others. This highlights the complex relationship between cognitive awareness, behavioral regulation, emotional conditions, and environmental influences in sustaining autonomous learning practices.

Overall, the challenges identified in this study indicate that autonomous learning among graduate students involves more than the ability to learn independently or utilize learning strategies effectively. Although students demonstrated responsibility, initiative, and awareness of effective learning practices, maintaining behavioral consistency remained a significant challenge. These findings suggest that autonomous learning should be understood as an ongoing process requiring continuous self-regulation, behavioral management, and adaptation to internal and external learning conditions.

4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that graduate students demonstrated relatively moderate levels of autonomous learning, particularly in terms of motivation, responsibility, and willingness to engage in independent learning activities. Students actively utilized various learning strategies, including time management planning, digital learning resources, peer discussion, and problem-solving behaviors, which reflect important characteristics of autonomous learners. These findings support previous studies suggesting that autonomous learners tend to demonstrate initiative, active engagement, and responsibility in managing their own learning processes (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981).

However, the findings also reveal that autonomous learning among graduate students is more complex and dynamic than simply possessing the willingness to learn independently. Although students demonstrated relatively high levels of motivational and cognitive autonomy, they continued to experience difficulties in maintaining consistent behavioral regulation, particularly in relation to procrastination, time management, distractions, and fluctuating motivation. Findings reveal a gap between awareness of

effective learning and consistent application, reflecting the challenge of sustaining autonomy. Similar tendencies have also been identified in EFL contexts, where students demonstrate growing independence while still relying on external structures such as teacher direction and academic deadlines (Rahmasari et al., 2025). This finding reflects the ongoing negotiation between students' independent learning intentions and the practical realities of managing academic demands within higher education contexts.

The contrast between students' motivational independence and their behavioral inconsistency highlights an important dimension of learner autonomy. Students generally understood the importance of planning, responsibility, and independent learning, yet many still depended heavily on deadlines and external pressures to maintain academic engagement. These findings reinforce the argument that learner autonomy should not be understood as a fixed individual characteristic, but rather as an ongoing and dynamic process influenced by cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and environmental factors. This interpretation is consistent with Littlewood's (1996) perspective that learner autonomy involves both the ability and willingness to act independently. Similarly, Benson (2011) emphasized that autonomy involves control over learning management and decision-making processes. In this study, students appeared to possess the willingness and awareness necessary for autonomous learning; however, their ability to sustain consistent self-regulated behaviors remained less stable.

Furthermore, recent studies reinforce this interpretation by showing that students may possess knowledge of learning strategies while still experiencing difficulties in consistently maintaining self-regulated learning behaviors within higher education contexts (Hailikari et al., 2021). This suggests that the development of autonomous learning is not simply a matter of acquiring learning skills or strategies, but also involves continuous behavioral regulation in response to academic demands and environmental conditions. Similar findings have also been identified in self-regulated learning research, which suggests that students often struggle to apply effective learning strategies consistently in practice despite understanding their importance (Calonia et al., 2023; Mares-Ruiz et al., 2023).

The findings also indicate that students actively attempted to regulate their learning processes through a variety of learning strategies. Time management appeared as one of the most frequently reported strategies, as students attempted to organize their learning activities through planning, scheduling, and prioritization. However, deeper analysis revealed that these strategies were frequently applied reactively rather than proactively. Many students reported taking academic tasks more seriously only when deadlines approached, suggesting that their learning behaviors remained strongly influenced by external pressures rather than fully sustained through internal regulation. Similar patterns have been identified in previous studies showing that students frequently depend on extrinsic structures such as deadlines to maintain academic engagement (Tuan, 2021). This further supports broader findings in self-regulated learning research suggesting that students may possess effective strategies while continuing to experience difficulties in applying them consistently over time (Calonia et al., 2023; Hailikari et al., 2021).

Another important finding concerns the use of digital learning resources in supporting autonomous learning practices. Students actively utilized online materials, digital platforms, journals, and external learning resources to deepen their understanding beyond classroom instruction. These findings reflect students' initiative in independently expanding their learning experiences and demonstrate the increasing importance of technology in supporting self-directed learning in higher education contexts. Previous studies similarly

highlight that technology-enhanced learning environments can facilitate learner autonomy by enabling flexible, self-paced, and student-centered learning experiences (Achuthan, 2025; Ahmed et al., 2020; Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023; Ubaedillah & Pratiwi, 2021). Technology has also been shown to contribute positively to students' engagement and learning performance while encouraging more learner-centered educational practices (Cripps, 2020; Mahmud & Nur, 2018; Pratiwi et al., 2021). This suggests that reflective problem-solving behaviors alone may not fully guarantee sustained autonomous learning unless accompanied by stable behavioral regulation and consistent learning engagement.

At the same time, the findings also suggest that digital learning environments may create additional challenges for sustaining autonomous learning behaviors. Although technology supported flexible access to learning opportunities, students also reported experiencing distractions caused by social media and digital devices. This highlights the dual role of digital environments within autonomous learning processes, functioning simultaneously as facilitators of independent learning and as sources of fragmented concentration and reduced engagement. Similar complexities regarding digital learning environments have also been discussed in recent studies emphasizing the interconnected relationship between autonomous learning, self-regulated learning, and technology-mediated educational experiences (Robles Mucho et al., 2026). These findings highlight that digital autonomy requires not only access to technological resources, but also the ability to regulate attention, manage distractions, and maintain behavioral consistency within increasingly technology-mediated learning environments.

The findings further indicate that autonomous learning should not be interpreted as complete independence from others. Students frequently relied on peer discussions and collaborative learning interactions to clarify concepts, exchange ideas, and strengthen understanding. These findings support the perspective that learner autonomy can coexist with social interaction and collaborative learning processes rather than requiring complete isolation from others. In this context, students demonstrated autonomy by strategically utilizing available social and academic resources to support their learning goals. This interpretation aligns with previous studies emphasizing that autonomy involves the ability to effectively use social resources as part of the learning process (Everhard & Murphy, 2015; Jehanghir et al., 2024). These findings reflect that autonomous learning among graduate students in Indonesian and Thai higher education contexts is not characterized by isolated individual learning, but rather by the strategic combination of independent learning and collaborative academic interaction. The findings also underscore the influence of sociocultural learning environments in which peer support and collective interaction remain important aspects of academic learning practices.

Another important finding concerns students' problem-solving behaviors when facing learning difficulties. Rather than avoiding challenges, students attempted to overcome learning problems through reviewing materials, seeking alternative resources, and repeating learning activities until understanding was achieved. These behaviors indicate that students engaged in reflective learning processes involving self-monitoring and adjustment of learning strategies. However, similar to other autonomous learning strategies identified in this study, these efforts often appeared situational rather than consistently sustained over time.

The challenges experienced by students further reinforce the complexity of sustaining autonomous learning practices. Procrastination emerged as one of the most significant challenges affecting students' ability to maintain consistent engagement in

academic activities. Although students demonstrated awareness of their academic responsibilities, many still delayed initiating tasks until deadlines became urgent. These findings support previous research indicating that procrastination is closely associated with difficulties in self-regulation and behavioral control (Derakhshan et al., 2020). Similarly, recent studies suggest that students may understand effective learning strategies while continuing to struggle with their practical implementation due to motivational and behavioral barriers (Mares-Ruiz et al., 2023).

Difficulties in time management further highlight the importance of behavioral consistency in autonomous learning. Although students attempted to organize study schedules and manage academic responsibilities, maintaining stable learning routines remained difficult. This aligns with self-regulated learning perspectives emphasizing continuous monitoring, regulation, and adjustment of learning behaviors (Hailikari et al., 2021; Zimmerman, 2002). In addition, fluctuating motivation indicates that autonomous learning is strongly influenced by students' emotional and psychological conditions. Students reported inconsistent motivation levels that directly affected their academic engagement and learning consistency. These findings support research emphasizing the important role of motivation in sustaining self-regulated learning and academic persistence (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Overall, the findings suggest that learner autonomy among graduate students should be understood as a developing and continuously negotiated process rather than as a fully achieved condition. Although students demonstrated important characteristics of autonomous learners, including initiative, responsibility, active engagement, and strategic learning behaviors, sustaining consistent behavioral regulation remained a significant challenge. This implies that the development of learner autonomy in graduate education requires support not only for cognitive independence, but also for behavioral regulation, motivational consistency, and effective management of learning environments. These findings contribute to broader discussions on learner autonomy and self-regulated learning by highlighting that autonomous learning among graduate students is shaped not only by cognitive awareness and motivation, but also by behavioral consistency, sociocultural learning practices, and the ability to regulate learning within complex higher education environments.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated graduate students' engagement in autonomous learning, focusing on autonomy levels, strategies, and challenges. Students demonstrated a moderate level of autonomous learning, particularly in developing responsibility, learning independence, and intrinsic motivation. This autonomy was not consistently reflected in daily learning practices. In particular, maintaining consistent study habits, especially in relation to time management and self-regulation, remains a challenge.

The results also indicated that students employed strategies such as organizing study activities, utilizing digital resources, engaging in peer discussions, and problem-solving. These strategies, however, were frequently applied reactively in response to deadlines rather than as part of sustained learning routines. At the same time, students faced persistent challenges in sustaining autonomy, including procrastination, poor time management, distractions, and fluctuating motivation. These challenges underscore the gap between students' intentions and enacted learning behaviors. This suggests that the key

issue is not a lack of awareness or strategies, but the difficulty in applying them consistently over time.

Taken together, autonomous learning should be conceptualized as a dynamic process, shaped by internal and external factors, rather than a fixed ability. The study highlights that autonomous learning among graduate students is closely related to behavioral consistency, self-regulation, and learning environments within higher education contexts. Future research should examine interventions that enhance self-regulation, sustain motivation, and reduce procrastination. Expanding research across diverse educational contexts will deepen understanding of how autonomy develops in varied settings. This study contributes to learner autonomy scholarship by integrating quantitative and qualitative perspectives, offering cross-contextual insights from Indonesia and Thailand, and emphasizing the dynamic relationship between learning independence, behavioral regulation, and self-directed learning practices among graduate students. This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study involved a relatively small number of participants from Indonesia and Thailand. Although this participant size was appropriate for exploratory qualitative-dominant research, the findings may not be generalized broadly to all graduate students or educational contexts.

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