

## Online Autonomous Learning of English Reflected in The Writing of EFL Learners

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### Abstract

*This qualitative case study aims to investigate EFL learners' experiences in online autonomous learning as represented in their writing. The study explores characteristics that influence learners' writing and investigates how the writing product reflects their autonomy in learning. Purposeful sampling was used to choose twelve secondary pupils from an Indonesian private school. Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews, augmented with artifacts and student journals. Benson's (2012) aspects of autonomy used as a guide for thematic analysis. The participants' L2 writing experiences were observed while they were producing an academic essay. The study underlines the necessity of self-regulation and cognitive control during the writing process. The findings point to a multidimensional landscape shaped by technology, instructor feedback, and collaborative activities. Additionally, this practice, as seen by learners, not only improved overall learning quality by allowing them to focus on specific language components, but it also contributed to increased EFL writing confidence. Finally, teachers who want to empower students and improve language acquisition should recognize the importance and potential benefits of online autonomous learning.*

**Keywords:** Online Autonomous Learning, Writing, Technology

### INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy is a crucial skill, as it emphasizes a learner-centered approach where students critically reflect on their learning processes to develop meaningful personal connections (Schwienhorst, 2008). Autonomous learning is often seen as a marker of a student's academic success. However, in Indonesia, it has not been widely recognized as a success indicator. An informal interview with some Indonesian students revealed that they view education primarily as a compulsory task aimed at graduation rather than acquiring knowledge. This perception is deeply rooted in Indonesia's historically teacher-centered educational system, making the implementation of autonomous learning challenging.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a rapid transition to online learning worldwide, presenting unprecedented challenges in education. Teachers and students had to adapt quickly to online environments, significantly limiting traditional classroom interactions. This shift led to "learning loss" in Indonesia, resulting in lower student achievement. Despite these setbacks, the pandemic also highlighted the potential of digital education to foster autonomous learning, particularly in writing. Aldaghri and Oraif (2022) found that the pandemic positively impacted EFL learners' engagement in writing.

Many students have begun using online resources to support their L2 writing activities, such as recording new vocabulary, writing emails, and commenting on social

media (Huzairin et al., 2020). As a secondary level teacher, the researcher observed that various online platforms aid students in their learning processes. Most secondary students use online resources to complete schoolwork, including presentations, essays, online quizzes, and collaborative projects. These activities often stem from the students' initiative and motivation, reflecting the theory of autonomy. Technology's efficiency and broad reach have significantly boosted students' motivation in writing (Sockett, 2014).

Recent studies on autonomous learning in digital contexts show that online environments can significantly enhance learners' autonomy, especially in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). From the students' perspective, learning English online during the pandemic increased their autonomy. A study by Cárcamo and Pérez (2022) supported this, revealing that students who actively participate in online classes tend to develop autonomous learning skills. These skills include listening, structure, and reading, which foster self-reliance, information literacy, linguistic confidence, and strategic learning (Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023). Additionally, students recognize the potential of e-learning and other digital classes to develop autonomous learning (Khan, Ali, & Alourani, 2022; Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023). Teachers also have a positive attitude towards using online classrooms for fostering autonomy (Yeung, 2016). Prior research emphasizes the potential of online platforms to activate students' autonomous learning.

In today's globalized world, writing in English is crucial for competitiveness. Mastery of writing develops critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills—key components of the 21st-century 4C skills. Writing is essential for building knowledge and achieving academic success (Hyland, 2013). It also plays a critical role in future social and professional mobility (Naghdi-pour, 2022). Given that learners are central to successful autonomous learning, understanding their beliefs and practices in writing is vital for developing their language skills (Sukhenko, 2019).

Despite its importance, research on online autonomous learning in EFL writing is limited, particularly in Indonesia (Aprianti & Winarto, 2021; Biglari et al., 2021; Lengkanawati, 2017; Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023; Wiraningsih & Santosa, 2020). Writing is often viewed as the most challenging language skill for EFL learners, who face difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, syntax, cultural differences, and idiomatic expressions (Ratminingsih, 2015; Salem, 2007; Zamel, 1985; Zeng, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digitalization of education, transforming how writing is taught and learned, and sparking debate on the level of autonomy in EFL learners' writing skills.

Warschauer and Liaw (2011) explored how technology, such as blogs and Live Ink, can enhance autonomous language learning by improving reading and writing skills. However, research on autonomous language learning and writing skills in Indonesia, especially among secondary level students, remains sparse. Although many secondary students use online media for various academic tasks, there is a need for more research on their autonomous learning experiences.

This study aims to investigate EFL learners' experiences with online autonomous learning in writing within secondary education in Indonesia. Specifically, it seeks to identify to examine how their writing reflects their autonomy. The study employs a case study design and integrates theoretical concepts from autonomous learning (Benson, 2011) and writing (Hyland, 2003). Understanding students' perceptions and practices of autonomous learning is crucial for enhancing their independence and providing a foundation for teachers to support their development.

## METHOD

The study was conducted at an international private secondary school in Sragen, Central Java, Indonesia, using the Cambridge curriculum for English. This affluent school, characterized by cultural diversity, combines optimism and wealth, fostering dynamic cross-cultural exchanges. Committed to social responsibility, the school offers scholarships to students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and integrates hybrid learning, blending traditional and technological teaching methods. One curriculum goal is to promote autonomous learning, aligning with the research focus. The researcher, being a part of this school, had greater flexibility and freedom to conduct the study. The research targeted intermediate-level English students involved in higher-level classes, using the Cambridge Empower B1+ book. According to the CEFR, the B1+ level denotes independent users who can produce coherent texts on familiar or interesting topics and describe experiences, events, desires, and aspirations.

The research specifically examined students' experiences in writing through online autonomous learning. Students frequently used online platforms like Google Docs and Canva for collaborative writing activities. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants capable of following the research process. Participants were contacted individually and asked to sign consent forms in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure understanding of the research's benefits, risks, and viability. Ultimately, five students participated in the interview sessions. The research employed a qualitative descriptive methodology with a case study design, suitable for exploring EFL learners' experiences supporting autonomous learning in writing. Data collection included interviews, journals, and artifacts, providing comprehensive insights into the students' experiences. Data was gathered from three sources: interviews, journals, and artifacts. Interviews were semi-structured, based on Benson's (2011) dimensions of autonomy, focusing on students' control over their cognitive processes and self-management in learning. Participants discussed their experiences, events, and feelings during their online autonomous writing activities. Journals documented participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences during their writing activities. The format, adapted from Gibbs (1988), included sections for description, feelings, conclusion, and action plan. Writing in their first language ensured clarity and accuracy. These journals provided valuable data for further analysis and interviews. Artifacts consisted of students' writing assignments, serving as secondary data to evaluate their writing skills. Participants selected topics of interest, wrote argumentative essays following specific guidelines, and received corrective feedback. Their reflections on the writing process, documented in the journals, were further explored during interviews.

In analyzing the data, the approach of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. This technique involves finding, examining, and presenting patterns (themes) in data. The process includes reading the data repeatedly, classifying and categorizing data extracts, and rearranging the data into thematic topics. (1) Catching Up Your Data: The first phase involves transcribing relevant data, carefully reading and re-reading it to capture initial ideas. The researcher transcribed the interview audio and matched it with journal data, (2) Generating Initial Codes: After familiarizing with the data, the second phase begins with creating initial codes using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) technique. Descriptive codes were created with as many potential themes as

possible, (3) Exploring for Themes: The third stage involves classifying themes by analyzing gathered codes. Descriptive codes were labeled with words or phrases to represent data chunks. Data extracts were organized into potential codes, forming broader themes based on the research questions, (4) Defining and Naming Themes: Clear names and definitions were given to the identified themes. Themes were linked to the research questions and the specific focus of the study, analyzing EFL learners' use of online platforms during autonomous writing activities, (5) Producing the Report: The final phase involved drafting a report that presented the complex story in a concise, coherent, logical, and engaging manner. The report aimed to provide a clear description of the findings, ensuring themes and arguments related to the research questions and framework were supported by sufficient evidence, thus enhancing credibility.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the current development of online learning, EFL learners take charge of their own learning, making writing a flexible and personal process shaped by autonomy. Using online tools and digital resources, they participate in real writing activities, allowing them to work at their own pace. Collaborative features, like peer feedback, further enrich their learning. This study found a positive impact on students' writing due to their autonomy, which led to noticeable improvements in learning quality, confidence, focus on writing aspects, and self-management. First, recognizing the improvement of quality of writing means the study observed significant improvements in EFL learners' writing skills through online autonomous learning, focusing on aspects like grammar, vocabulary, and composition. Participants highlighted these benefits;

*Reflecting on my writing journey, I recognized a noticeable improvement in the depth of analysis present in my work. This positive development was attributable to the advantages offered by online learning. Engaging in virtual education not only provided me with a flexible and convenient platform for acquiring knowledge but also granted me the invaluable resource of time. (James, personal interview, 2023).*

*I improved how I write by using online platforms for writing exercises and joining English writing competitions. I enrolled in online courses and explored different types of literature to make my sentences more varied and structured, which helped boost my overall writing skills. (John, personal interview, 2023)*

*This positive change was due to the benefits of online learning. Being part of virtual autonomous learning not only provided me with a flexible and convenient way to gain knowledge but also gave me more time, which was really valuable. This allowed me to have a learning experience that was more personalized and efficient. (Sara, personal interview, 2023)*

Second, it Improved Learners' Confidence, online autonomous learning significantly boosted learners' confidence in writing. It allowed them to tackle individual challenges at their own pace:

*I felt there was a significant change in my writing abilities after I implemented autonomous online learning. Previously, I often lacked confidence in constructing English sentences correctly, but then I became more confident to try different writing styles and expanded my vocabulary. (Katty, personal interview, 2023)*

*Through online autonomous learning, I've become more confident and willing to try different writing styles, exploring ways to express myself more effectively. This newfound confidence not only helped me expand my vocabulary but also motivated me to incorporate a variety of linguistic nuances into my writing. (James, personal interview, 2023)*

Third, it can make students to be more Focus on Several Aspects of Writing. They can improve writing through online autonomous learning involves focusing on vocabulary, composition structure, creativity, and self-assessment:

*I dedicated time to editing the manuscript, conducting four rounds of grammar checks to minimize errors. The time distribution was as follows: 30% for addressing challenges, 40% for paraphrasing, 15% for grammar checks, and the remaining 15% for rewriting. (Sara, Journal, 2023)*

*At approximately 10 o'clock, right before heading to the basketball competition at Gor Diponegoro, I spent some time revising my essay in response to the feedback from my teacher. Constructive comments were given regarding my writing and the sources of information I had used, highlighting that I had relied on sources that could be considered less concrete and somewhat outdated. (Katty, Journal, 2023)*

After all, the online autonomous writing also provides Interactivity to Engage Students' Self-Management of Learning. It is urged that Interactive elements in online learning are crucial for self-management of writing activities. They enhance motivation and responsibility:

*Incorporating practical tasks into my learning experience, such as engaging in regular writing assignments, proved to be instrumental in deepening my understanding and honing my critical writing skills. The opportunity to receive timely feedback on my assignments played a crucial role in my academic development, allowing me to identify areas for improvement and refine my approach to expressing ideas coherently. (Katty, personal interview, 2023)*

*This can be achieved through the implementation of online discussion forums where students can exchange ideas, ask questions, share insights related to the course content, and enhance interactivity. These forums provide a platform for students to actively engage with the course material and each other, fostering*

*a collaborative learning environment that goes beyond the traditional classroom setting. (Alexa, personal interview, 2023)*

In conclusion, the implementation of online autonomous learning has shown significant improvements in students' English writing skills. The first area of improvement is the enhanced quality of writing. Online autonomous learning allows students to focus on specific language aspects like grammar, vocabulary, and structured sentences, creating a more personalized and efficient learning experience. Studies confirm that autonomous learning effectively targets students' strengths and weaknesses, making the learning process more efficient in both online and offline modes (Liu, 2016; Orawiwatnakul & Wichadee, 2017; Koirala, 2020). High-autonomy learners have more opportunities to develop their strengths outside the classroom compared to those with low autonomy.

Participants noted the role of online autonomous learning in enhancing their focus on key language components, leading to improved overall learning quality. Additionally, online autonomous learning has boosted students' confidence in EFL writing by allowing them to control their learning, engage in autonomous activities, and progress at their own pace. Studies show that confidence and independence are crucial for student achievement in "out-of-class" environments like self-access centers, virtual classes, and hybrid learning settings (Hsieh & Hsieh, 2019; Lengkanawati, 2017; Sukhenko, 2019). Empowering students through autonomy has proven to be a successful strategy, encouraging them to experiment with different writing styles and linguistic nuances.

Improving writing skills through online autonomous learning requires focusing on key elements such as vocabulary enrichment, structural coherence, and individual creativity. Students must develop skills to critically assess and edit their work for self-improvement. This approach is demonstrated by students like Sara, Alexa, Katty, and James, who dedicated time to editing, implemented feedback, and sought valuable insights. Such strategic focus ensures effective enhancement of writing skills, as evidenced by their diverse experiences and efforts. Moreover, this understanding of fostering learner autonomy, along with interactive elements, highlights the multiple dimensions of creating effective online learning environments.

Interaction is also crucial in online learning to engage students and support their self-management. In autonomous learning environments, students control their learning journey. Strategies to encourage learner independence include teaching methods, cooperative learning, self-reporting, diaries, evaluation sheets, portfolio creation, and changing teacher roles (Lengkanawati, 2017). Tools like project-based work, collaborative digital video projects (Hafner & Miller, 2011), and logbooks (Holúbeková et al., 2016) also foster learner autonomy.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, participants reported significant improvements in their English writing skills through online autonomous learning. This method enhanced learning quality by allowing students to focus on specific language components such as grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. These findings align with previous research highlighting the effectiveness of autonomous learning in addressing individual strengths and weaknesses,

promoting more efficient learning both online and offline. High autonomy enables students to develop skills outside the traditional classroom, encouraging practical application beyond formal education. Participants emphasized the importance of online autonomous learning in improving overall learning quality for EFL learners. Additionally, it boosted students' confidence in EFL writing by focusing on vocabulary, structural coherence, and creative expression. Sara, Alexa, Katty, and James demonstrated how online autonomous learning creates a personalized and adaptable environment that empowers students and maximizes their language improvement potential. The relationship between culture and learner autonomy highlights how cultural contexts influence the learning process. Experts note that culture significantly affects students' readiness for autonomy, either supporting or hindering independent learning. EFL learners' writing reflects the complex interplay of personal autonomy and cultural influences, offering insights into the diverse paths of language acquisition.

This study fills a significant gap in the literature on autonomous learning by exploring the practical experiences of EFL learners using online autonomous learning to improve their writing skills. While previous research has focused on the theoretical benefits of autonomous learning, there has been little attention to the learners' experiences and the practical dynamics involved. This study addresses this gap by examining how online autonomous learning impacts EFL learners' writing abilities. By highlighting these diverse experiences, the study offers new insights and perspectives, enriching the current understanding of autonomous learning and its role in writing development.

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