

UNRAVELING THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL ECOLOGY ON THE AUTONOMY OF ASIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AN AUSTRALIAN ACADEMIC SETTING

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Received:	04/4/2024	This research investigates the impact of changing educational environment on five overseas students' autonomous learning in Australia. Using the learning ecology framework, the study examines the correlation between changes in the learning environment and the degree of autonomy achieved by the learners. The study uses a case study approach and semi-structured interviews to assess the influence of changing learning environments on learner autonomy. Results show that changes in the learning environment freed students from standardized testing, allowing them more freedom in their educational pursuits. This independence led to improve academic performance. The study serves as a pilot for the second phase, which involves in-depth interviews with students upon their return to their home countries to determine if they sustain autonomous learning behaviors post-immersion in the English as a Second Language (ESL) environment.
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PHÂN TÍCH TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA SINH THÁI GIÁO DỤC ĐỐI VỚI TÍNH TỰ HỌC CỦA SINH VIÊN QUỐC TẾ Á CHÂU TẠI MÔI TRƯỜNG HỌC ĐƯỜNG Ở ÚC

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	04/4/2024	Nghiên cứu này điều tra tác động của việc thay đổi môi trường học tập đối với sự tự học của năm sinh viên quốc tế tại Úc. Sử dụng khung sinh thái học tập, bài nghiên cứu khảo sát mối tương quan giữa sự thay đổi trong môi trường học tập và mức độ tự học đạt được bởi sinh viên. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu ứng dụng và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc để đánh giá tác động của việc thay đổi môi trường học tập đối với sự tự học của sinh viên. Kết quả cho thấy sự thay đổi trong môi trường học tập giải phóng sinh viên khỏi các bài kiểm tra tiêu chuẩn, cho phép họ có nhiều tự do hơn trong việc theo đuổi học vấn của mình. Sự độc lập này dẫn đến cải thiện hiệu suất học tập. Nghiên cứu phục vụ như một nghiên cứu sơ bộ cho giai đoạn thứ hai, trong đó bao gồm phỏng vấn sâu với sinh viên sau khi họ trở về quê hương để xác định liệu họ duy trì các hành vi tự học sau khi tiếp xúc trong môi trường học tiếng Anh như một ngôn ngữ thứ hai.
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1. Introduction

The contemporary educational landscape witnesses a growing trend of students pursuing academic endeavors in English-medium institutions abroad, necessitating a deeper exploration into the autonomy of foreign students amidst transitions between language learning environments. The concept of learner autonomy in the field of second language acquisition has been defined in various ways by different scholars. Holec [1] describes autonomy as the ability to take control of one's own learning process by setting goals, choosing content and methods, overseeing acquisition, and evaluating knowledge. Little [2] emphasizes that learner autonomy involves detachment, critical thinking, decision-making, and autonomous action, with a focus on developing a psychological connection to learning materials. Benson [3] expands on the idea of learner autonomy, stating that it extends beyond the classroom to encompass learning experiences outside of formal education. From a social constructivist perspective, autonomy is seen as a result of the interaction between social and reflective processes [2]. Autonomy is viewed as a dynamic progression influenced by both internal cognitive factors and external elements like task arrangement and learning environment [4]. Benson [3] further notes that learner autonomy is not just about how learners act, but also about their potential capacity to engage in a learning environment, which can be influenced by changes in living circumstances and social involvement.

In the contemporary educational landscape, an increasing number of students opt to pursue their academic endeavors in English-medium institutions located abroad [4]. When examining the autonomy of foreign students, it becomes imperative to consider the transition from one language learning environment to another, as alterations in the learning milieu and social interactions may significantly impact learners' levels of autonomy. Building upon the foundational work of Ernst Haeckel, who coined the term "ecology" to elucidate the interconnectedness among organisms, ecological linguistics, as defined by Van Lier [5], delves into the intricate relationships between language, cognition, action, and power dynamics, transcending the study of individual lexical items or grammatical rules. This ecological perspective offers a comprehensive framework for examining the interconnectedness within a student's language-learning environment [6]. Expanding on this notion, Barron [7] introduced the concept of a "learning ecosystem," encapsulating both the physical and virtual environments that foster educational opportunities. Van Lier [6] underscores the paramount importance of comprehending one's environment for optimal learning outcomes. Complementing this perspective, Gibson [8] introduced the concept of affordances, referring to environmental elements that either facilitate or impede actions, goals, and significance [6]. Moreover, social interaction, particularly through conversation, emerges as a pivotal context for language acquisition [5].

Drawing upon the ecological framework proposed by Van Lier [6], this study seeks to investigate the impact of changing educational ecology on the autonomy of international students studying in Australia. By employing a case study approach and semi-structured interviews, this study aims to examine the correlation between changes in the learning environment and the degree of autonomy achieved by international students in Australia. The findings from this research will contribute to our understanding of how educational contexts shape learner autonomy and inform strategies for promoting autonomous learning behaviors in diverse linguistic and cultural settings.

2. Literature review

Extensive research has also investigated the effects of ecological changes on the development of learner autonomy. It is important to acknowledge that in the context of language acquisition, autonomisation refers to the process by which people understand and acquire a certain level of control over the individualization that arises as a result of long-term urbanization and globalization [9]. Ecology emphasizes the importance of diverse populations and heterogeneous concepts in learning. It suggests that learners of different languages can benefit from shared experiences and support. Researchers and educators can help teachers modify and adapt materials

for effective learning. Ecology emphasizes the mutual dependence of materials and students, emphasizing the importance of considering how the situation impacts individuals and communities. A person's context can serve as a resource for the other context [10].

Palfreyman [11] further elucidates the significance of social resources in language learning, emphasizing their acquisition through connections and networks. In essence, the dynamics between students, their learning communities, and their surroundings play an indispensable role in shaping the language-learning journey [6]. A growing focus within learner autonomy research is examining how learners respond to shifts in their learning environment, particularly when those shifts involve technological, sociocultural, and institutional changes [10], [12], [13]. In the context of standardized testing, Murray [14] argues that the removal of such assessments can create affordances for learners, fostering greater autonomy and flexibility in educational pursuits. The findings of the study indicate that changes in the learning environment, specifically the absence of standardized testing, contribute to increased learner autonomy and improved academic performance. Additionally, Murray [14] posits that self-determination acts as an affordance, fostering educational opportunities and empowering learners in their language acquisition endeavors.

Recent studies continue to underscore the importance of social networks and resources in second language learning, both in-person and online, in fostering autonomy and identity development [9], [11]. Similarly, the removal of constraints within learning environments, such as standardized tests or rigid structures, is an ongoing area of inquiry. Researchers explore how such shifts create space for learners to exhibit greater autonomy [14]. Another study by Sato [15] researches on how studying abroad may enhance the language skills of Japanese students and the capacity to adapt to other cultures. Results indicate that every participant developed their identities in their second language. Their engagement in learning and using English is stimulated via their interactions with local people and their own personal growth, which is inspired by their connection with an admired individual. This influence has endured significantly even after their return to their native country. Additionally, the research demonstrates that in the absence of unequal power dynamics in social interactions, language learners have the ability to develop their desired second language identities in a positive manner. This focus aligns with the dynamic experiences of international students navigating new contexts. Besides, the study by Isabelli-Garcia et al. [16] has explored how studying abroad influences students' language learning, cultural perceptions, identity development, and autonomy. The study highlights the importance of students' perceptions, motivations, and interactions with the host culture in shaping their study abroad experiences.

Moreover, a gap in teacher education programs concerning the integration of learner and teacher autonomy is identified. Wette and Furneaux [17] reveal that international students enrolled in colleges that use English as the primary language of instruction have difficulties in adapting to the academic communication norms and practices. These students often cultivate autonomous learning techniques to manage the challenges posed by language limitations and the requirements of academic tasks. Moreover, there may exist a gap in teacher education programs concerning the integration of learner and teacher autonomy, which requires addressing autonomy to be effectively enacted in the classroom [18]. This suggests that for changes in learning ecology to genuinely promote learner autonomy, teacher training must evolve to include these competencies.

While existing research has focused on changes in students' perspectives and language proficiency, the current study aims to investigate the fluctuations in learner autonomy among international students during their study abroad experiences. This research aims to explore the impact of changes in the learning environment on the independent learning capabilities of international students, with a specific focus on Asian International Students transitioning to an Australian academic setting. Through an analysis of five case studies conducted at a university in Australia, the study seeks to elucidate any variations in autonomy experienced by these students following their migration. By examining the key elements of the learning ecosystem and its interplay with students' motivations for language acquisition, this research offers fresh

perspectives on how educational contexts shape the linguistic and cognitive development of individuals. Consequently, it aims to provide valuable insights into how adjustments in the learning environment affect the autonomous learning capacities of foreign students.

The objectives of this paper are centered around addressing the following questions:

- How do changes in the learning ecology impact the level of learner autonomy of Asian international students enrolling at a university in Australia?

3. Methodology

Informed by an ecological framework, this qualitative case study explores the dynamic relationship between evolving learning environments and learner autonomy development among international students in Australia. To capture this evolution, two in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant over a one-year period. This longitudinal approach strengthens the study's credibility and reliability by providing insights into the shifts in learner autonomy as participants' contexts change. Additionally, the researcher's shared living arrangement with participants offers opportunities for naturalistic observation. This embedded perspective complements the interview data, allowing for a richer understanding of how environmental factors beyond the classroom shape students' autonomous learning behaviors.

3.1. Participants

The participants involved in this study were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity while indicating their nationality. The participants encompass a diverse array of backgrounds and academic pursuits. Participant 1 and Participant 2, both Vietnamese nationals, are enrolled in a Master's program in Applied Linguistics and TESOL, spanning a duration of two years. Similarly, Participant 3, also from Vietnam, is pursuing a Master's degree in Accounting, also spanning two years. Contrastingly, Participant 4 and Participant 5 hail from China, with Participant 4 pursuing a Master's degree in Accounting and Participant 5 enrolled in a three-year Master's program in Chiropractic care.

Despite the variations in their academic disciplines, all participants share a common thread of pursuing Master's degrees in Australia subsequent to completing their Bachelor's degrees. This collective pursuit underscores their commitment to higher education and signifies a shared educational and cultural background, shared between Chinese and Vietnamese heritages. Additionally, the participants' residential arrangements present a unique aspect of this study. All participants reside within the confines of a single on-campus dormitory, facilitating ease of access for the researcher and fostering a conducive environment for data collection. Following the attainment of their Master's degrees, participants are anticipated to return to their respective countries of origin, marking the culmination of their academic journey in Australia.

3.2. Procedures and data analysis

In this study, the correlation between changes in the learning environment and enhanced learner autonomy is being explored using in-person interviews [19]. The interviews aim to facilitate information exchange and ensure a thorough exploration of ideas while maintaining individual perspectives and minimizing group dynamics [19]. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant. The initial round of the interview focused on their learning experiences in their home country and early impressions of the Australian educational context. The second round of the interview, approximately one year later, centered on their evolving perceptions of learning, challenges, and strategies for independent learning. Interviews were conducted in a private room at the university library, lasted approximately 60-90 minutes each, and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Besides, one of the researchers shared a house with all five participants throughout the study period in Australia. This shared living environment offered opportunities for naturalistic observation of participants' study habits, interactions with course

materials, social interactions relevant to learning, and use of technology for language learning purposes. This longitudinal approach enhances the credibility and reliability of the findings, allowing for insights into the evolution of learner autonomy and its connection to changes in the participant's environment. Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms.

Data analysis involved coding interview transcripts to identify common themes and patterns [20]. The study's ecological framework shaped the analysis process. Themes were examined for their connections to various levels of the participants' learning environments, including the classroom, social and cultural contexts, technological tools, and institutional policies. The analysis specifically sought to illuminate how changes within these environments both promoted and constrained the development of learner autonomy. This systematic process enables the identification of key factors that shape learner autonomy development within dynamic learning environments.

4. Results & Discussion

Learning is a lifelong process that requires consistent effort and development. Therefore, this section will commence with a concise overview of the prior language acquisition experiences of the participants, which will be succeeded by an analysis of their progress since commencing their academic pursuits in Australia.

4.1. Prior educational experience of the participants

Each of the five participants is a native of an Asian nation. Consequently, they exhibit numerous parallels in their native countries' educational experiences and cultural backgrounds. All of the participants expressed that their educational settings in their native nations were extremely demanding and that they felt tremendous pressure to fulfill the test-oriented curriculum's requirements.

While I was in China, I learned English so that I could pass the test. Before I could get my degree, I had to pass the test to get into college and show that I could speak and write English well enough. After that, I worked hard at studying and got the IELTS score I needed to go to Australia to get my master's degree. (Participant 1)

I've been learning English for sixteen years now. I learned a few words in English when I was seven years old, and I started taking English classes seriously when I was twelve because it's a required subject in high school. It was necessary for me to pass an entrance test that included English in order to get into the university. Following that, I need to meet the English language standards of both my education and my job. Because of this, English is the main subject of my work and studies. (Participant 2)

When queried about English language learning-related activities they engaged in, the participants' responses and viewpoints were varied. Participant 1 and Participant 2 regarded themselves as autonomous, given that they were well aware of the connection between their English language learning objective and their university major.

Because I focused on English grammar and reading in college, I actively sought out and read a huge number of literary works. Also, I had a few foreign friends from different countries at the time, which gave me more chances to improve and build my communication skills. At the time, I thought of myself as a self-directed language student because I was always looking for new ways to study and use the language. (Participant 1)

However, the remaining three participants, who were pursuing studies in alternative fields such as accounting and chiropractic, did not perceive themselves as autonomous learners. This was due to the fact that their English learning experience was confined to classroom time and they did not engage in substantial English practice beyond the classroom.

I devoted little time outside of class to studying or practicing speaking or listening abilities because I did not recognize the significance of foreign languages at the time. I devoted the majority of my time at university to my discipline. I simply executed the practice and instructions that my class instructor requested of me. (Participant 5)

4.2. Development of participants' autonomy when studying abroad

Following the first interview session, the second interview took place one year later. During this session, the learners' attitudes toward language acquisition and activities outside the classroom underwent modifications.

I possess the capacity to formulate strategies to enhance my skills, as well as the ability to identify and choose the necessary resources and materials to support my progress. (Participant 1)

I have the compulsion to enhance my academic achievement, as well as the compulsion to enhance my interpersonal communication skills. (Participant 3)

In short, none of the five participants prioritize their language learning objectives only on passing the exam. Instead, their goals have shifted towards adjusting to the ESL environment based on their individual needs. Furthermore, the participants also express the favorable alterations in their attitudes towards acquiring and using the English language as a result of the modifications in their surroundings.

But changes in both my home and school environments have helped me become more independent in learning language skills outside of school. The people in my social group inspire me to spend more time studying outside of school. In order to improve my knowledge and skills in many areas. (Participant 2)

In addition, the participants also highlighted the alterations in their motivation and behaviors outside of the classroom.

I became a member of many social groups where I encountered individuals from other nations, I only spoke in the English language. I am intrigued that I do not need to be concerned about my language proficiency, but I get pleasure from engaging in regular practice and acquiring new knowledge on a daily basis. (Participant 4)

I have discovered that I am more driven in my learning and dedicate more time to my independent learning. This is because my learning is no longer limited to just passing tests, as it was in Vietnam. Additionally, my out-of-class learning is not just a hobby, but rather it directly contributes to my academic achievements in class. I feel more motivated and have greater dedication to my extracurricular studies. (Participant 5)

The data suggests that the differences in the learning and living environments motivate the five participants to take charge of their own education outside of the classroom. It is important for students to adapt to their surroundings and effectively communicate with others they encounter in their many social engagements. In addition, the changes made to the learning environment allow the participants to deviate from the curriculum focused solely on tests and give them more freedom in their educational endeavors. These changes help foster their independence beyond the classroom and lead to enhanced academic performance. Palfreyman [9] asserts that an individual's lifelong transformations have a pivotal role in molding their own language acquisition milieu. This study outlines the modifications made to the learning and living situations, which have resulted in the development of a distinctive language-learning environment. The changes in the learning environment from EFL to ESL have fostered more autonomy in language acquisition beyond the traditional classroom setting. One primary advantage is that the participants gain autonomy in their education, which was lacking in their home countries where education was driven by standardized testing. Furthermore, participants are given more flexibility in their learning, allowing them to choose where to focus their attention and which abilities to prioritize for improvement. Driven by the dual objectives of adapting to their new environment and achieving academic excellence, participants enhance their study time outside the classroom.

In short, the extent to which a learner is autonomous is determined by three main factors: their aptitude, their inclination, and the level of independence they have [3]. Furthermore, students' degrees of autonomy are influenced by both their own cognitive processes and their relationships with peers in the classroom. The manner in which students' everyday lives and classrooms have evolved has a significant impact on their views on education, their approaches to community

participation, and their ideas for pedagogical innovation [10], [11]. Therefore, these factors motivate the students to engage in autonomous learning styles outside the confines of the classroom. Furthermore, these factors might have a substantial influence on fostering student autonomy. Implementing self-directed learning and self-management tactics may promote more autonomy, which is strongly correlated with better academic achievement, heightened happiness with learning, and enhanced communication abilities.

Marangell et al. [21] contend that the matter of integrating foreign students is not just a concern for universities, but also for the wider community. Therefore, universities' internationalization plans must now focus on broadening their efforts to include the wider society and adopting a community-oriented approach to internationalization processes. The findings of the current study indicate that colleges may employ more efficient instructional techniques by understanding and embracing the rich affordance environment for students, this action would enhance the university experience for all students and better cater to the foreign student population. Implementing these tactics may enhance students' ability to effectively manage their own learning and navigate their way toward achieving excellent educational achievements.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, the results of the research have significant implications for teachers and policymakers. The environments that provide learners with many opportunities to interact with their surroundings play a crucial role in language acquisition outside the traditional classroom setting. Modifications to the learning environment may have a significant impact on student's ability to develop autonomy, which in turn can result in better educational results, such as higher academic achievement and more satisfaction with the learning process. Failure to acknowledge cultural and language disparities among Asian overseas students might hinder their capacity to cultivate independence and flourish within the Australian university system. International students, especially those from countries where English is not the primary language or with a curriculum focused on exams, experience significant changes in their living and learning environment when they study in a country where English is the native language. These changes offer them opportunities to interact socially and become more exposed to the target language. The most important advantage of this is that it enhances their ability to learn the language independently outside of the classroom.

Hence, institutions should consider these disparities and design techniques that foster the independence of every student, regardless of their nation or cultural background. Educators should possess knowledge of diverse learning environments and endeavor to provide a conducive setting that enables every student to achieve academic success, irrespective of their socio-economic status or personal conditions. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize the cultural disparities among students in order for universities to effectively facilitate the growth of their autonomy and guarantee their achievements in higher education. By gaining a more profound comprehension of the development of learner autonomy, educators may provide a more nurturing educational setting that benefits all learners in every field of study. Universities may facilitate student achievement by enabling students to develop their own aptitudes and expertise, while simultaneously deriving gratification from their educational journey. Ultimately, it is vital to guarantee that every university student attains both academic and personal triumph.

Despite the aforementioned advantages, it is important to acknowledge many constraints that should be considered in this research. Given that this research was just a pilot, it is crucial to exercise prudence before generalizing the results to larger groups or other circumstances. Furthermore, the present research does not include the observation of actual classes. Instead, it primarily focuses on pupils from other nations. To achieve further progress, it is essential to include the perspectives of educators. Furthermore, given that this study just examined the perspectives of students, further investigation from the vantage points of instructors and

university administrators is important in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of learner autonomy.

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