



EFL Students' Self-Selected Reading in Technology-Mediated Distance Learning: A Space for Learner Autonomy

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Introduction

The burgeoning interest in online learning or distance learning mediated by technology has necessitated greater attention to promoting learner autonomy (LA), including in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. This capacity is crucial for successful EFL learning, as evidenced in previous empirical studies (e.g., Khotimah et al., 2019; Little, 2020). Concomitantly, the absence of immediate teacher assistance in technology-mediated distance learning highlights the need for promoting learner autonomy. Myriad EFL scholars have engaged in scholarly discussion to promote LA in classroom contexts. Conceptually, some scholars have proposed some frameworks, giving practical guidelines for teachers to support LA in the instructions (see, e.g., Benson, 2016; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). However, empirical evidence also indicates that while teachers have a positive perception of LA, they lack the ability to incorporate LA into their pedagogical practices (Chang, 2020), highlighting the need to enhance their skills to apply the LA construct in their classrooms. Thus, it urges extended empirical investigations into how the idea of LA is implemented in classroom practices.

Likewise, the nature of extensive reading (ER), adhering to students' relevance and students' self-choice (Day & Bamford, 2002; Renandya et al., 2021), is interlinked with the concept of LA. The space for choices in reading texts for students is intensively associated with building students' motivation and fostering curiosity in reading (Khotimah, 2020; Renandya et al., 2021). The scholarly conversation pertaining to how students self-select reading texts and how it impacts their LA development has received inadequate attention. This condition might present a challenge to making informed pedagogical decisions.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring the students' dynamic use of their freedom to select texts and how it affects their LA development in the ER classroom with two research questions.

1. What reading texts do the students select? Why and how?
2. How does autonomous self-material selection help them exercise LA?



Literature Review

Learner Autonomy in Technology-Mediated Distance Learning and Space for Choices

The emergence of interest in integrating technology for more learning opportunities and a shift toward student-centered learning gradually led to their merging into mainstream practices (Reinders & White, 2016). In enacting technology in EFL teaching, teachers should not merely encourage students to engage in self-access learning. More importantly, teachers should provide necessary scaffolding, such as assisting students on how to pinpoint their educational needs, prioritize their learning objectives, locate suitable materials, document their learning, and assess their progress (Reinders & White, 2016). Further, Reinders (2018) uncovered that the use of technology for language learning is not likely to result in better students' autonomous behaviors without teachers' sound pedagogy, including adequate training on how to utilize it properly. In this manner, providing varied and ongoing training to students might help them perceive competence, leading to their autonomous learning (Stockwell & Reinders, 2019). Ryan and Deci (2020) suggest that teachers can promote autonomy by displaying interpersonal behaviors such as providing choices, supporting initiatives, and reducing control.

In relation to LA, there is a long scientific history of choice discourse in learning and human optimal functioning, especially as a notion of perceived choice. In regard to self-determination, the fundamental theoretical idea of autonomy, perceived choice has been recognized as a significant experiential aspect of learning (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Practically, learning environments may offer students a choice or a predetermined action plan, impacting their autonomy, self-reliance, and motivation. Autonomy-enhancing environments increase students' learning responsibility and motivation, while limited autonomy may decrease motivation and engagement (Chiu, 2021).

Extensive Reading in Principles and Reading Texts' Self-Selection

ER is essential for language acquisition as it aligns with Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis (Krashen, 2004; Renandya & Jacobs, 2016). The hypothesis underscores the language input that is abundant and regularly available, comprehensible, and contains language slightly above current learners' language repertoire. ER prioritizes comprehension and meaning, emphasizing independent reading for enjoyment and self-directed learning with little teacher intervention (Renandya et al., 2021). The 10 principles of ER, proposed by Day and Bamford (2002), outline the unique characteristics of ER, including the selection of comprehensible and diverse topics, student autonomy in selecting reading materials, and teachers acting as guides rather than testers. In ER, students have autonomy in selecting and reading texts that match their language and interests, with teachers providing guidance and scaffolding for better reading (Day & Bamford, 2002; Jacobs & Renandya, 2021). Empirical evidence indicates that students' perceived autonomy in ER class significantly contributes to positive outcomes in terms of reading motivation (Tanaka, 2017).

Recent literature emphasizes diverse reading materials, including content diversity and considering the reasons for text selection, highlighting the need for incorporating a range of reading texts in instruction (Flores et al., 2019; Fullerton et al., 2018; Conradi-Smith et al., 2022). Similarly, Choi and Lee (2020) suggest that teachers facilitate students' engagement in enjoyable reading by providing access to diverse and beneficial resources while closely monitoring their progress. However, those studies were situated in the reading classroom, where the teachers served as the selectors of the reading texts. The relevant studies focusing on the students as active agents in the text selection have emphasized the benefits of self-selected readings in developing academic success and a love for reading (e.g., Khotimah, 2020; Renandya et al., 2021), but less attention has been given to how EFL students self-select their reading texts and how it facilitates their LA. This empirical evidence can help teachers and researchers understand students' ER experiences and autonomy construction, potentially impacting future pedagogical decisions.

Method

Research Design

Using an exploratory case study design, this study investigated the ways in which EFL students chose their own reading materials and how this process contributes to their LA development. The exploratory approach is well-suited for this study as it allows for a thorough examination of the self-selection process and its perceived effects on LA development among EFL students. The investigation was oriented toward scrutinizing a small number of participants, allowing for a detailed and in-depth examination of their experiences and perspectives (Yin, 2009).

Research Context and Participants

The study took place in a distance ER course during the COVID-19 pandemic at a public university in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Eight students (six females and two males, aged 20-21 years) out of 19 gave their consent to participate and were pseudonymed as Anita, Bitu, Cita, Dita, Erika, Farid, Galih, and Hilda. These students were studied as a single case over sixteen weekly 90-minute synchronous or asynchronous online meetings. The course aimed to enhance students' awareness of the importance of reading and improve their linguistic, cognitive, and social skills through ER activities. At the beginning, the students received an introduction to the principles of ER, including the technical procedures of reading text selection from open access sources and the use of Google Sites as the platform for students' portfolios. They were then exposed to six biweekly sessions of independent ER, during which they self-selected authentic reading materials, engaged with their readings, and made meaning of what they read. Additionally, the students participated in biweekly individual written reflections, group and classical sharing sessions, reading tours (visiting others' Google Sites), and presentations.

Data Collection

To meet the research objectives, a set of students' learning portfolios and biweekly written reflections served as the research instruments. The use of learning portfolios allowed us to gain valuable insight into the students' reading profiles and the texts they self-selected. Specifically, students were asked to document their self-selected reading texts, their reasons for selecting those texts, and the vocabulary and insights they gained from the texts. In addition, biweekly written reflections were collected from the students to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences during the ER activities. In their written reflections, students were encouraged to share their feelings, perceived benefits, challenges, and critical incidents during the ER. By analyzing the portfolios and reflections, we were able to identify patterns and gain insights into the complex phenomenon of self-selection and LA development. This approach allowed us to gather rich and detailed data that helped us better understand the relationship between self-selection and LA development among EFL students.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we utilized a qualitative thematic analysis approach. Firstly, we transcribed all the data from the students' learning portfolios and biweekly written reflections. We then proceeded with the reading of the data to establish familiarity and identify relevant data. Employing a bottom-up approach, we developed initial codes to the data and searched for themes based on the significant patterns that emerged. We then reviewed and named the themes. Additionally, we utilized basic calculations to improve the clarity of the students' reading profiles and experiences. We counted the number of times both data and participants provided relevant excerpts, the total number of articles read, and the total amount of time spent reading per

session. All the steps were iterative in nature to draw a meaningful and relevant conclusion. Further, to ensure that our results were trustworthy, we employed a member-checking technique where we gave the participants access to the data and allowed them to review, reduce, or provide additional insight. Our careful and iterative data collection and analysis approach, combined with the member-checking technique, helped to ensure the credibility of our findings.

Findings

The analysis yielded three themes: 1) "Reading as a means to attain personal interests, aspirations, and relevance"; 2) "Self-material selection as a catalyst for promoting learner autonomy"; and 3) "Self-material selection as a driving force to persevere in the arduous task of reading." The first theme addresses the first research question, while the remaining two themes address the second research question.

Reading as a Means to Attain Personal Interests, Aspirations, and Relevance

The observation of student portfolios revealed that self-selected reading materials catered to the diverse interests and needs of EFL students, including a wide range of topics related to their personal interests, aspirations, and real-life experiences. This finding highlights the potential of self-selection to foster student engagement and motivation in ER activities. The themes and topics of students' reading materials are depicted in the following figure:

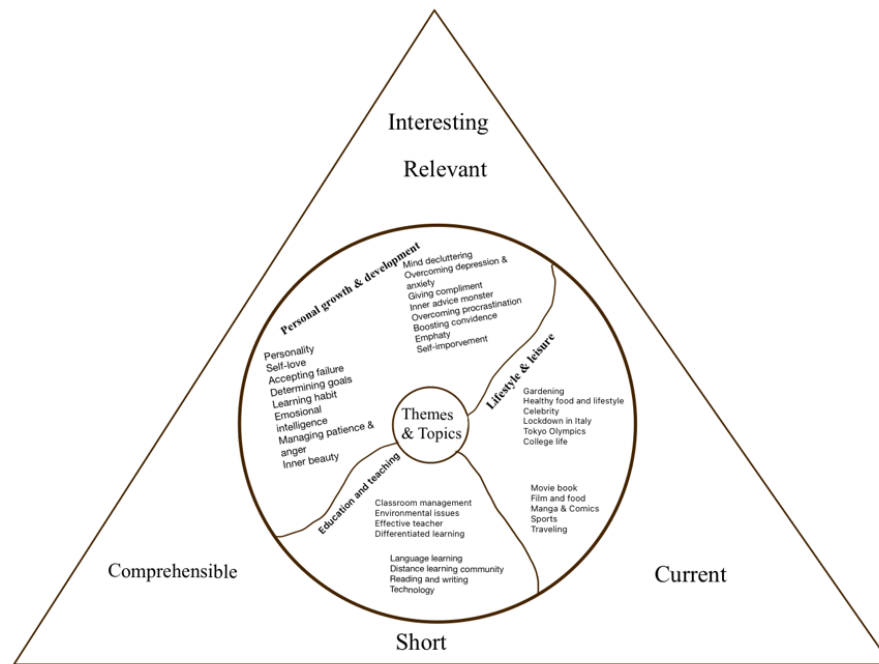


Figure 1. Students' self-selected reading topics.

From the findings, we identified three themes: personal growth and development, lifestyle and leisure, and education and teaching. The first theme focused on topics such as boosting confidence and self-improvement, while the second encompassed topics such as healthy living and traveling. Lastly, the third theme involved students' significant interest in various aspects of teaching and learning. Further, students were inclined to opt for reading materials that were interesting to them, relevant to their aspirations, and

significant to their real-life experiences. They also preferred reading materials that are concise, up-to-date, and easy to comprehend. By factoring in these preferences, students are more likely to be motivated to read and learn, which may lead to the development of stronger reading skills.

The study found three key themes related to why students chose particular reading materials, as illustrated in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Students’ Reasons to Select the Reading Materials

No.	Reasons for reading material selection	Data (N)	Participants (N)	Sample Data
1	For personal interest	9	8	"The reason I chose this journal article is because I think this is one of the most interesting topics for me; therefore, I decided to read this article." (Anita)
2	For learning and development	13	8	"I read articles related to traveling and movies, because I think that at this time it is not possible to do this, so I read and look for references so that later it can be useful." (Galih)
3	For curiosity and exploration	11	8	"I don't ever think the development of technology could actually be very fast. Even less about AI systems, how robots can act like humans and how they are going to make robots with human thinking so they can do what we tell them to do, and it was so crazy. ... To be honest, it's the best theme that I chose, I guess. Because the articles contain a lot of life lessons that are very inspirational, it could satisfy my curiosity and set me on fire to read them." (Farid)

The students’ reflection indicates that their self-selection of reading materials was motivated by personal interest, learning and development, and curiosity and exploration. Personal interest played a significant role in material selection, with students opting for topics that they found interesting. Similarly, students chose materials for learning and development purposes, seeking knowledge and inspiration for future use (aspirations). Finally, students also expressed a strong interest in exploring new topics, such as the rapid development of technology and its impact on society, that are relevant to them.

All in all, the students in the study demonstrated varied reading profiles during six sessions of ER, as indicated by the data in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Students' Reading Profiles

Participants	Students' reading profiles for 6 sessions of ER based on the portfolios and written reflections
Anita	Read 37 texts, 120-138 minutes per session, in free time (morning and afternoon), preferred easy language and enjoyable topics, struggled with difficult words and irrelevant topics, maintained a positive attitude towards reading, had clear reading plan and interest in various topics.
Bitu	Read 25 texts, 120 to 240 minutes, on campus during free time, preferred meaningful articles, struggled with convoluted language and technical issues, had a positive attitude, challenged herself by reading articles above her level.
Cita	Read 14 texts, 120 to 180 minutes, preferred simple words and interesting topics with pictures, struggled with difficult words and uninteresting topics, maintained a positive attitude, found happiness and knowledge through reading.
Dita	Read 21 texts, 60 to 135 minutes, at home after breakfast or while waiting for class, preferred physical books, enjoyed reading meaningful and relevant texts, maintained a positive attitude, reading is enriching.
Erika	Read 15 texts, 30 to 300 minutes, mostly in her room while lying down, struggled with difficult words, enjoyed interesting and relevant texts, had a strong desire to understand the texts.
Farid	Read 13 texts, 90 to 200 minutes, at night when there was no disturbance, preferred interesting and relevant texts, struggled with difficult words, had a positive attitude, reading is rewarding, actively sought to read regularly.
Galih	Read 22 texts, 120 to 180 minutes per session, developed regular reading habit, struggled with time and motivation, had a positive attitude, enjoyed reading various topics, had a strong willingness to learn new vocabulary.
Hilda	Read 19 texts, 100 to 150 minutes per session, read after prayer or during break time, preferred a calm environment, chose interesting topics, found some articles too challenging, had positive attitude, planned the reading time, and actively sought to improve vocabulary.

Table 3 outlines that the students read varying numbers of texts during the sessions of ER. Despite occasional struggles with difficult words and uninteresting topics, the students generally maintained a positive attitude towards reading and actively sought to acquire knowledge through interesting and relevant texts. These findings suggest that ER activities can be beneficial for students' language development and personal growth when they are able to choose materials based on their interests, aspirations, and relevance. It also revealed students' preferred time and place for reading. For example, Anita read in her free time in the morning and afternoon, while Bitu read on campus during her free time. Dita preferred physical books at home or while waiting for class, and Erika read mostly in their room while lying down. These details suggest that the students' reading habits and experiences were influenced by their preferred times and locations.

Self-Material Selection as A Catalyst for Promoting Learner Autonomy

The research findings suggest that self-material selection can serve as a catalyst for promoting learner autonomy. This is evidenced by students like Hilda, who developed a strategy for effective reading and expressed excitement to learn new vocabulary.

“This reading activity really gave me benefits for my own development and also gave me new information and knowledge. And I'm really excited to continue it. I made a strategy for my reading process; therefore, it will be more effective for me. I really want to learn various new vocabulary.”
(Hilda)

Additionally, Anita demonstrated clear goal setting with a reading plan, while Bitu challenged herself to read articles beyond her level. Erika and Dita used a dictionary and read slowly and repeatedly to aid comprehension; Farid made a commitment to read daily; Galih expressed curiosity about new words in the texts; and Hilda had specific targets for vocabulary acquisition. These findings highlight the importance of allowing learners to select their own materials and encouraging them to take ownership of their learning process. In this regard, the students revealed their developed skills in making plans, regulating their learning, and initiating effective strategies to aid and engage them in the reading process.

Self-Material Selection as A Driving Force to Persevere in the Arduous Task of Reading

The students showed that self-material selection can act as a driving force to persevere in the arduous task of reading. One student, Bitu, acknowledged that reading on a formal topic was a challenge for her, but she persevered by training herself to read regardless of the time it takes. Despite facing technical issues with her laptop, she remained patient throughout the reading process. Another student, Dita, highlighted the benefits of reading and encouraged others to give it a chance. Galih dedicated about 75-80 minutes a day to reading but sometimes struggled with boredom and anxiety during longer reading sessions. Nonetheless, he was motivated to continue reading daily to achieve his personal goals. Hilda changed her topic to something more exciting for her, and even when she faced a time constraint, she was still excited to read and dedicated extra time to finish an article. These examples demonstrate how self-selected materials can serve as a driving force for students to overcome challenges and persevere in the task of reading.

Discussion

Attempting to address the research questions, the findings suggest that allowing EFL students to select their own reading materials can address their diverse interests and needs, potentially increasing their motivation and curiosity for reading (Renandya et al., 2021; Tanaka, 2021). Such an approach aligns with the principles of ER, which emphasize student autonomy in the selection of reading materials while teachers act as guides rather than evaluators (Day & Bamford, 2002). The study identified three prominent topics and typical texts selected by students, along with their reasons for selection and reading profiles. These factors are not "value-neutral" in the development of EFL teaching and learning. In the study, three major topics were identified: personal growth and development, lifestyle and leisure, and education and teaching. They tended to select texts that were interesting, meaningful for their aspirations, relevant, current, short, and comprehensible, echoing the principles of the comprehensible input hypothesis (Renandya & Jacobs, 2016; Krashen, 2004). The analysis also revealed three main reasons why students chose specific reading materials: personal interest, learning and development, and curiosity and exploration. In praxis, students disclosed varied reading profiles with unique preferences, habits, and challenges during ER activities. By

referring to this empirical data, teachers might be well informed about the students' relevance, which might direct their pedagogical decisions. Empirically speaking, this finding is consistent with the literature on choice discourse in learning and human optimal functioning, which underlines the importance of perceived choice in learning (Deci & Ryan, 1987).

The results of the study have also implied that letting students choose their own reading materials may also increase their autonomy and perseverance. By choosing their own resources, learners take charge of their learning and gain valuable skills like planning, self-control, and the ability to launch successful learning strategies (Reinders & White, 2016). Students in the study showed these abilities through their precise goal setting, dedication to daily reading, and readiness to take on challenges that were above their level. Self-selected resources also assist students in overcoming obstacles like time restraints, boredom, and technological difficulties, inspiring them to reach their individual objectives and stay involved in the learning process. The students seemed to gain a better attitude toward reading (Khotimah, 2020; Renandya et al., 2021). Our study offers new insights by emphasizing the role of student autonomy in self-selected reading. Unlike previous research where the teachers served as the text selectors (Conradi-Smith et al., 2022), this study allowed students to choose texts based on their interests. Our findings align with earlier studies on diverse reading materials and the influence of topic preferences on reading motivation (Choi & Lee, 2020; Flores et al., 2019; Fullerton et al., 2018). However, our study underscores the importance of providing space for student choices, which enabled them to regulate their own learning and make informed decisions regarding their reading. This students' increased autonomy may, in the long run, lead to more sustained learning development, motivation, and engagement (Reinders & White, 2016), ultimately benefiting their overall language acquisition (Little, 2020). This data indicates the significance of letting students choose their reading texts (Ryan & Deci, 2020) and providing them with the necessary scaffolding (Day & Bamford, 2002; Jacobs & Renandya, 2021; Reinders & White, 2016) to support them in selecting reading materials based on their interests, aspirations, and relevance to help them take control of their learning.

Conclusion and Implications

The study's findings support the idea that giving EFL students the freedom to choose their own reading material can boost their motivation and interest in reading, as well as their autonomy and perseverance. The study emphasizes the students' growing capacity to control their own learning when given the freedom to make choices. In turn, their language acquisition may benefit from this enhanced autonomy since it may result in more sustained learning development, motivation, and engagement.

Although the generalizability of the current study is constrained, it nonetheless has a practical impact on the advancement of EFL teaching and learning. Teachers can utilize this empirical insight to inform their pedagogical choices and provide the necessary scaffolding that will enable students to choose their own reading materials based on their relevance. This means empowering students with the freedom to choose their own resources and assisting them in creating effective learning processes. This teaching approach can foster a love of reading in students and enhance their language proficiency in a way that is enjoyable and meaningful. By providing students with the opportunity to take control of their education, they can acquire valuable skills, gain meaningful knowledge, and ultimately achieve their learning objectives.

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