

Students' Self-Directed English Learning Strategies and Challenges at Non-English Department (NED): Narrative Inquiry

Nur Hidayat¹, Nilam Trahkumala²

^{1,2}*Department of English Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia*

**) correspondence: nb249@ums.ac.id*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze students' self-directed English learning strategies and challenges that were raised during the self-directed learning process among the non-English department (NED). This study involved three participants from a non-English department in Central Java, Indonesia, who implemented self-directed learning in learning English with some criteria such as being active and engaged in international seminars and workshops, winning multiple English competitions, and having a high level of English proficiency. The research design of this study was a narrative inquiry with a qualitative approach. To collect the data, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and continued with narrative analysis to analyze the data. The result of this study indicated that some strategies were found during the participants' implementation of self-directed English learning, such as involving technology, taking notes, and utilizing social media. Several challenges have also been faced during self-directed learning implementation, including finding the right materials, grammar, and motivation. This study contributed to providing a deep understanding of the strategies that the students used during self-directed English learning, along with the challenges. Besides, this study offered practical implications for educators and policymakers in designing effective and innovative learning based on the students' needs in non-English departments. Additionally, the result of this study enriched the literature about self-directed language learning, especially for students in non-English departments.

Keywords: self-directed learning; non-English department (NED), strategies; challenges; narrative inquiry; technology

INTRODUCTION

English has become an international language that is used in several fields, including education, technology, communication, and commerce. By mastering English, people have a big chance to communicate with other people from different countries and cultures and open opportunities in human resources and information (Hwang, 2023; X. Liu et al., 2025; Ou & Gu, 2022). The development of technology and social media has also made English more essential to increase personal and professional branding. Therefore, many people make an effort to learn English to keep up with global development and the competition in the working world.

Due to the strong demand for English proficiency, many people apply self-directed learning to master English. They prefer self-directed learning because they can learn flexibly, and there is no requirement that they must complete it, as in formal education. Self-directed learning allows people to learn based on their learning needs without being limited by a strict curriculum (Lemmetty, 2023; Sachdeva & Mahajan, 2022). They can use digital resources such as video, social media, and language applications to support their self-directed learning (Lech & Harris, 2018; Soyoof et al., 2023). The use of digital media allows learners to learn anytime and everywhere, thereby supporting the flexibility in the learning process (Arifani et al., 2020; Harmadi et al., 2025; Hidayat et al., 2023; Rakhmadi & Haryanti, 2025). Furthermore, by using digital multimedia resources such as e-books, e-novels, movies, and podcasts, the learners can improve their English effectively (Hidayat, 2017; Hidayat & Setiawan, 2020; Rahman & Jamila, 2024). By implementing self-directed learning with technology

support, people can succeed in learning a language and have equal quality with people who learn English in a course or formal education (Chiang, 2024; Karacan et al., 2022).

Although self-directed learning provides flexibility and effectiveness in learning, it has several issues. Some studies explain that self-directed learning have difficulty in constructing learning materials that are appropriate to their ability level without formal instruction (Baars & Viberg, 2023; Johnson, 2023). It causes disparity in developing their English skills. The lack of suggestions from educators, teachers, and peers hinders their deeper understanding of language use (Astuti & Barratt, 2021; Chen, 2020). Without proper guidance and refinement from the expert, they are not realizing the mistakes they made, especially in pronunciation and grammar (Fernández-Michels & Fornons, 2021; Yang & Zhang, 2023). It can obstruct the development of linguistic competence, thereby causing confusion and misunderstanding with other people.

Many studies have investigated successful people in English learning in the formal context. However, success in an individual context still gets a little attention, especially about the challenges and the strategies to address the challenges during implementing self-directed learning (Brockett & Hiemstra, 2018; Jossberger et al., 2015; Puma et al., 2018). Therefore, additional research needs to be conducted to fill that gap. This study investigates a self-directed English learning journey from beginner to advanced. The research focus is on the learners' strategies and challenges during the implementation of self-directed learning in mastering English. This study contributes to providing a deeper understanding of effective strategies in implementing self-directed learning to master the English language and the challenges during self-directed learning implementation.

METHOD

The approach of this study was a qualitative study with a narrative inquiry design. By using narrative inquiry design, the researchers revealed the participants' strategies and challenges during the implementation of self-directed learning in the English learning process. It facilitated the researchers to analyze the uniqueness of participants' experiences during the process of self-directed learning and highlight personal perspectives from each participant. Leproni and De Angelis (2024) and Sztukowski and Funk (2020) explain that narrative inquiry provides an opportunity for researchers to get information about how individual social and cultural factors influence unique experiences.

This study involved three university students from non-English departments in central Java, Indonesia, who implemented self-directed learning in mastering English. They learn English through digital resources such as YouTube, English App, websites, and social media. They achieved specific English level proficiency without taking formal courses or joining English language programs. They obtained a TOEFL score higher than 550, won some English speech competitions, and engaged actively in international seminars. Those criteria aimed to provide different perspectives from the participants on self-directed learning experiences from novice to proficient levels.

A semi-structured interview was conducted in this study to collect the data. The questions of the semi-structured interview were adopted from Morris and Rohs (2023). The semi-structured interview was conducted individually and face-to-face with the participants. Each session of the interview, the researchers need approximately 40-50 minutes for each participant. To analyze the data, the researchers conduct narrative analysis. After that, the researchers confirmed the result of the interview with each participant to ensure that it was in accordance with their intention and to avoid misunderstanding.

RESULTS

Strategies to Master English in Self-directed Learning

In this part, the researcher explained the interview results from three participants narratively. The result focused on their strategies in implementing self-directed learning to master English.

"I lost the competition, but my parents were very happy when they saw me perform on stage. The school also asked me to give an English speech at the school's arts performance. From then on, I became interested in English. I started learning English from English speech contest videos on

YouTube and the internet. I learned by listening to English speech videos repeatedly and taking notes of words that I didn't understand. I also imitated the pronunciation of the words. Besides that, I also used an online dictionary to improve my English pronunciation. Additionally, I often watched English-language films with English subtitles and used social media to improve my English skills. The support from my family also made me more enthusiastic about learning English". (Participant 1)

"I started learning English in high school. Due to financial constraints, I hoped that mastering English would improve my future. My motivation to learn English grew when I saw the significant job opportunities for high school graduates who could speak English in my area. Due to my limited financial situation, I began learning English from books and the internet. The English books I studied at that time were school textbooks and books I downloaded from the internet. I also used films as a learning resource. I loved Japanese cartoons (anime) with English subtitles. I learned English by noting down words and sentences I didn't know from books and films, and then looking them up in a dictionary. After that, I tried to practice them in conversation and writing. I also found help from social media and the British Council website, which provides a variety of interesting English language materials for beginners to advanced students. I learned a lot from that website." (Participant 2.

"My strong desire to learn English independently began during the Covid-19 pandemic in high school, when I saw an Indonesian content creator on Instagram who was fluent in English and had visited abroad. When I couldn't interact socially in person, I spent more time on my smartphone. It seemed like it would be great to travel the world and communicate with anyone from any country. To achieve this, I needed to master English, an international language. I then learned English through social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. I also make notes to write foreign words whose meaning I do not know. Sometimes I also watched movies and played English word games for entertainment." (Participant 3)

The interview results with the three participants indicated that there were similar ways they implemented self-directed learning in mastering English. The main strategy was integrating technology into the learning process. The first participant utilized English speech videos from YouTube, an online dictionary, and movies to get information and increase her English skills. She watched the videos and movies repeatedly. Similarly, the second participant also used technology, especially to access English books, films, and BBC websites. At the same time, the third participant used a smartphone. It indicated that all participants involved technology in their learning process. The next strategy is taking note of words or sentences whose meaning they do not know. All the participants used this strategy to make it easier for them to memorize and review what they have learn. The last strategy is social media and watching movies. As all participants explain in the interview script, they also utilized social media and movies to improve their English during the implementation of self-directed learning.

Challenges in self-directed learning implementation

Based on the interview results, several challenges were found when the participants conducted self-directed learning. It is presented in the following scripts:

"The main challenge while implementing self-directed learning in mastering English is to find the right learning materials. As we know, there are many English resources in the form of videos, books, novels, applications, and other media on the internet. However, I need to select the right learning materials that are relevant to my level. I do not have a teacher or friends to consult about it." (Participant 1)

"The challenge when I learn English individually is grammar. I am still confused when I learn about future perfect and past continuous in the TOEFL exercise. In some texts or conversations in the English books, I never meet those sentences. It makes me have to learn more, so that I can understand well and be able to implement it in the TOEFL test and daily conversation." (Participant 2)

"For me, the most challenging part of learning English is keeping motivated to be consistent. It needs more effort and commitment to learn English everyday. Sometimes I cannot be consistent with

learning English everyday because of the many agendas and work that I have to do. Sometimes, I feel bored when I learn English alone.” (Participant 3)

The interview results from three participants indicated that there are three main challenges that they face: finding the right materials, grammar, and motivation. The first participants explained that there were many English learning materials that were provided on the internet. It made her unsure which materials were relevant to her level and needs. That condition made the learning process unfocused. Grammar aspects also became a challenge. As the second participant explained, grammar such as future perfect and past continuous makes him confused because he has never met it in conversation or text in English books. In addition, the third participant thought that keeping motivation to learn English every day was challenging. He explained that it was difficult to keep their motivation because there was a lot of agenda and work that should be undertaken. Besides, boredom caused by learning English alone added to the challenge in implementing self-directed learning.

DISCUSSION

The present study aims to investigate the strategies that participants use in implementing self-directed learning to master English. Besides, it analyzes the challenges that are faced during the implementation of self-directed learning. This study found that the main strategy used by the participants to master English is evolving technology during self-directed learning implementation. This finding is in line with Chiang (2024) and Karacan et al. (2022), who explain that the use of technology supports self-directed learning implementation for individuals. Moreover, the utilization of digital media enables learners to study at any time and in any location, hence facilitating flexibility in the learning process (Arifani et al., 2020; Harmadi et al., 2025; Hidayat et al., 2023; Rakhmadi & Haryanti, 2025). This finding also found that they take notes of some words or sentences that they do not know the meaning of. It corroborates with Madhavi et al. (2025) and Wei et al. (2025), who underline that taking notes helps individuals to reflect and review the study. Furthermore, it supports them in memorizing the learning materials (Liu et al., 2019). This study also found that social media, websites, and movies are used by participants in improving their English. It is consistent with Liu et al. (2026), Lokollo (2025), and Zhang and Hashim (2025), who point out that the use of social media, websites, and movies can support individuals in implementing self-directed learning.

The second finding found three challenges that they faced during self-directed learning implementation, including finding the right materials, grammar, and motivation. This finding is consistent with the previous studies' findings. Muslimin (2025) explains that the learners often face difficulties in selecting learning materials when implementing independent learning due to the large number of materials available. Moreover, Febriana et al. (2022) assert that grammar is often complex and makes it difficult for students, especially when learning autonomously. In addition, Ma and She (2024) report that maintaining motivation is a significant challenge in self-directed learning.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the strategies individuals use in pursuing self-directed learning to achieve English language proficiency. Furthermore, it examines the obstacles they face in implementing self-directed learning. The findings indicate that the primary approach participants use to achieve English language proficiency involves evolving technology into their self-directed learning framework. Moreover, they reveal that individuals take notes on specific words or sentences whose meanings they do not understand. In addition, this study reports that participants utilize social media, websites, and movies as tools to improve their English language skills. Secondary findings identify three challenges faced during self-directed learning: finding appropriate materials, addressing grammar issues, and maintaining motivation.

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