



EXPLORING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING THROUGH ENGLISH LEARNING JOURNALS AMONG VOCATIONAL STUDENTS

Dewi Suryanti¹, Fajar Pudo²

¹Politkenik Negeri Lampung

²Politkenik Baubau

E-mail: [1dewisuryanti@polinela.ac.id](mailto:dewisuryanti@polinela.ac.id), [2lightdawn580@gmail.com](mailto:lightdawn580@gmail.com)

Accepted :

17 July 2025

Published :

25 July 2025

Corresponding Author:

Dewi Suryanti

Email Corresponding :

dewisuryanti@polinela.ac.id

ABSTRACT

In the realm of English language education for vocational students, cultivating self-directed learning is pivotal in equipping learners with the skills necessary for lifelong learning. This study investigates the extent to which weekly learning journals, composed over a three-week period by 50 vocational students, reflect their self-directed learning behaviors beyond the classroom setting. Employing a qualitative methodology through thematic analysis, the research identified three key themes recurring in the journal entries: recognition of learning needs, self-evaluation, and the use of learning strategies. The predominant theme was students' awareness of their learning needs, with particular emphasis on difficulties in comprehending and applying English tenses—an area that frequently became the focus of their independent study efforts. The second theme pertained to students' reflective evaluation of their learning progress and areas requiring improvement. The least represented theme involved strategic planning, including the selection of methods or tools to enhance language proficiency. These findings indicate that the students are in the initial phase of developing autonomous learning, showing a foundational awareness of their challenges but lacking the consistent application of deliberate strategies that characterize mature self-directed learners. The study underscores the importance of structured pedagogical support to nurture greater autonomy and strategic engagement in English language learning among vocational students.

Keywords: *Self-Directed Learning, Learning Journal, Learner Autonomy, English Learning, Vocational Students*

1. INTRODUCTION

The capacity to manage one's own learning has emerged as a fundamental competency in 21st-century education, particularly within vocational contexts where adaptability and lifelong learning are critical to professional success. In English language learning, this need becomes even more pronounced due to limited instructional time, which often falls short in preparing students with the communicative skills necessary for the workplace (Treesattayanmune & Baharudin, 2024; Jaya et al., 2025a; Luthfiyyah et al., 2021). To address this gap, promoting self-directed learning (SDL) has been proposed as a viable pedagogical strategy. SDL empowers learners to take ownership of their learning process by identifying goals, selecting methods, and assessing progress independently (Lee, 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2022; Jaya et al., 2025).

This study responds to the growing imperative to understand how vocational students engage in English language learning outside the classroom through independent efforts. To capture these practices, 40 students from two vocational study programs were asked to write weekly learning journals over a period of three weeks. These journals allowed students to select English topics of personal interest and document their learning behaviors, including the methods used, sources consulted, challenges faced, and progress achieved. The journals served as the primary data source to examine the students' engagement with SDL principles.

The research draws upon Knowles (2018) SDL model, which outlines three critical stages of self-directed learning: (1) diagnosing learning needs, (2) evaluating learning experiences and outcomes, and (3) formulating learning goals and selecting strategies. For analytical purposes, these stages are reframed into three themes: learning needs, learning evaluation, and learning strategies. The thematic analysis seeks to answer the central question of the study: To what extent do vocational students

demonstrate these components of SDL in their independent English learning practices?

Preliminary findings suggest that while many students exhibit an emerging awareness of their learning needs particularly around grammar, such as English tenses they often lack strategic planning and consistency in applying effective learning techniques. Reflection on progress is present but tends to be surface-level, indicating that most students are still navigating the early stages of SDL. These results align with previous research suggesting that novice learners require structured support to transition into more autonomous roles (Foxworthy & McCarter, 2025; Mutanga, 2024; Sujati et al., 2023).

Ultimately, this study contributes to the discourse on learner autonomy by highlighting both the potential and limitations of SDL in vocational English education. The insights gained may inform the development of adaptive teaching practices and targeted interventions aimed at scaffolding students toward greater independence in their language learning journeys.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning (SDL), also referred to as *autonomy learning* in several studies, is a concept that emphasizes an individual's active engagement in managing their own learning process. This includes not only the initiative to learn, but also the ability to decide what to learn, how to learn it, and how to evaluate the outcomes of that learning (Knowles, 2018). SDL has become increasingly important in higher education, as not all competencies can be optimally achieved within the limited time and space of the classroom.

In the context of English language learning, SDL is particularly essential. English is a skill-based subject that requires

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continuous and repetitive practice in order to reach functional proficiency. This presents a unique challenge, especially in non-English majors where English is only taught as a supporting or complementary subject. With limited instructional time and constrained classroom interactions, it is often insufficient for students to rely solely on formal teaching. Therefore, lecturers are expected to create a learning environment that encourages students to discover effective strategies for learning beyond the classroom rather than merely transferring knowledge during class sessions.

The first crucial step toward building such an environment is to understand how students actually engage in self-directed learning. To investigate this phenomenon, this study adopts Malcolm Knowles's (1975) theory of self-directed learning as the primary theoretical framework. Knowles defines self-directed learning as a process in which individuals "take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. This process can be categorized into three core stages:

1. **Diagnosing Learning Needs:** Learners become aware of the gap between their current abilities and the competencies they need to develop. This includes awareness of their strengths, weaknesses, and learning goals.
2. **Formulating Goals and Choosing Strategies:** Based on their identified needs, learners set learning objectives and determine the strategies and resources they believe are effective and suitable for reaching those objectives.
3. **Implementing and Evaluating Learning Outcomes:** Learners carry out independent learning activities and engage in reflection to assess their progress and the effectiveness of their chosen strategies.

Within this framework, SDL involves not only learning independently, but also developing *metacognitive* skills that is, thinking about one's own thinking and learning processes.

Learning Journals as a Tool to Observe Self-Directed Learning

To explore how students engage in SDL in their English learning, this study uses learning journals as a key method of data collection. A learning journal is a reflective medium through which students record what they have learned, how they learned it, and their experiences, thoughts, and emotions throughout the learning process (Dash, 2022; Sari & Ningsih, 2023; Ratih & Arsih, 2024).

According to Jennifer A. Moon (Moon, 2006) a learning journal is: "*a vehicle for reflection in the learning process, allowing students to develop awareness of their thinking, deepen understanding, and recognize personal change.*" Moon emphasizes that journals are not merely records of events, but tools for constructing meaning, organizing thought, and developing self-awareness and self-evaluation skills. In the context of SDL, a learning journal provides a valuable lens to observe: how students identify their learning needs; how they reflect on their progress and experiences, and whether they are able to plan and implement independent learning strategies.

Therefore, the weekly journals written by students in this study are analyzed as authentic reflections of the SDL stages they experience, as well as a foundation for identifying what kinds of pedagogical support they still need in order to grow as effective autonomous learners.

Previous Research

This research originated from classroom observations conducted during the course of teaching, and was further supported by a review of previous studies that examined the phenomenon of self-directed

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learners or autonomous learners across various learning contexts and settings. Ultimately, 20 relevant articles were identified and examined, all of which demonstrated a strong connection to the present study and provided a foundational rationale for its conduct. Nineteen of these articles were published within the past five years and were sourced from the ERIC database, while one article, published in 2007, was included due to its high relevance to the research topic. A review of 20 selected research abstracts on the topic reveals diverse yet interconnected strands of investigation, which can be grouped into five thematic areas: (1) self-directed learning readiness, (2) cognitive and reflective dimensions of learner autonomy, (3) strategic approaches and classroom innovations, (4) the use of learning journals or diaries, and (5) contextual and cultural perspectives on learner autonomy.

Several studies highlight SDL readiness as a multidimensional construct that encompasses access to learning resources, learners' evaluative capacity, and the emotional-social learning environment. For example, research in K–12 settings emphasizes the importance of creating physical, diagnostic, and affective conditions that enable learners to act autonomously. These studies [(Alwadaeen & Piller, 2022), (Chukwunemerem, 2023), (Orakci, 2021), (Sappapan, 2022)] advocate for institutional support structures such as consultation sessions and mentoring that reinforce students' ability to manage their learning process.

Another strand of research focuses on internal learner characteristics such as cognitive flexibility, reflection, and motivation. Studies such as *Exploring the Relationships between Cognitive Flexibility Learner Autonomy, and Reflective Thinking* (Foxworthy & McCarter, 2025), reveal how reflective thinking positively predicts cognitive flexibility, which in turn fosters learner autonomy. Similarly, research on

motivation links self-determined learning behavior to learners' psychological autonomy, reinforcing the notion that internal drive is a precursor to effective independent learning (Nuray & Ceylan, 2021; Nayeem et al., 2025).

Several studies Suwannaphima and Vibulphol (2023), Dilarose and Yukamana (2025), Han (2022) explore project-based learning (PBL), the reading circle method, and teacher-guided strategies to promote student initiative. For instance, Thai students engaged in project-based English instruction showed increased autonomy through collaborative learning and reflective journaling. Teachers' perspectives also emerged as significant, suggesting that promoting autonomy is not only about student readiness but also about teachers' ability to design enabling environments (Sakhiyya, 2019; Teo et al., 2019; Poonpon, 2019).

A recurring theme in the literature is the use of learning journals and language diaries as tools for both reflection and autonomy development. Journals allow learners to document their thoughts, progress, and challenges, making the learning process visible and conscious. Articles such as *Reflective Pathways* (Rafique, 2025) and *Learning Diaries in the EFL Classroom* (Melina, 2007) illustrate how journaling helps reduce language anxiety, enhances metacognition, and reinforces learning ownership. These findings resonate with Moon's (2006) conceptualization of journals as reflective spaces that transform experience into structured understanding.

Contextual studies conducted in countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan provide insights into how cultural values and educational systems influence the development of learner autonomy (Melvina & Julia, 2021; Treesattayanmune & Baharudin, 2024; Daflizar, 2021; Tran & Duong, 2020; Almusharraf, 2021; Irshad, 2022). For example, research in Indonesia and Vietnam

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shows that while students recognize the value of autonomy, institutional expectations and teacher-centered norms often inhibit its practice. This underscores the need for culturally responsive pedagogies that gradually scaffold learners into more autonomous roles.

In summary, the literature presents learner autonomy as a multifaceted concept influenced by cognitive, emotional, institutional, and cultural variables. The role of learning journals stands out as a practical and scalable strategy to foster reflective thinking and self-awareness. However, while many students show strong awareness of their learning needs, fewer demonstrate the strategic behavior required to fully manage their learning, a gap this current study also addresses.

3. METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology, utilizing thematic analysis as formulated by Braun and Clarke (2019) to investigate how vocational students exhibit traits of self-directed learning (SDL) in their independent English language study outside formal classroom settings. Anchored in Knowles' SDL framework which underscores the learner's autonomy in identifying learning needs, setting goals, selecting strategies, and evaluating outcomes the analysis aimed to interpret students' learning behaviors through this theoretical lens.

The dataset comprised 150 journal entries produced by 50 vocational students over a span of three weeks, with each participant contributing one entry per week. These reflective journals captured students' self-initiated English learning activities, focusing on the specific topics they independently selected and the processes they engaged in during their study. The journal entries provided rich, first-hand insights into how learners

navigated their own learning journeys and served as a valuable source for examining the extent to which SDL principles were applied in vocational English language education.

The data analysis in this study followed a series of stages adapted from the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2019) and Braun & Clarke (2022) This approach allowed the researcher to systematically examine students' journal entries and interpret the recurring patterns in relation to self-directed learning (SDL). The process began with a phase of data familiarization, during which the researcher read all journal entries carefully and repeatedly. This step was essential for gaining a thorough understanding of the content, context, and tone of the students' reflections. Through this immersion, the researcher sought to capture both the explicit meanings and the underlying insights embedded in each learning experience. Following familiarization, the researcher conducted initial coding by identifying and highlighting segments of text that conveyed significant meaning. These codes often reflected students' awareness of their learning gaps, descriptions of progress, or expressions of independent effort in their English learning journey. The next step involved searching for themes. The initial codes were then organized into three major categories based on Malcolm Knowles' (1975) self-directed learning framework:

- Learning Needs: Indicators of students' awareness of their weaknesses and learning priorities, such as difficulties with understanding verb tenses.
- Learning Evaluation: Reflections on learning progress and outcomes, including recognition of improved comprehension or skills.
- Learning Strategy: Specific actions or approaches students used to support

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their learning, such as watching instructional videos, taking notes, or practicing independently.

After grouping the codes, the researcher entered the stage of reviewing and refining themes. At this point, each theme was reassessed and compared against the raw data to ensure consistency, accuracy, and alignment with students' actual expressions. Finally, in the defining and naming themes phase, each theme was given a clear conceptual definition grounded in theory. The finalized themes were then systematically described and used as the basis for presenting the study's findings in the results and discussion sections.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the 150 journal entries reveals that most vocational students remain in the initial stages of developing self-directed learning competencies. A significant proportion 102 entries (68%) corresponded to the theme of Learning Needs, indicating that students are largely focused on identifying their limitations, confusion, or areas in English that require further improvement. In contrast, Learning Evaluation was evident in 51 entries (34%), where students engaged in reflective assessment of their progress, often noting enhanced comprehension after engaging with learning activities such as watching videos or completing assignments. The least represented theme was Learning Strategy, found in only 18 entries (12%), where students described deliberate actions they undertook such as practicing consistently, taking notes, or seeking additional learning materials. These findings suggest that while students demonstrate emerging awareness of their learning challenges and outcomes, they are still in the process of cultivating the strategic autonomy necessary for effectively managing their language learning outside the classroom.

Self-Directed Learning Categories and Common Student Expressions

In analyzing student journals, three core categories were identified to represent different stages of self-directed learning: *Learning Needs*, *Learning Evaluation*, and *Learning Strategy*. Each category reflects a different aspect of how students engage with their learning process, from recognizing their needs, reflecting on their progress, to taking action independently.

Learning Needs

This category highlights students' awareness of their own learning challenges, gaps in understanding, or recognition of essential English topics that they feel the need to master. It represents the foundational phase of self-directed learning, where learners begin to observe what they do not yet fully grasp. Common expressions found in this category include statements like "I realize...", "I still find it difficult...", "This topic is important because...", and "Now I know...". These reflect moments of realization and acknowledgment of personal learning priorities.

Learning Evaluation

This category focuses on students' reflections regarding what they have learned, how much progress they have made, and how their understanding has changed over time. It often includes comparisons between their prior and current knowledge or mentions of learning breakthroughs after specific learning activities. Typical expressions include: "I understand better now...", "Now I know...", "This topic helped me...", "After watching/learning, I got it...", "I was confused at first, but now...", and "It's quite difficult to distinguish...". These statements indicate a growing metacognitive awareness of learning outcomes and the learning process itself.

Learning Strategy

This category captures students' actions and efforts to improve their learning independently. It is the most advanced phase in self-directed learning, where learners begin applying strategies to meet their

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learning goals. Students in this category demonstrate agency by describing specific steps they take, such as practicing, reviewing, or seeking additional input. Expressions that commonly represent this category include: “*I keep practicing...*”, “*I believe if I keep practicing...*”, “*I want to learn more...*”, and “*I write down notes...*”. These statements reflect motivation, initiative, and a sense of responsibility toward continuous improvement.

Overall, these categories and their associated expressions provide insight into how learners progress in their autonomy, from recognizing their needs to actively managing their learning journey.

Research Insight

The analysis of learning journals written by non-English-major vocational students reveals an important insight into their development as self-directed learners. Among the three key phases of self-directed learning learning needs, learning evaluation, and learning strategy most students appear to remain in the earliest phase, where they demonstrate awareness of the necessity to learn English. They recognize that English is an essential skill to acquire and acknowledge the wide range of topics they need to master. However, a critical gap becomes evident: students often do not know how to approach the learning process itself. Although they are aware of what they lack, they struggle to define effective strategies for improvement. In other words, they have not yet fully developed the “how” of learning. This lack of metacognitive awareness and strategic planning suggests that many students have not reached the level of autonomy needed to take ownership of their English learning beyond the classroom.

This insight carries important implications for educators, particularly lecturers. It highlights the need to design classroom systems that do not merely deliver content, but also equip students with the tools and strategies to learn independently. Language instructors are encouraged to integrate reflective and strategy-based

learning activities that help students understand how to learn, not just what to learn.

As a case study, this research serves as a timely reminder to the educational community: fostering independent learning is not a passive process. Helping students become strategic, self-aware, and self-directed learners is a vital pedagogical responsibility, especially in a world where knowledge is abundant, but the ability to navigate and apply it independently is what distinguishes successful lifelong learners.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal that the majority of non-English-major vocational students are still in the early stages of developing self-directed learning (SDL) capabilities. Out of 150 learning journal entries analyzed, 68% (102 entries) fell into the Learning Needs category, indicating that students primarily focus on identifying their own limitations, areas of confusion, or specific English topics they find difficult. This reflects the initial phase of SDL, where learners begin recognizing what they do not yet understand or master. According to Knowles (2018), diagnosing learning needs is the foundational step in becoming a self-directed learner.

However, the findings also show that students demonstrate limited ability in the subsequent stages of SDL Learning Evaluation and Learning Strategy. Only 34% (51 entries) included reflective insights on progress or comprehension outcomes, while just 12% (18 entries) described concrete strategies they employed to enhance their learning, such as repeated practice, note-taking, or using supplementary resources. These figures suggest that students have not yet fully developed the metacognitive and strategic dimensions of SDL. As Foxworthy and McCarter (2025) argues, effective self-directed learners must not only identify what they need to learn, but also know how to learn and regulate their progress accordingly.

This aligns with Chukwunemerem (2023) assertion that self-directed learners actively manage, monitor, and evaluate their

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own learning process. The scarcity of entries reflecting strategic planning shows that many students lack these advanced SDL skills. Similarly, Alwadaeen and Piller (2022) notes that learner autonomy does not emerge spontaneously; it must be cultivated through intentional pedagogical interventions.

The students' journal expressions such as "I realize...", "I still find it difficult...", or "I want to learn more..." indicate internal motivation and awareness of their learning needs. However, these expressions often lack a clear plan of action. Ibrahim et al. (2022) emphasizes that SDL involves a combination of self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. While this study confirms the presence of motivation, the other two dimensions remain underdeveloped.

These findings carry important implications for educators, particularly English language instructors in vocational education. Rather than focusing solely on content delivery, teaching should also prioritize the development of learners' metacognitive skills and learning strategies. Learner autonomy is a teachable competence and should be systematically incorporated into instructional design.

Reflective practices such as learning journals and strategy-focused instruction (e.g., goal setting, self-monitoring tools, and guided resource selection) can help bridge the gap between awareness and action. Teachers should introduce and model learning strategies that empower students to take greater control over their language development. Structured scaffolding is essential to support learners in transitioning from awareness of their needs to actively managing their learning process.

In summary, this study highlights that fostering self-directed learning among vocational students requires more than encouraging independent effort it demands pedagogical systems that teach students how to learn effectively. The ability to identify learning gaps is a critical first step, but without strategy use and reflective evaluation, students may struggle to progress toward true learner autonomy. In the context of vocational education, where adaptability and

continuous learning are essential, building SDL competence is not optional it is an educational imperative

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined how non-English-major vocational students engage in self-directed learning (SDL) through the practice of writing weekly English learning journals. The thematic analysis of 150 journal entries revealed three key phases of SDL: Learning Needs, Learning Evaluation, and Learning Strategy. Most students were found to remain in the Learning Needs stage, demonstrating an awareness of their weaknesses and the importance of mastering English. While some students began to reflect on their learning progress, only a small number described the use of deliberate strategies to improve their English independently. This pattern indicates that although students show motivation and recognize what they need to learn, many still lack the strategic tools and metacognitive awareness required to effectively manage their learning beyond the classroom. In other words, they are aware of what to learn, but not yet fully equipped with how to learn it. These findings emphasize the crucial role of lecturers in not only delivering English content but also guiding students in developing learning autonomy. By incorporating reflective tasks and strategy-oriented activities, educators can better support students in building the mindset and habits of autonomous learners. In a broader context, the study highlights that in an era of abundant information, teaching students how to learn is just as important as teaching the subject itself. Promoting self-directed learning is essential to prepare vocational students for lifelong learning and continuous professional development.

Based on the findings, several recommendations for future research are proposed. First, longitudinal studies could be conducted to observe how students' self-directed learning behaviors evolve over time, especially when reflective activities are

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sustained and supported. Second, experimental interventions such as explicit instruction in learning strategies or metacognitive training could be designed and tested to evaluate their effectiveness in fostering SDL. Third, comparative studies across different educational settings (such as academic versus vocational contexts) could offer deeper insights into how various learning environments influence SDL development. Fourth, qualitative research exploring students' personal perceptions of their learning autonomy, the challenges they face, and the kinds of support they need would contribute to more learner-centered teaching practices. Lastly, future studies might also examine how teacher education and professional development programs prepare instructors to nurture self-directed learning in vocational English classrooms. By expanding research in these areas, educators and institutions can better equip students with the tools and mindset necessary for effective, independent, and lifelong learning.

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