



SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING PRACTICE IN CRITICAL SPEAKING CLASS: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION EFL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

In the context of higher education, this qualitative study investigates the implementation of self-directed learning (SDL) in critical speaking class for English as Foreign Language. As the need for critical thinking and fluent English in global communication grows, it is crucial that students be able to take charge of their own learning in speaking classes. The study looks into the coping mechanism, challenges and experiences of EFL university students who participate in SDL for critical speaking assignments. Semi-structured interview and classroom observation were used to gather data. Thematic analysis revealed several challenges including low self confidence, limited linguistic resources, lack of exposure to authentic materials and inadequate instructor scaffolding. Students overcome these challenges by implementing variety strategies, including reflective practices, peer collaboration and the use of digital platforms. The results emphasize the need for more supportive learning environment that balances autonomy with guided instruction. This study provides more pedagogical insights for educators who want to improve learner independence in EFL contexts and promote effective SDL in critical speaking instructions.

Keywords: critical speaking, EFL context, self-directed learning, student autonomy

INTRODUCTION

Being able to communicate critically and effectively in English has become crucial for university students in the age of globalization and rapid technological advancement, particularly in situations where non native English speakers are present. In addition to achieving linguistic proficiency, English as a foreign language (EFL) learners are expected to exhibit critical thinking and self control during the learning process. Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is approach to promote these competencies, in which students take charge of determining their own learning needs, setting objectives, locating resources and assessing their progress (Garrison, 1997).

The SDL approach encouraged learner autonomy, reflective thinking, and meaningful engagement in higher education, especially in critical speaking classes, and it is consistent with 21st-century learning principles (Pham & Truong, 2020). However, There are significant obstacles when putting SDL into practice in EFL speaking classrooms. The metacognitive awareness (Handayani & Aisah, 2013) and linguistics proficiency necessary for autonomous learning are often lacking in EFL students, particularly in tasks requiring critical discourse and inpromptu argumentation (Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2021). Furthermore, the formation of independent learning habits is frequently hampered by the old paradigm approach, teacher-centered learning that learning process should focus on the teachers/ lecturers not on the students as the subjects

of teaching and learning process. It is also stated in Nguyen and Habok (2022) article, telling about teacher-centered pedagogical culture found in many Asian higher education system. A more thorough examination of how SDL is implemented and experienced by students of EFL speaking courses, especially those that emphasize public speaking and critical thinking is necessary in light of these contextual barriers.

In light of those factors, the primary issues of this study attempts to explore how EFL learners perceive and experience SDL in critical speaking classrooms, as well as identifying the main obstacles and strategies involved in this learning process. The researchers hopes that result of this study can improve pedagogical approaches that promote critical communicative competence and learner autonomy in higher education.

Prior research has looked at SDL's role in speaking skill development (Lamb & Arisandy, 2020) and general language learning (Song & Hill, 2007). Additionally, studies have demonstrated how SDL improves learners' satisfaction, learning outcomes (Zainuddin et al., 2019), and also motivation (L. T. Nguyen & Dooly, 2021). The Literature is still lacking, though, on how SDL is specifically implemented in critical speaking classes, where students are expected to not only speak fluently but also to respond in promptu, argue critically and formulate well supported opinions. The experiences and adaptive strategies of students in this particular learning context have not been thoroughly explored qualitatively in many studies.

By providing empirical insights into SDL practices in critical speaking classes in an EFL higher education context. This study is well positioned to close this gap. It is essential to comprehend these practices in order to inform curriculum design, teacher preparation, and the creation of learner centered strategies that promote critical and linguistic competence.

METHOD

In order to investigate and comprehend participants' experiences, viewpoints and behaviours pertaining to self-directed learning practices in critical speaking classes within the EFL context of higher education, this study used qualitative, case study. The depth and complexity of learners' difficulties and coping mechanisms in their real world learning environments can be captured by this design (Cresswell, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to choose participants based on their willingness to reflect on their self-directed learning experiences and their active participation in critical speaking courses. To gather the data, the study used semi-structured interview, classroom observation and complementary reflective learning journals. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to examine the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study are presented in this section in three main themes that arose from thematic analysis: (1) Challenges in applying Self-Directed Learning (SDL) in critical speaking classes, (2) Students' Strategies for overcoming SDL challenges. The researchers also provide (3) the function of institutional and instructional support in improving SDL practices.

The challenges in applying SDL in critical speaking classes

The majority of participants said that using self-directed learning approach in critical speaking course was difficult. There are three subthemes that surfaced:



a. Limitations in Linguistics and Cognitive Ability

Throughout critical discussion, students frequently reported having trouble structuring their arguments, choosing suitable words and staying fluents (Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2021). One student said that He has already had the idea but He is not sure how to say it in English, then He forget the words that he could not produce. It shows that SDL in EFL context can be hampered by the lack of linguistics and cognitive ability .

b. Low Self Confidence and Fear of Making Mistakes

The fear of peer and lecturer criticism was a common theme in both observations and interviews. Unless specifically asked, many students refrained from taking part. Observational notes shows that rote expressions, extended pauses and frequent hesitation. This support the findings of Pham and Truong (2020), who found that anxiety and low self-efficacy prevent learners from taking risks and being autonomous when speaking.

c. Lack of Exposure To Authentic Input and Speaking Models

Students reported that their access to real world English Speaking contexts was restricted, which left them without many useful example of critical speech. From reflective journal, a student said that He has tried watching debates on social media but He could not understand the accents or fast speaking. This phenomenon in line with the finding of research by Lamb and Arisandy (2020) that highlighted the value of digital media and real resources to help ERFL learners to speak fluently.

Solutions (Strategies) Used To Overcome SDL Challenges

Despite the challenges, students demonstrated initiative and resourcefulness in creating learning support strategies.

a. Peer Collaboration and Informal Practice

In order to practice argumentation and get feedback from their peers, students often organized unofficial speaking groups outside of the classrooms. They were able to reduce their anxiety and simulate speaking situation because of collaborative efforts. As a students said that He used debate cards to practice His argumentation delivery and it helped him be more confident. This Peer based self-directed learning with sociocultural theory holds social scaffolding and meaningful interaction and can improve speaking learning (H. T. Nguyen & Habok, 2022).

b. Using Online Resources and Digital Platforms

To improve pronunciation and organize their arguments, many students resorted to websites like Youtube, Ted Talks, and English Speaking learning applications like ELSA Speak. According to research by Zainuddin et al. (2019) when incorporated into SDL routines, Mobile assisted Language Learning can also increase learner autonomy and speaking performance.

c. Setting Objectives and Engaging in Reflective Activities

Several students kept weekly journals of their objectives and reflections. Increased self-awareness and study improvement in confidence and articulations. One of students said that he was hesitant in speaking English but after doing reflection section and trying to practice more make him feel easier to convey his opinions. According to Song and Hill (2007) the students who regularly set the goals and tracked the progress were better at managing their learning and reflective practices help them bridge the gap between intention and performance.

The Role of Institutional and Instructional Support

This point is to highlight the important of lecturer Facilitation and institutional Scaffolding in enhancing SDL in critical speaking

a. Instructor Input and Motivation

Students appreciated when lecturers/instructor provided helpful criticism and fostered a positive learning atmosphere. Lecturer who employed interactive activities (such as debates, and roleplay), scaffolding, and guided questioning were seen as promoting autonomy (L. T. Nguyen & Dooly, 2021). One of student reported that She was inspired to keep trying after the lecturer provides feedback and acknowledged her progress.

b. Curriculum Design and Learning Resources

One barrier was found to be lack of institutional resources such as specialized critical speaking materials or access to language laboratory. There should be systematic SDL guide or a resources bank. As Sahrir et al. (2018) emphasized that curriculum alignment, mentorship, and mobile resources are essential for successful implementation of SDL in speaking courses.

CONCLUSION

The results showed that although SDL has a lot of potential to improve students' independence, critical thinking, and oral proficiency, a number of linguistic, psychological and contextual challenges prevent it from being used effectively in critical speaking classes. Students frequently struggled with low confidence, poor argumentation abilities and limited vocabularies and lack of real world speaking role models. Limited exposure to English in everyday situations and lack of institutional support made the difficulties worse. Despite the challenges, students showed initiative and fortitude by working together as a group, using digital tools, the establishment of personal learning objectives, and reflection exercises. By implementing those strategies the students were able to gradually increase their independence and self assurance while navigating the challenges of crucial speaking assignments. The importance of curriculum design and lecturer's support in promoting SDL was also emphasized in this study. A more positive learning environment that was facilitated by lecturers who provided encouragement, scaffolding and constructive criticism. The institutional gaps such as resources and structured guidance should be potentially realized and provided. In conclusion, This study demonstrates although EFL students in higher education are willing to learn critical speaking on their own, they need supportive environment that blends pedagogical and institutional scaffolding with learner agency. This findings adds thacademic research about autonomy in EFL settings especially in speaking environments that require a high level of cognitive processing.

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