The Impact of Social Support Systems on EFL Students Self-Directed Learning Skills

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the effects of social support on EFL students' self-directed learning (SDL) skills. Thus, a mixed-methods approach was adopted to design the study and answer the research questions: (1) What is the level of social support and self-directed learning skills among EFL students? (2) Is there a correlation between social support and self-directed learning skills among EFL students? (3) Does the gender of EFL students affect the level of their social support and self-directed learning skills? (4) In what ways does the relationship between social support and self-directed learning skills impact FLL? Data was collected via two sources (surveys and focus group interview) in which two hundred 367 students—199 male and 168 female—from the department of English language and literature at Mut'ah University participated in this study. First, the study findings revealed that family support scored the highest among other types of social support. Second, the assessment of the learning process was the most important among all SDL skills. Third, a significant positive correlation was found between social support and self-directed learning skills. Lastly, a significant difference in both levels of social support and self-directed learning skills among the EFL students, in favor of female students, was detected. Furthermore, the study offered implications for educators, EFL teachers, and policymakers.

Keywords: *Social Support, Self-Directed Learning Skills, EFL Students, Language Proficiency*

INTRODUCTION

Language education has seen an increase in the use of self-directed learning (SDL) as a good method for learning languages. Self-directed learners choose directions, define goals, select resources, and evaluate their results in relation to predetermined standards (Ayyildiz & Tarhan, 2015). Unlike conventional teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), SDL is one of the critical skills that learners should acquire in order to master linguistic competence and communicative proficiency. Nevertheless, successful outcomes of the SDL are not necessarily related to individual willingness and abilities, but rather to social support structures, which create an environment for students to develop necessary SDL skills (Demir & İlhan, 2022; Joshi & Sheliya, 2018).

Social support includes diverse forms of help, feedback, and guidance displayed by mates, teachers, and other inhabitants of the educational community. In the situation of EFL education, social support is represented through collaborative tasks, student relations, teachers' feedback, and the aid of materials that are inside or outside the classroom. Several studies discussed the psychosocial support systems, which are responsible for the learners' willpower, self-esteem, and perseverance in self-directed learning (Xiaojiao et al., 2023; Chi et al., 2022; Akhtar et al., 2024). Creating a friendly environment and collegial support enables language teachers to provide EFL students with the opportunity to have control over their learning, cultivate thinking, and be more successful in their academic pursuits. Social support is considered as fundamental in motivating EFL students to develop their SDL skills; however, not much is understood about the specific ways in which social support brings about this result (Ahmad, 2021; (Suprapto, 2023).

PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on the ways in which learners' autonomous behavior, motivations, and participation in self-directed learning activities are influenced by social support, with a particular emphasis on how these effects relate to EFL students' SDL skills. Ahmad (2021) asserts that a variety of psychological factors may affect self-learning strategies in different ways. In addition, Hafizah and Sayadi (2022) claim that social support is crucial

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for academic achievement and recommend that future research should focus on the connection between social support and other elements associated with learning strategies. This disparity in research necessitates conducting in-depth studies to clarify the type, scale, and results of social support as a significant psychological construct in EFL classroom. By highlighting the relationship between social support and SDL, it becomes easier for educators at all levels and policymakers to implement efficient instructional techniques, pedagogical programs, and support systems to help students build their learning skills and achieve their learning goals. This study intends to fill the current gap by exploring the influence of social support on EFL students' self-directed learning skills in different educational contexts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is the level of social support and self-directed learning skills among EFL students?

Is there a correlation between social support and self-directed learning skills among EFL students?

Does the gender of EFL students affect the level of their social support and self-directed learning skills?

In what ways does the relationship between social support and self-directed learning skills impact FLL?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study lies in its ability to move towards the landscape of the development of evidence-based practices, policies, and interventions that would support the development of independent and equitable language learning spaces. This study highlights language education and how it is grounded in social support and constitutes the development of a learning atmosphere that fosters learners to become independent, resourceful, and lifelong learners. Moreover, it attempts to significantly contribute to the field of language learning dynamics and ensure that EFL learners can derive as much value as possible from their learning experience; thus, it will serve as a well-informed foundation for the development of more effective pedagogical programs and support systems. In addition, this study suggests models of social support systems that promote EFL. Furthermore, to ensure that the proposed recommendations are evidence-based, this study aims to offer insights that could help educators, policymakers, and educational practitioners improve social support and create favorable conditions for autonomous learning among EFL students.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The current study attempts to achieve the fig goals: First, investigate the links between social support and self-directed learning (SDL) abilities among EFL learners. Second, determine models of social support systems, which promote the acquisition of English language by foreign users. Third, explore the effects of social support on motivation, autonomy, and interest in self-directed learning among the EFL students. Fourth, to investigate the influences of peer collaborations, teachers' assistances and EFL learning adventures on the progress of SDL. Finally, determine the role of social support in promoting EFL students' SDL abilities together with their language-learning efficacy.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RELATED STUDIES

Du Toit-Brits (2018) presents a comprehensive transitional and integrated self-directed learning theory to offer an intellectual framework for the aesthetic representation of the intricacies of SDL in various learning contexts. The theory successfully interlinks person, society, and environment as the main factors that shape SDL experience, helping the EFL teacher to understand the process of their own professional development and to teach the students how to use acquired skills for lifetime learning. Furthermore, the study of Murniati, Hartono, and Nugroho (2023) on the challenges and supports for SDL among college students and the social efforts in tackling self-directed learning difficulties focused on the multifaceted nature of SDL and the significance of social support in the effort of overcoming barriers related to independent learning. Through this study, the importance of social support structures to promote SDL among EFL learners is demonstrated, and it is stressed that instructors should give the learners mentorship towards the skills to help them become self-driven.

Hafizah and Sayadi (2022) investigated the students' readiness for SDL in developing their English writing skills. The authors determined the aspects making higher students' preparedness for SDL such as the level of

motivation, self-efficacy, and social support. This investigation points to implementing a teacher–led classroom where targeted interventions guide students to learn SDL traits and enhance writing in EFL academic assignments. Social support is a substantial factor on SDL among EFL learners and it emphasizes the role that teachers should have in encouraging learners to become self-directed learners whereas educators should gear their instruction to student–centered approaches in order to promote learner's active participation in the learning process. Through the creation of an acceptable and cooperative atmosphere, teachers may improve students' SDL, elevate their language proficiency, and develop in them what is needed for successful functioning in the globalized world.

Also, Dewi, Marlina and Supriyono (2019) revealed the function of SDL for the English as a second language learners who were guided in the Languages Institution. Their research demonstrated that the aspects they studied varied from learner to learner and that they employed different strategies, approaches as well as challenges, which helped to crystallize the dynamic procedures involved in SDL. This research, therefore, highlights how teachers should play their roles in contrasting learning preferences and expectations to implement such SDL sessions. Oveisi and Nosratinia (2019) found that SDL, resilience, and the willingness to communicate are important factors. The EFL learners' interaction of SDL was explored during the research. The outcomes of investigation displayed an influential component for highlighting the potentials in terms of resilience and positive attitude in studying foreign language, which also uncovers the correlations among cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. This Research shows that even though SDL skills are underlying literacy achievement in the case of foreign language learning, these skills are also the cause of mental improvement.

In another hand, the study conducted by Rafiee, Pazhakh, and Gorjian (2014) about self-directed learning in speaking skills development among Iranians who are at different levels of English competence came forth in their research. Studies evince that college students who follow SDL gain much fluency in speaking owing to the fact that they are self-determined and creative. This study demonstrates that development of SDL capabilities leads to strengthening the communicative competence and confidence in students' ability to practice English in the real situations. In addition, Aghayani and Janfeshan (2020) looked at the relationship between SDL and writing proficiency among EFL learners and reported a significant improvement in students' writing when supported by SDL. Aghayani and Janfeshan argue that learning SDL skills like self-regulation, goal setting, and reflection not only helps EFL students improve their writing skills but also provides a room to improve overall language skills. Empowering the mentor teacher roles may help EFL students realize the purpose of learning a foreign language; thus, enables them to gain and retain the knowledge necessary to progress. Furthermore, Khodabandehlou et al. (2012) examined the impact of self-directed learning strategies on EFL learners' reading comprehension skills. The research intended to provide evidence of the effectiveness of SDL in the development of reading skills and helping learners become independent. Eventually, SDL motivates the learning context, which is based on the learners and their role in the learning process.

Meanwhile, other studies looked at the relationship between social support and EFL students' self-directed learning (SDL) skills in different learning contexts. For instance, Mohammadi and Araghi (2013) explored the relationship between EFL learners' self-directed language learning readiness and course accomplishment in English courses in online education setting in Iran. The study detected a positive relationship between SDL and course accomplishment, which means that individuals' involvement and self-discipline play a vital role in the achievement of the students' academic objectives in the EFL context. This study brought to the light the necessity to evaluate and enhance the learner's SDL readiness to match up with students' different backgrounds, which aids in bringing good learning outcomes. Adi, Artini, and Wahyuni (2021) outlined SDL during the COVID-19 pandemic and tested teachers' beliefs of students' self-directed learning. This study provided new knowledge on the hybridity of SDL methods in distance teaching. Besides, it revealed that the efficient segment of teachers' assistance is a crucial factor in enhancing students' self-regulation skills against the backdrop of disorganization in the conventional training system. Likewise, Dwilestari (2021) explored the overlap of the challenges and opportunities in schools by testing the implications of SDL in the context of English as a foreign language class during the pandemic. The study described flexible learning techniques and social companions as the most important factors for the success of classroom transformation. Such findings enabled EFL students

to overcome the barriers which they had never faced, and thereby, develop the skills required for self-directed learning, in such circumstances. Shams (2013) tested the combination of traditional learning with the innovations of modern times and the effect of such hybridizing on the Iranian EFL learners' self-teaching in the process of vocabulary acquisition. The study asserted that blended learning is one learning approach that leads to the maturity of the learner (autonomy) and, consequently, improved results in language learning (in EFL included). Thus, EFL instruction is becoming more and more learner centered. On the other hand, İzağpana (2022) measured the effects of the flipped teaching on the academic resilience of EFL students, as well as their autonomy and SDL. The study showed a possibility of using the flipped class strategies as a powerful tool to promote student directed learning by making students feel responsible for their academic journey. One could argue that the strength of this study resides in the way it shows how technology can help EFL learners improve their SDL skills, which in turn helps them perform better academically and feel more confident when studying new languages. Furthermore, Ashadi et al. (2022) examined the effects of EFL teachers' identity on self-directed learning. The researchers explored the working experiences from the perspective of a phenomenological approach. Ashadi et al. shed light on the teacher's role in the instruction of SDL in learners in a remote learning environment while highlighting the necessity of continuous professional development to equip teachers to support autonomous learning.F

The studies mentioned above examined self-directed learning in EFL instruction and emphasized the elements affecting the learning processes, taking into account some cutting-edge instructional strategies and technological advancements to enhance independent learning results. Nonetheless, the studies failed to analyze the psychological dimensions of social support, which is essential to designing strategies that improve EFL students' self-directed learning skills. To raise the competency of EFL students, researchers, educators, and legislators can benefit from an understanding of the intricacies of the SDL method and its connections to learner autonomy and lifelong learning.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study sets a target to understand how social support stability is linked with self- direct learning skills in EFL students. Examining the psychological dimensions of social support is pivotal for constructing approaches, which are helpful in development the learning condition of the affected individuals. The exploring of this study has been done according to a mixed-methods design. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies are implemented on gathering data, which is obtained from the students.

Quantitative Measures

In order to gathering the quantitative data, the study adopted two scales, "Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support" (Zimet et al., 1988) consisting of three dimensions in (12) items: family support (4 items), social support (4) items, and friends support (4) items. Furthermore, "self-directed learning skills" (Ayyildiz and Tarhan, 2015) consisting of (9) dimension in (40) items: "evaluation of learning success" (5 items), "ability to apply learning strategies" (5 items), "ability to use learning opportunities" (3 items), "motivation and self-confidence" (4 items), "attitude towards learning" (4 items), "assessment of learning process" (6 items), "ability to manage information" (5 items), "ability to plan learning" (5 items), finally, "learning responsibility" (3 items).The scales pointed (1-5) where point five (5) indicates a strong agreement and point one (1) is a strong disagreement (5-Point Likert Scale). The scales refer to quality due to their high degree of reliability and validity in measuring the variables of this research.

Qualitative Measures

The qualitative measures in this study provide the secondary set of data, with the goal to explore the relationship between social support and EFL students' self-directed learning skills, to further confirm and consolidate survey responses, and to answer the research questions. Since emotional responses and managing strategy perception are the most important factors when considering the social support of students, a sample guide for the interviewers was prepared in reference to journals that are based on pilot studies to check the appropriateness

of the guide. Then, the interview guide was modified to some extent in order to make it more thorough and successful in gathering the necessary data during a pilot test involving a small group of EFL students. The researchers adjusted the interview questions and ensured that sufficient data was "extracted" by answering the participants' questions during the "pilot testing stage." Carefully considered responses from pilot participants were incorporated, and the interview guide was only modified when it became essential to maximize its enhanced functionality.

Finally, the researchers conducted the interview via the Zoom application. The focus group interview was audio-recorded, and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The researchers ensured that communicative elements of active listening, like involving and clarifying, were effectively implemented to allow learners to freely express their ideas and thoughts at any time or place.

Validity and Reliability

While a jury of language instructors and psychologists evaluated the scales and the interview questions to ensure the validity of the instruments, the researchers used Cronbach's alpha and split-half methods to ensure the reliability of the scores. The results were high according to the Cronbach alpha and spilt-half reliability scores of the social support scale, which were 0.89 and 0.86, respectively, and the self-directed learning skills, which were 0.84 and 0.81, respectively.

Participants

The study recruited 367 students—199 male and 168 female—from the department of English language and literature at Mut'ah University. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 28 years old. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that pseudonyms would be used to refer to their identities. The samples were assigned based on the qualitative principles and quantitative power elements to give respondents sample acting and statistical authority.

Procedure and data Analysis

For the quantitative data analysis, the objective-based questionnaire, and the software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) provided statistically significant results. An independent sample t-test is one of the main steps that followed for measuring social support and self-directed learning skills. The Pearson correlation coefficients was also computed to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between variables. On the other hand, Participants' responses from the focus group interview were in-depth analyzed through a thematic analysis involving patterns and narratives of their social support and self-directed learning skills. The qualitative analysis was multi-layered, and it required a couple of repetitive processes like data familiarization, theme creation, and interpretation. The transcription served as a focal point in the determination of the themes. Moreover, the credibility of the findings was enhanced through the triangulate technique, which gave an overall insight into the psychological issues related to social support and self-directed learning skills, contributing to the greater meaning, and understanding of the interpretation and implications of the study.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

RQ1: What is the level of social support and self-directed learning skills among EFL students?

Table 1 Results of independent sample test

Variable	Dimensions	Means	St.dev	T	α
Social support	Family support	3.73	.35	1.96	.01*
	Social support	3.45	.36	1.83	.04*
	Friends support	3.59	.39	1.92	.00*
	Total	3.55	0.42	1.73	.00*
Self-direct learning skills	"Evaluation of learning success"	3.33	.41	1.11	.02*
	"Ability to apply learning strategies"	3.42	.40	1.84	.07
	"Ability to use learning opportunities"	3.54	.35	2.92	.03*
	"Motivation and self-confidence"	3.67	.44	2.33	.06
	"Attitude towards learning"	3.82	.31	.98	.00*
	"Assessment of learning process"	3.86	.34	.99	.01*
	"Ability to manage information"	3.75	.37	1.02	.43

"Ability to plan learning"	3.66	.39	1.14	.24
"Learning responsibility"	3.62	.38	1.23	.11
Total	3.61	.43	1.85	.13

* Sig at (α≤0.05)

Table 1 shows that the total means of social support were at a medium level (3.61). Moreover, the ratings for the dimensions' means ranged from 3.73 to 3.45. Furthermore, the dimension of family support scored the highest, while the dimension of friend support scored the lowest. In terms of self-directed learning skills, the dimensions' mean rating ranged from 3.86 to 3.33, and the overall mean was at a medium level (3.61). The dimension with the highest score was "assessment of learning process," while the dimension with the lowest score was "evaluation of learning success."

RQ 2: Is there a correlation between social support and self-directed learning skills among EFL students?

Table 2 Results of Pearson correlation coefficients

Dimension	Family support	Social support	Friends support	Total Social support
"Evaluation of learning success"	.32**	.43**	.33**	.39*
"Ability to apply learning strategies"	.34	.37*	.27*	.35*
"Ability to use learning opportunities"	.27*	.31*	.32*	.41**
"Motivation and self-confidence"	.28	.39	.26**	0.33*
"Attitude towards learning"	.29**	.32**	.24*	.40*
"Assessment of learning process"	.23**	.36**	.38**	.29**
"Ability to manage information"	.26*	.28**	.32**	.36*
"Ability to plan learning"	.26*	.25**	.29**	.34*
"Learning responsibility"	.27**	.32*	.39*	.38**
Total Self-direct learning skills	.46*	.35**	.39*	.43**

* Sig at (α≤0.05) and ** Sig at (α≤0.01)

In Table 2, a significant positive correlation was found between social support and self-directed learning skills (r =.43); furthermore, findings presented a positive correlation between self-directed learning skills and the dimensions of family support, social support, and friends' support, with a value of r =.46, 35, and 39, respectively.

RQ 3: Does the gender of EFL students affect the level of their social support and self-directed learning skills?

Table 3 Results of t-test

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	St. d	t	α
Social support	M	199	3.69	.37	-1.59	.02*
	F	168	3.86	.35		
Self-direct learning skills	M	199	3.63	.36	- 1.14	.04*
	F	168	3.91	.35		

* Sig at (α≤0.05)

One-sample t-test was run to answer the third research question. As shown in Table 3, the findings indicate a significant difference in both levels of social support and self-directed learning skills among the EFL students, in favor of female students.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Once the participant's responses were analyzed, the participants were interviewed collectively in a focus-group format. The focus group interview sought to explore the relationship between social support and self-directed learning skills among EFL students; besides, to further confirm and consolidate survey responses, and to answer the research questions.

RQ 4: In what ways does the relationship between social support and self-directed learning skills impact FLL?

Family Support

The participants reached a consensus about their family support describing it as a rescue boat that helped them survive during their academic journey. One student noted, "*I would have made it this far without my family's support.*" Another student said, "*My friends support me, but it is as much as my family does. It has been unconditional.*" Others stated:

> Yes, we receive support from our professors, classmates, and neighbors occasionally. However, this kind of support does not feel as deep and as sincere as our families do. Especially, with online learning……I barely know the looks of our professors and classmates.

Assessment of Learning Process

A part from all discussed self-directed learning skills; the majority of the participants described the "assessment of learning process" as the gauge for learning. One student noted, "*I study English language. I do not think the grades matters the most. At the end of the day, I want to assess my learning, and be satisfied.*" Another one said, "*Once I feel that my learning is maximized that all matters.*"

While some students discussed the importance of their attitude towards learning, the majority of the calls supported assessing the learning process. Some students noted:

> It is all about knowing where you stand now…..and where you are going next. This can only be done by assessing our learning processes, and that the support, care, learning and mentoring we receive at the university should take us there.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between EFL students' self-directed learning skills and their social support system. Administering a survey to 367 students from the department of English language and literature at Mut'ah University, and conducting a focus group interview revealed that social support systems influence EFL students' SDL skills. First, the findings revealed that the EFL students felt that the support of their families was the highest level of social support they have received; thus played a significant role in their academic success. Such finding corresponds with (Ashadi et al., 2022; Aghayani and Janfeshan, 2020; Dewi, Marlina and Supriyono, 2019; Du Toit-Brits, 2018; Dwilestari, 2021; Murniati, Hartono, and Nugroho, 2023) who found that EFL students who received social support from family members or teachers at schools exhibited high level of SDL. This type of support allow EFL students to interlink with their family members, teachers, society, and environment; thus, help the EFL shape their SDL experience, and understand the process to use acquired skills for lifetime learning. One aspect that may contribute to such a finding is the cultural influence. Jordanian people, in general, are social by nature, and they value social connections and supports offered by family members or by teachers who are often respected and seen as one's parents. Therefore, the social support provided by family members or teachers is highly considered and appreciated, and has positive impact on EFL students' SDL skills. Second, the findings also indicated that EFL students felt that the assessment of learning process was the most important SDL skills. Such finding agrees with (Aghayani and Janfeshan, 2020; Du Toit-Brits, 2018; Khodabandehlou et al., 2012; Mohammadi and Araghi, 2013) who found that the assessment of learning process was a substantial SDL skill among EFL learners, as it encourages learners to become self-directed and self-reliant. Therefore, language teachers should gear their instruction to student–centered approaches to promote students assessment of learning process. The nature of tasks and activities involved in FLL, particularly in Jordan, may contribute to such a finding, as they do not foster teamwork activities, thus laying more focus on individual work. Khodabandehlou et al. (2012) provide evidence of the effectiveness of SDL in the development of autonomous learning. Finally, the finding showed that EFL female students exhibited higher levels in both social support and self-directed learning skills than did their male counterparts. Such a finding adds to the field of EFL education and calls for such studies to understand the similarities and differences between male and female EFL students SDL from a psychological perspective.

One aspect that may contribute to such a finding is that females are more social, and exhibit more social support than their male counterparts do, and such support is reflected in their SDL skills.

This study offers implications for educators, EFL teachers, and policymakers to implement efficient instructional techniques, pedagogical programs, and support systems and create favorable conditions for autonomous learning to help EFL students build their learning skills and achieve their learning goals.

Nonetheless, the study has a number of limitations. First, the study was limited to one location; it would be useful to explore the effects of social support on EFL students' SDL skills in multiple study sites. Another shortcoming was the focus group interview; the participants were interviewed only once in a collective format, which may not have been comfortable for them to disclose other sources of social support. Therefore, semi-structured interviews should have been undertaken with participants.

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