

Investigating readiness for autonomy: A comparison of Malaysian ESL undergraduates of three public universities

Thang Siew Ming and Azarina Alias
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

ABSTRACT

In this competitive society it is essential to produce graduates who are autonomous, critical, competitive and capable of meeting with changing academic and professional needs. However, Thang (2001, 2003, & 2005) revealed that the undergraduates (both distance learners and on-campus learners) of the National University of Malaysia, a public university in Malaysia displayed a lack of autonomy in their learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) and seemed to prefer a more teacher-centred approach to learning. This present study is an extension of Thang's studies. It compares the learner characteristics of Malaysian undergraduates of three public universities in order to find out to what extent the findings of Thang's studies are applicable to other public universities. A quantitative approach using a questionnaire was used for the study. The data were analysed using item analysis, factor analysis and frequency analysis. The study revealed that a majority of the students from all three universities preferred a teacher-centred approach to learning. The authors propose that in interpreting autonomy in the Malaysian context, sociocultural factors should also be taken into consideration.

Introduction

In Malaysia, English is a compulsory subject taught to university students regardless of the disciplines they are majoring in. However, despite learning English in schools since primary one, most of these students are still weak in English (New Sunday Times, 2005; Pillay, 1995). Why is this so? Is the education system at fault? Are the courses offered inappropriate or are the students themselves to be blamed?

It is a well-known fact that learners' active participation ensures success in language learning. Tudor (1996) proposes that the fundamental underpinning principle of this is learner-centeredness which can be defined as learners being more independent and responsible in order to assure success in learning a language.

In the Malaysian context, Thang (2001, 2003 & 2005) found that undergraduates of the National University of Malaysia (both distance learners and on-campus learners) to be very teacher-centred. The present study compares the learning characteristics of students from three public universities in Malaysia, namely the National University of Malaysia (UKM), The Putra University of

Malaysia (UPM) and The Open University of Malaysia (OUM). The ultimate goal of this study is to determine the extent of autonomy among Malaysian undergraduates in public universities.

Literature Review

Role of learner autonomy in language learning

In 1979, Henri Holec prepared a report for the Council of Europe in accordance with the general movement in adult education and the concept of permanent education (cited in Little, 1995). He promotes the notion of autonomy which covers educational contexts as well as every other area of life by describing it as “a means of breaking down the barriers that so often exist between learning and living” (cited in Little, 1995, p.6). His idea is in tandem with Janne’s view expressed in an earlier report which states that adult education

becomes an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man, and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. From the idea of man ‘product of his society’, one moves to the idea of man ‘producer of his society.

(cited in Little, 1995, p. 6)

The underpinning principle of these two reports highlights the importance of learner autonomy in producing independent learners who are able to apply autonomy in other aspects of their lives; hence, the learners are able to be proactive, independent and responsible individuals who are capable of shaping a good society.

Benson (1997) proposed a framework which embraces three fundamentals in describing learner autonomy in language education: a ‘technical’ perspective, a ‘psychological’ perspective and a ‘political’ perspective. The ‘technical’ perspective emphasizes skills or strategies for effective and unsupervised learning which comprises ‘metacognitive’, ‘cognitive’, ‘social’ and other strategies identified by Oxford (1990). The emphasis on these strategies is often referred to as ‘learner training’ and will eventually enhance learning because the focus is on the learners (Wenden, 1991; Oxford, 1990).

The ‘psychological’ perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes broader attitudes and cognitive abilities which enable learners to take responsibility for his/her own learning. This is in line with Holec’s (1981) definition of autonomy which is accepting responsibility for one’s own learning. This includes planning for learning, being innovative in the learning process, and being able to evaluate that learning. The last element, ‘political’ perspective, highlights the freedom and control that learners have over the contents and processes of their learning. In addition, Benson (2001) further suggests that approaches to fostering autonomy may also focus on technology or other resources, on the learner himself/herself and/or on decision-making in the learning context.

Most commonly accepted definitions of autonomy (including Benson’s three perspectives) focus on the importance of personal autonomy and view actions

and decisions undertaken collectively as indication of a lack of autonomy. This concept of autonomy (which we shall refer to as the western concept of autonomy), was promoted in the context of language education in Europe and has in the last twenty years become influential as a highly desirable goal in many parts of the world (Pemberton, 1996; Benson & Voller, 1997; Benson, 2001). This view of autonomy precludes consideration of “the wider social, cultural, and political concerns of language education” (Pennycook, 1997, p. 41). Benson (2001) describes this view of autonomy as an attempt not only at authoring the individual’s life, but also at authoring the social realities that constitute our collective lives.

Studies on learning characteristics

For the past few years, studies on Hong Kong learners have suggested a general pattern of typical Hong Kong Chinese learner. Hong Kong learners were reported to favour rote learning over creative learning, dependent on the syllabus, lacking in intellectual initiative, passive, reticent, and reluctant to openly challenge authority especially teachers (Pierson, 1996). Murphy (1987) pointed out that Hong Kong students displayed an unquestioning acceptance of the knowledge of the teacher or lecturer instead of an expression of opinion, independence, self-mastery, creativity and all-around personal development. In addition, an investigation of Hong Kong immigrant children in Canadian schools by Chan and Hui (1974) indicated that the Chinese students were very polite, but more quiet and shy than other students. Pierson (1996) further found them to be submissive to their teacher and that they did not challenge him/her sufficiently. In short, Hong Kong learners seem to exhibit a general pattern of being less autonomous (in the Western sense), having less initiative and wanting to be told what to do.

On the other hand, a case study carried out by (Intratrat, 2004) in Thailand to investigate teachers’ and students’ attitudes towards using CALL in promoting learner autonomy revealed that both teachers and learners appreciated the advantages offered by CALL. They had positive attitudes towards learner autonomy and rated the autonomous method as the best method. Although some teachers showed a preference for the teacher-centred approach, very few students agreed with this and the difference between these two groups were found to be significant. Vanijdee’s findings (2003) on Thai English distance learners supported that of Intratrat. She found the students to display varying degrees of learner autonomy and to be generally “self-sufficient”. Findings in Dickinson (1996) and Tantiswetrat & Chongsuphajsiddhu (1996) also supported the above findings suggesting that Thai students conform more to the Western concept of autonomy than students in Hong Kong and Malaysia.

In the Malaysian context, not many studies have been conducted on learners’ characteristics. Nevertheless, there are studies that explore distance learners’ abilities to adapt to the distance learning mode in the Malaysian context that are worth considering. Saw et al. (1999) investigated the adult educational transition among East Malaysian distance learners of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and

found evidence that indicated that the distance learners were able to adapt and accommodate the disruption of distance learning to other elements of their lives. Similarly, another research undertaken by Atan et al. (2003) discovered that distance learners displayed positive and significant changes in their self-confidence and adapted well to the learning styles demanded by the distance education programme. They also made appropriate adjustments towards the demands of the new learning environment, leading to the building up of confidence and success in their studies. In addition, they developed required skills in terms of management of their time and critical thinking. The study used a questionnaire formulated by Lauzon (1989) and was a modification of the questionnaire used by Saw et al. (1999), Idrus et al. (2001) and Azli et al. (2000). It was conducted on distance learners of three universities (i.e. MARA University of Technology, the National University of Malaysia and University of Malaya). A comparison of mean scores using T-tests were used to analyse the results. These two studies focused on learning of content courses. So far, I am aware of only Thang's studies that explore students' perceptions of distance language courses.

Thang (2001 & 2005) studied Malaysian distance learners' conceptions of their learning of English. Her study was undertaken in UKM, one of the eight public universities in Malaysia, and the respondents were the first- and second-year distance learners who had just completed their first English Proficiency Course. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. A comparison of mean scores using ANOVA and exploratory factor analysis were used to analyse the quantitative data and the qualitative data were analysed by identifying themes. Her study revealed that the distance-learning undergraduates displayed a lack of autonomy and awareness of language learning processes in their learning of English as a Second Language (ESL). Her findings on on-campus undergraduates at the same university also revealed similar findings (Thang, 2003). In this study a questionnaire was used to collect data. Exploratory factor analysis was used to analyse data. Her study on the distance learning of English in UKM found no such adaptive and accommodative abilities as concluded by Atan et al. (2003). Instead she found that the distance-learning students were not able to cope with their English courses and complained of little improvement in their English proficiency level. Thus, it appears that Malaysian distance learners encounter more problems learning English than content courses.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A quantitative approach was used in this study. This approach not only allows a large volume of data to be analysed relatively quickly (Denscombe, 2002), but also enables the researcher to replicate a previous study and compare the results obtained. The precise and clear-cut measures allows for evaluation of results with reliable statistical methods. This enables the researcher to judge whether the findings have occurred by chance alone (Northey et al., 2002). In this case, it means that the researcher can prove the reliability of the findings using the

appropriate statistical methods and compare the findings to the previous studies conducted by Thang (2001, 2003 & 2005).

Research Instrument

A questionnaire was used in the collection of data for this research. This questionnaire is part of a 92-item questionnaire designed by a team of researchers working on an IRPA* project. The items in the questionnaire can be classified under three categories:

Category 1: 18 items designed to find out to what extent the students are inclined towards teacher-centeredness. These items deal with the learners' reliance and dependence on the teachers. They describe the roles of the teacher as the source of information and the central figure in the learning processes. The items look more into learners' inclination, i.e. whether they are more inclined towards teacher-centeredness or independent learning.

Category 2: 18 items designed to find out to what extent the students are inclined towards autonomous learning. These items highlight the learners' ability to be independent and responsible learners. They describe the learners as active individuals who want to take charge of the learning process and determine what they want and how they want to learn. These items are indicators of autonomous learning.

Category 3: 8 items designed to find out to what extent the students are computer literate. These items explore the learners' ability to use computers and how they feel towards the use of computer technology in learning. Appendix 1 displays the complete list of items according to categories.

The Likert scale (comprising 4 for "Strongly agree", 3 for "Agree", 2 for "Disagree" and 1 for "Strongly disagree") was used to score the items. These items were randomly ordered. The questionnaires were translated into Bahasa Malaysia (The Malay Language) to avoid subjects' failure to understand and respond appropriately due to difficulty in comprehending the questions.

Sample population

The respondents in this study are students of UKM, UPM and OUM. Table 1 displays the distribution of respondents according to universities.

Table 1

Distribution of respondents according to universities

Universities	Number of respondents
UKM	255
UPM	299
OUM	202

* This study was funded by the Malaysian Ministry of Science and Technology under the IRPA (Intensified Research Priorities Areas) scheme.

Description of English courses offered to respondents

UKM offers a variety of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses for students of various disciplines such as English for Business, English for Social Sciences and English for Science and Technology. The ESP courses offered are compulsory for the students and they aim at equipping the students with necessary skills to handle authentic reading materials in their respective disciplines. The students who are mainly recent school-leavers have to attend four hours, face-to-face tutorials per week. However, students with low proficiency in English i.e. those who scored bands 1 and 2 in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) are required to take basic proficiency courses offered by the Centre of General Studies before embarking on the ESP courses. In addition, some faculties require their students to take more advanced level courses such as Critical Thinking, Interactive Reading, Speech Communication, Public Speaking and Writing Skills.

Similarly, UPM also offers a variety of English courses to their students. These students are also mainly recent school-leavers. These courses are categorized in three levels: Basic, EPC (English Proficiency Course) Level 1 and EPC Level 2. Students who enter the university with band 1 and 2 in MUET are required to take a basic course, i.e. English for Academic Purposes, before they can proceed to courses in EPC 1 and EPC 2. Direct entry to EPC 1 is allowed for students who obtain band 3 in MUET and to EPC 2 for students who obtain band 4 and above in MUET. Examples of EPC 1 are Grammar in English, Writing for Academic Purposes and English in the Work Place and examples of EPC 2 are Interactive Speaking, Public Speaking and Report Writing. The faculties decide on the EPC 1 and EPC 2 that their students have to take. All the course are conducted via the face-to-face mode.

OUM students are also required to take a number of English courses to improve their English language proficiency. OUM students are mainly mature students with at least one year of working experience. Most of them are teachers. Students have to take English for Written Communication in their first year, English for Oral Communication in the second year and English at the Workplace in the third year of their studies. The students have to attend five tutorial sessions. All the courses are conducted through a mixed mode—online and face-to face.

Procedures for data collection

The questionnaires were distributed to first-year undergraduates from the three universities via their respective English language instructors. They were allowed to take the questionnaires home and respond to them during their free time. The UKM and UPM respondents were required to return the completed questionnaires to their language instructors during their next lesson, which would usually be two to three days after the previous lesson. The OUM respondents, on the other hand, handed in the questionnaires a week later since they normally meet their instructors during weekends.

Methods for analysing data

Item analysis

An item analysis was carried out on the sample population. The intention of this analysis was not to ascribe a preference for a particular learning modality (proposed in a single question) as constituting in itself a learning style, as that would be over-presumptuous (Willing, 1988, p.152), but to identify some general trends to enable a better understanding of how learners from different institutions respond to each item individually.

Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was used to look for sets of responses which have a high correlation with each other. This method would elucidate and shed light on the learning preferences of the learners because it sorted through the possible combinations or responses across all cases studied in order to find a consistent pattern/set. If a pattern or patterns was/were established, it is necessary to examine the particular issues involved in order to see whether those patterns appeared to have any coherent 'meaning' in recognisable cognitive or learning style terms (Willing, 1988).

The scoring procedures on the factors were also based on that of Willing's (1988) scoring methods. After the two factors were identified, the following scoring procedures were applied to identify the predominant preference of each subject i.e. the mean scores for each subject's responses to the items listed under each factor were calculated. First, the mean scores of each student for Factor 1 and Factor 2 were compared. The factor that had the highest mean score for that particular student would be considered as representing the predominant style of the student. The person was then placed in the learning preference group, which was defined by that set of questions.

The internal consistency of the items in each factor established for the respective institutions was checked using Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient. The items in each factor would be considered reliable if the established readings were above 0.7. Finally, frequency counts were used to measure the distribution of respondents from the three different universities according to factor groupings.

Analysis of Data

Item Analysis

An item analysis was carried out on the sample population to identify some general trends to enable a better understanding of how learners from different institutions responded to each item individually. However, it is important to note that the preference for a single question does not constitute in itself a learning style (Willing 1988).

The Likert scale (comprising 4 for strongly agree, 3 for agree, 2 for disagree and 1 for strongly disagree) was used to score the items. The ranking of the mean

scores of the students from the three institutions reveals that the mean scores fall between 1.9 (approaching disagree) and 3.4 (between agree and strongly agree). The ranking further reveals that the items that have the higher mean scores are those related to teacher-centred learning mode and the lower items are those related to autonomous learning. A general pattern observed in the ranking suggests that learners generally prefer the teacher-centred to autonomous learning mode.

The five items that have the highest mean scores for each of the three institutions are shown in Table 2.

The results suggest that generally learners appear to be aware of the importance of reading widely (Item 49) and acquiring the appropriate learning strategies (Item 46). However, they would still prefer the teachers to be in-charge which include telling them their mistakes, guiding them and motivating them (Items 52, 60, 91). In addition they would like the teacher to facilitate their learning processes by varying their teaching styles to suit their needs (Item 41). Thus, it is possible to deduce that they are teacher-centred although not fully teacher-dependent.

The five items that have the lowest mean scores for each institution are shown in Table 3.

High mean scores for Items 59, 72, 79 and 55 suggest confidence and a high level of autonomy. Since the mean scores for these items are generally low, this suggests a lack of confidence and autonomy among these students. The low mean scores for Items 40 and 43, however, suggests that all learners enjoy studying via computer. This is an encouraging sign but does not necessary mean that the learners are able to use computers effectively in their learning processes.

Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was used since the intended purpose of the study is to elucidate and to shed light on the learning preferences of the learners rather than being predictive. Principal components factor analysis of all items were carried out using SPSS 11.0 programme on learners of the three universities

Table 2
Items with the highest mean scores for UKM, UPM and OUM

Items	UKM	UPM	OUM
41. I like teachers who vary their teaching styles to meet our learning needs.	3.51	3.48	3.43
46. I think teachers should make us aware of the strategies that can be used to learn English more effectively.	3.50	3.48	3.31
91. I think it is important for English teachers to motivate us.	3.37	3.46	3.40
49. I feel it is important to read widely on my academic coursework.	3.38		3.25
52. I like the teachers to tell me all my mistakes.		3.35	3.24
60. I need a lot of guidance in my learning.	3.34	3.41	

Table 3

Items with the lowest mean scores for UKM, UPM and OUM

Items	UKM	UPM	OUM
40. I feel uncomfortable in the learning laboratory.	2.31	2.39	2.30
59. I feel that the method used by my teacher inhibits my learning style.	2.07	2.14	2.35
55. I only need my lecture and tutorial notes.	2.07	2.22	2.30
43. I do not enjoy studying using the computer.	1.96	1.98	1.97
72. I dislike being directed on how to learn.			2.43
79. Students should be encouraged to challenge their teachers.	2.30	2.23	

respectively to enable a comparison of factors amongst learners of the selected universities. The varimax R (orthogonal) rotation and Kaiser normalization procedure were used for this purpose. The number of factors with Eigenvalues above 1 was very high: UKM, 27; UPM, 24; and OUM, 26. The percentage of explained variance was also high, all above 65%.

However, it was not possible to identify any coherent patterns through analysis of these factor solutions. The factors also appeared to be levelling off with the lower components. Therefore, it was decided to limit the factors to three and perform principal components factor analysis again. Three-factor solutions with an explained variance of 28.6% for UKM, 31.2% for UPM and 30.1% for OUM were obtained. The analysis of items in each factor for each university showed that there was no clear-cut pattern to distinguish factor 2 and factor 3. Thus, the principal components factor analysis procedures were carried out once again, this time limiting factor extraction to two. It was possible to see a distinct pattern for each of the factors. The factor solutions obtained accounted for 26.6% of explained variance for UKM, 30.7% for UPM and 31.7% for OUM. To decrease cross-loadings and to increase efficiency, all items that loaded below 0.3 were deleted. In cases where there were cross-loadings of items between factors, the lower loadings were automatically deleted. Finally, any loading of below 0.4 was deleted.

Description of factors

As mentioned earlier, two factors for each institution were identified from the factor analysis. A careful scrutiny of the two factors reveals that they generally represent two types of learning preferences. Factor 1 can be described as the "Teacher-centred group" as it has predominant features of teacher-centred learning whereas Factor 2 is classified as "Autonomous group" as it has predominant features of autonomous learning. See Table 4 for the common characteristics of Factor 1 and Table 5 for the variations in characteristics of Factor 1; and Table 6 for the common characteristics of Factor 2 and Table 7 for the variations in characteristics of Factor 2.

Table 4

Common characteristics of Factor 1 present in the three institutions

Factor 1: Teacher-centred group

Items	Autonomous learning
49.	I feel it is important to read widely on my academic coursework.
57.	I think it is important for us to learn about the purposes behind the activities given.
61.	I think teachers should empower us to be responsible for our own learning.
	Teacher-centered
38.	I like the teacher to explain everything to us.
41.	I like teachers who vary their teaching styles to meet our learning needs.
46.	I think teachers should make us aware of the strategies that can be used to learn English more effectively.
52.	I like the teacher to tell me all my mistakes.
60.	I need a lot of guidance in my learning.
63.	I like teachers who use a lot of their own materials in classes.
71.	I like teachers who correct all my spoken mistakes.
78.	I like teachers to frequently point out my mistakes.
82.	I think it is important for teachers to give us regular feedback on our work.
91.	I think it is important for English teachers to motivate us.
	Computer literacy
56.	I believe it is important to have language laboratory sessions.
92.	I think audio-visual aids should be used frequently in English classes.

Table 5

Variations in characteristics of Factor 1 present in the three institutions

Factor 1: Teacher-centred group

Items		UKM	UPM	OUM
	Autonomous learning			
65.	I always take the initiative when learning about something.		✓	✓
76.	I like the opportunity to correct my classmates' mistakes.		✓	
87.	I like the opportunity to self-correct minor mistakes in my work.		✓	✓
	Teacher-centredness			
44.	I like the teacher to give us tasks to work on.			✓
47.	I like the teacher to ask me to talk about my interests.		✓	
55.	I only need my lecture and tutorial notes. (neg)	✓		
59.	I feel that the method used by my teacher inhibits my learning style. (neg)	✓		
66.	I believe it is necessary to have formal teaching to learn English.			✓
75.	I like teachers who ask us to give our views in class.		✓	
	Computer literacy			
43.	I do not enjoy studying using the computer. (neg)	✓	✓	
50.	I conduct a lot of research using the internet.			✓
62.	I wish I were given some opportunities to learn English through using the computer.			✓
80.	I believe that some English classes can be conducted more effectively in a multimedia laboratory.		✓	✓
86.	I think on-line learning should be included in English classes.		✓	✓

Factor 1: Teacher-centred group

The common characteristics of this factor are given in Table 4. An analysis of the common characteristics reveals that learners of the three universities belonging to this group display the following features. They rely on the teachers to explain everything to them and guide them in their learning. Teachers are also seen as the resource and feeder to point out and correct their mistakes. In addition, the learners also prefer the teachers to give regular feedback on their work.

Nevertheless, the learners do indicate a desire to be responsible and independent in their own learning processes. This is expressed in their desire to learn about the purposes behind activities given and to read widely on academic work. However, they express a preference for teachers to empower them and make them aware of the correct language learning strategies. They also expect teachers to vary their teaching styles to meet their learning needs. Teachers are also seen as motivators to stimulate their learning of English. These learners further express approval of learning through ICT, but not in the form of learning independently via computer. They prefer learning via computer classes and audio-visual aids, instead.

The variations in characteristics of this factor are given in Table 5. An analysis of the variations of characteristics reveals the following differences. One very significant difference is that OUM learners believe that it is necessary to have formal teaching to learn English (Item 66). A possible explanation for this could be that the OUM learners were dissatisfied with their present learning mode. This is worrying. Further research needs to be undertaken to determine whether the problem is with the delivery mode or the learners themselves.

Another interesting point to note is that all the three groups show interest towards the communicative-based approach in teaching. For UPM group, this interest comes in the form of showing a preference for teachers who ask them to talk about their interests and giving their views in class (Items 47 & 75) or desiring self- and peer- correction (Items 76 & 87). Similarly, OUM students also prefer to self-correct minor mistakes (Item 87). As for UKM learners, it comes in the form of expressing dissatisfaction towards receiving only tutorial and lectures notes (Item 55). UPM and OUM groups further express a desire to take initiative when learning about something (Item 65). However, the UKM groups seem to be satisfied with their teachers' style of teaching (Item 59). A further point to note is that OUM and UPM groups have more items under the computer literacy category than UKM. These items come in the form of requesting for more online English classes and opportunity to learn English through computer or in the multimedia laboratory. Another difference worth pointing out is that only the OUM group indicates that they conduct a lot of research using the Internet (Item 50). This suggests that they are more independent than learners from the other two universities.

Factor 2: Autonomous group

The common characteristics of this factor are given in Table 6. An analysis of the common characteristics reveals that the autonomous groups of UKM, UPM and

Table 6

Common characteristics of Factor 2 present in the three institutions

Factor 2: Autonomous group	
Items	Autonomous learning
42.	I think teachers should give us opportunities to select the units we like to learn.
51.	I think that teachers should give opportunities to students to learn in their own learning styles.
53.	I think teachers should give students opportunities to decide where and how to learn.
69.	I know my learning style and use it effectively.
73.	I like teachers who give us a lot of opportunities to learn on our own.
83.	I like my friends to check my work.
85.	I think teachers should allow us to learn at our own pace.
90.	I would like more opportunities to learn on my own.

Table 7

Variations in characteristics of Factor 2 present in the three institutions

Factor 2: Autonomous group		UKM	UPM	OUM
Items	Autonomous learning			
55.	I only need my lecture and tutorial notes.		✓	✓
59.	I feel that the method used by my teacher inhibits my learning style.		✓	✓
65.	I always take the initiative when learning about something.	✓		
72.	I dislike being directed on how to learn.		✓	✓
76.	I like the opportunity to correct my classmates' mistakes.	✓		✓
79.	Students should be encouraged to challenge their teachers.		✓	✓
87.	I like the opportunity to self-correct minor mistakes in my work.	✓		
	Teacher-centredness			
47.	I like the teacher to ask me to talk about my interests.	✓		
84.	I think teachers should consider our cultural backgrounds in designing lessons.		✓	✓
	Computer literacy			
50.	I conduct a lot of research using the internet.	✓		
80.	I believe that some English classes can be conducted more effectively in a multimedia laboratory.	✓		
86.	I think on-line learning should be included in English classes.	✓	✓	

OUM prefer a more independent environment in learning. These learners possess strong characteristics of autonomous learners. They want the freedom and responsibility to decide what, where, when and how to learn. They want to employ their own learning styles. The learners are confident of themselves and believe that peer evaluation is an opportunity to enhance their language ability. It is interesting to find out that the common characteristics shared by learners in this group are those related to learner autonomy only.

Variations in characteristics of this factor are given in Table 7. An analysis of

Table 8

Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient for each factor/group

Universities	Teacher-centred group	Autonomous group
UKM	0.80	0.71
UPM	0.90	0.74
OUM	0.90	0.83

these characteristics reveals the following differences. It appears that the Autonomous group in UKM contains some characteristic that lean towards semi-autonomy. The items that suggest this are:

- I believe that some English classes can be conducted more effectively in a multimedia laboratory (Item 80).
- I always take the initiative when learning about something (Item 65)
- I like the opportunity to self-correct minor mistakes in my work (Item 87).

The Autonomous group of UPM shares one of these characteristics with UKM i.e. they agree that on-line learning should be included in English classes (Item 86). However, they share more characteristics with the OUM group that leans towards total autonomy. They are:

- indicate that they only need their lectures and tutorials notes (Item 55)
- feel that methods used by teachers inhibit their learning styles (Item 59).
- dislike in being directed on how to learn (Item 72).
- believe that students should be bold enough to challenge their teachers (Item 79).

This supports earlier evidence that suggests that the UKM students are the least autonomous among the three universities. In addition, although the views of these learners towards the use of computers in learning are not the same, generally they seem to approve and support the use of computers in language learning.

Reliability analysis

Before proceeding any further, it is important to check the internal consistency of the items in each factor/group for the three universities. Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was used for this purpose. The items for factor 1 (the teacher-centred group) are presented in Table 4 and 5 and the items for factor 2 (the autonomous group) are presented in Table 6 and 7. The readings established are displayed in Table 8.

The internal consistency of both factors/groups for each institution was above 0.7 which confirmed the reliability of classification of the factors/groups.

Frequency Analysis

A frequency count of the number of students' belonging to the teacher-centered group and the Autonomous group was carried out on each of the

universities. The comparison of the number and percentage of learners belonging to each group is shown in Table 9.

The data show that a majority of the learners in the three universities prefer teacher-centred learning as opposed to autonomous learning: 87.1% of UKM students, 87.6% of UPM students and 79.7 % of OUM students. However, there is marginal difference of about 8 % between OUM students and students from the other two institutions. Similarly, OUM has the highest percentage of autonomous learning (14.4%), followed by UKM and UPM (12.5% and 12.4% respectively). These findings confirm earlier claims that UKM students seem to be the most teacher-centred and OUM students the least teacher-centred.

Discussion of results

The results suggest that generally the learners are aware of the importance of reading widely and acquiring the appropriate learning strategies. They also seem to enjoy communicative-based learning. However, majority of them are teacher-centred although not fully teacher-dependent. They prefer their teachers to be in-charge which include telling them their mistakes, guiding them and motivating them. This is, perhaps, a washback effect of the 'spoon-feed' system operating in most Malaysian primary and secondary schools.

There is also a small group of autonomous learners present in each university. These learners desire the freedom and responsibility to decide what, where, when and how to learn. They prefer to employ their own learning styles and are confident in themselves and believe that peer evaluation is an opportunity to enhance their language ability. There are also some differences among learners of this group in the three universities. The most obvious difference is the degree of autonomy among them. It appears that OUM students are the most autonomous and UKM students the least. This may due to the fact that most of OUM students are mature learners.

Similar findings were found in researches on Hong Kong Chinese learners. Hong Kong Chinese learners are reported to be passive, reticent, and reluctant to openly challenge authority, especially teachers. They are dependent on the syllabus, lack intellectual initiative and prefer rote learning to creative learning (Murphy, 1987; Pierson, 1996). These findings lead to us to ponder over important

Table 9
Learners' preferences groupings according to universities

Grouping		UKM	UPM	OUM
Teacher-centered group (TC)	Count	222	262	161
	%	87.1	87.6	79.7
Autonomous learning group (AL)	Count	32	37	29
	%	12.5	12.4	14.4
Unknown	Count	1	0	12
	%	0.4	0	5.9

issues regarding autonomous learning: If learners prefer teacher-centred learning, does that mean that they are not autonomous? Is autonomy applicable only to Western learners? Why is it that Asian learners can still achieve good results when studying abroad? This suggests the possibility that teacher-centredness may be influenced by the cultural values and mentality of Asians and does not necessarily mean a lack of ability to learn autonomously. Murphy (1987, p. 43) states that:

Hong Kong students display unquestioning acceptance of the knowledge of the teacher or lecturer. This may be explained in terms of an extension or transfer of the Confucian ethic of filial piety. Coupled with this is an emphasis on strictness of discipline and proper behaviour, rather than an expression of opinion, independence, self-mastery, creativity and all around personal development.

The same principle may apply to Malaysian learners. From a cultural perspective, the students in Malaysia bear some similarities to the Hong Kong students. Malaysia also contains a sizeable proportion of Chinese students (the second largest racial group in West Malaysia) who may be indoctrinated with the Confucian ethic of piety from young. The Malays (the largest racial group in Malaysia) also display high respect for the teachers though in a different form. For example, it was a very common practice in the Malay culture for parents to give a cane to the teachers when they sent their children to school or to religious classes in the past. Such practice symbolizes power, trust and respect granted to the teachers in teaching their children. In return, the children were trained to respect and accept the knowledge of the teachers (Siti Zuraina et al., 1999). Azarina's (2006) study that compared learning characteristics and the extent of autonomy of Malay and Chinese students under investigation found no significant differences between the two ethnic groups. Both groups were teacher-centred and possessed characteristics generally considered as not atypical of autonomous learners.

Balla et al. (1991) argue that the passivity and rote learning among Hong Kong students are influenced more by structural elements rather than cultural factors. They posit that this is a result of the mixture of British colonial and educational bureaucracy with the residual elements of traditional Chinese culture transmitted by the family. Malaysia was also previously a British colony and its education was similarly influenced by the British. Thus, the above factors may also influence Malaysian learners.

Hence, it is inaccurate to conclude that Malaysian learners do not have the capacity for autonomy just because they show a preference for the teacher-centred learning mode. We are not proposing that all the students in the teacher-centred group are autonomous, but the possibility that many of them are capable of working independently.

Conclusion

The findings of this present study suggest that a majority of UKM, UPM and OUM respondents are teacher-centered. However, as discussed in the previous

section, this does not mean that the learners are not capable of being autonomous as they do possess autonomous learning characteristics such as awareness of the importance of reading widely and acquiring appropriate learning strategies. The learners may have the capacity to be autonomous, but this quality is not revealed probably because of the influence of socio-cultural factors. Teachers are viewed as the source of knowledge and an important asset to the students and they display reliance on the teacher as a symbol of respect. Thus, as pointed out by Hedge (2001, p. 101) teachers should take “the view that their role may be to mediate between cultures to find a way forward”. This will require careful classroom discussion and support for learners to propel them forward to greater autonomy.

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Appendix 1: Items used in the questionnaire according to categories

Category 1: 18 items designed to find out to what extent the students are teacher-centered.

38. I like the teacher to explain everything to us.
41. I like teachers who vary their teaching styles to meet our learning needs.
44. I like the teacher to give us tasks to work on.
46. I think teachers should make us aware of the strategies that can be used to learn English more effectively.
47. I like the teacher to ask me to talk about my interests.
52. I like the teacher to tell me all my mistakes.
60. I need a lot of guidance in my learning.
63. I like teachers who use a lot of their own materials in classes.
66. I believe it is necessary to have formal teaching to learn English.
68. I like teachers who follow the text closely.
71. I like teachers who correct all my spoken mistakes.
75. I like teachers who ask us to give our views in class.
78. I like teachers to frequently point out my mistakes.
81. I do not have adequate management skills to learn on my own.
82. I think it is important for teachers to give us regular feedback on our work.
84. I think teachers should consider our cultural backgrounds in designing lessons.
89. I think teachers should give us less homework and allow us to do our work in class.
91. I think it is important for English teachers to motivate us.

Category 2: 18 items designed to find out to what extent the students are autonomous in their learning.

42. I think teachers should give us opportunities to select the units we like to learn.
49. I feel it is important to read widely on my academic coursework.
51. I think that teachers should give opportunities to students to learn in their own learning styles.
53. I think teachers should give students opportunities to decide where and how to learn.
55. I only need my lecture and tutorial notes.
57. I think it is important for us to learn about the purposes behind the activities given.
59. I feel that the method used by my teacher inhibits my learning style.
61. I think teachers should empower us to be responsible for our own learning.
65. I always take the initiative when learning about something.
69. I know my learning style and use it effectively.
72. I dislike being directed on how to learn.
73. I like teachers who give us a lot of opportunities to learn on our own.
76. I like the opportunity to correct my classmates' mistakes.
79. Students should be encouraged to challenge their teachers.
83. I like my friends to check my work.
85. I think teachers should allow us to learn at our own pace.
87. I like the opportunity to self-correct minor mistakes in my work.
90. I would like more opportunities to learn on my own.

Category 3: 8 items designed to find out to what extent the students are computer literate.

40. I feel uncomfortable in the learning laboratory.
 43. I do not enjoy studying using the computer.
 50. I conduct a lot of research using the internet.
 56. I believe it is important to have language laboratory sessions.
 62. I wish I were given some opportunities to learn English through using the computer.
 80. I believe that some English classes can be conducted more effectively in a multimedia laboratory.
 86. I think on-line learning should be included in English classes.
 92. I think audio-visual aids should be used frequently in English classes.
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