Investigating Students' Strategy in Conducting Independent Learning at SMP 12 Binjai

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the strategies used by seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 12 Binjai in conducting independent learning in English. This study uses a qualitative research design, data collected through a questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions. The instrument, a carefully structured questionnaire, was administered to the students, whose responses served as the primary data source. The data were analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach through data reduction, categorization, and conclusion drawing, following Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework. The findings reveal that students applied various strategies aligned with Zimmerman's (2000) three-phase model of self-regulated learning: forethought, performance, and self-reflection. In the forethought phase, students engaged in goal-setting and planning; during the performance phase, they managed time and minimized distractions; and in the self-reflection phase, they evaluated their learning progress. The study concludes that while students demonstrate foundational self-regulated learning behaviors, there remains a need for more structured guidance to deepen their metacognitive skills and enhance their overall learning autonomy.

Keywords:
Student Strategy, Independent Learning, Self-Regulated Learning, English Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

Independent learning has gained significant attention in the field of education as it plays a crucial role in fostering self-directed learning, especially in language acquisition. According to Knowles (1975), independent learning is defined as a process where learners take control of their learning activities, including planning, executing, and assessing their learning strategies. Candy (1991) describes it as a learner's ability to take charge of their own learning, involving planning, executing, and assessing their learning strategies. Similarly, Little (1991) defines independent learning as the capacity to take control of one's own learning, highlighting the importance of learner autonomy. These definitions highlight that independent learning refers to a process where learners take initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying resources, and evaluating learning outcomes.

In the context of English learning, independent learning plays a vital role in helping students achieve language proficiency beyond classroom instruction. Holec (1981) emphasizes that autonomy in language learning allows learners to take responsibility for all decisions concerning their learning. Benson (2001) suggests that independent language learning involves learners setting their own objectives and selecting appropriate methods and resources. Furthermore, Dickinson (1995) notes that independent language learners are more motivated and tend to achieve better outcomes due to their active engagement in the learning process. Therefore, independent learning is essential for students to develop their English skills effectively and sustainably.

To achieve independent learning, students need to employ certain strategies that enable them to take control of their learning. Oxford (1990) categorizes these strategies into cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, which help learners process, plan, and evaluate their learning. Zimmerman (2002) highlights self-regulated learning strategies, including goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-reflection, as essential for independent learning. Additionally, Chamot and O'Malley (1994) identify learning strategies such as summarizing, predicting, and questioning as tools that

facilitate independent language acquisition. These strategies help students plan, monitor, and assess their learning, making them more self-reliant in their English learning.

Despite the theoretical framework supporting independent learning, its implementation in real-world educational settings, particularly in junior high schools, often faces significant challenges. Many students struggle with the transition from dependent to independent learning, often due to a lack of confidence in their ability to make learning decisions or because they are unfamiliar with the strategies necessary for effective independent learning. This gap between theory and practice highlights the need for research that explores the actual strategies employed by students to develop independence in their learning, particularly in English language acquisition.

Several previous studies have conducted that can support this research. First, a study by Susiani et al. (2022) examined the influence of cultural factors on student motivation and independent learning skills, highlighting the role of motivation in adopting independent learning strategies. Second, research by Albano and Velasco (2023) identified independent learning strategies such as goal setting, attention control, self-monitoring, and help-seeking, and their relationship with vocabulary skills in English. These studies indicate the significance of learning strategies in fostering learner autonomy but also suggest the need for more context-specific research.

This study aims to investigate the strategies used by seventh-grade students at SMP 12 Binjai in their learning toward becoming independent learners in English learning. The findings of this research will not only contribute to the understanding the strategies of independent learning but also provide practical insights for educators to enhance their teaching approaches and support the development of independent learning among students.

THEORY

Independent Learning in English Language Learning

Independent learning in the context of English language learning refers to students taking responsibility for their own progress, particularly outside of structured classroom settings. This includes setting language learning goals, choosing appropriate study methods, and regularly evaluating personal improvement (Little, 1991). In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings like Indonesia, independent learning becomes even more crucial, as students often have limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

According to Benson (2011), language learner autonomy or independent learning emphasizes a learner's ability to control their learning decisions, including how, when, and what to study. This is especially important in junior high school contexts where students begin to develop stronger cognitive and self-regulation skills necessary for managing their own language acquisition. Moreover, independent learning in English is often supported by metacognitive strategies, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning, as well as motivational factors like interest and self-confidence (Oxford, 1990). In Indonesia's school system, fostering such habits early on can significantly improve students' long-term English proficiency (Musthafa, 2010).

Strategy in Independent Learning

Zimmerman's Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how students can actively manage their own learning. According to Zimmerman (2000), self-regulated learning involves a continuous cycle of three interrelated phases that learners navigate as they take charge of their education.

The first phase is the forethought phase, where students begin by setting specific goals, selecting appropriate strategies for achieving those goals, and preparing themselves mentally. For example, in the context of learning English, a student might decide to learn five new words each day, setting a clear target to improve their vocabulary. This planning stage also involves building motivation, which helps drive the student's commitment to their goals.

The second phase is the performance phase, where students implement the strategies they have devised in the forethought phase. During this phase, students actively engage in the learning process, using various resources such as English learning apps, watching educational videos, or practicing with classmates. Throughout this stage, they continuously monitor their understanding and progress, ensuring that they are effectively applying the strategies they planned in the previous phase.

The last is the self-reflection phase occurs after the learning task is completed. In this phase, students reflect on their performance, evaluating what strategies worked well and which ones need improvement. This reflective process encourages students to assess their learning experience, make necessary adjustments to their methods, and apply these insights to future learning tasks. The cycle of forethought, performance, and self-reflection helps learners refine their approaches over time, fostering greater independence and self-regulation in their learning process.

Zimmerman's model underscores the active role of learners in their educational journey, highlighting how they take responsibility for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their progress. This self-directed approach helps students become more effective and autonomous learners, as they continuously refine their strategies based on their own experiences and self-assessment.

Factors Influencing Strategy Use in Independent English Learning

The strategies students use in independent English learning are influenced by several internal and external factors.

1) Motivation and Attitude

Motivation plays a key role in students' willingness to take responsibility for their English learning. Learners with high intrinsic motivation tend to use more effective and varied strategies (Uztosun, 2020). A positive attitude toward English learning also encourages students to persist even when challenges arise.

2) Access to Resources and Technology

Students with access to digital tools such as language apps, online dictionaries, and video content tend to develop more independent and self-regulated learning habits (Reinders & White, 2011).

3) Language Proficiency Level

Students with higher English proficiency may have more exposure to various strategies and be more capable of selecting the most effective ones. Beginners, on the other hand, might rely on simpler strategies such as repetition or memorization, while advanced learners may apply more complex approaches like self-evaluation or error analysis (Oxford, 1990).

METHOD

This study used qualitative research design to explore the strategies used by students in independent learning. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is appropriate when the aim is to understand participants' perspectives and experiences in depth. The data is collected through a questionnaire that includes open-ended questions. The open-ended items allow students to express their thoughts freely and reflectively. The questionnaire is the main instrument used, carefully developed to align with the research focus. The data for this study are the answers from the questionnaire completed by the students. The participants in this study are seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 12 Binjai, who served as the primary data source.

The collected data is analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that qualitative data analysis involves three major components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This study follows several steps: collecting responses from the questionnaire, reducing the data by selecting relevant and significant information, categorizing the responses into themes, drawing conclusions from the patterns that emerge, and verifying the findings for accuracy. This method allows the researcher to deeply understand the learning

strategies applied by the students and the internal or external factors that influence their choices.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

Based on the data from questionnaire, reseacher categorized the responses into the three phases of self-regulated learning according to Zimmerman (2000): forethought, performance, and self-reflection.

Phase	Sample Student Responses	Keywords Identified
Forethought Phase	Perencanaan, menentukan tujuan, menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang kondusif, membuat jadwal belajar.	Planning, goal-setting, environment, motivation.
Performance Phase	Proses belajar, menggunakan waktu sebaik mungkin, mengurangi main HP, belajar pelan-pelan mandiri.	Time management, independent practice, manage distraction, active process.

Self-reflection Phase	Evaluasi, refleksi, mengetahui apa yang kurang dari belajar, menilai apa yang berhasil dan tidak.	Evaluation, reflection, self-assessment.

The results from the student responses reveal a pattern of behavior that closely aligns with the three phases of self-regulated learning (SRL) as defined by Zimmerman (2000): forethought, performance, and self-reflection. Each phase is reflected through various strategies and habits reported by students, showing a dynamic and ongoing process in their independent learning experiences.

In the forethought phase, students described their efforts to mentally and practically prepare before engaging in a learning task. Many responses emphasized planning strategies such as setting specific academic goals (e.g., "menentukan tujuan"), organizing a schedule ("membuat jadwal belajar"), and creating a supportive learning environment ("lingkungan belajar yang kondusif"). These behaviors reflect not only their readiness but also a growing sense of ownership over their learning journey. Motivation was also a subtle theme here, some students expressed a strong internal desire to improve, which corresponds to Zimmerman's idea that self-motivation fuels the planning process.

Moving into the performance phase, students reported how they implemented their planned strategies in real learning contexts. For instance, they mentioned trying to stay focused by reducing distractions, like limiting the use of their phones ("mengurangi main HP"), and managing their time effectively by scheduling tasks and making use of small pockets of time ("menggunakan waktu sebaik mungkin"). Some responses also indicated that students were gradually building independence, such as transitioning from needing guidance to studying alone ("belajar pelan-pelan mandiri"). These behaviors show that students are actively engaged in learning, monitoring their progress, and

applying tactics to stay on track are the key aspects of the performance phase.

Finally, in the self-reflection phase, students shared insights into how they evaluate their own learning processes and outcomes. Reflections included evaluating what strategies worked or didn't ("evaluasi dan refleksi"), recognizing personal challenges such as laziness or confusion about where to start, and thinking about how to improve next time. These reflections are important because they indicate a metacognitive awareness that supports long-term improvement. The ability to reflect and adjust strategies is central to Zimmerman's model, as it prepares learners for the next cycle of planning with greater precision and insight.

Overall, the data demonstrates that students are engaging with all three phases of self-regulated learning to varying degrees. While some are stronger in the planning and doing phases, others show more awareness in reflecting and adjusting. This variation suggests that while students have the foundation of self-regulated learning, further guidance especially in metacognitive strategies could enhance their independence and learning outcomes.

B. Discussion

The results of this study strongly support Zimmerman's (2000) theory of self-regulated learning, which emphasizes a three-phase model: forethought, performance, and self-reflection. Students' responses revealed clear engagement with these phases, especially in planning their learning (forethought), carrying out study strategies (performance), and evaluating their learning experiences (self-reflection). This alignment suggests that, even without formal instruction on self-regulated learning, many students naturally develop and apply strategies that resemble those proposed by Zimmerman. For example, students who mentioned setting goals, preparing schedules, and creating supportive environments clearly demonstrated behaviors consistent with the forethought phase. Likewise, reports of active engagement in learning and time

management reflect the performance phase, while their personal evaluations and reflections match Zimmerman's self-reflection phase.

However, while the results are generally consistent with the theory, some differences were also observed. Zimmerman emphasizes continuous, conscious self-monitoring during the performance phase, but only a few students explicitly mentioned monitoring their understanding while learning. Most of them seemed to focus more on external behaviors, such as using time wisely or avoiding distractions, rather than on internal cognitive monitoring. This may indicate that while the structure of SRL is present, the depth of metacognitive regulation is still developing. Additionally, Zimmerman's model assumes that learners transition smoothly between phases in a cycle, but the data suggest that some students are stronger in one phase than the others, for instance, being able to plan but struggling with reflection or sustained performance. This reveals that although the theory provides a helpful framework, its real-world application may vary depending on students' individual experiences and self-awareness levels.

The impact of these results is meaningful both for educators and learners. First, the fact that students naturally engage in self-regulated strategies indicates that teachers can build upon this foundation through explicit instruction, helping students become more aware and intentional about their learning process. Teaching students how to better self-monitor and reflect could enhance their independence and academic success. Second, the study highlights the importance of guiding students equally through all three phases of learning, not just focusing on performance (e.g., doing assignments), but also encouraging thoughtful preparation and reflective practice. Finally, these insights can inform curriculum design, suggesting that self-regulation skills should be embedded in learning activities to foster long-term learner autonomy.

CLOSING

A. Conclusion

This study concludes that seventh-grade students at SMP 12 Binjai apply various strategies that reflect Zimmerman's (2000) self-regulated learning theory, encompassing forethought, performance, and self-reflection phases. Students demonstrate the ability to plan their learning through goal-setting and time management, actively engage in tasks by minimizing distractions and practicing independently, and reflect on their learning outcomes to identify areas for improvement. While many students naturally adopt these strategies, the depth of their metacognitive skills, such as conscious self-monitoring still requires development. Overall, the study highlights that students possess the foundational elements of independent learning but would benefit from more structured guidance to optimize these strategies fully.

B. Suggestions

The researcher suggests that educators should provide explicit instruction and support in self-regulated learning strategies, especially in the area of self-monitoring and reflection. Teachers can integrate activities that foster students' awareness of their own learning processes, such as guided goal-setting sessions, reflective journals, and peer feedback. Furthermore, curriculum designers should consider embedding these strategies into daily lessons to promote consistent practice. Encouraging students to become more intentional and reflective learners will not only improve their English learning outcomes but also help them develop long-term learning autonomy and academic resilience.

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