

**ASSESSING STUDENTS' INDEPENDENT LANGUAGE LEARNING (ILL): BAHIR DAR UNIVERSITY
DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM STUDENTS IN FOCUS**

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ABSTRACT

Governments have already acknowledged the significant role of education for societal socioeconomic development. The question on how learning could be facilitated has still an area of focus, and the role of Independent Language Learning (ILL) for helping learners develop their target language proficiency has already been acknowledged in second/foreign teaching and learning literature (Benson, 2006; White, 2008). This survey study assessed whether students following their study in undergraduate distance program of Bahir Dar University perceive and practice ILL. The possible relationships among perceived language proficiency, ILL perception, practice and challenges were also examined. One hundred and thirty students were randomly selected from a population of one thousand two hundred students. A closed ended item questionnaire and unstructured interview were employed for collecting data. Descriptive statistics and correlations were used for analyzing the survey data, and the interview data were presented thematically. The descriptive statistics results showed considerably high perceived language proficiency and positive ILL perceptions as well as merely significant level of practices of ILL in the context of facing prominent challenges though interview results failed to validate such outcomes. The correlation result also showed positive interrelationships among the variables such as perceived language proficiency, ILL perception and practices and challenges.

Keywords: Education for development, Language learning, independent language learning, perceived language proficiency, independent language learning perceptions, independent language learning challenges

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

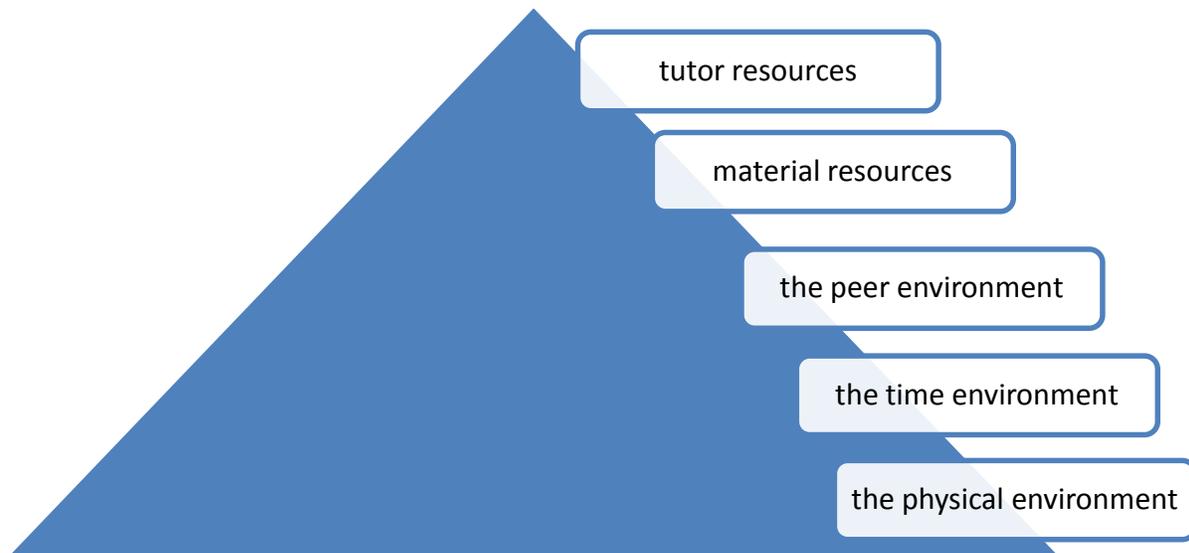
English language being served as a common means of communication in business, diplomacy and politics of the world has one area of concern in education through which the socioeconomic development of a nation is largely determined. Creating a learning environment that empowers English language learners in defining what to learn and how to learn has become the central point of language instruction. In other words, the idea of Independent Language Learning (ILL) has been one area of concern in second/foreign language education for more than three decades. The European Center for Modern Languages (ECML) was the prominent advocator of ILL with establishing a self-access center for learning languages in the 1990s (Benson, 2006). The basic assumption behind providing such learning resources was to encourage the practice of learning languages in a self-study context where the decision of choosing what language to learn and how to go about it were left to individuals depending upon their language needs for communication across Europe. ILL was, thus, defined as learners' capacity for managing the process of learning a language alone (Hole, 1981). Students are supposed to have the required skills and knowledge for addressing the demands of learning independently a target language in order to develop communication competence. Atkinson (1987) in defining ILL emphasizes on responsibility of learners to take charge of their learning in which deciding learning objectives, experiences and monitoring and evaluating of the learning progress are up to individual learners.

According to Benson (2001), ILL has been used interchangeably with several other terms including autonomous learning, self-regulated learning, self-instruction and self-directed learning though considerable perspective differences could be noticed among them. For example, White (2008) attempts to differentiate autonomous learning with ILL as the former is about the learners' ability of taking charge of their learning, and the later refers to the actions learners take for their responsibility in their learning. The author further discusses the nature of ILL with three dimensions. First ILL as a learning context for self study or independent learning; secondly ILL as goal of educational philosophy for learners' self-reliance and independence; thirdly, ILL has been considered as attributes or abilities learners developed through different forms of interaction with the environment. With such varied perspectives White considers ILL as a "dynamic, contingent nature of learning as it unfolds in particular contexts created by contributions of participants" (2008:14). In the present study, ILL is referred as learners' disposition and capability of managing the learning process in the context of distance education where mediating individuals like teachers or tutors are absent.

ILL has been primarily acknowledged as a means of facilitating learning a second/foreign language because of the constructivist's orientation of language learning in which the role of the learner is recognized as actively organizing, analyzing and evaluating the learning matter (Benson, 2006; White, 2008; Williams and Burden, 1997). Freire (1993) strongly suggests the involvement of learners in instructional decisions for successful learning outcomes. Even, ILL has also been reinforced by the dynamic nature of the modern world that demands citizens to be "better educated, more skilled, lifelong autonomous learners (Weinstein et al, 2011: 41). Moreover, with the help of ICT development and related learning opportunities, considerably significant changes of lesson delivery – from a highly authoritative teacher focused to a more flexible learner-centered teaching have been observed.

According to Meyer (2010), two fundamental elements play significant roles for independent learning: external and internal elements. The external elements or factors are reiterated in the form of creating favorable condition for positive interdependence between students and teachers, and setting up or developing supportive environment. That is, learners usually need not only more friendly relationship with their respective teachers but also supportive learning environment for involving in activities that need their prolonged self effort and perseverance. More specifically, MacBeath (1993:9) as cited in Meyer (2010) stated ‘enabling environments’ that have to be established for independent learning with hierarchical order (see Figure 1).

Fig.1 Hierarchical order of enabling environments adapted from MacBeath (1993)



The internal elements or learner factors refer to important components of individual learners’ cognitive, metacognitive and affective variables that play significant roles for independent learning. Learners’ cognitive skills including memory, attention and problem-solving are called upon ones understanding of what the learning issues is. The metacognitive skills consisting of thinking about how learning happens, maintain learners’ planning of the learning; whereas affective skills as manifested in the form of emotions and feelings, are used for controlling ones learning effort and involvement.

Similarly, Lee (1998) noted some fundamental factors that affect ILL. The first is *voluntariness*. Effectiveness in independent learning process requires learners’ willingness to wards learning independently (Lee & Ng, 1994; as cited in Lee, 1998). *Free choice* is also an element that affects’ learners’ contribution to ILL. Making independent decisions on learning objects, contents, monitoring mechanisms and learning outcomes could create motivation and commitment towards ILL. *Flexibility* is another important component for ILL. Independent learning, by its nature, requires a flexible learning program that could consider individual learners’ needs and interests. *Teacher support* is still a prominent component for ILL. Teachers could create strong ties with their students for giving advice, guiding and making orientation on how to manage learning tasks independently (Kelly, 1996; as cited in Lee, 1998). *Peer support* is the last, but not the least important component for ILL. Learners need to

establish a culture of cooperation among them for sharing learning tips and strategies, techniques and experiences (Dam, 1996; Pemberton, 1996; as cited in Lee, 1998).

According to Sheerin (1997) learners cannot achieve complete independence in learning at once despite environmental and personal provisions and support for ILL. They need some steps to go through. Accordingly, a detailed analysis of independent learning activities presented in his model: indentifying ones strengths and weaknesses of learning and language needs, setting learning objectives, planning learning activities, exercising or carrying out the learning activities, and evaluating the progress or learning outcomes. Based on their experience and capacity of doing things independently, learners could manage such learning process with or without the supervision of teachers or another other agents.

More research works have been done on facilitating and deterring factors of ILL. Reinders and Loewen (2013) study showed a strong connection between students' initiation and participation and their ILL experiences. That is, students having more sense of readiness for independent learning were those who exercised their language learning practice autonomously. Defi (2007) in Asian context also studied how students' language proficiency affects their ILL. The study findings confirmed the significant role of language proficiency for involving them in an independent language learning activities. In Newcastle University, Johnes (1998) examined the effect of self-instruction on students' language command. The results did not show more positive impacts on students' improvement; rather more drop outs and lower language improvement were observed on those practicing the self-instruction. Similarly, in a recent study on the role of language proficiency on autonomy and motivation at one of international university in Iran, little effect was observed on both students' autonomy and motivation. However, positive effects of ILL were observed in a study on independent English language learning using internet that students showed significant language improvement as a result of experience in ILL (Islam, 2010).

Promoting ILL in second language education, in general, has become one major area of focus with the development of learning strategy training (Oxford, 1990) that was assumed to solve, if not, minimize the factors deterring ILL effectiveness in second language education. Developing teacher education program tailored for ILL was also suggested by some scholars (e.g., Little, 1999; Reinders and Balcikanli, 2011; Hurd, 2008). Nevertheless, effective use of ILL with significant learning potentials of internet and web-based instructional resources has still a problem to be addressed in ILL research. White (2011) also acknowledges the difficulties facing ILL research as she says the fundamental challenges of "developing the ability of learners to engage with, drive benefit from, and contribute to learning environments not directly mediated by the teacher". Insignificant number of research endeavors has been observed, however, on the factors or difficulties learners face in making use of ILL. Thus, this research mainly sought to address students' perceptions and practices of ILL at higher education context. It also focused on the relationship, if any, among students' perceptions of their language ability, and their practices.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study generally examined the independent EFL learning experiences of distance education students at Bahir Dar University. More specifically, it sought to:

1. Assess the level of distance program students' perceived language ability, ILL perception, practice and challenges.
2. See the correlations, if any, among ILL perception, perceived language ability, challenge and practices of distance program students at Bahir Dar University

METHODOLOGY

This survey study was conducted at Bahir Dar University where thousands of students have been attending their first degree in distance program. Students in various fields of study including English language, accounting, management, economics, geography and education are required to take two courses of English language: communicative English Skills and basic writing skills. These courses are assumed to improve students' English language proficiency that will be needed for handling their academic studies. The students take the courses with the help of learning materials the so called modules. Each course has its own module for students to study and practice exercises and activities independently or together with friends. In a semester of four months, students usually have only two contacts with their respective tutors for general reflections and feedback on the courses they registered and worked with the learning materials. The students' active involvement in the self study practices is required for a student to get pass mark in each course. However, the university does make little effort on helping students understand the nature of independent learning in general and independent language learning in particular for managing the self learning activities effectively. This study, thus, involved one hundred thirty students randomly selected from one thousand two hundred students of different departments (English, accounting, management and education).

PARTICIPANTS

This study involved one hundred thirty students (72 females and 68 males) and two male instructors or tutors. The selection of students was based on systematic random sampling where students from different departments (English language & literature, Geography, Accounting, Management and Economics) were approached during their tutorial sessions. The ages of students ranges from 20 to 55 years though majority of them fall in between 25 and 30 years. The instructors were chosen based on their willingness and accessibility. They had 10 and 15 years of teaching experience at the university and had considerable profile of tutoring students in distance program.

INSTRUMENTS OF DATA COLLECTION

This study used questionnaire and interview for data collection. The questionnaire was designed to examine the level of students' perception towards learning English language independently, and see their practical experiences of independent learning. Items of the questionnaire were prepared based on literature reviews related to perceptions of independent language learners (e.g., Brown, 2002) and independent language learning (e., g., Benson, 2006; White, 2008). The questionnaire had two

sections: the first section presented items on independent language learning; while the second was about background information of participants. The items were clustered into four thematic categories: perceived language ability, perceptions, practices, and challenges of independent language learning. Students were required to response to individual closed ended items in the form of (always 4, sometimes 3, rarely 2 and never 1) or (strongly agree 5, agree 4, neutral 3, disagree 2, and strongly disagree 1).

The unstructured interview was conducted to see how instructors/tutors evaluate students' language proficiency and the efforts the students show up in tutorial sessions. The questions mainly focused on the level of students' language command, the types of instructional assistance students sought from their tutors, the degree of participation in discussing exercises from the learning modules. The interview was, thus, conducted to validate the students' self-reported data on language proficiency and independent language learning practices.

PROCEDURES

The prepared items of the questionnaire were given to one experienced TEFL educator in the university to assess their content and relevance of addressing independent language learning. Some modifications on the clarity and reduction of item numbers were made based on the comments. The questionnaire administered to thirty students in the university for pilot and a reliability coefficient of Cronbach's alpha 0.81 was found, and this amount could reasonably be alright for using it in such survey study. The questionnaire for the main study, then, was administered by tutors of students from different departments. That is, individual tutors were given sheets of the questionnaire while they were heading to tutorial sessions, and the tutors of respective department students spent twenty-thirty minutes facilitating each student filled out the given questionnaire. Thus, the collected data were entered SPSS 20 program for analysis of descriptive statistics and correlations.

Data from interview were collected in the form of informal discussions with each of the two instructors after the end of their tutorial sessions. Forty-fifty minutes discussions were made on how students approach tutorial sessions and involve in exercises discussions. The interview data were analyzed thematically and presented imbedded with the survey data.

RESULTS

Figure 2. Self-perceived language proficiency

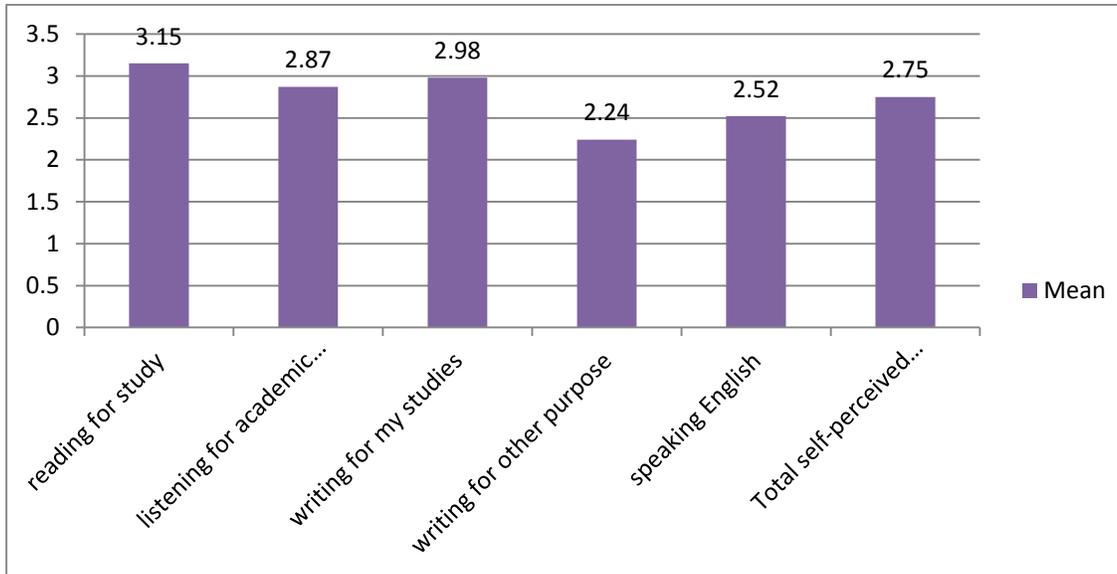


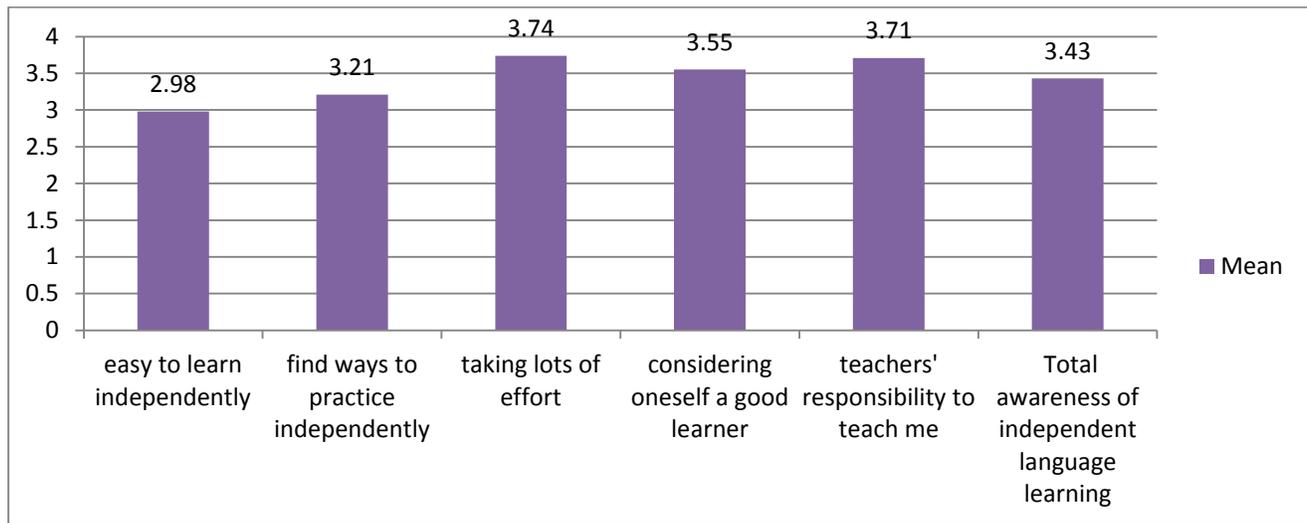
Figure 2 shows the students' mean reported language command. As the table indicates, the students' mean responses to their self-perceived reading, listening and writing proficiency of academic communication is fairly high (mean 3.15; mean, 2.87; mean, 2.98 for reading, listening and writing respectively). They tend to feel that they have considerable command of English language for comprehending and writing academic issues. Even, the total mean response to the overall English language proficiency shows merely high level of communication for academic matters (mean, 2.75 for total language proficiency). However, the students seemed to be concerned about their general speaking skills and writing proficiency for non-academic issues.

Data from interview tend to question such students' perceived level of language proficiency. The two interviewees complained their tutees' language that the majority of students were having difficulties of understanding or following lectures (explanations) given in English. One interviewee said:

Since most students do not respond to my questions, I have to make my notes ready for teaching...I mean tutoring in English and ...at the same time in Amharic (local language). Otherwise, no communication will happen. Even, when I give specific instructions only in English during the tutoring session, students usually get confused. They do not know what to do...so I have to repeat things in Amharic.

In general, the students' response in the survey data about their own language proficiency does not appear practical in the tutorial sessions as the interviewed tutors noted.

Figure 3. Perceptions of ILL



The above Figure3 shows the students' mean responses on their awareness about independent language learning. The students reported of having considerably more understanding of the efforts language learning requires and self-confidence they have for managing independent language learning (mean, 3.74 and 3.55 for effort and learning confidence respectively). This means the students appear to be more aware of the demanding nature of learning English that necessary devotion of time and energy is expected from an individual of learning the language well.

However, the students' response on teachers' responsibility in guiding students for independent learning is fairly high (mean, 3.71). That is, the students' expected much more follow up and support from their respective teachers though the students reported having a strong sense of independence and awareness about the need and benefits for learning English independently. The overall mean response on the possibility and roles of independent English learning is considerably positive and significant (mean, 3.43). Generally, the students' mean response on the awareness about the bennefits of independent language learning becomes considerably significant. i.e., they reported on of having noceable degree of positive perception and intent for making use of the opportunity.

Conversely, tutors in their interview session noted that students mostly focused on receiving feedback and any other form of inputs from their respective tutors other than participating in exercises and activities carried out during tutorial sessions. Both interviewees said that though we instructors or tutors were required to make a review of the course based on the given module or material that students had already received for reading and doing actities ahead of time, the students insisted us (teachers) to do every exercise of the material . Majority of the students kept silent when the tutors asked for answers to the exercises of the module. One interviewee stated:

You see totorials are scheduled for revision. That means, students are expected to read and practice the exercises and tasks of the material. So our job is giving some hints about the course and doing a few exercise together with the students. However, when I asked students to give the points from the material, they simply gaze at me, no anwer. So you have to try to give more explanations of points as much as possible....imagine

the tutorial sessions has only four hours so how can you finish the course in such a manner? This is because of the highly dependent nature of our students, I guess. Of course, one or two students out of twenty five or more students tried to give answers to some exercise questions. This is good, but the problem here is when such interested students responded to you, the other students became uncomfortable as the majority wanted me to finish the module without spending time on asking and discussing a few issues or points with one or two active students.

The interviewed teachers also complained about not only the inactive role majority of students were taking during the tutorial sessions, but also the shortage of time for facilitating and managing tutorial sessions as the instructional expectations of students getting higher and higher. Therefore, such discourses of the interviewed tutors entirely question the students' self-reported data indicating positive perceptions and endeavors of independent language learning.

Figure 4. Practices of ILL

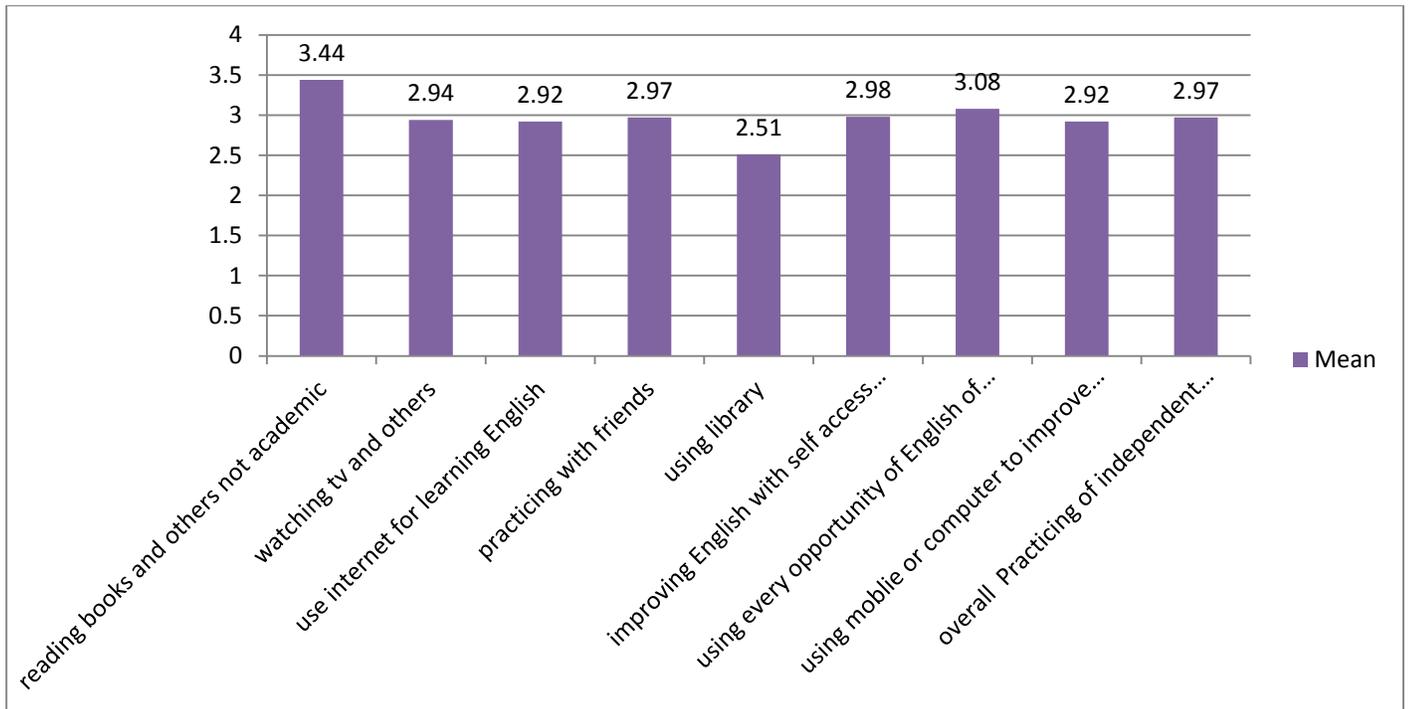


Figure 4 above presents the students' mean responses on the independent English learning practices. Accordingly, the most frequent practice of self-learning by the students is reading English learning books (mean, 3.44). The students seemed to spend more time for reading English language materials for improving their proficiency. Even, in the majority of independent language learning opportunities the students' mean response showed fairly significant attempts of learning independently (e.g., mean, 3.08 for using every learning opportunity; mean, 2.98, for improving with self-access resources; and mean, 2.97, for

practicing with friends). The mean response result for the overall practices of independent learning also indicates occasional self-learning efforts where considerable development of language command would be expected over time.

While the students in the self-reported practices of independent language learning revealed considerable attempts of involving in independent learning experiences, the interview data seemed to challenge it:

Researcher: I think the students felt that they have been trying to study or improve their English independently.... With the help of the material or module of course?

Tutor1: I do not know how it could happen. You see, in the tutorial session most students became silent when I asked whether they had read and done the exercises before coming to the session. Even, when I asked one or two general information about the course, I found one or none to respond. So, if they had the experience of practicing languages or reading materials for improving, I think I should have seen some aspect of active engagement in my tutorial sessions.

Tutor 2: In my experience, I observed such paradoxical responses: I usually asked my students to raise their hands of those who have read and done the exercises given home. For the last two or more months, they took the material or module with them and kept it home. During that time I felt that they could practice learning the language with the material for improving their language. That is why I asked them whether they had tried or not. Surprisingly, some half or more students usually showed me their hands up. However, during the actual tutorial discussion I did not find more than one or two participants. Therefore, sometimes I shouted over them 'if you have read and practice the exercises independently home, you failed to respond?'. Nothing!..... you could not find signs of exercising independent language learning.

The survey result of the students' self-reported practices did not seem to be reflected in the tutorial sessions as the interviewees noted. Therefore, there seems to be inconsistent on what students reported and what teachers or tutors observed in tutorial sessions.

Figure 5. Challenges of ILL

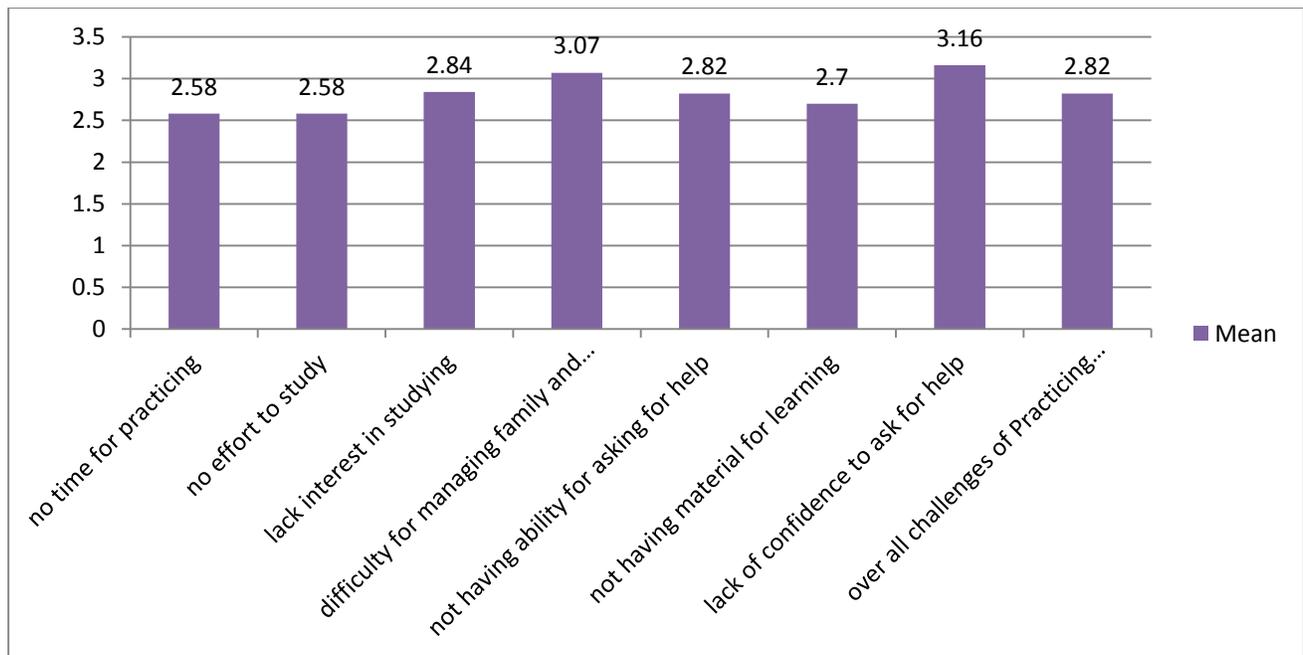


Figure 5 above shows the students' mean responses on individual challenges they would find during their independent language learning efforts. The students' overall mean response on the possible challenges of independent learning practice does indicate inconceivable reaction (mean, 2.82). That is, the students did not seem to realize the difficulties they would face in practicing self-learning; and little impact could be expected from using independent language learning techniques and opportunities. Surprisingly, the students' report on each list of possible ILL difficulty revealed nothing. This, however, does not seem to mean that the students are free of learning difficulties. It may rather imply that the students did not largely involve in independent learning practices so as not to notice the challenges the students could face in the process.

Interview data stated in the preceding section from the two tutors also deemphasized the possible challenges the students could face in practicing ILL. The interviewee argued that the students would not face problems of learning resources and materials given those students themselves became ready for self-supportive learning practices.

Table1 Correlations among Self-perceived Language Proficiency, Awareness, Practices and Challenges of Independent Language Learning

		Self-perceived language proficiency	Awareness of independent language	practicing independent language learning	challenges of practicing language learning
Self-perceived language proficiency	Pearson Corr. Sig. (2-tailed) N				
Awareness of independent language	Pearson Corr. Sig. (2-tailed) N	.401** .000			
practicing independent language learning	Pearson Corr. Sig. (2-tailed) N	.280* .013	.277* .014		
challenges of practicing language learning	Pearson Corr. Sig. (2-tailed) N	.416** .000	.363** .001	.203 .075	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The above table 1 presents correlations among students' perception of ILL, self-perceived language ability, practice of ILL and the challenges they face for ILL. Statistically significant positive correlation is found between the self-perceived language ability and perception of ILL (corr. .401, $P < 0.005$). The students with relatively more sense of self confidence on their own language command could show up considerable level of positive perception on ILL. Understandably, a person with positive self-concept concerning his/her ability could regard him/her self as a self reliance person for using ILL. Statistically significant positive correlations are also observed among the self-perceived language proficiency, ILL practice and ILL challenges (corr. 0.280, and 0.416 respectively, $P < 0.005$). That is, having positive perception of students' own language proficiency is meant not only to see some efforts of using ILL but also to experience possible challenges the students are facing in ILL. Even the students' perception of ILL is statistically correlated with the practices as well as the challenges of ILL (Corr., 0.277, and 0.363 respectively, $P < 0.005$). The students' awareness on ILL has some positive relations with their practices and the possible

challenges of ILL. That is, the more the students will be aware of the ILL, the larger the possibility of using ILL as well as of facing some difficulties associated with it. Generally, this correlation coefficients tends to prove that when students become self confident of their own language ability, they will have positive perceptions on independent language learning activities and considerable involvements in the learning tasks where teachers or other assistant bodies are not around. Nevertheless, such positive relationship among self-perceived language proficiency, ILL awareness, and ILL practices does not seem to be supported by the interview data.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to assess the nature of ILL as perceived by students and the relationships between perceived language ability, awareness, practice and challenges of ILL. Considerable level of language command mainly for academic discourses was reported by the students. Surprisingly, the interview data failed to confirm such result. Rather as the interviewees stated, a large number of students did not seem to verbalize their ideas in English adequately. The point is how this contradictory result (response) happened between the students and their respective teachers (tutors) on language proficiency and ILL practices? One possible justification could be the students did not seem to conceptualize clearly the nature and practice of ILL. For example, considerably high level of self-perceived language proficiency report may not be surprising for students who do not know well what a proficient language learner mean.

Concerning the correlation analysis, a statistically significant positive relationship among the variables such as language ability, ILL perception and practice was observed. That is, the more the students develop their own sense of language competence, the more likely to have positive perception towards ILL and to exercise ILL activities. This result supports Brown's (2002) assumptions stated in his book 'Strategies for Success' as he claims that learners should develop their own sense of positive thinking and language ego (confidence in learning a language with personal effort and dedication) if they want to improve their language proficiency in a self study context. This result also confirms the Reinders and Loewen's (2013) study that showed a strong connection between independent language learning and students' wiliness in involving in self learning activities. Besides, in Indonesian state school context, students' positive attitudes towards language learning was also found essential in practicing independent language learning inside and out classrooms despite having restricted access to autonomous learning opportunities (Lamb, 2004).

Generally, Successful ILL experience in one way or the other needs to have not only well-resourced language centers and self study opportunities but also strong encouragement and facilitation of developing learning positive perceptions towards learning independently. Based on a case study result on involvement of sell-access centers by university students for developing their language skills, Souto and Turner (2000), noted that a comprehensive and coordinated assistance framework is needed for students to engage in independent language learning experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

This survey study addressed the students' self perceived proficiency of English language, perceptions of language learning independently and reported practices the students did in following distance education program. Based on results from questionnaire, two major conclusions could be drawn. Firstly, the data on self-perceived language proficiency and perceptions

on ILL seem to reflect the students' positive stance of the language command they have and the role of ILL for learning English effectively though the interview data failed to confirm. That is, considerably high level of perceived proficiency and optimistic perception towards ILL tends to be reflected on the students' perspective. Secondly, the practical experiences the students reported of ILL became considerably significant while challenges they faced in ILL reported inconsiderable. The students felt that they involved in self language learning activities with little challenge they faced in internal and external environments. Nevertheless, based on the interview result, we may conclude that such positive efficacy, positive relationship among self-perceived language command, ILL perception and ILL practice should convince the teachers' or tutors' expectations as well as observation about the students. Generally, this result implies one thing that practical ILL to happen, reflective learning experiences would have to be introduced in second/foreign language education.

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