

Exploring English Education Students' Experiences in Mastering English Vocabulary through Independent Learning

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary mastery is essential for EFL students because it supports effective communication and overall English language proficiency. Since classroom instruction alone is often insufficient for sustained vocabulary development, many students engage in independent learning beyond formal instruction. However, limited qualitative studies have explored students' experiences and challenges in independent vocabulary learning, particularly within Indonesian higher education, where English is learned as a foreign language and opportunities for authentic language exposure are relatively limited. This study aimed to explore English Education students' experiences in learning English vocabulary through independent learning and to identify the challenges they encountered at an Indonesian university. A descriptive qualitative design was employed involving 30 English Education students who completed open-ended questionnaires, with five participants subsequently selected for semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students employed various learning strategies, digital resources, and social support while encountering challenges in setting learning goals, maintaining learning consistency, managing distractions, monitoring progress, and evaluating learning strategies. The study concludes that successful independent vocabulary learning depends on effective self-regulation and provides pedagogical insights for promoting learner autonomy in Indonesian EFL higher education.

Keywords: *Independent Learning, Vocabulary Learning, Students' Experiences, Self-Regulated Learning*

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INTRODUCTION

Independent learning is an approach that allows students to take responsibility for their own learning by determining what to learn, how to learn, and when learning takes place. Holec (1981) defines independent learning as learners' ability to take charge of their own learning, including setting learning objectives, selecting learning materials, choosing appropriate learning methods, and evaluating learning outcomes. Expanding this concept, Benson (2011) explains that learner autonomy consists of technical, psychological, and social dimensions. The technical dimension concerns learners' ability to utilize learning strategies and resources, the psychological dimension emphasizes motivation and self-awareness, while the social dimension highlights learners' freedom to make decisions within their educational environment. Likewise, Little (1991) argues that learner autonomy requires learners to develop the capacity for reflection and self-regulation rather than simply being given freedom to learn independently. In adult education, Knowles (1980) further emphasizes that adult learners naturally tend to direct their own learning based on their previous experiences, personal goals, and learning needs.

The importance of independent learning has also been recognized in Indonesia through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2021. This policy encourages students to become active learners by providing greater opportunities to manage their own learning, participate in

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 exploratory activities, develop personal competencies, and utilize various digital learning resources.

In the context of English language learning, independent learning plays an important role in vocabulary development. Vocabulary serves as the foundation of language competence because it enables learners to understand and express meaning effectively. Wilkins (1972) argues that vocabulary is the foundation of communication because meaningful interaction cannot occur without sufficient vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, Nation (2013) argues that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of language proficiency because learners cannot comprehend or produce meaningful language without adequate vocabulary. Since classroom learning alone often provides limited opportunities for vocabulary acquisition, English Education students need to develop their vocabulary independently by selecting learning resources that suit their learning preferences. These resources may include learning applications, English reading materials, videos, social media, and other authentic English content that provide continuous exposure to new vocabulary. Students' learning experiences also play an important role in vocabulary development because vocabulary is acquired not only through direct instruction but also through meaningful learning experiences. Dewey (1938) argues that meaningful learning occurs when learners actively engage in and reflect upon their experiences.

Although independent learning provides learners with greater flexibility and autonomy, it also presents several challenges throughout the learning process. Zimmerman (2000), through the theory of Self-Regulated Learning, explains that successful independent learning involves three phases: forethought, performance, and self-reflection. During the forethought phase, learners establish learning goals and plan learning strategies. The performance phase involves implementing strategies while monitoring learning progress, whereas the self-reflection phase focuses on evaluating learning outcomes and the effectiveness of learning strategies. In the context of vocabulary learning, difficulties at any of these stages may reduce the effectiveness of independent learning. Therefore, the success of independent vocabulary learning depends not only on learners' autonomy but also on their ability to regulate, monitor, and evaluate their own learning process.

Previous studies have examined independent learning and vocabulary learning from various perspectives. Hong & Du (2021) found that Quizlet promotes learner autonomy by increasing students' motivation, engagement, and responsibility through features such as flashcards, games, and self-study activities. Similarly, Ruswandi et al. (2024) reported that EFL students actively learned vocabulary outside the classroom using various digital resources, including mobile applications, English videos, online reading materials, and personal vocabulary notes, although their learning practices were often influenced by motivational and environmental factors. Likewise, Daly (2022) argued that autonomous learning encourages learners to take greater responsibility for vocabulary development by independently selecting learning strategies and learning resources that suit their individual needs.

Other studies have explored independent learning from different perspectives. Janitra (2020) reported that students with higher levels of self-regulation were better able to manage independent vocabulary learning by setting learning goals, selecting appropriate learning materials, and monitoring their learning progress. (Chubaryan et al., 2023) demonstrated that the use of vocabulary journals enhanced vocabulary retention and encouraged learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Hendriwanto et al. (2021) found that YouTube supported independent English learning by improving students' language skills, including vocabulary, despite challenges related to motivation, limited teacher interaction, and internet access. Similarly, Luthfiyah & Sukarno (2025) revealed that independent learning enhanced students' understanding, confidence, and learning skills, although learners continued to experience difficulties in time management, maintaining concentration, and sustaining learning consistency.

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the importance of independent vocabulary learning in fostering learner autonomy and long-term language development among EFL

students. Research indicates that successful vocabulary acquisition extends beyond classroom instruction and depends on learners' ability to regulate their own learning through goal setting, strategy selection, monitoring, and self-evaluation (Nation, 2022). With the rapid development of digital technology, students also rely on online dictionaries, mobile applications, artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools, and social media platforms to expand their vocabulary and practice language independently (Chen & Hsu, 2023; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2024). However, recent studies have reported that many EFL learners continue to face challenges in maintaining learning consistency, selecting effective strategies, and managing distractions in self-directed learning environments (Lai, 2022; Teng, 2023). Furthermore, self-regulated learning has been identified as a key factor influencing the success of independent vocabulary learning because it enables learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning process more effectively (Oxford, 2023). These findings underscore the need to explore students' authentic experiences to better understand how independent vocabulary learning can be supported in higher education.

Although these previous studies have contributed valuable insights into independent learning and vocabulary development, most of them primarily focused on learning media, learning strategies, self-regulation, or the effectiveness of autonomous learning. Furthermore, many of these studies employed quantitative or mixed-method approaches, providing limited understanding of students' lived experiences during independent vocabulary learning. Consequently, relatively little attention has been given to exploring how students personally experience learning English vocabulary independently and the challenges they encounter throughout the learning process, particularly in the context of Indonesian higher education.

To address this gap, the present study explores the experiences of students in the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University in learning English vocabulary through independent learning and identifies the challenges they encounter during the learning process. In this study, Benson (2011) learner autonomy theory is used to explore students' experiences in independent vocabulary learning, focusing on the technical and social dimensions. The technical dimension helps explain students' experiences in using learning resources and learning activities, while the social dimension explores the role of social interaction in their learning experiences. The psychological dimension is not included because this study focuses on students' experiences rather than their internal motivational or affective aspects. In addition, Zimmerman (2000) Self-Regulated Learning theory is used as the analytical framework to identify the challenges students encounter throughout the independent vocabulary learning process.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore students' experiences in learning English vocabulary through independent learning and the challenges they encountered throughout the process. Qualitative research enables researchers to understand participants' perspectives and experiences in their natural context (Creswell, 2014). This design was considered appropriate because the study focused on describing students' real experiences rather than measuring variables statistically. To obtain comprehensive data, the researcher employed an open-ended questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews, allowing both a broad overview and in-depth exploration of students' independent vocabulary learning experiences.

Respondents

The study was conducted in the English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Tadulako University. The questionnaire participants consisted of 30 active undergraduate students selected through purposive sampling. This sampling technique was employed because the study specifically targeted students who had experience learning English vocabulary independently outside formal classroom instruction. Participant recruitment was carried out by inviting students enrolled in the English Education Study

Program who met the predetermined inclusion criteria. To be included, participants had to (1) be active students of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University, (2) have experience learning English vocabulary independently through activities such as using digital applications, online resources, reading, or self-study, and (3) voluntarily agree to participate by providing informed consent.

Following the questionnaire, five participants were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews to obtain richer and more in-depth information about their independent vocabulary learning experiences. The interviewees were chosen based on the richness, clarity, and diversity of their questionnaire responses, ensuring that different learning experiences, strategies, and challenges were represented. This criterion-based purposive sampling enabled the researcher to explore a broad range of perspectives while maintaining relevance to the research objectives. All interview participants provided informed consent prior to the interviews, and their identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality and encourage open, honest responses throughout the study.

Instruments

Two research instruments were used to collect the data: an open-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The open-ended questionnaire was designed to obtain a general understanding of students' experiences and challenges in independent vocabulary learning by allowing participants to express their ideas freely. The semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain more detailed insights into the participants' experiences and challenges they face. Although the interviews followed a prepared interview guide, additional follow-up questions were asked whenever necessary to clarify participants' responses and obtain richer information.

Procedures

Data collection was conducted in two stages. First, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to 30 students to obtain an overview of their independent vocabulary learning practices and challenges. After the questionnaire responses were analyzed, five participants were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences more deeply and to complement the questionnaire findings. Using these two data collection methods enabled the researcher to obtain both broad and detailed information regarding students' independent vocabulary learning.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). The analysis followed six stages: (1) familiarizing with the data by repeatedly reading the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for potential themes by grouping related codes, (4) reviewing and refining the themes, (5) defining and naming each theme, and (6) producing the final report by interpreting the themes in relation to the research questions. This analytical approach enabled the researcher to identify meaningful patterns that reflected students' experiences and the challenges they encountered in independent vocabulary learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Experiences in Mastering English Vocabulary through Independent Learning (RQ 1)

The findings revealed that students actively engaged in independent vocabulary learning by employing various learning strategies, utilizing diverse learning resources, and organizing

their own learning activities outside the classroom. Rather than relying solely on classroom instruction, participants independently selected learning materials and strategies that matched their interests, learning needs, and personal preferences. The data also indicated that students demonstrated awareness of the importance of developing vocabulary continuously through self-directed learning.

One of the most prominent findings was the use of multiple learning strategies to support vocabulary acquisition. Most participants reported that they regularly repeated newly learned words, wrote vocabulary notes, reviewed previously learned vocabulary, and practiced using new words in sentences. These strategies helped them remember vocabulary more effectively while encouraging continuous exposure to English outside the classroom. Besides applying individual learning strategies, students also made extensive use of digital technology to support their learning. Social media platforms, English learning applications, YouTube videos, websites, movies, songs, and English reading materials were frequently mentioned as the primary sources for learning new vocabulary. These digital resources allowed students to encounter vocabulary in authentic contexts while providing flexibility in choosing when and how they wanted to study.

One respondent explained:

"When learning English vocabulary on my own, I like using content on social media such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. I often watch short videos, read captions, or follow English learning accounts that share new words and expressions. From these platforms, I can see how vocabulary is used in everyday conversations, which makes it easier and more fun to understand. Learning vocabulary through social media feels more interesting and less boring than just memorizing words from a book"
(Respondent 1, Questionnaire, April 14, 2026)

This response indicates that social media was not merely used for entertainment but also became an important learning resource that exposed students to authentic language use. Learning vocabulary through contextualized examples helped students understand word meanings more naturally than traditional memorization. Another participant described a combination of learning strategies used during independent learning:

"I usually learn new words by writing notes, watching English vlogs or videos, and repeating the words often." (Respondent 2, Questionnaire, April 21, 2026)

This finding suggests that students combined several learning activities rather than relying on a single strategy. The integration of note-taking, repetition, and audiovisual materials enabled students to reinforce newly acquired vocabulary from different perspectives. Besides choosing learning resources and strategies, some students also attempted to organize their learning process by establishing simple study routines. Students commonly reported setting aside a short period each day to review vocabulary or setting small daily learning targets that were easier to achieve.

One participant stated:

"I usually make a simple schedule, like studying vocabulary for 10–15 minutes every day. I try to be consistent by choosing a specific time, such as in the morning or before sleeping. I also combine activities, like reviewing old words and learning a few new ones each session. This helps me stay organized and not feel overwhelmed."
(Respondent 4, Questionnaire, April 20, 2026)

This response demonstrates that students attempted to regulate their own learning by organizing manageable learning routines that could be integrated into their daily activities. The interview data further strengthened these findings. Participants explained that they deliberately selected learning resources that were easy to access, interesting, and appropriate for their English proficiency level. Rather than using only textbooks, they preferred digital platforms because these resources provided enjoyable learning experiences while exposing them to authentic vocabulary.

One interview participant explained:

"I usually choose apps or materials that are easy to access and interesting for me, especially social media like Instagram or TikTok. I prefer content that is simple,

Exploring English Education Students' Experiences in Mastering English Vocabulary through Independent Learning engaging, and not too formal because it helps me understand the meaning of words more easily. I also choose materials that match my level, so I don't feel overwhelmed when learning new vocabulary." (Informant 1, Interview, April 26, 2026)

Another participant emphasized that maintaining simple daily targets helped sustain learning consistency:

"I stay consistent by setting a small daily target, like learning 5–10 new words, and reviewing them regularly." (Informant 2, Interview, April 25, 2026)

These interview findings suggest that independent vocabulary learning was characterized by students' ability to choose learning resources, develop personal learning routines, and adjust learning activities according to their own needs and learning preferences. Another important finding concerned the influence of social interaction on students' independent vocabulary learning. Although independent learning emphasizes learners' responsibility for managing their own learning, the findings showed that friends, online communities, and social media also contributed to students' vocabulary development. Participants explained that they often received recommendations for learning applications, English videos, vocabulary learning techniques, and useful online resources from their friends or online communities.

One respondent commented:

"Yes, they do. My friends and online communities often share tips, apps, and new words, which give me ideas on how to learn better. Sometimes, we also motivate each other to stay consistent." (Respondent 1, Questionnaire, April 21, 2026)

However, social influence did not automatically determine students' learning behaviour. Many participants explained that they preferred adapting recommendations according to their own learning styles rather than following every suggestion completely.

As one participant stated:

"I adjust their suggestions to match my own learning style instead of following them completely." (Respondent 3, Questionnaire, April 20, 2026)

The interview findings reflected similar experiences. Participants acknowledged that social interaction motivated them to continue learning while introducing them to new learning resources and strategies.

One interview participant explained:

"Yes, my friends or online communities help me by sharing new vocabulary, recommending resources, and sometimes motivating me to keep learning." (Informant 1, Interview, April 25, 2026)

Another participant added:

"Yes, they influence my strategies. For example, I sometimes try learning methods that my friends or people online suggest, especially if they seem practical and easy to follow." (Informant 3, Interview, April 25, 2026)

Overall, the findings indicate that students' experiences in independent vocabulary learning were characterized by active involvement in selecting learning strategies, utilizing diverse digital resources, organizing personal learning routines, and receiving support from social interactions. Although students benefited from recommendations and encouragement provided by friends and online communities, they remained responsible for making their own learning decisions and adapting learning methods according to their individual preferences and learning needs.

Challenges in Independent Vocabulary Learning (RQ 2)

The findings revealed that although students actively engaged in independent vocabulary learning, they also encountered various challenges throughout the learning process. These challenges occurred before, during, and after learning, including difficulties in setting learning goals, maintaining consistency, staying focused while learning, and evaluating their learning

progress. Overall, the findings indicate that managing independent vocabulary learning requires not only motivation but also the ability to regulate the learning process continuously.

One of the most common challenges reported by participants was determining clear learning goals and deciding which vocabulary should be prioritized. Students explained that the large number of unfamiliar English words often made them uncertain about what vocabulary they should learn first. As a result, some participants admitted that their learning lacked direction because they did not have specific learning targets.

One respondent explained:

"When learning vocabulary independently, I often face several difficulties. One of them is maintaining consistency because sometimes I feel lazy or get busy with other activities. In addition, I sometimes find it hard to remember the vocabulary I have learned if I do not review it regularly. The lack of clear goals also makes my learning less directed." (Respondent 1, Questionnaire, April 16, 2026)

Similarly, another participant stated:

"Yes, sometimes I find it difficult to set clear goals because I am not always sure what target should achieve." (Respondent 2, Questionnaire, April 20, 2026)

These responses suggest that setting learning objectives was not always an easy task. Students frequently experienced uncertainty regarding which vocabulary should receive greater attention, resulting in less structured learning activities. The interview findings supported these questionnaire responses. One participant explained that the abundance of unfamiliar vocabulary made it difficult to determine learning priorities.

"I sometimes find it difficult to set clear goals or decide which vocabulary to learn. This happens especially when I don't know which words are more important or useful for me. I also feel confused because there are many words to learn, so it's hard to choose a specific focus." (Informant 1, Interview, April 25, 2026)

Besides planning their learning, maintaining consistency throughout the learning process also emerged as a major challenge. Many participants admitted that they often lost motivation, became distracted by other activities, or simply felt too tired to continue studying vocabulary regularly. Although several students had established learning schedules or daily targets, they were not always able to follow them consistently.

One respondent stated:

"The main difficulties I face are inconsistency, lack of motivation, and sometimes forgetting the words I have learned." (Respondent 3, Questionnaire, April 16, 2026)

Another participant shared a similar experience:

"I sometimes have difficulty staying consistent and managing my time, especially when I feel unmotivated or distracted by other activities. It can also be challenging to remember new words for a long time if I don't review them regularly." (Respondent 4, Questionnaire, April 21, 2026)

These findings indicate that sustaining regular vocabulary learning remained difficult despite students' awareness of the importance of independent learning. Other activity and fluctuating motivation often interrupted their learning routines. Interview participants also described consistency as one of the biggest obstacles in independent vocabulary learning.

"I think the hardest part is staying consistent and not forgetting what I've learned. Sometimes I also lose motivation." (Informant 2, Interview, April 26, 2026)

Another significant challenge involved maintaining concentration while learning through digital media. Although students regarded social media, YouTube, and other online platforms as useful learning resources, they also admitted that these platforms frequently distracted them. Instead of continuing their vocabulary learning, students often shifted their attention to entertainment content available on the same platforms.

One respondent explained:

"Yes, because there are so many things to watch on YouTube, sometimes I get distracted and end up watching other videos." (Respondent 6, Questionnaire, April 14, 2026)

These findings suggest that while digital media provides rich opportunities for vocabulary learning, it may also reduce learning effectiveness when students struggle to maintain attention and self-discipline. The findings further revealed that evaluating learning progress was another major challenge experienced by many participants. Several students attempted to monitor their vocabulary development by reviewing vocabulary notes, testing themselves, or using newly learned vocabulary in sentences. However, they still found it difficult to determine whether these activities reflected real improvement because they rarely received external feedback.

One participant explained:

"I monitor my progress by reviewing vocabulary regularly and testing myself to practice exercises. I also find it difficult to monitor my progress. Since I do not receive regular feedback or evaluation, it is hard for me to know how much my vocabulary has improved. Sometimes, I am not sure how far I have progressed in my learning." (Respondent 8, Questionnaire, April 16, 2026)

Another respondent reported:

"I usually monitor my progress by checking how many new words I can remember and use in sentences. I also review my notes regularly to see my improvement over time. But even so I still find it difficult to monitor the progress of the most challenging part of monitoring my progress is the lack of feedback. Even when I try to use new vocabulary, I usually only practice by talking to myself." (Respondent 9, Questionnaire, April 21, 2026)

The interview data also confirmed these findings. Participants explained that they often questioned whether the learning strategies they used were effective because they could not clearly observe their own progress.

One interview participant stated:

"Yes, I find it difficult to know whether my learning methods are effective or not. This is because I don't always see immediate results, so I feel unsure if I'm improving or not. Sometimes I can remember words, but I'm not confident using them." (Informant 4, Interview, April 26, 2026)

Another participant similarly explained:

"I find it challenging to evaluate my learning progress because I don't have clear indicators. Usually, I only check if I can remember and use the words in sentences. If I feel that a method is not helping me, I try to change or adjust my strategy slowly based on my experience." (Informant 8, Interview, April 25, 2026)

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students experienced challenges throughout the entire process of independent vocabulary learning. These challenges included establishing clear learning goals, maintaining motivation and consistency, avoiding distractions while using digital media, and evaluating learning progress without sufficient feedback. Although students developed various personal strategies to overcome these difficulties, they continued to experience uncertainty in managing and monitoring their vocabulary learning independently.

Discussion

Students' Experiences in Mastering English Vocabulary through Independent Learning

The findings show that students experienced independent vocabulary learning as a flexible process in which they could choose learning resources, apply learning activities, manage their learning time, and interact with others according to their individual needs. Students used various resources, including learning applications, videos, social media,

movies, websites, and reading materials. They also applied different learning activities, such as repeating vocabulary, taking notes of new words, making sentences, and reviewing previously learned vocabulary. These findings indicate that students did not rely solely on classroom instruction but took initiative to develop their vocabulary independently outside the classroom.

The use of various digital resources found in this study is in line with Hong & Du (2021), who found that digital tools such as Quizlet could support students' autonomy in vocabulary learning. Their study showed that digital features such as flashcards, games, and self-study activities encouraged students to become more active, motivated, and responsible for managing their vocabulary learning. Similarly, the students in the present study used digital applications, videos, and social media to access vocabulary learning materials based on their interests and needs. This suggests that digital technology provides students with greater flexibility in deciding what materials they want to learn and how they want to engage with vocabulary outside the classroom.

The findings are also consistent with Daly (2022) study on learner autonomy and vocabulary learning through Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), which showed that mobile technology could provide learners with flexible opportunities to learn vocabulary independently. In the present study, students frequently used applications, social media, videos, movies, and other digital platforms as learning resources. These resources allowed students to encounter English vocabulary in different contexts and choose materials that they considered interesting and appropriate for their learning needs. This reflects the technical aspect of learner autonomy proposed by Benson (2011), particularly learners' ability to make decisions about learning resources and ways of managing their learning.

The findings further support Ruswandi et al. (2024), who reported that EFL learners engaged in autonomous vocabulary learning outside formal instruction through digital media, vocabulary repetition, and everyday activities. Similarly, the students in this study used repetition, note-taking, reading, watching videos or movies, and listening activities to develop their vocabulary. However, the students did not necessarily use one fixed method. Instead, they selected and combined different learning activities according to their preferences and circumstances. This demonstrates that students had an awareness of their responsibility for developing vocabulary independently.

Hendriwanto et al. (2021) also found that YouTube could support students' independent English learning by providing various materials that helped develop listening, speaking, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Similar to their findings, students in this study used videos and social media to encounter vocabulary in meaningful contexts. However, the present study shows that students did not limit their learning to YouTube but also used other digital platforms, applications, movies, websites, and reading materials. This indicates that students actively selected resources that they considered accessible, interesting, and appropriate for their learning needs.

The findings are also relevant to Chubaryan et al. (2023), who found that vocabulary journals could encourage learners to record, review, and reflect on new vocabulary while developing greater responsibility for their own learning. Although the present study did not specifically focus on vocabulary journals, some students similarly used personal notes to record new vocabulary and review words they had learned. This shows that students employed personal learning practices to support their vocabulary development and to take greater responsibility for their learning outside the classroom.

In addition to the technical aspect, the findings reveal that students' independent vocabulary learning was also influenced by their social environment. Friends and online communities provided students with recommendations for learning applications, videos, vocabulary, and learning methods. Some students also reported that suggestions from friends or people online motivated them to continue learning and introduced them to new ways of learning vocabulary. This finding is relevant to Benson (2011) social aspect of learner

autonomy, which recognizes that learners' autonomy develops within a social and educational context rather than in complete isolation from other people.

However, social influence did not mean that students simply followed the suggestions provided by others. Some students reported that they accepted recommendations but adjusted them according to their own learning styles and needs. Others preferred to manage their learning independently and were not strongly influenced by friends or online communities. This finding demonstrates that students continued to maintain control over their learning decisions even when they received support or suggestions from their social environment. In this sense, social interaction functioned as a source of information, motivation, and learning opportunities, while students remained responsible for deciding whether and how to use the information they received.

This finding also supports the social dimension of Benson (2011) learner autonomy theory, which emphasizes that autonomy does not mean learning completely alone or being separated from other people. Instead, learners can interact with their social environment while still maintaining control over their learning decisions. In the present study, students' interactions with friends and online communities helped them discover new resources and learning methods, but they remained free to select, modify, or reject the suggestions based on their own needs. Therefore, the social environment supported students' independent vocabulary learning without taking away their responsibility for managing the learning process.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students' experiences in mastering English vocabulary through independent learning involved both technical and social dimensions of learner autonomy. From the technical aspect, students independently selected learning resources, applied different learning activities, and managed their learning according to their preferences. From the social aspect, friends and online communities provided recommendations, motivation, and learning information, while students still maintained control over their learning decisions. These findings support Benson (2011) view that learner autonomy involves learners' ability to make decisions about their learning within available resources and social contexts. Therefore, independent vocabulary learning in this study can be understood not simply as learning without teachers or classmates, but as a process in which students actively manage their learning while making use of the resources and social support available to them.

Challenges in Independent Vocabulary Learning

Although students experienced several benefits from independent vocabulary learning, the findings also revealed a number of challenges. The main challenges included difficulty in setting clear learning goals, deciding which vocabulary to prioritize, maintaining consistency, managing time, staying focused, maintaining motivation, and evaluating learning progress. These challenges indicate that having the freedom to learn independently does not always mean that students can easily manage the entire learning process. Students need to regulate their learning activities so that their independent learning can be sustained and directed toward meaningful learning outcomes.

These findings can be understood through Zimmerman (2000) Self-Regulated Learning theory, which consists of three phases: forethought, performance, and self-reflection. In the forethought phase, some students experienced difficulties in setting clear learning goals and deciding which vocabulary they should focus on because they encountered many unfamiliar words. In the performance phase, students faced difficulties in maintaining consistency, motivation, and concentration. Social media, although useful as a learning resource, could also become a source of distraction because students were easily exposed to entertainment content. These findings are consistent with Luthfiah & Sukarno (2025) study, which found that university students experienced challenges related to time management, maintaining focus, and understanding learning materials when implementing independent learning. The findings also support Janitra (2020) study, which showed that self-regulation was related to

students' ability to set learning goals, select appropriate materials, and monitor their vocabulary learning progress.

The self-reflection phase also presented challenges for students. Although some students attempted to monitor their progress by reviewing vocabulary, testing themselves, or using new words in sentences, they often found it difficult to determine whether their learning methods were effective. The lack of direct feedback and clear indicators of progress made some students uncertain about whether their vocabulary knowledge had actually improved. This finding suggests that self-evaluation is an important but challenging part of independent vocabulary learning. Students may remember some new words but still be unsure whether they can use them accurately and appropriately in communication. Overall, the findings indicate that the success of independent vocabulary learning depends not only on the availability of learning resources and the strategies students use, but also on their ability to plan, manage, monitor, and evaluate their own learning process. Thus, students' challenges reflect the importance of developing self-regulation alongside learner autonomy in independent vocabulary learning.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored English Education students' experiences in mastering English vocabulary through independent learning and examined the challenges they encountered. The findings indicate that students actively utilized diverse learning resources, including digital applications, social media, videos, websites, movies, and reading materials, while employing strategies such as repetition, vocabulary note-taking, sentence construction, and contextual learning. These practices demonstrate that students exercised learner autonomy by selecting resources and strategies suited to their individual needs. Social support from peers and online communities also contributed positively by providing motivation and learning recommendations. However, students experienced difficulties in setting learning goals, maintaining consistency, prioritizing vocabulary, managing digital distractions, monitoring progress, and evaluating learning outcomes. These findings suggest that successful independent vocabulary learning depends not only on access to learning resources but also on effective self-regulation. Therefore, English language educators should incorporate explicit instruction on goal setting, self-monitoring, and reflective learning strategies to strengthen students' autonomous vocabulary development. Future research should involve more diverse participants and educational contexts to further explore factors influencing independent vocabulary learning in EFL settings.

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