

Unveiling Success: An Exploration of Self-directed Learning among TOSE Students

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Abstract

This study explores the Self-Directed Learning (SDL) strategies employed by successful students preparing for the Test of Standard English (TOSE) at an Indonesian university, using Garrison's (1997) SDL model as a framework. The research focuses on three dimensions of SDL: self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three TOSE students, revealing key findings about their motivational drivers, organizational strategies, and reflective practices. The results indicate that students exhibit both entering motivation rooted in a desire to achieve high scores and avoid failure and task motivation, which is influenced by long-term career aspirations and the need for timely graduation. Additionally, participants employed effective self-management techniques, such as setting clear learning objectives and utilizing AI tools for practice, while also engaging in metacognitive strategies to monitor their progress. The study highlights the importance of balancing self-directed efforts with external feedback and guidance from educators. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of SDL in language proficiency testing contexts and offer practical recommendations for enhancing student learning strategies in high-stakes assessments. Future research should aim to broaden the participant pool and investigate the role of AI tools in supporting diverse learning preferences.

Keywords: Garrison SDL model, TOSE, Self-directed Learning

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving social and technological landscape, the importance of lifelong learning has become increasingly emphasized. Lifelong learning refers to the ongoing, self-motivated process of acquiring knowledge and skills throughout an individual's life, often beyond formal education. This concept is closely linked to Self-directed Learning (SDL), a term coined by Knowles (1975), who defined it as a process in which learners take initiative to identify their learning needs, set personal goals, choose appropriate resources, and evaluate their progress. SDL promotes autonomy in learning, allowing students to take control of their educational journey and become more independent and proactive in managing their learning processes. As emphasized by Knowles, SDL is essential for students in the contemporary world for three key reasons: first, the acquisition of knowledge is no longer solely the teacher's role, as individuals can now independently seek and acquire knowledge; second, learning is no longer confined to the classroom, as it can take place anytime and anywhere; and third, learning is a lifelong process that extends beyond adolescence, continuing throughout an individual's life.

The importance of SDL has been further highlighted in the post-pandemic era, where education has increasingly shifted to online platforms, making independent learning more crucial. Research by Arifin (2021) underscores how the educational landscape has transformed in response to the pandemic, emphasizing the growing role of student independence. In this context, SDL is seen as a key model to support students in navigating the challenges of online

learning. Numerous studies have explored the positive effects of SDL in higher education, with findings that SDL fosters greater independence, enhances academic achievement, and promotes self-reliant problem-solving. For example, Siswanto (2024) found that the SDL model empowered university students to take control of their learning by setting goals and choosing methods aligned with their preferences, fostering greater motivation and information-seeking behaviors. Similarly, Cuong (2023) found that students with higher levels of SDL tended to perform better academically, highlighting the strong link between SDL and student success.

In the field of English language learning, SDL has also proven beneficial in enhancing various language skills. Huda (2022) showed that SDL significantly improved English reading comprehension, with students demonstrating greater awareness of reading strategies and taking responsibility for their learning. Aghayani (2020) found that independent learning through SDL greatly influenced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' writing achievements. Hidayati (2021) also explored the experiences of university students using SDL to enhance their listening skills, finding that students who set specific goals, selected their own learning materials, and engaged in activities such as watching videos and listening to music developed better understanding of vocabulary, pronunciation, and native culture, ultimately improving their speaking skills. These studies suggest that SDL is an effective approach to language learning, enabling students to take ownership of their learning process and develop essential language skills.

One critical context in which SDL has proven valuable is in preparing for high-stakes language proficiency exams such as the Test of Standard English (TOSE). The TOSE is a standardized test used to assess the English proficiency of non-native speakers, testing skills in reading, writing, and listening. Many Indonesian universities require students to pass the TOSE as a graduation requirement, making success in the exam a crucial aspect of academic achievement. However, test-takers face several challenges, including insufficient preparation, lack of familiarity with the test format, psychological factors such as anxiety, poor time management, and insufficient general knowledge Salma (2018). These challenges often hinder students' performance, making it essential for students to adopt effective learning strategies in preparation for the test.

SDL offers a promising solution to these challenges, as it allows students to take responsibility for their own learning and tailor their study approaches to their specific needs. By providing students with the autonomy to choose their learning materials, set goals, and focus on areas where they need improvement, SDL helps overcome the limitations of traditional, teacher-guided instruction and enhances students' chances of success in high-stakes exams like the TOSE.

This study aims to explore the experiences of successful TOSE test-takers at a public university in Surakarta and to investigate how they have used SDL strategies to prepare for the test. The theoretical framework for this study is based on Garrison's (1997) SDL model, which includes three core dimensions: self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. Self-management refers to a learner's ability to effectively control their learning environment and resources; self-monitoring involves the learner's responsibility to regulate, reflect on, and adjust their learning strategies; and motivation, which includes both entering motivation (initial engagement with the learning task) and task motivation (sustained effort throughout the task), is essential for driving learners to persist in their learning. These interrelated dimensions provide a structured framework for understanding how learners navigate challenges and employ coping mechanisms to manage their SDL practices effectively.

This study will focus on understanding how successful TOSE students use SDL strategies, examining how they manage their learning, monitor their progress, and maintain

motivation during their preparation for the test. Insights from this research will provide valuable information on effective SDL practices for language learners, helping both students and educators improve performance in standardized exams. Furthermore, by exploring the personal experiences of successful TOSE students, this study seeks to offer practical recommendations for enhancing self-directed learning in the context of English language proficiency testing.

Method

This study employs a qualitative case study design, which is ideal for in-depth exploration of a specific system Stake (1995) in this case, the Self-Directed Learning (SDL) strategies of TOSE students. Aligned with the study's goals, this method examines SDL through the dimensions of self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation, focusing on the strategies, challenges, and coping mechanisms students use. Data was collected from three TOSE students, recruited via a questionnaire sent to eligible participants who are English Education majors, have passed the TOSE, and have engaged in SDL during their preparation. The three final participants Danang, Bayu, and Restu (pseudonyms), aged 19-22 were selected voluntarily based on these criteria, all having achieved high TOSE scores.

Semi-structured interviews was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the students' SDL experiences across the three dimensions. The data is analyzed using thematic analysis, following the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) approach. This involves: (1) Data Condensation, where interview responses are transcribed, coded, and categorized into themes related to SDL; (2) Data Display, organizing the data by emerging themes; and (3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification, where conclusions are drawn, interconnecting the themes with theoretical concepts and ensuring they are supported by evidence.

Results

The motivation

The results identified two types of motivation among students: entering motivation and task motivation, which varied across participants. Entering motivation refers to the initial drive to prepare for the TOSE test, which in this study was attributed to a strong desire to pass the test with excellent grades and the fear of failure. For instance, Danang shared, "I study for TOSE almost every day after classes because I don't want to fail and retake the test. I prefer to focus and aim for the best result I can achieve." Similarly, Restu expressed, "I don't want to fail the test, so I always try to maximize my TOSE preparation."

Task motivation, on the other hand, refers to the motivation that sustains learners throughout the preparation process. For these participants, task motivation was driven by long-term career goals and the desire to graduate on time. Bayu mentioned, "I think the university provides us with a beneficial program. I can use the TOSE certificate when applying for jobs in the future." Danang echoed this sentiment, adding, "I have a long-term goal of becoming a civil servant (CPNS), and I need the TOSE certificate since it's a requirement." Restu, however, focused on her short-term goal of timely graduation, stating, "I need to pass the test as soon as possible so I can meet the requirements and graduate on time."

Self-management

Students used time-management and resource-management strategies to effectively self-manage their self-directed learning for the TOSE test. They began by defining clear learning objectives and creating a structured study plan, prioritizing tasks, and staying consistent with their study routine. Restu shared, "First, I set my goal—to pass the TOSE test with a high score, for me that's anything above 500." Danang echoed this sentiment, adding, "If I want to achieve

a high score, I need to put in the effort. That's my goal." Bayu explained his approach to planning: "I love making to-do lists, especially for my study schedule. For TOSE, I prioritize what I need to focus on most, starting with grammar, which is my weakest area." Restu emphasized the importance of consistency, stating, "For me, staying consistent is key. I've planned my study routine, alternating between reading, writing, and listening sections each day." Danang added, "Having a learning plan for TOSE makes everything seem less complicated and more manageable." These strategies reflect how students organized their time and resources to meet their goals.

Self-monitoring

Students employed both cognitive and metacognitive strategies for self-monitoring during TOSE preparation. Cognitive strategies included identifying learning resources; such as AI tools and YouTube, practicing with the TOSE handbook, Learning material independently by applying critical thinking, summarizing, and note-taking. As generative AI becomes more popular, students have increasingly used these tools for test preparation. For example, Restu mentioned, "I often use AI for TOSE practice; it helps a lot, and most of them are free." When asked which AI tools she used, she explained, "To expand my English vocabulary, I use AI flashcards; for reading comprehension, I practice with AI quizzes; and for listening skills, I use YouTube." Bayu highlighted the importance of critical thinking, especially for the reading comprehension section: "The key is to read critically so you can immediately grasp the information from the passage and answer the questions quickly." Danang, on the other hand, focused on summarizing and note-taking to improve his grammar for the structure and written expression sections, saying, "I usually summarize and take notes, which really helps me understand grammar better." In addition to using AI and other resources, all participants utilized the TOSE handbook provided by their university to prepare for the test.

The participants also employed several metacognitive strategies, including practicing and discussing with others, evaluating their progress through feedback, and adapting their study plans through reflection. While self-directed, students still needed evaluation, guidance, or corrective feedback from peers or teachers. Danang shared, "I struggle with structure and written expression, and when I'm unsure, I usually seek feedback from my course teacher, mostly about grammar." Similarly, Restu highlighted the benefits of group study, saying, "I like studying with friends because we can casually share and correct each other it's easier and more fun." Bayu emphasized the importance of self-reflection based on teacher feedback: "After receiving feedback from my teacher, I often review the sections where I'm lacking to make sure I understand them well." These strategies show how the participants integrated feedback and reflection to improve their performance during TOSE preparation.

Discussion

This case study examines the Self-Directed Learning (SDL) of TOSE (Test of Standard English) students through the lens of Garrison's (1997) SDL model, focusing on the dimensions of self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. Using data gathered from semi-structured interviews with three TOSE students, the findings highlight the specific SDL strategies employed in each dimension.

Table 1 provides an overview of the study's key results.

Motivation	Entering motivation	strong desire to pass the test with excellent grades and the fear of failure
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	Task motivation	long-term career goals and the desire to graduate on time
Self-management	Time management and resources management	defining clear learning objectives and creating a structured study plan by prioritizing tasks, and staying consistent with their study routine
Self-monitoring	Cognitive strategies	identifying learning resources; such as AI tools and YouTube, practicing with the TOSE handbook, Learning material independently by applying critical thinking, summarizing, and note-taking.
	Metacognitive strategies	practicing and discussing with others, evaluating their progress through feedback, and adapting their study plans through reflection.

The motivation of successful TOSE students can be categorized into two key types: entering motivation and task motivation. Entering motivation is driven by a strong desire to achieve high grades and a fear of failure, while task motivation is fueled by long-term career aspirations and the goal of graduating on time. This suggests that students often begin their studies with the primary aim of passing tests and fulfilling graduation requirements. However, as they recognize the benefits of the TOSE test, their internal motivation evolves into task motivation. This finding aligns with Wang (2023), who noted that internal motivation can shift to external motivation once students perceive its practical value. To effectively self-monitor their learning process, students should establish clear learning objectives and create structured schedules. An organized learning schedule helps students prioritize their tasks by clearly outlining what they need to accomplish. One student remarked that having a study plan made complicated tests like TOSE more manageable. Additionally, Zhu (2023) highlighted that well-organized courses enable learners to better manage their time and resources. Classes structured with clear instructions and requirements prevent learners from wasting time on unnecessary tasks. Moreover, learners reported actively using AI as part of their cognitive strategies for TOSE preparation. They found AI to be a convenient and free resource, making it a valuable tool for self-directed learning (SDL). This underscores the importance of AI in enhancing students' SDL, aligning with recent research by Li et al. (2024), which emphasizes AI's availability, versatility, and transformative potential in supporting self-directed learning. Despite their self-directed approach, the findings indicate that students continue to rely on metacognitive strategies, highlighting their need for guidance and support from teachers. This emphasizes the ongoing necessity for external feedback and direction, even within self-directed learning contexts, as noted by Garrison (1997).

The result of the study can help other learners adopt similar practices to improve their own performance in language tests and inform effective teaching approaches for teacher and

curriculum designer to better support students in becoming more self-directed and effective learners in preparation for standardized exams.

A limitation of this study is the small sample size, consisting of participants from the same study program and semester. This homogeneity may restrict the generalizability of the findings, as the results may not fully represent the diverse experiences of students from different academic backgrounds, levels, or institutions. Future research should consider including a broader range of participants to enhance the applicability of the results.

Future research should include a larger and more diverse sample of participants to improve the generalizability of the findings across different student populations. Additionally, further studies could explore the broader benefits of utilizing AI tools in TOSE preparation, investigating how various AI applications can support different language skills and learning preferences, and examining their long-term impact on student performance and engagement.

Conclusion

The findings of this research highlight the SDL strategies used by TOSE students in their test preparation, focusing on three dimensions: self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. Motivation is divided into two types: entering motivation, driven by a strong desire to pass the test with excellent grades and fear of failure; and task motivation, based on long-term career goals and the desire to graduate on time. Self-management includes time and resource management, where students define clear learning objectives, create structured study plans by prioritizing tasks, and maintain a consistent study routine. Self-monitoring involves both cognitive strategies—such as identifying learning resources like AI tools and YouTube, practicing with the TOSE handbook, and using critical thinking, summarizing, and note-taking—and metacognitive strategies, which include practicing and discussing with peers, evaluating progress through feedback, and adapting study plans based on reflection. In conclusion, while students may share similar backgrounds and goals, they employ diverse cognitive and metacognitive strategies to guide their learning, demonstrating that individuals adapt their approaches to suit their personal learning styles, ultimately aiding in achieving their objectives.

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