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SELF-DIRECTEDNESS IN NON-FORMAL ONLINE BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSES: ADULT LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Self-directedness is vital to adult learners as it allows them to stay motivated and achieve effective results while learning online and balancing between family and work. This research aims to determine Lithuanian adult learners perceived self-directedness while learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in non-formal online courses. To this end, their approaches towards the factors of self-directedness were investigated. The indicators defined by Khat (2015), including Goal Setting, Time Management, Procrastination Management, Assignment Preparation, Final Test Preparation, Note-taking Capability, Research Capability, Technical Readiness, Online Class Readiness, and Stress Management were involved in a detailed analysis to establish which variables were the most meaningful ones in terms of learners' self-directedness. The study revealed that adult students are highly self-directed while learning Business English in non-formal online courses at a language school. The findings confirmed that the application of self-directedness and its development in learning processes leads to higher levels of motivation and successful learning outcomes. Based on the findings, these adult learners' perspectives could contribute to larger-scale surveys in formal and informal forms of education to enhance learners' self-directedness and achieve successful learning results.

Keywords

Self-Directedness, Adult Learners, Online Learning, English for Specific Purposes, ESP, Business English

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has made an enormous impact on education. It has forced the majority of educational institutions worldwide to shift to online learning. It has also caused many challenges for people who function as adult members of society and possess different responsibilities in their lives. Balancing between family and work makes an impact on learners' independence and autonomy in learning, especially online. Therefore, enhancing self-directedness is essential to encourage learners to stay motivated and achieve effective results.

Self-directedness is fundamental in the education of adult learners because the more competent in terms of their self-directedness they are, the more they manage to effectively balance between all the commitments they possess (Knowles, 1975; Khiat, 2015). While learning online, students should be independent and autonomous, which means they need high levels of self-directedness. As it is defined by Knowles, the process of self-directedness involves taking initiatives, diagnosing learning needs, formulating learning objectives, choosing suitable learning strategies and material resources as well as assessing learning results (Knowles, 1975). It has been established that the adult education framework can be applied to the development of the ESP curriculum. Moreover, ESP classes are designed in a way that puts more emphasis “on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures; therefore, authentic contexts and language use in typical work situations raise interest in learning ESP” (Vaičiūnienė, 2009; Fiorito, 2005, as cited in Vaičiūnienė and Užpalienė, 2010, p. 94). However, when students get exposed to authentic learning resources, they have to develop their strategies how to process all the information and acquiring necessary ESP skills and knowledge. Such a learning process requires students to be able to self-regulate their learning and perform independently. Thus, self-directedness plays a key role here. However, the literature overview demonstrates that little-known research has focused on students' self-directedness while learning ESP online. Investigating this issue would not only deepen ESP teachers' understanding of their students' perspectives towards self-directed learning, but it would also encourage them to adopt a strategy of self-directed learning in ESP classes. The current study was conducted to fulfill this research gap. The present study aims to determine Lithuanian adult learners perceived self-directedness while learning Business English in non-formal online courses. To this end, their perspectives towards the factors of self-directedness

were investigated. To reach this aim, the following research objective was set- to analyze the extent of the adult learners' self-directedness levels by examining their approaches on the indicators of self-directedness as defined by Khiat (2015). The indicators included the following: time management, research capability, goal setting, procrastination management, assignment preparation, final test preparation, note-taking capability, technical readiness, online class readiness, and stress management.

The present paper begins with an overview of the relevant literature which reports on previous investigations in the field and proceeds to the description of the research method, the presentation, and discussion of the results. Last, conclusions are drawn and future research implications are described. To conduct the research, a quantitative methodology is used.

2. Literature Review

The conducted literature analysis proves that self-directedness plays an important role in ESP, which requires independent language learning. Moreover, the literature overview shows the importance of online learning and proves that understanding the role of self-directedness while learning online is fundamental (Song & Hill, 2007).

2.1. The Role of Self-Directedness in ESP

ESP courses provide learners with an opportunity to gain all the practical skills that are essential in their careers (Islam, 2014). It has been recognized that there is a need to enhance self-directedness in ESP. For instance, Tuzlukova and Singh's (2018) findings revealed that it is not enough to teach students only linguistic and language knowledge. Thus, ESP classes should be designed in a way that learners would obtain opportunities to gain 21st-century skills, such as finding, interpreting, and using information. Along similar lines, Liashenko and Hnapovska (2020) revealed that ESP courses could be designed in a way that would enhance graduate students' employability. The authors found that applying critical thinking tasks in ESP classes enhances students' professional competencies, which, as a result, might increase their employability. These research study results are in line with Tuzlukova and Singh's (2018) findings which revealed that ESP classes should be designed not only for developing linguistic competencies.

According to Ajideh (2009), ESP is "an approach to language teaching which aims to meet the needs of particular learners" (p. 166). The author concludes that it is essential to select and grade ESP materials based on learners' needs. However, ESP teachers should adopt learning strategies, including autonomous learning and metacognitive strategies, to design a

more effective ESP course. Similarly, Ghobain (2016) also emphasized the importance of promoting students' autonomy while learning ESP. A quantitative study was conducted with ESP students in the medical field to see what levels of motivation they possessed. The findings revealed that ESP learners' in the medical field motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, was high, and it made a positive impact on their autonomy and learning responsibility.

The relevant literature analysis shows that applying the adult education framework to ESP curriculum development brings successful and effective results. In the analysis of ESP learners' profiles in the light of adulthood, Sifakis (2003) points out the necessity to involve ESP learners in the process of syllabus and lesson planning. This means that adult learners tend to be inherently autonomous, thus, they should actively perform not only in learning processes but also in designing the curriculum. Along similar lines, Mohammadi and Mohammadi (2012) analyzed what kind of influence self-directed training has on ESP learners' readiness for self-directedness. Their findings revealed that learners' self-directed learning readiness could be enhanced by conducting self-directed training.

2.2. The Role of Self-directedness in Online Learning

It has been established that the learning process and personal features justify the relationship between online learning and self-directedness. To illustrate, Song and Hill (2007) introduced a theoretical and explicit model for perceiving the role of self-directedness while learning online. It explains that self-directed learning in an online context involves such personal attributes as having abilities to appropriately use resources, apply necessary strategies, and possess an adequate amount of motivation, whereas the process of self-directed learning consists of planning, monitoring, evaluating activities. The authors have also added a learning context containing resources, structure, and the nature of tasks, which plays an important role in self-directedness while learning online. Similarly, Maphalala et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of self-directed learning as universities were forced to switch to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors investigated the experiences of university students and how self-directed they were while learning online. It was found that online learning provided students with an opportunity to become independent and self-regulated learners. However, some challenges involved students' inabilities to navigate some of the self-directed activities. Thus, lecturers should continuously offer their guidance and feedback for all the students about their learning, but at the same time avoid becoming a source of knowledge and still allow students to perform independently. In another study, Sze-yeng and Hussain (2010) explored self-directedness while learning in an environment of social constructivism. It

was found that teaching learners to use such resources as Moodle, Google Docs and Wikipedia had a positive impact on the enhancement of adult learners' self-directedness.

The relevant literature illustrates that there is a necessity to analyze the factors that influence study outcomes to determine how connected self-directedness and academic performance are. For instance, Chou and Chen (2008) conducted an investigation, where they explored how related self-directedness is with students' academic performance when classes are organized online. The authors conducted six quantitative studies, and there was a bond found only in one case, which proved that there is a strong relationship between students' self-directedness and their successful study results. Therefore, such factors as the reliability of academic performance, students' learning styles, quality of online learning materials, learners' educational backgrounds, prior knowledge for contents, etc. should be taken into consideration while trying to figure out how strong the connection between students' study results and their self-directedness while learning online is. Along similar lines, Sumner's (2018) findings showed that high levels of self-directedness and the application of various Internet tools play an important role in undergraduate students' levels of self-directedness in terms of their abilities to learn with technology. Therefore, appropriate resources and strategies should be selected by college students and instructors to enhance the efficiency of self-directed learning with technology. In another study, Song and Bonk (2016) conducted a study that aimed to establish the kinds of motivational indicators and learning resources while learning in informal online classes. According to Song and Bonk (2016), such aspects as "freedom and choice, control, interest and engagement" (p. 1) increase learners' motivation for self-directed informal learning.

It has been found in the literature that to enhance autonomous learning and students' motivation, authentic materials, which can be accessed online, should be offered in ESP classrooms (Vaičiūnienė, Užpalienė, 2010). The authors conducted a study on ESP students' perspectives towards authentic materials in technology-based ESP classes and found that the usage of authentic resources brings opportunities for professional knowledge development, encourages communication, an exchange of information, and increases educational value.

It has been also reported in the literature that there exist links between self-directedness and online learning experience. For instance, Chou (2012) explored what kind of influence self-directedness has on engineering students while their classes are conducted online. It was found that there is a positive relationship between engineering students' learning abilities and online learning performances. However, it was also revealed that some students' self-directed abilities do not have any impact on their learning results. It was proposed to design different

learning materials for learners with low levels of self-directedness and learners with high levels of self-directedness. In another study, Beach (2017) investigated elementary teachers' online learning experiences and found that it is essential to promote self-directed learning to encourage teachers' engagement with professional learning, develop positive self-directed learning experiences, and better relationships between professional knowledge and practice.

As little-known research has been focused on the ways how adult learners perceive their self-directedness while learning English for Specific Purposes online, the present research aims to fill this gap and to contribute to the body of knowledge in the field by analyzing Lithuanian adult learners' perspectives to their levels of self-directedness in non-formal online Business English courses.

3. Methodology

The specific procedures and techniques used to identify and analyze the research topic were as follow:

3.1. Research Objectives

The objective behind the research paper was to recognize Lithuanian adult learners perceived self-directedness while learning Business English in non-formal online courses in a language school.

3.2. The Research Sample

The research sample was composed of adult learners learning Business English in non-formal online courses in a language school. There was a total of 32 students who received the questionnaires online. The respondents' age ranged from 19 to 52 years old, with an average of 34.6.

3.3. The Research Tool

The statements from the questionnaire that was designed by Khiat (2015) were applied in the data collection for the current study. The author provided his consent for the usage of the questionnaire in the survey.

There were 66 questions with eleven indicators of self-directedness in the original questionnaire. The indicators were designed to determine how students evaluated their competencies in terms of their competencies of self-directedness. All the respondents' ESP classes were organized online. For this reason, the current study excluded the questions related to how prepared students were for face-to-face classes, and also two statements of the indicator related to research capability. Thus, their current research study consists of 58 statements.

The respondents were provided with the questionnaire, where they had to evaluate statements according to the Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). This makes the research measurable, it evaluates the quality of the research, and its techniques. The feedback that was received was kept anonymous during the research so that respondents' identities remained unrevealed. The respondents were provided with the preamble to the questionnaire, which explained the aim of the questionnaire and informed them on the duration of the questionnaire that was required to complete the survey.

4. Results and Discussion

The research asked adult learners to evaluate the statements related to their levels of self-directedness. Respondents' answers showed the way they perceived their competencies while learning ESP in non-formal online Business English courses. Figure 1 presents adult learners' perceived competencies towards their self-directedness according to the following ten indicators.

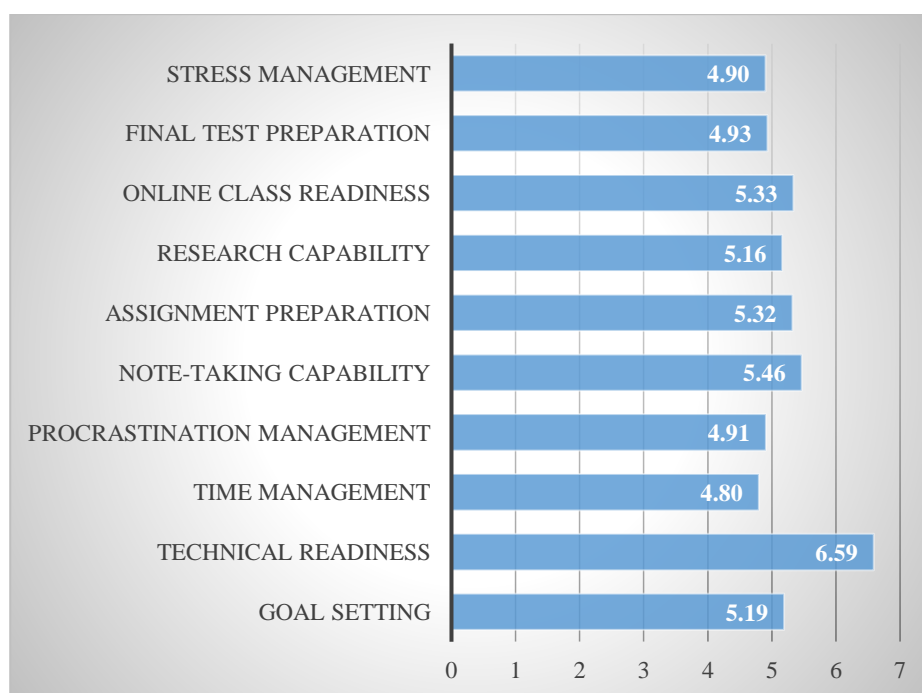


Figure 1: Respondents' Evaluations of The Factors of Self-Directedness

(Source: Self)

All the indicators that were included in this research were assessed higher than four, where four according to the Likert scale is neither agreed nor disagreed. The results show that the adult learners learning Business English online evaluated these indicators of self-directedness in the highest levels (score is >5): technical readiness (6.59), note-taking capability (5.46), online class readiness (5.33), and assignment preparation (5.32). Goal setting

(5.19) and research capability (5.16) had scored above five, which also suggests that adult learners are well-prepared in terms of these factors of self-directedness. The research results indicate that learners evaluated time management (4.80), stress management (4.90), procrastination management (4.91), final test preparation (4.93) below five, which may explain certain difficulties adult learners encounter related to these four indicators of self-directedness.

The evaluation of adult learners' perspectives towards self-directed learning indicators is presented in sequence in Figure 2.

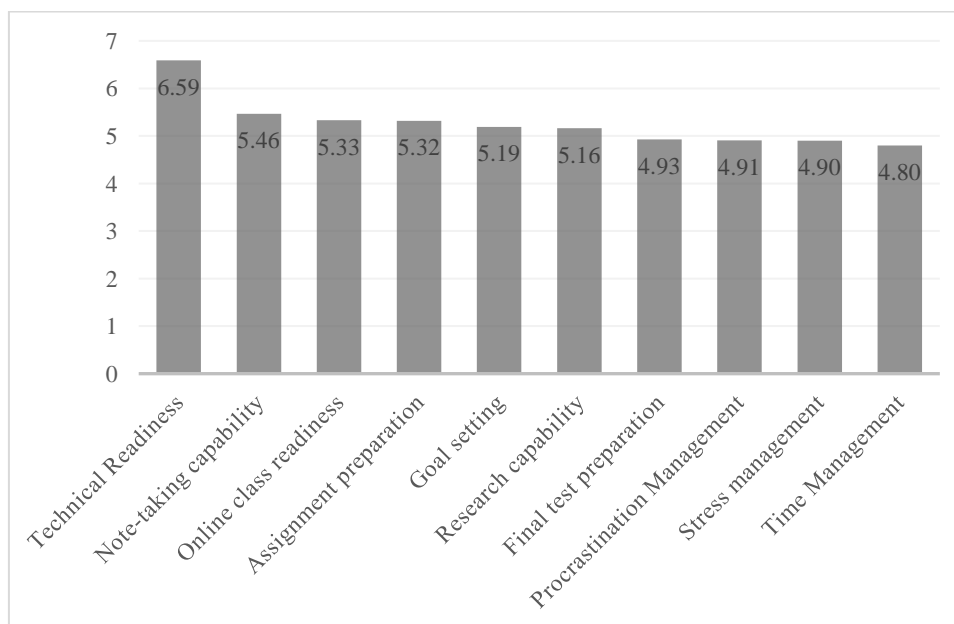


Figure 2: *The Sequence of The Factors Related to Self-Directedness*
(Source: Self)

The sequence of the indicators of self-directedness summarizes the results and emphasizes that students faced no problems related to such self-directed learning indicators as technical readiness, note-taking capability, online class readiness, and assignment preparation. These results show that adult learners were competent and self-directed while attending online ESP classes.

Sumuer (2018) reported a favourable effect of the application of Web 2.0 tools on students' self-directedness. The author emphasizes the importance of using technology in ESP classes as it positively affects learners' self-directedness in terms of their technical and online class readiness.

Being self-directed in technical readiness, note-taking capability, online class readiness, and assignment preparation explains learners' abilities to appropriately use a computer and the Internet, prepare sufficient notes, relate their study materials to their work and life, properly assess and use information from the Internet, manage to focus during online classes, set goals

and have capabilities to research the information they need. This is in line with Tuzlukova and Singh's (2018) results who revealed that ESP students should be taught not only linguistic and language knowledge, but also 21st-century skills, such as finding, interpreting, and being able to effectively use information.

However, the findings indicate that even though adult learners perceived themselves as technically ready to study in non-formal online Business English courses, they still encountered difficulties to cope with procrastination, stress, and time management. It means that some adult learners lacked motivation while studying, felt anxiety, postponed the completion of their study tasks. Also, they did not follow their study schedule and find time to study course materials. Thus, it is possible to assume that adult learners' motivation diminishes due to the pressure that learners encounter while preparing for exams. As a result, it might hinder their self-directedness too. This finding is compatible with Khiat (2017) who found that stress management increases when students feel unable to meet their study expectations, assignment deadlines and pass them. Moreover, Muslimin and Harintama (2020) found that the pandemic caused high levels of online learning anxiety, which appeared to be one of the factors that significantly reduced the effectiveness of students' online learning. Therefore, helping learners to cope with stress might result in developing higher degrees of self-directedness in terms of stress management. This would allow them to feel more motivated, avoid anxiety and encourage them not to delay tasks as well as to follow their study schedule and devote additional time for studying course resources. Also, another assumption can be made that despite the fact that adult learners' ESP classes are organized online, which is less time-consuming, they might still cope with some difficulties to manage their time and stress while balancing between family, work and other commitments they have. These study results are compatible with the findings of Burkšaitienė et al. (2021) which suggest that inability to deal with time and procrastination management that resulted in poor stress management might have been caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and a sudden switch to online learning. Thus, helping students avoid anxiety and manage their stress levels might develop their self-directedness.

Such factors as procrastination, stress and time management were identified as the most problematic ones for self-directed learning in non-formal online Business English courses. Therefore, in order to clarify more exact reasons, further research should be conducted. This would expand our perception towards the implementation of self-directed learning strategies that would enhance adult learners' self-directedness while learning ESP online.

5. Conclusion

The paper creates a basis for high importance towards the enhancement of adult learners' self-directedness while learning ESP online as it aimed at establishing Lithuanian adult learners' perspectives towards self-directedness.

The feedback that was received from students shows that they know, acknowledge and highly evaluate their levels of self-directedness in non-formal online ESP courses in terms of such competencies as technical readiness, note-taking capability, online class readiness and assignment preparation. These digital abilities enhance learners' independence and self-directedness.

It can be also concluded that since adult learners perceived themselves as competent in digital competencies, such as technical readiness, note-taking capability, online class readiness and assignment preparation, their perspectives towards such self-directed indicators as goal setting and research capability were positive as well. It shows that they managed to monitor their course achievements and set targets for their assignments and examinations.

The most significant findings of the current study are related to procrastination, stress and time management, which showed that respondents felt less competent towards these factors. The results suggest that negative effects were caused and adult learners felt procrastination, stress and inability to efficiently manage their time not only because of their constant duties to balance between family, work and other commitments they had but also because of the COVID-19 pandemic due to which there was a sudden switch to online learning. These outcomes should motivate educators to apply the strategy of self-directed learning in order to help learners deal with such challenges, increase their motivation and achieve more effective learning results.

The research comes with certain limitations, where it has also highlighted the need for further clarification. While the research paper has outlined adult students' perspectives towards self-directed learning, it has also shown the shortcomings. Firstly, the number of students that were part of the research was relatively low. Secondly, a further recommendation could be a more in-depth follow-up study in other forms of education, including formal and informal.

Taking a wider representation among various educational institutions could lead to facilitating the implementation of self-directed learning strategies while learning ESP.

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