

EFL Learner Autonomy at a *Pondok Pesantren* in South Kalimantan, Indonesia: A Narrative Inquiry

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Received:

January 29, 2026

Revised:

January 31, 2026

Accepted:

February 1, 2026

Published:

February 1, 2026

ABSTRACT

This study explores how learner autonomy is experienced by students learning English as a foreign language in a highly structured *Pondok Pesantren*. The study aims to describe the types of learner autonomy demonstrated by students through their learning experiences. This research employed a narrative inquiry approach. This approach is particularly suitable for the *Pondok Pesantren* context as it captures students' lived experiences and how learner autonomy is negotiated within a highly structured, faith-based educational environment. Five Grade XI students aged 16-17 years from a *Pondok Pesantren* in South Kalimantan, Indonesia, were purposively selected based on their active participation in English learning and the uniqueness of their learning experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom and out-of-class observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using narrative thematic analysis. The findings show that students demonstrated several types of learner autonomy, including technical, psychological, sociocultural, proactive, reactive, political, and critical autonomy. These forms of autonomy appeared in daily learning activities such as using dictionaries and limited digital tools, interacting with peers, completing teacher-guided tasks, and initiating learning activities independently. However, autonomy related to learning decision-making and critical reflection was less visible and appeared within the boundaries of institutional routines and learning practices in the *Pondok Pesantren* context. Conceptually, the study highlights learner autonomy as a contextual and evolving process shaped by institutional structures and students' lived experiences. The study concludes that learner autonomy in a *Pondok Pesantren* develops gradually as a contextual and evolving process reflected in students' everyday English learning experiences.

Keywords: *english learning; learner autonomy; narrative inquiry; pondok pesantren; students learning english as a foreign language*

INTRODUCTION

English has become a global language widely used in communication, education, and technology. Hall (2016) notes that English now has an unprecedented global reach, enabling communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In Indonesia, English

is taught as a foreign language and included in the national curriculum; however, many students still experience difficulties in learning it effectively. Previous studies indicate that students often rely heavily on teachers and lack the ability to manage their own learning, which negatively affects their English proficiency and performance in international literacy standards.

This condition highlights the importance of learner autonomy in language education. In response to ongoing challenges in English learning, recent studies have increasingly emphasized autonomous learning as a key factor in improving language development (Ludwig et al., 2023). As English continues to gain global importance, educational approaches have shifted toward encouraging learners to take greater responsibility for their learning, both inside and outside the classroom. This shift reflects the growing recognition of learner autonomy as a central concept in successful language learning.

The concept of learner autonomy has been widely discussed in the literature. Ludwig et al. (2023), building on the foundational work of Holec (1981) and Little (1991), explain that learner autonomy involves learners' capacity to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning. Autonomy, therefore, does not simply mean learning independently, but rather developing reflective and conscious control over learning processes. Despite this theoretical understanding, many learners still misunderstand autonomy as studying alone without guidance. Khulaifiyah et al. (2021) found that students often struggle to plan learning activities, select appropriate strategies, and evaluate their progress independently.

In Indonesia, this challenge is particularly evident in traditional and teacher-centered learning environments. *Pondok Pesantren*, as Islamic boarding schools with structured daily routines, exemplify such contexts. While these institutions emphasize discipline and responsibility, students' learning activities are often tightly regulated and heavily guided by teachers. As a result, opportunities for students to exercise control over their English learning remain limited (Sari et al., 2022; Intania & Nurcholis, 2024). Teaching English in *Pondok Pesantren* also faces additional constraints, including limited learning resources, strong emphasis on religious studies, and curricula that prioritize classical Islamic texts over foreign language learning (Umar, 2022; Agustriani, 2023; Auladi & Bakhtiar, 2023).

Nevertheless, several studies indicate that *Pondok Pesantren* are institutionally prepared to support English learning. Nur et al. (2021) report that many *Pondok Pesantren* are equipped with qualified teachers, adequate facilities, and supportive learning environments. Some institutions also provide language clubs and skill-based programs to enhance students' language competence. However, these initiatives do not always result in strong learner autonomy, as students often remain dependent on teacher direction.

Research conducted in various contexts shows that English as a foreign language learners generally demonstrate low levels of autonomy. Studies by Alemu (2023), Khulaifiyah et al. (2021), and Khaidir (2020) reveal that learners tend to rely on teachers despite being aware of the importance of independent learning. Teachers themselves

may also have limited understanding of how to foster autonomy effectively (Husna et al., 2024). Although instructional approaches such as flipped learning (Izadpanah, 2022) and metacognitive training (Aziz et al., 2024) have been shown to support autonomy, the overall development of autonomous learning skills remains constrained.

Within the *Pondok Pesantren* context, some studies report positive outcomes related to English learning. Hadist and Anwar (2023) show that speaking and memorization strategies can enhance students' confidence, while group discussions and real-life topics promote engagement (Al-Khusain, 2022). However, these studies primarily focus on classroom activities and teacher-guided instruction, offering limited insight into how students themselves develop autonomy or what forms of autonomy they demonstrate in their daily learning experiences.

Another limitation of previous research lies in methodological approaches. Many studies rely on quantitative methods such as questionnaires and tests, which measure levels of autonomy but fail to capture how autonomy develops in students' everyday learning practices. Narrative inquiry, which emphasizes learners' personal stories and lived experiences, remains underutilized in this area (Barkhuizen, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is particularly relevant for understanding how learners negotiate academic demands, personal motivation, and cultural expectations in structured educational settings.

Previous studies on learner autonomy in EFL contexts have predominantly relied on quantitative measures and classroom-based observations, offering limited insight into learners' lived experiences and personal meaning-making. As a result, how students narratively construct and negotiate autonomy within highly structured and faith-based environments such as *Pondok Pesantren* remains underexplored. Narrative inquiry is therefore essential to capture learners' voices and to understand autonomy as a contextual and experiential process rather than a fixed individual trait.

Understanding learner autonomy in *Pondok Pesantren* also requires attention to the nature of the institution itself. *Pondok Pesantren* are defined as Islamic educational institutions that integrate traditional religious instruction with formal education (Rahayu, 2020; Manshuruddin et al., 2021). They emphasize spiritual development, moral formation, and social responsibility alongside academic learning, often through traditional instructional methods (Silfiana, 2020). Students live within a disciplined religious community where daily routines and religious obligations strongly shape learning behaviors (Mutmainah & Mahfudoh, 2021). This unique context may influence the ways in which learner autonomy is expressed and developed.

Given these gaps, there is a need to explore learner autonomy in English learning within *Pondok Pesantren* using a qualitative and experience-based approach. Investigating students' narratives can provide deeper insight into how autonomy is constructed, negotiated, and enacted within faith-based and highly structured educational environments. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the types of learner autonomy demonstrated by students learning English as a foreign language in a *Pondok Pesantren* in South Kalimantan. By focusing on students' lived experiences, this research seeks to contribute theoretically to the understanding of learner autonomy in religious

educational contexts and practically to support English teachers and school administrators in designing learning practices that encourage greater student responsibility. The guiding research question is: *What types of learner autonomy are present in English learning within the Pondok Pesantren context?*

METHOD

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach as its research design. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative method that focuses on exploring and interpreting personal stories to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Rather than seeking generalizations, this approach emphasizes depth, context, and the uniqueness of participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry was chosen because it allows an in-depth exploration of how students learning English as a foreign language in a *Pondok Pesantren* experience and manifest learner autonomy in their English learning.

The study followed a qualitative paradigm to uncover meanings underlying students' behaviors and learning experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Qualitative data, which take the form of spoken or written words (Miles et al., 2014), were used to capture students' motivations, reflections, and learning practices. The researcher was directly involved in the research setting and interacted with participants through in-depth interviews and informal conversations. Learner autonomy was interpreted using Benson's (2011) conceptual framework as an analytical lens, which includes technical, psychological, sociocultural, political, critical, proactive, and reactive autonomy.

The research was conducted at *Pondok Pesantren Rasyidiyah Khalidiyah Amuntai* in South Kalimantan. This Islamic boarding school was selected because it integrates religious and general subjects within a structured learning environment, making it a relevant context for examining learner autonomy in English learning (Rahmi, 2017). The participants were five Grade XI students selected through purposive sampling. Grade XI students were considered suitable participants because they tend to demonstrate more stable emotional development, stronger social maturity, and greater self-direction in learning (Bawono, 2023).

In narrative inquiry, a small number of participants is appropriate due to the emphasis on depth and richness of individual narratives rather than generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Five participants were sufficient to capture diverse learning experiences, and data saturation was reached when recurring themes related to learner autonomy emerged consistently and no new insights were identified.

Consistent with the nature of narrative inquiry, participant selection was not intended to achieve generalization or to test abstract theories, but to prioritize depth, contextual richness, and the uniqueness of individual learning experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The five participants, referred to as Students 1 to 5 (S1-S5), represented diverse educational backgrounds, learning trajectories, and levels of engagement with the *Pondok Pesantren* environment. They included both dormitory and non-dormitory students, whose varied experiences provided rich narrative data to contextualize the development of learner autonomy.

Data were collected using interviews, observations, and documentation. The interviews were open-ended and guided by an interview framework adapted from Benson (2011) and Creswell and Creswell (2023), and they were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to allow participants to express their experiences comfortably. Observations were carried out inside and outside the classroom using guiding observation notes and descriptive field records, focusing on how learner autonomy was manifested in students' daily English learning activities without introducing additional analytical categories. Documentation, including assignments and records of English-related activities, was used to support the interview and observation data.

Data analysis followed the narrative inquiry process outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), which includes identifying the phenomenon, selecting participants, collecting and re-storying narratives, confirming stories through member checking, organizing narratives into themes, and validating the findings. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, including source triangulation across participants and technique triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents. NVivo was used solely as a supporting tool to assist in organizing qualitative data systematically. Through this process, the study identified forms of learner autonomy as they were experienced and narrated by students in English learning within the *Pondok Pesantren* context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the data gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis with five students (S1–S5), this study found that students displayed various forms of autonomy in learning English at the *Pondok Pesantren*. Some forms of autonomy were more noticeable in their learning experiences, while others appeared less frequently. Psychological and technical autonomy were the most prominent, as they were clearly observed in both interviews and classroom activities. In contrast, critical and political autonomy were seldom mentioned by the students in interviews and were not observed during lessons. The following sections describe each type of learner autonomy based on the students' experiences.

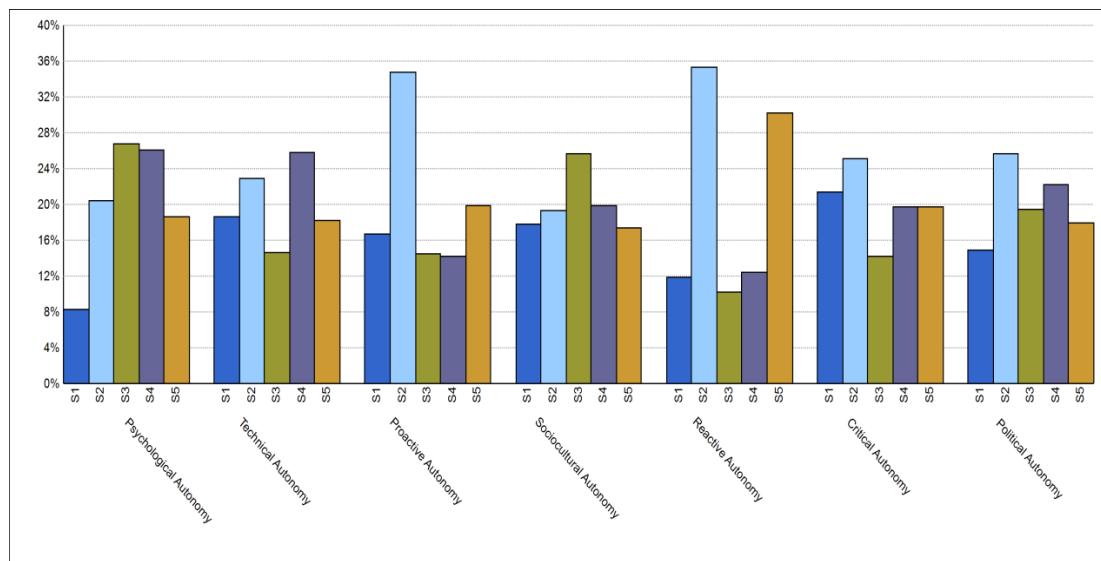


Figure 1: Ranking of Autonomy Types from Most to Least Frequent Based on the Interview Accounts of Students S1–S5 at *MA NIPA Pondok Pesantren Rasyidiyah Khalidiyah Amuntai*

The presence of the seven types of learner autonomy was determined by how frequently each type appeared in the students' learning narratives during interviews, which were analyzed using NVIVO. To confirm these results, classroom observations were conducted to see which types of learner autonomy could be observed in practice, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Range of Autonomy Types from Most to Least Observable in Classroom Observations of Students S1–S5 at *MA NIPA Pondok Pesantren Rasyidiyah Khalidiyah Amuntai*

No	Type of Learner Autonomy	Observability	Description Based on Observation
1	Psychological Autonomy	Observable	Students demonstrated confidence, motivation, and self-awareness while engaging in learning activities.
2	Technical Autonomy	Observable	They used learning strategies, such as completing tasks and following instructions on their own.
3	Proactive Autonomy	Observable	Some students showed initiative by asking questions and preparing learning materials in advance.
4	Sociocultural Autonomy	Observable	Students interacted and worked together with their classmates during classroom activities.
5	Reactive Autonomy	Observable	They exhibited reactive autonomy by responding to tasks and instructions given by the teacher.
6	Critical Autonomy	Not Observable	No signs of critical reflection on the learning content or processes were observed during class.
7	Political Autonomy	Not Observable	Students were not seen participating in decisions regarding learning rules or policies.

a. Psychological Autonomy

Regarding psychological autonomy, S1's motivation to learn English was largely driven by his dream of studying abroad. This personal goal encouraged him to take charge of his own learning and study on his own. He explained:

I motivate myself to learn English because I want to study abroad in the future. This dream makes me feel that I must improve my English ability from now. I realize that English is very important if I want to have a strong preparation when I really try to get the opportunity to study overseas. I also feel more motivated because I often hear encouragement from Ruangguru and from my muallim-muallim in the pesantren. They often share stories and advice about the importance of English for our future, and this makes me more confident that my effort in learning English has a clear purpose. To support my learning, I make a simple study plan. When I have free time or during the weekend, I try to read about two pages from my English handbook. Sometimes I also try to find new vocabulary to improve my English little by little. (Interview S1, 24 September 2025)

Observations indicated that S1 asked questions during class and remained attentive to the lessons (In-Class Observation S1, 29 September 2025; 6 October 2025). Outside of class, he also showed a desire to practice speaking and improve his English independently (Out-Class Observation S1, 31 October 2025). These results indicate that S1 demonstrates psychological autonomy, being motivated and taking responsibility for his own learning.

Similarly, S2 showed psychological autonomy through self-motivation, which came from teachers' guidance, support from friends, and his previous learning experiences. He also explored new experiences and created his own study plans. He explained:

I usually motivate myself by listening to advice from my muallim when they give advice in class. Sometimes I am also motivated by my friends from different schools. I usually meet them when we go to a restaurant together or when we attend English courses. When my friends invite me to meet, they often motivate me and encourage me to keep learning. I feel motivated because I want to try new things. I also often make my own study plan for English, especially when there is a test or when I am preparing for a test. Besides that, I also think about preparation for studying abroad. Even though it is not fully planned yet, I have thought a lot about continuing my study in Indonesia by taking an English major. I make my plans in the form of a schedule, such as deciding what to study today and what to study the next day. When I was in grade ten, my academic rank was below average, and that experience motivated me to study harder and make my own schedule from the beginning. I felt that I had to improve myself. I also have a desire to achieve something, such as becoming a champion in English speech competitions. I joined some competitions during school anniversary and Santri Day events, although I was not selected in the final stage. (Interview S2, 24 September 2025)

Observations confirmed this, showing that S2 carefully followed advice, remained focused during learning activities, and improved his work after receiving feedback (In-Class Observation S2, 3 October 2025; 10 October 2025; Document Analysis, October 2025).

For S3, psychological autonomy was reflected in his inner motivation, which developed from meaningful personal experiences. His interest in learning English was influenced by both his English teacher and his mother. After his mother assisted him with an English task, he became more motivated and engaged in learning English seriously. These experiences encouraged him to take his learning more seriously, as he explained below:

I feel motivated to learn English because of my English teacher, who is very good at explaining English lessons, and also because of my mother. In the past, my English teacher gave an assignment to me and my friends, but I did not really understand the material. Because of that, I asked my mother to help me with the English task. After that, I felt amazed by my mother's ability to complete the task, and this experience encouraged me to study English more deeply. I also make my own study plan. My plan is to use my free time or spare time to study and deepen my understanding of English materials. (Interview S3, 27 September 2025)

In practice, S3 demonstrated psychological autonomy by actively asking questions, particularly about pronunciation, whenever he did not understand the lesson. Classroom observations revealed that he frequently sought clarification during learning activities (In-Class Observation S3, 3 October 2025; 10 October 2025).

For S4, psychological autonomy was reflected in his strong aspiration to study abroad. This goal encouraged him to keep learning English, even when the lessons were challenging. His motivation was also shaped by stories of people who succeeded after studying overseas, as he shared during the interview:

I motivate myself to learn English because I want to study abroad. Thinking about the opportunity to study overseas makes me more enthusiastic about learning English, because English is one of the important requirements to be able to compete in the future. I feel motivated because I have a strong desire to study abroad. This desire appeared after I often saw examples of people who became successful after studying overseas, whether from teachers' stories, the internet, or other people's experiences. I also make my own study plan for learning English. I usually study during my free or holiday time. My plan is in the form of a study schedule. I decide certain days so that my learning is not random or based on my mood, but follows a clear pattern. I usually study twice a week and write the schedule on paper. (Interview S4, 24 September 2025)

Classroom observations confirmed this, showing that S4 remained attentive, asked questions, and worked diligently during lessons, reflecting strong psychological autonomy (In-Class Observation S4, 1 October 2025; 8 October 2025).

For S5, psychological autonomy was evident through his clear personal goal of continuing his studies abroad. His ambition to study outside Indonesia served as a source of self-motivation, driving him to continue learning English despite his busy schedule at the *Pondok Pesantren*. He described his motivation as follows:

I am motivated to learn English because I want to continue my study outside Indonesia, especially in Egypt. That is my main motivation. Like it or not, I have to master English. I realize that English ability is very important to be able to follow lessons abroad. So whenever I feel lazy, I remind myself of that goal to stay motivated,

even though life in the pesantren is sometimes very busy. I have not made my own specific study plan yet. Usually, I just follow the learning activities that are determined by the teacher in class. If I study independently, I usually do it occasionally when I feel the need to review the lesson. So far, I am not used to making my own study schedule or learning targets, and I still depend on the teacher's guidance and official activities in the pesantren. (Interview S5, 25 September 2025)

This was supported by observation data, which showed that S5 asked the teacher for clarification and guidance on pronunciation during class (In-Class Observation S5, 2 October 2025; 9 October 2025). Out-of-class observations further confirmed this, as S5 showed enjoyment in speaking practice and a strong desire to become more confident (Out-Class Observation S5, 29 October 2025).

b. Technical Autonomy

Regarding technical autonomy, S1 demonstrated a high level of independence in managing his learning activities and resources. He frequently studied English on his own and decided for himself which materials to use. Although access to technology was limited at the *Pondok Pesantren*, he found creative ways to continue learning, especially during his daily routine in the dormitory.

I usually learn English independently or by studying on my own. Sometimes I also ask my friends, especially friends in the dormitory. When there is vocabulary or a sentence that I do not understand, I usually ask my friends to help me understand its meaning. For self-study, I use a beginner English handbook that I bought by myself when I was in grade ten. I also use online resources such as YouTube, Ruangguru, and AI. However, because the use of mobile phones is limited in the Pondok Pesantren, I can only use them when I go home or when my parents visit me. In one semester, I usually go home once, and parent visits usually happen about once a month. Every time I have the opportunity, I always make time to use these applications because the explanations are easy to understand and I can choose topics based on my ability. (Interview S1, 24 September 2025)

Observation data showed that S1 used independent learning strategies, such as taking notes and consulting a dictionary. He often wrote notes, used a small dictionary, and reviewed his notes during lessons (In-Class Observation S1, 29 September 2025; 6 October 2025). However, during *muhadatsah* activities, when mobile phones and books were not allowed, he relied entirely on in-class interactions without extra resources (Out-Class Observation S1, 31 October 2025).

Similarly, S2 demonstrated technical autonomy by managing his study time, study locations, and learning materials independently. He set aside specific times to study English, especially on weekends, and chose places that helped him concentrate. He described his study routines as follows:

I usually set aside time on Sundays to study English. I start by learning basic things such as vocabulary and then move gradually from easier materials to more difficult ones, like grammar. I usually study by myself. Sometimes I study at the Regional Library, and if it is closed, I study at home. I also sometimes study at Sabilal Mosque

from around ten in the morning until twelve. On Sundays, if the library is not open, I go to the mosque. When I study there, I either borrow English books from the library or use online media on my phone. Besides books, I usually use websites or applications such as Duolingo. I do not use many other applications. I also join afternoon English courses at MA NIPA Rakha and Adira courses in Pakapuram. In one week, I usually attend courses three to four times because I want to improve my English skills. (Interview S2, 24 September 2025)

In-class observations confirmed this, indicating that S2 actively took notes and asked questions whenever he did not understand the lesson, demonstrating his ability to manage his own learning (In-Class Observation S2, 3 October 2025; 10 October 2025).

S3 demonstrated technical autonomy through the effective use of learning tools and resources. He integrated both offline and online methods by using notebooks, printed dictionaries, and digital dictionaries. He explained:

When the teacher explains the English lesson, I write the material in my notebook. If there are words that I do not understand, I look them up in an English dictionary or ask a friend who understands better. I can do this both during class and outside lesson time. To help my learning, I usually understand vocabulary by using a dictionary and listening carefully to the teacher's explanation. When I am outside the classroom, especially during English courses, I sometimes watch English learning videos on YouTube. The videos are shown through a TV during the course. I also use a dictionary application on my phone. I usually look for English material every time I attend the English course on Monday. I do not join any other courses outside the one provided by MA NIPA Rakha. (Interview S3, 27 September 2025)

Observations and document analysis confirmed that S3 often took notes, consulted dictionaries, and asked questions to enhance his understanding (In-Class Observation S3, 3 October 2025; 10 October 2025; Document Analysis, October 2025).

S4 demonstrated technical autonomy by attempting to understand the lesson on his own before seeking help. He explained:

My learning strategy is to study first and then ask the teacher if there are parts that I do not understand. I usually start by reading the material by myself. When I find difficult parts, I save them and ask the teacher later when I have the chance. In class, for example during discussion tasks, if something is not clear, I directly ask the teacher so I do not misunderstand the material. During discussions, I often find new vocabulary or explanations that I do not fully understand, so I ask for clarification. I also join afternoon English lessons with a tutor. When I am outside the pesantren, especially during holidays when I go home, I use applications such as YouTube or Ruangguru on my own phone. I usually use these applications when I have free time at home, although I only go home once in one semester. (Interview S4, 24 September 2025)

In-class observations indicated that S4 actively read texts on his own and took notes of key points during lessons (In-Class Observation S4, 1 October 2025; 8 October 2025).

S5 showed technical autonomy through hands-on learning activities and the use of digital tools. He highlighted the importance of *muhadatsah* activities for practicing English conversation and using AI applications for self-directed study:

I usually learn English through muhadatsah or speaking activities that are held in the morning after exercise. This activity helps me get used to using English in daily conversations with my friends. Usually, we greet each other or ask simple questions. Even though the conversations are simple, this activity helps train my confidence and my ability to speak English spontaneously in the pesantren environment. I also use applications, especially AI on my phone. I do not really use books; I use my phone more often. I do not use it very frequently, maybe about twice a week. I choose to use AI because nowadays students often use phones in daily life. Specifically, I use AI Gemini. I use this application to find the meaning of words or to ask about things that I do not understand from the lesson, and it really helps me when I study independently. (Interview S5, 25 September 2025)

Observations confirmed this, showing that S5 actively took notes and used dictionaries during class. Outside the classroom, he relied on the limited printed materials available due to the rules at the *Pondok Pesantren* (In-Class Observation S5, 2 October 2025; 9 October 2025; Out-Class Observation S5, 29 October 2025).

c. Proactive Autonomy

From the perspective of proactive autonomy, S1 demonstrated initiative by starting his own learning activities based on his awareness of his needs. He did not wait for the teacher's instructions but chose to engage in reading and speaking activities that he believed would boost his confidence in using English. His experience is described below:

I have never started an English project in the form of assignments, but I have initiated speaking activities by myself. I want to develop my reading and speaking skills more deeply. For speaking, I practice by talking with my friends, and for reading, I read English texts. I do this because I want to feel more confident when using English. I also study English based on my own desire. I usually start by looking for new vocabulary. At the beginning, I find about five new words. Sometimes I practice these words in simple dialogues or write them in short expressions. (Interview S1, 24 September 2025)

Classroom observations confirmed this, showing that S1 often carefully reread instructions and examples before asking the teacher for help (In-Class Observation S1, 29 September 2025; 6 October 2025). Out-of-class observations further showed that S1 followed scheduled activities rather than initiating them on his own (Out-Class Observation S1, 31 October 2025).

Proactive autonomy was also evident in S2's learning behavior. He frequently began English-related activities independently, such as reading English novels and using English in daily conversations. These activities were motivated by his desire to improve his English speaking skills, particularly for public speaking. He also explained how he gradually developed his learning by starting with simple language use. His experience is described as follows:

I often start my own English activities without being told by the teacher. I usually read English novels and speak English with people around my home or in the school environment. I do this to improve my public speaking skills in English. I also learn English based on my own desire by memorizing vocabulary and learning grammar. I

start from easy words, such as “sky,” and then continue to more difficult things, like introducing myself in English. (Interview S2, 24 September 2025)

Observations indicated that S2 showed proactive learning by carefully reviewing task instructions and examples before asking questions. He ensured he understood the requirements before seeking the teacher’s help, reflecting proactive behavior (In-Class Observation S2, 3 October 2025; 10 October 2025).

For S3, proactive autonomy was reflected in his habit of preparing ahead of lessons or assessments. He used his free time, especially in the mornings, to review materials and get ready for quizzes or tests. This preparation helped him feel more confident and prepared when completing tasks in class. His experience is described below:

I have started English learning activities by myself. Especially when I have free time in the morning, I prepare myself for quizzes or tests. In daily learning, before the teacher enters the classroom, I prepare what I need to study first. I do this so that when the teacher gives tasks or questions, I am already ready to do them and do not feel rushed. (Interview S3, 27 September 2025)

S3 demonstrated proactive behavior by reviewing English materials before class began. Observation notes indicated that he opened his notebook and revisited previous material prior to the start of the lesson (In-Class Observation S3, 3 October 2025; 10 October 2025).

d. Sociocultural Autonomy

Sociocultural autonomy could be seen in S1’s daily interaction with friends and teachers. In the *Pondok Pesantren* environment, English was used in *muhadatsah* activities, classroom learning, and sometimes in the dormitory. S1 took part in group English activities both inside and outside the *Pondok Pesantren*, which provided opportunities for shared learning and social engagement. His experience is described below:

I practice English every time there is muhadatsah. Sometimes, when I go back home, I also communicate with people from outside Indonesia through chat in online games. I also practice English in class with my friends and sometimes in the dormitory. In the dorm, I usually practice during free time, about twice a week, with my friends. I have also joined group English activities. Inside the pesantren, I join muhadatsah, and outside the pesantren, I join tutoring activities such as Ruangguru. I feel happy when joining these activities because I can deepen my English skills. (Interview S1, 24 September 2025)

S1 collaborated with peers during English tasks. Classroom observations indicated that he asked classmates about word meanings and checked his work with peers when unsure (In-Class Observation S1, 29 September 2025; 6 October 2025). This was consistent with the out-class observation showing that S1 practiced guided English dialogue with a peer during *muhadatsah* (Out-Class Observation S1, 31 October 2025).

S2 also showed sociocultural autonomy by practicing English with friends during lessons and by joining English-related groups both inside and outside the school. He

often spoke English with classmates and friends in different situations and took part in English learning communities where they practiced vocabulary and grammar together. He felt that these group activities were enjoyable and motivating. His experience is described below:

I often practice speaking English with my friends, both in class and outside the pesantren. Some of my friends understand English, and some do not, but I still try to speak English with them. I usually practice during English lessons or when I am with my friends at English courses outside MA NIPA Rakha. I have joined English groups both at school and outside school. In these activities, we learn English by memorizing vocabulary, learning grammar, and practicing grammar exercises. I feel that the activities are fun and exciting, and they make me want to learn more. (Interview S2, 24 September 2025)

Observations supported this finding, showing that S2 often collaborated with peers by asking classmates to check his answers and by discussing tasks together. This indicates that social interaction played an important role in his English learning (In-Class Observation S2, 3 October 2025; 10 October 2025).

S3 demonstrated sociocultural autonomy by using English in different social settings. He practiced English dialogues during classroom activities and sometimes started English conversations in the dormitory, especially when he was still studying at MTs. He also extended his learning outside the *Pondok Pesantren* by joining an English Club group on *WhatsApp* during periods when phone use was allowed. These social interactions provided additional opportunities to use English. His experience is described below:

I have practiced English dialogue during English lessons, and sometimes also in the classroom. There were also times when I practiced English in the dormitory. This started when I was still in MTs because I liked English. I also joined an English Club group on WhatsApp. I could not access it in the dorm because phones are not allowed, but during semester holidays or when I met my parents or went home, I used my free time to join the group. Joining the English Club group helped me deepen my understanding of English. (Interview S3, 27 September 2025)

Classroom observations showed that S3 frequently interacted with classmates by asking about vocabulary meanings and working together with his seatmates to understand difficult words (In-Class Observation S3, 3 October 2025; 10 October 2025).

e. Reactive Autonomy

Reactive autonomy could be seen in S1's learning behavior through how he responded to learning activities that were already planned and structured. After completing English assignments, he usually moved on to other academic tasks or *Pondok Pesantren* activities because of the tight daily schedule. He rarely continued studying English after class since most of his time was filled with dormitory routines. His experience is described below:

After I finish my English assignment, I usually continue to work on other tasks. I do this because there are many academic duties and daily activities in the pesantren, so I try to complete all tasks one by one so they do not pile up and so I can follow the

schedule that has been set. Usually, I do not continue studying English after class because the dormitory schedule is very busy. After class, there are activities such as amaliyah, memorization, and other routine activities. These activities happen frequently and in sequence, so there is little or no free time to continue learning English. (Interview S1, 24 September 2025)

S1 demonstrated reactive autonomy through responding to instructions, asking clarification questions, and participating actively when learning activities were already underway. Observational data showed that he asked questions during group tasks and responded to explanations given by the teacher (In-Class Observation S1, 29 September 2025; 6 October 2025). This was consistent with the out-class observation showing that S1 participated during the required speaking session and stopped when the activity officially ended (Out-Class Observation S1, 31 October 2025). Document analysis also showed that S1 followed instructions carefully, used examples and notes, and completed tasks as required (Document Analysis, October 2025).

S2 also showed reactive autonomy through learning behaviors that were influenced by schedules and assigned tasks. After finishing English assignments, he usually continued working on other unfinished tasks. When his schedule allowed, he used English for activities such as public speaking practice and reading English novels. He explained his learning pattern as follows:

After finishing my English task, I continue working on other tasks that are not finished. If there are no more tasks, then I continue using English for public speaking and reading novels. I do this because to understand English vocabulary, I need to read and find where the meaning appears in the text. After class, I check my study schedule. If that day is scheduled for English study, then I continue learning English. If there is no English schedule, I focus on other activities first. I usually study English about three to four times a week. (Interview S2, 24 September 2025)

Classroom observations supported this by showing that S2 revised his answers after receiving feedback from the teacher and continued working based on the corrections given (In-Class Observation S2, 3 October 2025; 10 October 2025).

Reactive autonomy was also found in S3's learning behavior through his habit of reviewing his work after finishing classroom tasks. He preferred to check his answers while still in class, especially for grammar topics. His experience is described below:

After finishing the English lesson, I check my learning results again because there may be mistakes or parts I do not understand yet. I usually do this while still in class. In the dormitory, I sometimes study again if I have time. After class, I review the material first. Outside the class, in the dormitory, I study again only when there is free time. However, there are many activities in the dormitory such as amaliyah and religious studies, so I only study English about two times a week. (Interview S3, 27 September 2025)

S3 showed reactive autonomy by responding to teacher questions and adjusting his understanding when clarification was needed. Observations indicated that he answered questions during lessons and followed the given explanations without

extending the discussion further (In-Class Observation S3, 3 October 2025; 10 October 2025).

S4 demonstrated reactive autonomy through his time management after completing English tasks. After finishing English assignments, he immediately worked on tasks from other subjects because of the busy academic and dormitory schedule. His main focus was completing assigned tasks and meeting deadlines. He explained that daily dormitory activities and academic responsibilities limited his time to continue studying English after class. He explained his situation as follows:

After finishing English tasks, I work on other assignments. Usually, after completing one task, I immediately move to tasks from other subjects because the dorm schedule is busy and there are many materials that must be completed on time. I try to manage my time so that all tasks get enough attention. My focus is usually on tasks with the nearest deadlines or those that need more concentration. I usually do not continue studying English after class because dormitory activities are already full, such as daily amaliyah, Qur'an recitation, assignments from other subjects, and routine dorm activities that happen almost every day. This makes extra time for learning English very limited. (Interview S4, 24 September 2025)

Classroom observations supported this pattern, showing that S4 asked the teacher for clarification when he did not understand the material and followed the instructions during tasks (In-Class Observation S4, 1 October 2025; 8 October 2025).

S5 also showed reactive autonomy through his habit of checking his work after completing English tasks. He carefully reviewed his answers and asked the teacher about mistakes to improve his understanding. However, he rarely continued learning English after class due to time constraints and other scheduled lessons. His experience is described below:

After finishing my English task, I check my answers again to make sure they are correct. I focus on the parts that are wrong so I can ask the teacher and understand my mistakes. I do not continue studying English after class because another teacher comes in, and in the afternoon I have Arabic lessons. I have to manage my time, so my time to study English outside class is limited. Arabic lessons usually happen almost every day, so I try to balance both languages. (Interview S5, 25 September 2025)

Observations showed that S5 revised his answers after receiving feedback from the teacher (In-Class Observation S5, 2 October 2025; 9 October 2025). In the out-class observation, S5 continued participating in speaking practice briefly after the instructor moved away, indicating sustained engagement within the ongoing activity context (Out-Class Observation S5, 29 October 2025).

f. Critical Autonomy

Critical autonomy was shown in S1's learning experience through his awareness of different teaching styles used by English teachers in the *Pondok Pesantren*. He noticed that each teacher had a different way of explaining the lesson, which affected how well he understood the material. However, he mainly expressed these views in informal

contexts rather than during classroom interactions. He described his perspective as follows:

In my opinion, the material is enough and almost the same as in other schools. The way of teaching depends on each teacher. Some teachers explain fast, while others explain slowly and more clearly. I have never told this opinion to the teacher. I usually just follow the teaching method in class. I once told my friend in the dorm that we should study English more so we can be fluent, and my friend agreed. I did not give suggestions to the teacher, but I told my parents that I want to practice speaking English more to be fluent. (Interview S1, 24 September 2025)

S1 did not demonstrate actions related to selecting personal topics for tasks or projects when options were available. Classroom observation showed that he followed the given instructions without attempting to negotiate or modify task content (In-Class Observation S1, 29 September 2025; 6 October 2025). This was consistent with the out-class observation, where S1 followed the printed dialogue script without evaluating or questioning the content (Out-Class Observation S1, 31 October 2025).

g. Political Autonomy

Political autonomy was seen in S1's learning experience when he was given a chance to choose his own learning topics. However, he usually chose simple and familiar topics that matched his level of understanding. He explained that choosing basic topics made him feel more confident and reduced pressure during learning and presentation activities. He described his experience as follows:

I have chosen my own English learning topic before. I usually choose basic topics such as introductions because if the topic is too deep, I might not understand it well. When the teacher gives freedom to choose a topic, I choose based on my ability. I prefer topics that are not too difficult so I can understand the material more easily and not feel burdened when learning or presenting it. I feel happy when I can choose because the topic really matches my level, so the learning process feels more comfortable and does not make me feel stressed. (Interview S1, 24 September 2025)

S1 did not show political autonomy beyond choosing topics that were already within his comfort zone. Classroom observations showed that he did not try to negotiate or suggest different topics during the lessons (In-Class Observation S1, 29 September 2025; 6 October 2025). This was consistent with the out-class observation, where S1 followed the instructor's assigned topic without attempting to suggest an alternative (Out-Class Observation S1, 31 October 2025).

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study show that the students learning English as a foreign language in the *Pondok Pesantren* displayed several types of learner autonomy, with each student describing different characteristics shaped by their learning experiences. Psychological autonomy was reflected in students' stories of motivation, confidence, and willingness to participate in English activities. This finding is in line with Pratiwi et al. (2023), who reported that motivation directly affects students' achievement and learning goals, making it a central factor in successful language learning. In the students'

narratives, personal interests and future aspirations encouraged them to remain engaged and complete learning tasks even when lessons were challenging. Technical autonomy also emerged through students' accounts of using learning tools such as dictionaries, English applications, online videos, and note-taking strategies to support their learning beyond classroom activities.

Technical autonomy was evident in the ways students described using available learning resources and strategies to support their learning. Students' narratives highlighted practices such as note-taking, dictionary use, reviewing materials independently, and accessing digital tools when permitted. Although access to technology was limited, students adapted to these constraints by making use of printed materials, peer support, and short periods of independent study. This finding aligns with Tuan (2021), who found that learners often demonstrate technical autonomy by following teacher guidance while managing their own learning strategies. Saeed (2021) also notes that autonomy can develop even in restricted environments when learners creatively use the resources available to them.

The findings further show that proactive and reactive autonomy were intertwined in students' learning experiences. Some students narrated how they initiated learning activities, such as preparing lessons in advance or practicing English independently. At the same time, many students explained that their learning efforts were often shaped by teacher instructions, schedules, and assigned tasks. This pattern suggests that autonomy in the *Pondok Pesantren* context was frequently enacted through responding to structured learning activities rather than through completely self-directed learning. Mehdiyev (2020) emphasizes that teacher guidance remains essential in supporting learner autonomy, particularly in contexts where learning is highly structured. From a narrative inquiry perspective, students' stories illustrate how autonomy was negotiated within institutional routines rather than exercised in isolation.

Sociocultural autonomy was reflected in students' accounts of learning English through interaction with peers, teachers, and learning communities. Activities such as *muhadatsah*, group discussions, tutoring sessions, and informal conversations provided social spaces where students could practice English collaboratively. These interactions contributed to confidence-building and language development, supporting Pratiwi and Syahriani (2020) and Wiraningsih and Santosa (2020), who found that group learning activities help students become more confident, reflective, and engaged in language learning through collaborative practices. Yang et al. (2022) similarly highlight the importance of supportive classroom environments in fostering learner autonomy. In this study, autonomy emerged as a socially mediated experience shaped by relationships and shared practices within the *Pondok Pesantren*.

Students' narratives showed limited expression of political and critical autonomy. While some students mentioned opportunities to choose learning topics or expressed awareness of different teaching styles, they rarely described questioning curricular decisions or negotiating learning content. This finding is similar to Melvina et al. (2021), who reported that Indonesian students learning English as a foreign language tended to follow teacher direction rather than challenge instructional practices. Tuan (2021) also

found that students often demonstrated autonomy within teacher-defined boundaries. This condition is closely related to Sujiatmoko et al. (2023), who emphasized that critical thinking skills are essential for learners to organize ideas and engage more meaningfully with learning content, yet such skills may develop gradually in structured educational contexts. In the *Pondok Pesantren* context, cultural values such as discipline, respect for authority, and adherence to institutional norms appeared to shape how students expressed autonomy.

The learning environment of the *Pondok Pesantren* played a significant role in shaping students' autonomy. Daily religious routines, strict schedules, and limited access to technology structured students' learning experiences. However, these structures also encouraged discipline, responsibility, and time management, which supported students' learning efforts. This finding is in line with Al-Khasawneh et al. (2024) and Trinh (2024), who emphasize that learner autonomy is influenced by environmental factors, teacher support, and institutional culture. Even within a structured system, students found ways to exercise agency through small, meaningful learning choices embedded in their daily routines.

Learner autonomy among students learning English as a foreign language in this *Pondok Pesantren* can be understood as dynamic and dependent on the context. The forms of autonomy identified in this study were interconnected and emerged differently across students' narratives and learning situations. Rather than indicating a linear development, these narratives illustrate how autonomy was experienced through students' ongoing engagement with learning activities and institutional routines. Viewed through a narrative inquiry lens, learner autonomy in this context was shaped by how students made sense of their experiences and exercised agency within the realities of their educational environment.

CONCLUSION

The study showed that students learning English as a foreign language in the *Pondok Pesantren* developed different forms of learner autonomy through their learning experiences, and these experiences supported their active engagement in learning English. The findings indicate that students demonstrated several forms of autonomy that emerged in relation to their daily learning situations, such as responding to assigned tasks or tests, preparing learning materials independently, practicing English on their own initiative, and using available resources including dictionaries, notebooks, and limited digital tools. Sociocultural autonomy was also reflected in students' interactions with peers during *muhadatsah*, classroom activities, and informal conversations. In addition, students expressed critical and political autonomy in modest ways, for example by sharing opinions about learning materials or choosing topics that felt more appropriate to their abilities.

The development of learner autonomy in this study was shaped by both internal and external influences. Students' narratives highlight the role of motivation, personal goals, learning strategies, self-reflection, and support from teachers and peers in shaping their learning journeys. Goals related to improving English skills or preparing for future

academic opportunities encouraged students to take greater responsibility for their learning. Reflection helped them recognize their strengths and areas for improvement, while encouragement from teachers and peers contributed to confidence and persistence. At the same time, the *Pondok Pesantren* environment, with its structured routines and limited resources, influenced how autonomy was practiced by fostering discipline, responsibility, and awareness of time.

Through their experiences over time, students developed a changing understanding of English learning. Many initially perceived English as a difficult school subject, but gradually came to see it as something that could be learned step by step within their everyday routines. This evolving perspective encouraged students to become more attentive, more engaged, and more reflective in their learning processes. Viewed through a narrative inquiry lens, learner autonomy in the *Pondok Pesantren* context can be understood as a gradual and ongoing process shaped by personal motivation, social relationships, individual learning strategies, and the distinctive institutional environment in which students learn.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Universitas Terbuka and Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia, for the academic environment and scholarly support that contributed to the completion of this study. Sincere appreciation is extended to the administrators, teachers, and students of Pondok Pesantren Rasyidiyah Khalidiyah Amuntai, South Kalimantan, for granting permission and providing cooperation throughout the research process. Special thanks are given to the five Grade XI students who willingly shared their learning experiences and narratives as the primary data of this study. The authors also express their gratitude to academic colleagues and peers for their constructive feedback, guidance, and insights during the research and manuscript preparation stages. Finally, heartfelt thanks are extended to family members and close peers for their continuous support, encouragement, and understanding throughout the completion of this research.

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