

Filipino College Students' Perspectives on the Challenges, Coping Strategies, and Benefits of Self-Directed Language Learning in the New Normal

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic posed different challenges among teachers and learners worldwide. To add to literature regarding teachers' and learners' responses towards the pandemic, this study sought to determine the challenges and coping strategies of self-directed language learners. Anchored in the Zone of Proximal Development Theory, utilizing a case study design, eight randomly sampled college self-directed language learners from three purposively and conveniently sampled higher educational institutions in the Philippines were interviewed. Three teachers and two parents were also interviewed for triangulation. Emerging themes revealed that the self-directed language learners have difficulty consulting with teachers, logistical issues and poor Internet connections, and family commitment and distractions. To cope with these challenges, they developed time management and self-discipline, cultivated self-reliance, and prepared contingency plans. Moreover, they gained self-motivation and academic independence while employing self-directed language learning in the new normal. This implies a positive adaptation to a new normal way of studying.

Keywords: *Self-directed language learning, new normal, overlapping roles*

Introduction

The global spread of COVID-19 has resulted in a paradigm shift in educational systems. Learners are obligated to study on their own with little assistance from their teachers; hence, self-directed learning (SDL). In basic education, *i.e.*, pre-school, elementary, and high school, learners gain self-regulated learning where they learn to study at their own pace following the guidelines set by their teachers. On the other hand, college learners gain SDL as they study at their pace, follow their guidelines, and experience less guidance from teachers as long as they achieve the required tasks assigned to them. Sometimes they even go beyond what is required of them at school. Although SDL was introduced many years ago, it is deemed to have the utmost importance for college students in the new normal where they learn on their own, with minimal or no face-to-face learning. Filipino nationals, who are also English as a Second Language (ESL) college learners in the Philippines, are not spared from this new normal; hence, this study was conducted. Because of the pandemic, language teachers and ESL learners need some adjustments to adapt to the new normal setting in education. Galang (2020) pointed out that language learning is still essential in the new normal despite the limitations faced by both teachers and learners. Because most of the instruction happens online, the use of new media has become a primary necessity. In the case of the Philippines, self-directed learning through online means may be achieved by encouraging a student-centered learning environment, such as that exemplified by Alga (2016), Deita and Posecion (2019), as well as Garcia et al. (2020).

Review of Literature

Self-Directed Language Learning (SDLL)

Self-directed language learning empowers second language learners so that outcomes are attainable by teachers and students inside and outside of the usual instructional context (Benson & Voller, 2014). Curry et al. (2017) argued that students who control their language learning through SDL are more likely to succeed. Nonetheless, control over learning still requires support in terms of

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resources, strategies, and evaluation of learning outcomes. This implies that although SDLL is done by students, teachers still play a big role. In the pandemic, the teachers' may be playing a more important social role, such as that seen in SDLL conducted in relation to technology (Lai et al., 2017; Sert & Boynuegri, 2017). Additionally, Haidari et al. (2019) found that technology is a significant predictor of SDLL. However, this result contradicted the findings of Sert and Boynuegri's (2017) study, which revealed that the skills of both students and teachers in the use of technology are not correlated to students' SDLL. Hence, the teachers' capacity to support students' language learning with the use of technology is vital in the *new normal* setting, where students barely see their teachers and classes are mostly taught online. A student-centered approach also goes with language learning for ESL students to gain SDL skills. When ESL students become active in their language learning, they tend to discover learning strategies that fit them. In an experimental study done by Dimaculangan and Dimaculangan (2018) between two adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in the Philippines, it was mentioned that language learning strategies are a variable in language acquisition which lead students to more self-directed learning. Furthermore, new learning is easier for EFL learners to transfer to different situations (see also Dagway-James & Bulusan, 2020).

Phases of Self-Directed Language Learning

In a literature review done by Marquez-Leccio (2016), it was revealed that students who are skilled in SDL show maturity and responsible learning. Moreover, they aspire for autonomy and show more initiative to study. To attain this specifically in language learning, students must undergo the phases of SDLL. The following phases of SDLL are derived from the SDL phases of Winne and Hadwin, as cited in Saks and Leijen (2014) and Knowles (1975).

Defining Language Learning Tasks

Learning tasks are a vital part of an instructional setting. According to Richter (2012), learning tasks are the interface between learners and the information they are learning; they activate and control the learning process to ensure that successful learning takes place. Moreover, learning tasks prompt students to actively engage in their learning. Identifying learning tasks is arguably the most difficult part of learning. Learning tasks differ in purpose, setting, subject matter, scope, form, and complexity; hence, learning tasks can be accomplished both in and outside of the classroom (Niv, 2019). Furthermore, learning tasks allow sumptuous time for students to work on their own or with a group (Anderson & Pesikan, 2016).

Setting Language Learning Goals

Setting goals helps students to self-direct their learning. This was shown by an integrative review by Traga (2020), where it was noted that teachers were helpful agents in students' goal setting, which can lead to learning independence. Since rapid change in educational systems is inevitable and technology is a primary factor, Hematian et al. (2017) argued that an urgent need exists for self-directed and self-motivated students. In an experimental study among 40 grade eight students in Iran, it was found that teachers must show students how to set goals to develop independent learning.

Furthermore, goal setting is associated with students' individual behaviors. The students set their own goals and motivated themselves to meet them, which can result in the achievement of the set goals (Huei-Ju, 2018). Moreover, Beckers et al. (2016) emphasized that SDL is a learning process which involves goal-directed and self-controlled learning behavior, while Schweder (2019) reiterated that students' loss of learning motivation can be related to not knowing how to set and/or achieve their goals. It can be inferred that for students to learn how to set goals, teachers or more knowledgeable adults should help them.

Employing Language Learning Strategies

Learning strategies, according to Shi (2017, p. 24), "are steps taken by learners to enhance their learning." All learning processes require a strategy to achieve the learning goals (Hardan, 2013);

therefore, employing learning strategies is imperative in SDL and SDLL. Language learning strategies, just like goal setting, can be taught to students (Saleh, 2018). Rigeny (1978) and Oxford et al. (1989), as cited in Hardan (2013, p. 1715), defined language learning strategies as the “behaviors used by language learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information.”

Evaluating Language Learning Outcomes

To evaluate ESL students' learning outcomes, they must monitor their own performance in class and be taught strategies that help them improve their language learning. In an online manner of learning in the new normal, regular monitoring of academic performance is important to improve the status of low-performing students and maintain the status of high-performing students. However, when Hromalik and Koszalka (2018) analyzed the reflective journals of community college students, they discovered that only high-performing students regularly monitor their academic progress.

Psychological Challenges of Studying in the New Normal

Among the challenges posed by the new normal in education is students' battle with anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues. In a web-based cross-sectional survey among 476 university students in Bangladesh, it was discovered that students had heightened depression during the new normal. Among the respondents, 15% had moderately severe depression, while 18.1% had severe anxiety. Some reasons behind these psychological issues were academic and professional uncertainty and financial insecurity (Islam et al., 2020). This implies that besides academic struggles, ESL learners may also suffer from mental health problems. In the Philippines, a study among 191 randomly sampled teacher education students in a state university affirmed the results of Islam et al.'s (2020) study. Buenvenida et al. (2021) found out that more than 20 % of the teacher education students perceived studying in the new normal as very stressful. The results also revealed that a positive and significant relationship between respondents' motivation and their stress level. This means that the stresses and anxieties they experienced during the pandemic motivated them to study harder.

International and national studies on SDL evince that it has had a positive effect on remote learning. However, although many studies on SDL have been conducted globally concerning language learning, such work is scarce at the national level especially among ESL students during the new normal who were future English language teachers. Hence, this study aimed to serve as a springboard for future research on the same topic in the Philippine higher education context.

Study Objectives

This study specifically aimed to:

1. Determine the challenges encountered by college self-directed language learners in the new normal.
2. Identify the coping strategies that were used to address those challenges.
3. Find out the benefits they gained from employing SDLL in the new normal.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored in Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Theory. ZPD is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). It refers to the gap between what the students are capable to do on their own, and what they can do with the help of someone more capable (McLeod, 2019) until they reach autonomy in their learning. Pathan et al. (2018) explained that among many others, ZPD is one of the theories commonly connected with second language learning. Moreover, the theory emphasizes that there is a difference in the language development of a student who is assisted by a more knowledgeable adult that may result in positive SDL outcomes.

ZPD, among other socio-cultural theories, affects the cognitive development of students in language learning.

ZPD was deemed fit for this study because it starts with what ESL learners can do for their own language learning without the aid of other people. The next level is when more complex concepts about language learning are introduced to them, which needs the assistance of a more knowledgeable peer, adult, or teacher. The product of what they can do alone and with the help of others is the last level of language learning, where ESL students are expected to use the learned language concept across disciplines, in communication, and in learning autonomy, which is also the goal of SDL.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study employed a case study design. The challenges, coping strategies, and benefits gained by ESL students from selected public and private Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines were explored. Although responses were subjective based on their perceptions, feelings, and experiences, the themes were identified objectively. Also, the process of their language learning in the new normal was explored; therefore, a case study method was utilized. Merriam (1998) stated that “qualitative case studies are prevalent throughout the field of education” (p. 26), and also pointed out that a case study is distinguished in the boundedness of the case being investigated, and how finite was the data collection. In the present study, the case was bounded among 3rd and 4th year Filipino Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSE) English students whose first language was not English. Moreover, data collection was limited to the challenges, coping strategies, and benefits that the participants experienced and/or gained from employing SDLL.

Participants of the Study

The population of the study was the third- and fourth-year ESL students from selected public and private HEIs in the Philippines. Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used in the selection of the public and private HEIs from Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. For the purposive sampling, the inclusion criteria were: (a) state universities and private sectarian universities and colleges; (b) with Bachelor of Secondary Education English programs; (c) with third- or fourth-year BSE majors in English that employ SDLL who were willing to participate in the study; (d) whose BSE English learners were willing to have a one-on-one video-recorded interview. Convenience sampling was also used because after setting the criteria, the researchers referred to the list of HEIs from an official government website. HEIs with available emails on their official websites and those recommended by the researchers’ friends and colleagues were given letters of intent. Among the 12 HEIs, three approved of the data gathering: 1 each from Luzon (ABC College-private), Visayas (DEF University-public), and Mindanao (GHI College-public).

Upon approval from the HEIs, the researchers got a list of learners from the HEIs’ College of Education or Registrar. To eliminate bias, the researchers employed a simple random sampling technique in choosing actual participants from the list through drawing lots. Two language learners were from ABC College in Luzon (Learners 1 and 5), three were from DEF University in the Visayas (Learners 2, 3, and 4), and three were from GHI College in Mindanao (Learners 6, 7, and 8). All were in their third year as BSE English learners except for Learners 7 and 8, who were in their fourth year. For triangulation, two parents and three language teachers of the participants who voluntarily participated were also interviewed. Learners 1, 4, 5, 7, and 8 were female, while Learners 2, 3, and 6 were male. Teachers 1 and 3 were female while Teacher 2 was male. The father of Learner 1 and the mother of Learner 4 were the parents who were included.

Learner 1 had a family problem which she kept confidential, Learner 2 was living with his extended family, Learner 3 worked part-time to sustain his personal needs, Learner 4 was not living with her parents because of their jobs, Learner 5 was living with her mother and stepfather, Learner 6 worked as a mechanic to support himself and his siblings, Learner 7 was a single mother who took care of her 2-year-old daughter, and Learner 8 lived in an area with an extreme Internet problem.

Data Gathering Tools

A self-constructed, semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data. The interview guide was validated by four English language experts, three research experts, and one English major learner to guarantee appropriateness and validity. The first part was highly structured in which the responses were short and accurate to get the participants' demographic profiles. Questions included the year level, type of institution (public or private), number of years of exposure to the English language, and estimated GPA. The second part was a semi-structured interview guide anchored in the study's objectives. It included probing questions that required participants to narrate stories instead of short answers. For the parents and teachers, two sets of self-constructed, semi-structured interview guides were formulated. The instruments were validated by the adviser and one panel member. Both interview guides consisted of five probing questions. Follow-up questions were done during the actual interviews. Three interviews (2 learners and 1 parent) were conducted via Zoom, and 9 other interviews (6 learners, 1 parent, 2 teachers) were done via Google Meet. One teacher was not able to be interviewed due to a hectic schedule at school, but provided written answers to the research questions. All interviews were one-on-one video recorded lasting from 39 minutes to 1 hour and 17 minutes. All the student and teacher participants were requested to respond in English as much as possible, while the parents were encouraged to speak in Tagalog.

Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed individually since the interviews were one-on-one. All Tagalog and Visayan terms were translated into English. The primary participants (ESL students) were the first to be interviewed. After transcribing these interviews, guide questions for triangulation were formulated, which were validated by the researcher's adviser and one panel member. After transcribing all the interviews, initial codes were developed which were narrowed down to the final themes. The analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, or coding the data to form themes, is a systematic process that—according to Creswell (2007)—ensures that the themes formed represent the case that is being discussed in a study. This means that the coding should be done thoroughly. In the present study, themes were checked by the researcher's adviser and methodologist, member-checked by the participants (8 learners and 3 teachers), and were modified considering their comments. These steps were done to ascertain the reliability and relevance of the themes in this case.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers secured clearance from their Institutional Review Board and were given the study protocol code 2021-ERB-AUP-008. Consent forms were also procured from the participants, and the signed forms were retrieved before the conduct of the interviews.

Results

The results revealed that the college self-directed language learners have difficulty consulting with teachers, logistical issues and poor Internet connections, and family commitments and distractions. To cope with these challenges, they developed time management and self-discipline, cultivated self-reliance, and prepared contingency plans. Moreover, they perceived that studying in the new normal helped them to gain self-motivation and academic independence. Since the genders of the primary and secondary participants were disclosed, gender-appropriate pronouns were used in this part.

Challenges Encountered by College Self-Directed Language Learners in the New Normal

According to the participants, difficulty consulting with teachers, logistical issues and poor Internet connections, and family commitments and distractions were the three most apparent challenges they were experiencing in the new normal.

Difficulty Consulting with Teachers

Teachers are an essential part of students' self-direction. In the phase where learning becomes difficult for learners and they think they cannot do it on their own, the guidance of the teacher is needed as implied in the ZPD theory (Vygotsky, 1978). However, because there was no face-to-face interaction between teachers and learners, teachers' involvement in learning became limited. In the new normal, the participants mentioned that they usually communicated with their teachers through their chat groups on Messenger and via emails (Learners 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8). For Learners 2, 3, and 4, the communication went to a middleman who was the student representative of their section. The concerns of the students were communicated with the student representative, and the student representative was the one who relayed it to their professors. According to Teacher 2, this was to ensure that email addresses or chat groups were not "bombarded" with concerns from different students, especially if many of them had the same concerns.

Consultation has been a challenge for the participants during the pandemic because they were accustomed to just visiting their teachers during consultation hours or approaching them right after class. However, the new normal created a distance between learners and teachers. Learners 3 and 6 mentioned that the language teachers were not online all the time, so it was a challenge when they had urgent concerns that only their language teachers could address. On the other hand, Learners 1 and 7 stated that because of the difficulty of consulting with their language teachers, they opted not to ask too many questions and tried to understand things on their own.

According to Learner 6:

"Sometimes, hindi kasi namin macontact yung instructors namin kasi busy sila. Sometimes po, Ma'am, kasi hindi ko talaga maintindihan yung lesson, so self-directed language learning ... sometimes it's hard because hindi lahat ng nasesearch mo is magbibigay sayo ng knowledge kaya kelangan mo talaga ng assistance ng teacher mo. Pero kung wala talaga, Ma'am, kelangan mo syang matutunan ng ikaw lang talaga" [we cannot contact our instructors because they are busy. Sometimes, Ma'am, because I really cannot understand the lesson, so self-directed language learning ... sometimes it's hard because not everything that you search can give you knowledge, so you really need the guidance of your teacher. But if there is really none, Ma'am, you really need to learn that on your own].

Teacher 3 proved that this was one challenge encountered by language learners during the new normal. She tried to orient learners to convey their concerns in their chat group on Messenger because other learners may have had similar questions, so there could be just one explanation for everyone. It was also possible that other learners could answer classmates' questions, and so they could exchange ideas through the chat group. However, Teacher 3 admitted that asking questions or conveying concerns through chat groups barely happened. The possible reason that she could think of was "because they are anxious that they will be labeled as slow learners if they clarify about the concepts."

Despite this challenge, the students found that difficulty in consulting with their teachers somewhat helped them to be more self-reliant and independent in their language learning. All the participants realized that in the new normal, they were on their own in terms of their language learning. They needed to understand the lessons by themselves (Students 1 and 7) or look for online sources when they encountered confusing topics (Students 3, 4, and 6).

Logistical Issues and Poor Internet Connections

Another apparent challenge for college self-directed language learners was logistical issues and poor Internet connections. Because the new normal demands digitalization, a stable Internet connection, steady electrical power, and good weather condition were necessities. Apparently, the proximity of the learners' homes was a possible reason for problems on the Internet. Only 2 among the 8 participants were living in cities. The others were in suburbs, and some were in remote areas where a little rain affected electricity and the Internet signal.

Learner 5 rescheduled her interview for this study twice because of a poor Internet connection, while Learner 8 rescheduled hers three times. Learner 8 explained that her greatest challenge in the

new normal is “the slow Internet connection”, especially since she was doing her practice teaching. It was difficult when she was disconnected during a scheduled class with her students. Learners 1 and 5 also mentioned that there were instances when they were having synchronous classes that they were suddenly disconnected because of a poor Internet connection. Learner 2 complained, “the Internet connection I have now is not totally stable, like it will be gone, totally, like for hours ... and when Internet is gone, I don’t have any means on how to attend classes” [sic].

Teachers 1, 2, and 3 were in consensus that the setback of the new normal in the educational system in the Philippines is regarding the Internet connection. Teacher 3 confirmed that specifically in her area in Mindanao, brownout happened at least once a week. If there was no electricity, there was also no WiFi connection. Also, a little change in the weather caused intermittent signals. This was a challenge for their learners as well as for the teachers during the new normal. This reduced the need to use the Internet. Affirmingly, the mother of Student 4 asserted that her daughter sometimes needed to go to the seaside to look for a more stable Internet signal especially during synchronous classes in the new normal. In her statement, the mother of Student 4 shared, “*Kahit gabi nandun sya sa tabing dagat makakuha lang ng signal kasi ayaw nyang mahuli sya*” [Even if it’s evening, she goes to the beach looking for an Internet signal because she doesn’t want to be left behind].

Family Commitments and Distractions

Besides the consultation issues, logistical issues and Internet problems, another theme that emerged was language learners’ family commitments and distractions at home. Because they were staying at home, they disclosed that it was difficult to set boundaries in their roles as children, siblings, friends, and learners.

Learner 3, who lived with an extended family (immediate family and cousins), cited that he sometimes had to do his required work in between house chores like cooking, doing the laundry, teaching the younger cousins with their modules, and others. Learner 6, on the other hand, prepared for class or did asynchronous activities during his breaks at work as a mechanic. Learner 6 is a breadwinner with three other siblings. To help the family with the expenses at home and with his schooling, he works as a mechanic while studying. Meanwhile, Learner 7 revealed that being a single mother, she has to sacrifice her early mornings to prepare for her teaching as a practice teacher or do other schoolwork because during the wee hours, her daughter is still asleep, and she will not be disturbed. She stated, “*Minsan gumigising po ako ng alas-tres ng umaga, alas-kwatro...ganyan, para gawin yung mga dapat sagutan para wala pong istorbo kasi tulog pa po yung baby ko* [Sometimes I wake up at around 3 or 4 am to do what I need to answer so that there will be no distraction since my baby is still asleep]. Learner 4, whose parents live on another island to work, serves as her 8-year-old brother’s sister, mother, and father. She does all the house chores and assists her brother and another cousin with their modules.

In the triangulation, Teacher 2 pointed out that the language learners in the new normal were experiencing different distractions at home so they could not focus on their school requirements. Distractions not only included the presence of entertainment such as television or Netflix, but distractions could also be the different roles that language learners were playing at home. They sometimes must take care of their younger siblings (Learners 1, 3, and 4), take care of the house when their parents are working (Learners 2, 5, 7, and 8), or work for their own needs (Learner 6).

Coping Strategies of College Self-Directed Language Learners

The participants, however, emphasized that the aforementioned challenges can be addressed. They developed time management and self-discipline, cultivated self-reliance, and prepared contingency plans to cope with their challenges in the new normal.

Developed Time Management and Self-discipline

Among all the skills developed during the new normal, time-management and self-discipline were the most repeated. All the 8 ESL college students thought that time management and self-discipline

were the top coping strategies that they developed during the new normal. It was a challenge for them to juggle different schoolwork and activities while at home, which in some ways was not conducive for learning (Learner 2) because when they were at home, they sometimes tended to delay what needed to be done for their studies. All the participants exclaimed that they were better at managing their time during the new normal. “Just now, I became more responsible in my learning abilities and tasks as a student and I also became more disciplined in time management” [sic], explained Learner 7, who found time to accomplish her school requirements, teach for her practice teaching, do household chores, and take care of her two-year-old daughter. Meanwhile, Learner 6 managed his time by organizing what needed to be done and not wasting his time. When he had no work at the mechanic shop, he did his school work. Learner 4, without her parents at home for 2 years now, made sure that she managed her school needs, choir practice, and the responsibility of being the elder sister to her younger brother who was also studying as an elementary student. According to Learner 3, there were a lot of distractions at home, i.e., household chores, high-volume television, noisy neighborhood, naughty siblings, crowded house, etc. Despite the challenges they encountered with studying at home, they were sure to meet their goals, do their tasks, and submit their output on or before time.

Additionally, Learners 2 and 3 mentioned that ESL learners like themselves played different roles at home and should be responsible to play those roles without compromising their studies. As for Learner 1, knowing that there was no teacher to supervise her, if she was not disciplined in managing her time, she would always delay her work. Consequently, Learner 8 reminded the ESL college learners that they “need to have time management in every module so that we [they] can submit the final output ahead of time.” Teachers 1, 2, and 3 generally agreed that the college self-directed language learners developed time management during the new normal. Moreover, Teacher 2 stressed that teachers should teach students “to be disciplined with their time and to really assess themselves what best works to them as a student”, while giving them the freedom to work on their own.

The mother of Learner 4 stated that being far from Learner 4 for two years now affected the studies of the latter in terms of managing her time. She mentioned:

Noon senior high sya, lahat ng mga personal na gamit nya, yung isusuot nya, ako ang naggagawana nun. Talagang pag-aaral lang ang sa kanya. Ngayon nahihirapan sya gawa ng wala ako. Kaya sinasabi nya, “Ma, iba talaga pag nandyan ka kasi...” Kumbaga focus sya lahat. Ngayon hindi eh. Syempre iisipin pa nya yung isusuot nya eh lalo kasama sya sa chorale. Yung time nya nauubos. [Before in senior high, all her personal things, what she'll wear, I do that for her. She really has to focus on her studies only. Now she's having a hard time because I am not there, she has to think of what to wear, especially that she is part of the chorale. She has no time anymore].

Cultivated Self-Reliance

To address the difficulty in consulting with teachers, the college self-directed language learners cultivated self-reliance. They learned to solve most of their concerns on their own. For all the participants, SDLL in the new normal meant total self-reliance when it comes to their language learning. The language learning of the ESL college students in the new normal revealed no face-to-face interaction with and less involvement of teachers and classmates. Hence, they perceived SDLL as taking the initiative to learn with or without help from others (Learner 8) where learning happens on their own (Learners 2, 4, and 6).

Learner 1 emphasized that during the new normal, she rarely asked her teacher about the lessons; instead, she tried to look for answers on her own, relying on her own abilities. Learner 7 did the same because she was “shy to ask” questions. Learner 3, on the other hand, thought that it was not good to always ask his teachers because they were also busy preparing for other classes and upgrading to earn their master's or doctor's degree. These concerns of the students pushed them to rely on themselves and look for other means to understand their lessons better; hence, they also learned how to optimize the use of the Internet through research. The participants' self-reliance also heightened during the new normal because “*napakaliit lang ng interaction ng teacher* [there is very little interaction with the teacher] so you are...asked or maybe forced to learn by yourself” (Learner 3). Therefore, the ESL college students found ways to “tailor their study on their own needs” (Learner 5)

so they can “gradually manage their learning; adopt it to the individual skills like studying the lessons on their own and comprehending the lesson on their own” [sic] (Learner7).

The father of Learner 1 admitted that he was unable to supervise his daughter's studies because of his work; however, he was confident that Learner 1 was very diligent with her studies and strove hard to be successful. Learner 1 lives on her own with her younger brother in the Visayas while both her parents are working in Luzon. Her mother mentioned that Learner 1 became more responsible to take care of herself, her brother, and their studies. Teachers 2 and 3 reiterated that ESL college students who employed SDLL did not need frequent monitoring from their teachers because they developed self-reliance. “Since self-directed language learning *lang sya, hindi masyadong needed and presence ng teacher* [since it is only self-directed language learning, the presence of the teacher is not much needed]” stated Teacher 2.

Teacher 1 also reiterated that the role of language teachers was to give “proper guidance and reminders” to keep the students on the right track as they “seek new strategies that will suit their learning needs as they employ SDLL especially in the new normal”. This was because their teachers or classmates were not available to help them at all times, and in the long run, this will benefit the students in their lifelong learning.

Prepared Contingency Plans

Due to logistical issues and poor Internet connections, the participants learned to think of contingency plans. The 8 participants agreed that one contingency plan was to have extra load for mobile data. Another way was to find a spot with a more stable Internet connection (Learners 4, 6, and 7). For others, they would go to a friend's or a relative's house where the Internet connection was better (Learners 1 and 5). During the interview, Learner 8 stressed that in her area, a little rain would completely disrupt the Internet connection, which led to her absence from her teaching practice. She had to “apologize to my students” almost every day because of this problem. As was affirmed by the mother of Learner 4, her daughter sometimes needed to go to the beach to look for a more stable Internet signal, especially if there was a synchronous class. On the other hand, what the language teachers usually did was to provide materials that the ESL college students could download and peruse even if they were offline (Teachers 1, 2, and 3). Learner 2 also stressed that he had language teachers who recorded their lectures and allowed the students to download them for later without worrying about having an intermittent Internet connection.

Benefits Gained by the Participants about Language Learning in the New Normal

All learners, including language learners, were caught by surprise to face the new normal. However, because self-directed language learners found ways to adapt to changes, challenges were managed with different proactive strategies. When asked about their perspective on language learning in the new normal, the participants argued that they gained (a) *self-motivation* and (b) *academic independence* in the new normal educational setting.

Self-Motivation

COVID-19 was a challenge for ESL college learners. Learner 3 divulged that because of the pandemic, his mental health suffered while adjusting to it. At the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, he felt fear and anxiety. He feared for his family's health and felt anxious about what a student's life would be like during the new normal. However, he mentioned that he was doing better now. Apparently, this also happened to Learner 1 who gained confidence in her language learning through writing. Although she did not suffer depression, studying in the new normal was tedious for her and tested her mental toughness. During the new normal, she was encouraged to create a Facebook page where she could post encouraging thoughts. This activity benefited her as an ESL student while she also encouraged others to be more resilient and positive amidst the pandemic. “Just in these pandemic times ma’am because *di ba* there are some victims of depression...in that page, ma’am, I want everybody who will be reading my thoughts, ma’am, they will get some motivation or inspiration”

[sic], Learner 1 expounded. Additionally, Learner 7 valued the importance of overcoming the new normal challenges for her daughter. She mentioned that she wants to give her daughter a better life, and being a single mother doubled the hardship, but she still endeavored to finish what she started. She was about to graduate in June 2021. Learner 4 kept on reminding herself that “*wala akong ibang aasahan kundi sarili*” [I have nobody else to ask help from but myself]. She also mentioned that thinking about the hardships of her parents, who chose to be separated from their children to provide for their needs, made her realize that she has no right to be neglectful of her studies. Hence, the participants thought of different motivational factors that would keep them going and brave the challenges of the new normal.

Employing SDLL in their learning not only benefited the learners; it also benefited the parents and the teachers. When asked if they ever encountered school-related problems with Learners 1 and 4, the father of Learner 1 and the mother of Learner 4 objected that they had never experienced being summoned by the school head or any teachers for any concern regarding their children’s studies. The mother of Learner 1 mentioned that they [she and husband] were proud of Learner 4. All their sacrifices being far from their two children were compensated with their children’s hard work at school during the pandemic even where they could not supervise them. The father of Learner 1, on the other hand, explained that family problems which occurred during the new normal did not hinder his daughter or cause her to neglect her duties as a student. Teachers 2 and 3 emphasized that despite the many challenges of adapting to changes in the new normal, ESL college learners still strove to finish their programs regardless of whether they were intrinsically or extrinsically motivated.

Teacher 1 stated that the new normal has taught many of her language learners to be resilient, flexible, optimistic, and resourceful. They found ways to deal with the difficulties they were experiencing, making the situation bearable. Also, the father of Learner 1 stated that he noticed his daughter’s *kasigasigan* (diligence) in her studies in the new normal.

Academic Independence

Besides self-motivation, the participants gained academic independence. Because there was very minimal involvement from their teachers and less collaboration with their peers, the ESL college students gained independence implicitly. Learner 4 argued that because in the new normal there was no teacher to “tell you everything that you have to do, you rely solely to yourself”, which Learners 3 and 8 also affirmed. Student 6 lengthily explained, “I learn to develop myself so I learn to understand with my own ... I learn to work on my own not just like before in face-to-face, sometimes you work together with your classmates. So now, I have to ... solely just myself ... so work hard properly the things to do the lesson” [sic].

The participants highlighted that they did their requirements on their own (Learners 2 & 4), rarely asked help from their teachers (Learners 3, 6, 7, & 8), and explored the Internet to look for ideas and search for answers to their concerns (Learners 1, 4, & 5). They also learned how to self-evaluate to see if their learning was improving despite the challenge that their teachers could not accommodate them all the time. “I do online quizzes, on grammar to check my progress in grammar and then...that is actually the determiner of where I am at or on the technical sides of that language [sic]” (Learner 4). Learners 2 and 3, on the other hand, admitted that they went back to the criteria or rubrics. “I immediately go back to the criteria ... back and forth to what I have wrote...and to see other works, Ma’am so that I can compare which part of our paper is different, Ma’am [sic]” (Learner 2). These strategies helped them in their independent learning. The grades that they got from performance of each task served as their affirmation that what they did was correct.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings revealed that in the new normal, the ESL college students were obliged to rely solely on themselves. Although teachers and classmates were willing to help, the situation made it difficult to get assistance from them. The difficulty in consulting with teachers, logistical issues and poor Internet connections, and family commitments and distractions were the most apparent challenges

that the college self-directed language learners experienced in the new normal. Because of these challenges, they cultivated self-reliance, prepared contingency plans, and developed time management to ensure that their language learning was not jeopardized. Besides the academic aspect, as well as the results, the demographic profiles, showed that each participant was in a unique situation which could also be a factor in their challenges adjusting to the new normal. However, all of them still gained self-motivation and academic independence in the new normal despite their situations. The results illustrated ZPD, wherein language learners try to do things on their own until they need help from a more knowledgeable adult, and in the new normal, online sources and materials, to aid their learning. In the end, their goal was to be independent learners who were resilient in facing challenges that different educational settings may pose.

Based on these results, ESL college learners are encouraged to develop SDLL and be more technologically adept so they can brave challenges brought about by the pandemic. It is suggested that language teachers provide succinct material, instruction or guidelines, and immediate feedback to help language learners in their SDLL. Moreover, parents and family members are encouraged to provide space and time at home to support ESL college learners' synchronous and asynchronous classes. Although needing to be done urgently, the curriculum developers must be quick-witted in creating a language learning curriculum that is holistic, learner-centered, and new-normal ready. This will help the curriculum implementers (teachers) and curriculum beneficiaries (students) to maximize their language teaching and learning. Lastly, because this study is qualitative, it cannot be generalized; hence, it is suggested that future researchers address this through a quantitative study using the emerging themes as variables. Factors such as teacher-provided learning materials and the mental toughness of the respondents may also be considered.

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