

ЛИНГВОДИДАКТИКА И НОВАЦИИ. ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ОСНОВЫ ИЗУЧЕНИЯ ЯЗЫКОВ И
КУЛЬТУР | LINGUODIDACTICS AND INNOVATIONS. PSYCHOLOGICAL BASIS OF LEARNING
LANGUAGES AND CULTURE

Студенческий опыт и отношение к самостоятельному изучению языка: пример Аддис-Абебского университета науки и технологий

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Цель данного исследования — проанализировать опыт и отношение студентов первого курса к самостоятельному изучению английского языка. Рассматривалась реальная деятельность студентов — как в классе, так и вне его — с точки зрения того, как они воспринимают самостоятельное изучение языка, насколько они готовы взять на себя ответственность за обучение и какова их мотивация изучать английский язык самим. 313 студентов заполнили анкету, составленную по результатам наблюдений за классом и обсуждений в фокус-группах. Количественные данные из анкет были проанализированы с помощью SPSS. Данные, собранные в ходе наблюдений и фокус-групповых дискуссий, обрабатывались с помощью качественного тематического анализа. Результаты показали, что студенты заинтересованы в изучении английского языка и в какой-то степени проявляют самостоятельность в обучении. Несмотря на их мотивированность и стремление к самостоятельному изучению языка, некоторые аспекты рассматривались как их ответственность. Преподаватели должны учитывать чувство автономии и ответственности студентов.

Ключевые слова: самостоятельное изучение языка, обязательства, практика.

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Students' Practices and Perceptions of Autonomous Language Learning: the Case of Addis Ababa Science and Technology University

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This study aimed to investigate freshmen students' practices and perceptions of autonomous English language learning. The study investigates the actual language learning activities students carry out inside and outside the classroom with a view to determining their perceptions towards autonomous language learning, their readiness to take responsibility for their learning, and their motivation level of learning English autonomously. 313 students participated in the survey questionnaire where classroom observations and FGDs were used for triangulation. The obtained quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS. The data collected through observations and FGDs were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Evidence from the results indicated that students were motivated to learn English and their behavior demonstrated that they were autonomous learners to some extent. Even though they were motivated and participated in autonomous language learning activities, there were only a few aspects that the students considered as their own responsibilities. Teachers should aware of students how to learn autonomously and share responsibility.

Keywords: autonomous language learning, responsibilities, practices.

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Introduction

The development of autonomy and independence in today's learners has become essential as a response to the numerous changes which have taken place in recent times. Some of the changes include the emergence of ICT and its personal, educational and social applications, the unprecedented availability of information, the impact of globalization, political, economic, and pedagogical developments worldwide, expansion in student enrolment, responding to new technologies, responding to the changing learner needs, and the increasing need for communication

between people from different parts of the world [12]. Learner autonomy has been found as a good quality of learners, and it is one of the elements that lead to successful learning. In language education, the theory and practice of learner autonomy refer to, broadly, a capacity for independent action that learners can develop in the process of learning, and which they can possess to varying degrees and express in various behavioral modes [8].

Even though definitions of autonomy have varied, they have usually included central features such as students taking responsibility for their learning because all learning can in any case only be carried out by the students themselves and also they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of their formal education and taking ownership (partial or total) of many processes [15; 6]. Little (1991) stresses that when responsibility for the learning process is given to the learner, the barriers to learning which are often found in traditional teacher-led educational structures will not arise. Autonomy is considered as a multidimensional concept which takes different context of learning and usually accepted as essentially implying particular skills and behaviors and particular methods of organizing teaching and learning process [3; 2].

Littlewood (1999) proposes a distinction between two levels of self-regulation: proactive and reactive autonomy. Proactive autonomy regulates the direction of activity and the activity itself while reactive autonomy regulates the activity once the direction has been set. Proactive autonomy will be achieved when learners are able to take charge of their learning, determine their objectives, select methods and techniques, and evaluate what they have acquired [9; 13]. However, in reactive autonomy learners don't need to create their own direction, but it enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to achieve their goal under the direction that has been initiated once [15].

Accordingly, in this study context of autonomous English language learning was seen as the capacity of students confidently and independently organize learning materials, students' commitment to use additional learning methods and resources, students' readiness to self-regulate and cooperate to learn individually or in groups by themselves, and the capacity to use available environmental opportunities and guidance from their instructors to achieve the teaching-learning goals.

In Ethiopia, English is taught as a Foreign Language (EFL). It is not widely used in day-to-day communication but is taught as a subject from the first grade and serves as a medium of instruction in all secondary schools and in higher institutions. This can have implications for students' attitudes, motivation, and home-based independent learning [17]. Firstly, the fact that English is not used for immediate social interaction may determine the extent to which students like to learn this language. Secondly, learning English for purposes that are not immediate enough can influence the level and type of motivation students possess. Finally, parents, caretakers, and other family members cannot provide enough support to children in the early grades to prepare them to become independent EFL learners. These factors can determine whether students will become lifelong independent EFL learners or not [17]. In the context of all these potential hindrances, high school and university students are expected to engage in learning a variety of strategies. Therefore, English teachers have to play a pivotal role to enable students to develop independent learning. Students on their part should also engage constantly in independent English Language learning both in and outside the classroom.

The traditional way of teaching foreign languages, which emphasizes teaching instead of learning, severely prevented learners from thinking and learning independently. Learner-

centeredness, which is the new perspective, has changed the roles of learners and teachers in the classroom [1]. In today's language classroom, learners are expected to take more responsibility for their own learning, and teachers are expected to help learners become more independent inside and outside the classroom. These developments have brought the concept of learner autonomy in the field of language teaching [5; 2]. Learners need to be independent learners because learning by what teachers give is not enough and teachers should be able to cultivate learners' ability to do things individually and independently. This needs autonomous learning ability, which is the ultimate goal of language learning.

Context of the present study

Addis Ababa Science and Technology University (AASTU) is one of the two science and technology universities accredited to the specialization of science and technology in Ethiopia starting in 2010. To join the university, interested students who had the highest score took an entrance exam provided by the university, and those who fulfilled the criteria joined the university. Obviously, students who passed through these kinds of processes are expected to be autonomous learners. In Ethiopia, where English is learned as a foreign language, learners need to be autonomous because their environment provides few opportunities to actually use English in daily life. Learners need to learn and practice the language on their own, apart from classroom instruction, because classroom instruction may not be sufficient to make them effective in their learning. Autonomous language learning is a very essential ability that learners should develop.

In spite of its importance in facilitating learning, few local studies have been conducted on learner autonomy. Mesfin (2008) [16] conducted an assessment focusing on the practice of autonomous learning and identification of the problems encountered in practicing it with grade 11 students, and attempted to identify students' awareness with respect to their own roles, responsibilities, and strategy use in language learning. Cherinet (2019) [5] conducted an investigation on EFL freshmen students' and teachers' perceptions and practices of learner autonomy at Wolayta Sodo University. Murphy (2011) [18] also argues that due to the lack of a single universal theory of autonomy, the educational importance of developing autonomy can take a variety of forms, depending on learning context and learner characteristics.

This study was intended to examine the state of autonomous English language learning practices, and students' perceptions of autonomous learning. Because English is a medium of instruction and nearly all the teaching and learning and reference materials are provided in English, English language courses given to university students help them to improve their proficiency. This implies that language teaching practices alone by teachers in the class cannot make students English language learners unless the students are committed to being autonomous learners. On the other hand, today's world situation encourages out-of-class and independent learning. Hence, the main aim of this research was to investigate students' autonomous learning practices and students' autonomy-promoting aspects at Addis Ababa Science and Technology University.

Research Methodology

The research approach of this study was a mixed approach. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed. In this study, the quantitative method depended on data gathered through questionnaires, whereas the qualitative method was based on data collected via observation and focus group discussion.

Research Participants and Samples

Freshmen pre-engineering students were the target population of the study because 'Communicative English Skills' is an English common course given for pre-engineering students. There were 36 sections having 45 students in each section. The total population of freshmen pre-engineering students was 1620 and the sample size was determined based on the sample size determination technique proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) [11]. Accordingly, 313 students were selected for the survey where systematic random sampling was used for selecting each sample element from the students. Four EFL teachers were willing to open their doors for observation and their classrooms were observed for two consecutive days. From these observed sections, 24 students participated in the FGD. Finally, these four teachers were interviewed.

Data Collection Instruments

To elicit the data from participants (students) three data gathering instruments: questionnaire, observation and focus group discussion were used. The questionnaire was chosen because a questionnaire is believed to be a useful tool to gather data on a wide range of topics from a large number of respondents while observations were chosen to see the real interaction or phenomenon as it takes place naturally [7]. FGD is a structured discussion used to obtain in-depth information (qualitative data insight) from a group of people about a particular topic.

A questionnaire was designed to see freshmen pre-engineering students' practice and perception of autonomous English language learning at AASTU. The questionnaire for this study was adapted from a questionnaire provided by Chan V. et al [4]. The questionnaire was constructed to identify the activities and tasks students were involved in learning English autonomously, their perceptions towards their responsibilities and their teachers' responsibilities, and the level of students' motivation.

When observation is combined with other data-collecting tools, it allows for an interpretation of the situation which is being studied. Four teachers were selected on a voluntary basis. Each section was observed for two consecutive days. Each session was scheduled for 1 hour. The observation was conducted for eight periods altogether. In total, the classes were observed for eight hours. In addition to note-taking, a semi-structured checklist was constructed by the researcher in order to specify the tasks and activities. The purpose of the FGD was to gather in-depth information from students about their autonomous English language learning practices and their perception of autonomous English language learning (taking responsibility). Semi-structured questions were used to conduct the discussion with four groups. In each group, there were six students. The students who participated in the discussion were selected using a simple random sampling method. The follow-up focus group discussions were recorded and students' responses were transcribed and analyzed. The result was used as a counter-check of the data obtained from the students' questionnaire.

Result and Discussion

The main objective of this research was to investigate freshman students' perceptions and practices of autonomous English language learning in AASTU. The study used both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data obtained from the survey questionnaire are presented in a tabular form with descriptive statistics and discussed according to the three main sections of the questionnaire, which were (a) students' autonomous language learning activities inside and outside the class; (b) students' perceptions of their responsibilities and the teacher's; and (c) students' motivation level. Results of the students' FGDs and classroom observations were also presented and

integrated with the survey result.

Students' Autonomous English Language Learning Activities Inside the Classroom

As one can observe from Table 4.1, in items 1-7 students were asked to identify how often they carried out the activities that indicated their autonomous English language learning practices inside the classroom. The responses of participants regarding the 'often/sometimes' and 'rarely/never' categories have been combined together to indicate a valid percentage of their answers. The major activities that students selected as they 'often' or 'sometimes' practiced include: noting down new information (93.9%), making notes and summaries of the lesson (81.8%), and discussing learning problems with classmates (81.5%). Most of the activities were practiced 'often' or 'sometimes' by the students except item 4, which is about making suggestions to the teacher where 80.8% of the students selected that they 'rarely' or 'never' practiced it.

Table 1

Students' autonomous English language learning activities inside the classroom (compiled from survey, 2022)

Item	Inside classroom activities	Often/Sometimes		Rarely/Never	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
1	I ask the teacher questions when I don't understand	180	57.5	133	42.5
2	I preview lesson before class (i.e. see summary, lesson...)	168	53.6	145	46.3
3	I note down new information	294	93.9	19	6.1
4	I make suggestions to the teacher	60	19.2	253	80.8
5	I take opportunities to take part in the activities that need to speak in English	208	66.4	105	33.6
6	I discuss learning problems with my classmates	255	81.5	58	18.5
7	I make notes and summaries of lesson	256	81.8	57	18.2

At observation time the students were observed when they take notes and refer to the meaning of a new word from their dictionary. Among the inside class activities, 'making suggestions to the teachers' was reported to be 'rarely' done. This result is the same with the findings of Chan V. et al [4]. This could be because of the previous culture that students' suggestions and comments usually had little effect on the teacher's decision, be it on the design of the course, classroom organization, activities, or assessment. Students were also observed when asking the teacher a question individually and then the teacher asked the whole class to let the others try to answer the question. As they also mentioned in FGD, students agreed that they are expected to complete what their teachers ordered them since the teacher monitors their work, and evaluates and gives value for their work at the end of the course. It was the teacher who dictated what happened in the classroom and they could only ask the teacher if they needed clarification. This, perhaps, conformed with the general impression that a student's previous learning experience and preference was largely teacher-centered and teacher-dominated.

Students' Autonomous English Language Learning Activities Outside the Classroom

More of the activities done for autonomous learning take place outside the classroom. From items 1-27, students were asked to identify their out-of-class autonomous learning activities.

Table 2

Students' autonomous English language learning activities outside the classroom (compiled from survey, 2022)

S/N	Outside classroom activities	Often/Sometimes		Rarely/Never	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
1	I read grammar books on my own.	183	58.4	130	41.5
2	I do assignments which are not compulsory.	161	51.5	152	48.6
3	I note down new words and their meanings.	236	75.4	77	24.6
4	I write in English for chatting with friends.	270	86.3	43	13.7
5	I read English notices.	259	82.8	54	17.3
6	I read English newspapers.	140	44.8	173	55.3
7	I send e-mails in English.	247	78.9	66	21.1
8	I read books or magazines written in English.	259	82.7	54	17.3
9	I watch English TV programs.	283	90.4	30	9.6
10	I listen to English radio.	152	48.6	161	51.4
11	I listen to English music.	250	79.9	63	20.1
12	I talk to the teachers outside the class in English.	63	20.1	250	79.9
13	I practice English recording my own voice outside the class.	75	24	238	76.0
14	I talk to foreigners in English.	184	58.8	129	41.2
15	I practice using English with friends.	188	60	125	39.9
16	I do grammar exercises.	245	78.3	68	21.7
17	I watch English movies without subtitles in your language.	276	88.1	37	11.8
18	I attend different seminars to improve my English.	88	28.1	225	71.9
19	I attend different training courses to improve my English.	102	32.6	211	67.4
20	I attend different conferences to improve my English.	64	20.4	249	79.6
21	I write a diary in English.	102	32.6	211	67.4
22	I use Internet in English.	299	95.5	14	4.5
23	I revise lessons and seek the reference books.	208	66.5	105	33.5
24	I do revision activities for my own sake even though it is not required by the teacher.	171	54.6	142	45.4
25	I attend self-study channels (e.g. e-learning).	143	45.7	170	54.3
26	I collect texts in English (e.g. articles, brochures, labels...).	177	56.5	136	43.5
27	I discuss with my teacher about my work.	72	23	241	77.0

Out of 27 outside classroom activities, there were 17 activities in which more than half of the respondents reported they 'often' or 'sometimes' engaged. The first top ten activities were:

- Using the internet in English (95.5%),
- Watching English TV programs (90.4%),
- Watching English movies without subtitles in their language (88.1%)
- Writing in English for chatting with friends (86.3%)

- Reading English notice (82.8%)
- Reading books or magazines written in English (82.7%)
- Listening to English music (79.9%),
- Sending e-mails in English (78.9%)
- Doing grammar exercises (78.3%)
- Noting down new words and their meanings (75.4%)

Students mentioned in the FGD that watching movies, listening to English music, and using the internet in English for different purposes were the practices that helped them to improve their English language even though it can't be sure they did it purposely to learn the language or not. Learning English vocabulary words and English grammar, practicing speaking English with their friends, and learning in a self-study center at a university were the practices that have a direct relation to studying or learning English; where the finding is similar with Chan V. et al 2002 finding [4]. This finding is reviewing and being prepared for class, attending a course and seminar provided by a university, and contacting teachers in order to discuss their work were less practiced even though they have a direct relation to studying or learning English. Some of the activities which are related to the study or learning of English appeared to be less widely practiced. It is uncertain whether some of the activities were all carried out for reasons of study. Talking to the teachers outside the class in English (20.1%) and attending different conferences to improve their English (20.4%) were the two least practiced activities. Students who participated in FGD have also said that they learn English more by watching movies and English YouTube channels and listening to different English music. As one student mentioned, the western entertainment industry attracted and forced them to learn English. Even though the students did not deny the importance of the teacher's guidance, everyone agreed that the English that is taught in the class only cannot make them learn English. They also mentioned that there are plenty of resources to learn English and the only thing that is needed from the students is their motivation to learn English.

In reactive autonomy, students will engage in fruitful independent study and organize their resources autonomously within a teacher-initiated direction [15]. But, evidence from this study did not support such an argument. The students' responses suggested that the kind of autonomous behavior that would seem to suit students' preferences did not seem to take place. One possible reason could be that these students had not yet received sufficient support from their teachers to learn autonomously, to function in such a direction. In addition, the practices that are 'rarely' or 'never' practiced are those that did not have a direct relationship with that course or it is possible to say that the teacher had no mechanism to check whether the students were doing those activities autonomously outside the class or not. This can also imply the reason for the practicability of those practices inside class was because the students might think they may be asked by their teacher or practicing those activities may help them during an exam. Pieces of evidence from the results for both the outside and inside-class activities and the FGD indicated that students' behavior demonstrated that they were involved in most of the autonomous language learning practices even though they did what they did unconsciously without understanding what is expected from autonomous learning.

Students' Perceptions Towards Language Learning Responsibilities

In order to answer the research question which investigates students' perceptions towards autonomous language learning and their responsibilities in English language learning, the students

were asked to indicate who is responsible for doing certain actions related to autonomous English language learning.

In items 1-21 in Table 3, students were asked to identify the actions that show their responsibility and their teacher's. As shown in Table, deciding what they learn outside class (85.9%), making sure that they make progress outside class (84.3%), looking for new opportunities to learn English (70.3%), and looking for other resources to learn English (57.5%) were the responsibilities that majority of the students considered as their own responsibilities only.

Table 3

Students' perceptions towards their and their teachers' responsibilities (compiled from survey, 2022)

S/N	Responsibility	Students'		Teachers'		Both teachers' and students'	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Planning							
1	Deciding the objectives of your English course	30	9.6	159	50.8	124	39.6
Learning process							
2	Deciding what you learn outside class	269	85.9	16	5.1	28	8.9
3	Deciding the textbook and materials you use in class	25	8.0	189	60.4	99	31.6
4	Choosing what activities to use to learn English in your English lesson	21	6.7	188	60.1	104	33.2
5	Deciding what you should learn next in your English lesson	19	6.1	229	73.2	65	20.8
6	Deciding how long to spend on each activity	60	19.2	145	46.3	108	34.5
7	Stimulating your interest in learning English	134	42.8	33	10.5	146	46.6
8	Making you work harder	129	41.2	32	10.2	152	48.6
9	Making sure you make progress during lessons	67	21.4	70	22.4	176	56.2
10	Making sure you make progress outside class	264	84.3	11	3.5	38	12.1
11	Looking for other resources to learn English	180	57.5	13	4.2	120	38.3
12	Looking for new opportunities to learn English	220	70.3	16	5.1	77	24.6
Evaluation							
13	Evaluating your learning	67	21.4	76	24.3	170	54.3
14	Identifying your strengths in learning English	133	42.5	36	11.5	144	46.0
15	Identifying your weaknesses in learning English	123	39.3	49	15.7	141	45.0
16	Evaluating the progress you have in learning English	69	22.0	60	19.2	184	58.8

17	Evaluating the outcomes of learning English	88	28.1	51	16.3	174	55.6
18	Evaluating the learning strategies	36	11.5	136	43.5	141	45.0
19	Evaluating the course	24	7.7	167	53.4	122	39.0
20	Analyzing what difficulty you actually have in learning English	121	38.7	41	13.1	151	48.2
21	Setting an action plan on how to solve learning problems or improve learning	94	30.0	53	16.9	166	53.0

The students considered as their responsibilities the ones which are related to outside class learning activities, and the searching of new opportunities and resources to learn English. The five actions that the majority of respondents felt the teacher should take responsibility for include: deciding what students should learn next in English lesson (73.2%), deciding the textbook and materials to use in class (60.4%), choosing what activities to use to learn English in English lesson (60.1%), evaluating the course (53.4%), and deciding the objectives of English course (50.8). This implies a tendency to be dependent on the teacher and their perception of teacher as the decision maker. However, evaluating the progress students have in learning English (58.8%), making sure you make progress during lessons (56.2%), evaluating the outcomes of learning English (55.6%), evaluating the learning (54.3%), and setting an action plan on how to solve learning problems or improving learning (53%) were the actions that majority of the students consider as both students and teachers were responsible for it. In addition, even though it was not the majority, the major percent of some actions like: making you work harder (48.6%), analyzing what difficulty you actually have in learning English (48.2%), stimulating your interest in learning English (46.6%), identifying your strengths in learning (46.0%), identifying your weaknesses in learning English (45.0%) and evaluating the learning strategies (45.0%) were also considered as the responsibility of both teachers and students. This result is different from previous studies [10; 4; 5] that considered dependence on the teacher as the reason for students' inability to be autonomous learners. The result of this study indicates that students consider most of the responsibilities as they are shared responsibilities. As they tried to justify the reason for sharing the responsibility, there were two reasons: first, they were afraid of taking full responsibility for their learning because they were not sure whether their decisions were right or not. That is why they want their teacher to assure them that their decisions are right. As one of the students mentioned in the discussion,

«Everyone can have a different goal, but the teacher has to set a goal that is general for all of us because everyone has a different goal that the teacher cannot help every student to achieve their goal. I plan or set a goal for what I am bad at. And some people may not know what they know and what they don't. So the teacher should give different assignments to different skills to test their skills and to discover what they are good at and what they are bad at».

Second, the students mentioned that their responsibilities were doing what is already planned on their module, doing the activities given there under the instruction of their teacher, and getting their grades under the evaluation of their instructor. This result also implies the reason for considering most of the responsibilities as they are shared responsibility of both teachers and students may be because they understand it is their effort that determines their success in language learning but the teacher is the decision maker.

It is justified that to be successful in acting autonomously, the confidence to take responsibility is the basic component [15]. Since the result of this study showed that the students considered as their responsibilities the ones which are related to outside class learning activities, and the searching of

new opportunities and resources to learn English, more of the responsibilities goes to the teacher even though the students understood they have shared responsibilities. Therefore, as the result showed, the responsibilities of the students were following what was stated in the module and the order of their instructor which means more of the responsibilities go to the teacher. This result is similar to some extent to the findings of Mesfin (2008) [16] which indicated a lack of the student's awareness of their teachers' roles towards their autonomous learning as if there is no clear understanding of one's responsibilities, it affects autonomous learning.

Level of Students' Motivation to Learn English Language

As summarized in Table 4, regarding the extent of students' motivation, the result indicates that students were reasonably motivated.

Table 4

Level of students' motivation to learn English language (compiled from survey, 2022)

Motivation level	Frequency	Percent
Highly motivated to learn English	97	31.0
Well-motivated to learn English	123	39.3
Motivated to learn English	79	25.2
Poorly motivated to learn English	11	3.5
Not motivated at all to learn English	3	1.0

The majority (95.5%) of students considered themselves as 'motivated', 'well-motivated or 'highly motivated'. The rest (3.5%) were 'poorly-motivated' and 1% was not motivated at all. In FGD students explained that they are motivated to learn English because they want to be competitive globally. Since English is an international language and they are higher education level students they all believe that learning English is not optional. In addition, most of them mentioned that the opportunity to get a scholarship nowadays is wide, and to be competitive everywhere in the world the major tool is English language. Even though students admitted they were motivated, they appeared to be less willing to make autonomous decisions (taking responsibility). This could be attributed to their expectation of the teacher's responsibilities and their lack of experience in learning autonomously.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has provided information on the activities that indicate the extent of AASTU students' autonomous learning practices and their awareness of taking responsibility. The students know that they have to be autonomous language learners at a higher education level. They took responsibility for the activities done outside the classroom, and they want to share most of the responsibilities with their teacher. From these results, it could be concluded that the students know they have to take more of the responsibilities for their language learning but they don't know the demarcation between their teachers' and their own responsibilities. This may imply that it needs to do more on module preparation, teachers' role, and students' classroom activities Teachers need to identify which areas of responsibilities to transfer to the students, where there is more scope for student involvement, and what contribution students could make in the whole language learning process.

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