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Investigating Learning Autonomy for Saudi Male English Language Students

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Abstract: In this research learning autonomy for Saudi male students has been investigated. More than ninety students from different levels in the English Department at the college of languages and translation in Imam Mohammed Bin Saudi Islamic University participated in this study. They answered a questionnaire which consisted of 18 statements each of which gave an indication how much those students are independent in learning English and show whether or not if they were autonomous learners. The result showed that the majority of responses fell in the negative side of the continuum. This indicated that Saudi learners are not autonomous. To make sure of the response, the mean score for each item was investigated. It showed that only three items which students got more than 3, while the rest of the item were below 3. Some suggestions and applications have been presented for the administrators teachers in the English departments in Saudi universities.

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In Western countries, more emphasis is placed on students for their own learning. There is wide acceptance by educators of the student-centered approach in language teaching. Students in these developed countries are seen as active learners rather than passive learners. Students in this case seek knowledge on their own based on their interests and needs (Iknon, 2013). In fact, the traditional way of teaching has been criticized. Sfard (1998) described traditional classrooms as being direct and controlled and students as being passive and mainly recipients. The National Research Council (2001) indicated that this negative position of students prevents them from being engaged in purposeful learning, effective processing, and learning strategies. Robison (2011) indicated that the creativity of students is being killed and hindered by the current formal teaching and that there is no way this state will be needed in the future of education and learning. Many studies have emphasized the importance of autonomous learning in education. For example, Riihimäki (2013) claimed, “The goal of educating a lifelong learner is commonly accepted in the field of education. Furthermore, there is a growing interest in making learners more involved and finding more learner centered ways of working” (p. 5).

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Saudi students are not different from other students in this world. The fast

changing of the society, especially in modern technology, has increased the requirements of learning and teaching as well. However, autonomous learning in Saudi schools is not popular and is discouraged by most of the teachers in the departments of English language in Saudi universities. Although most of us as teachers use different types of teaching strategies and the learners use different types of learning strategies, can these be considered part of learning autonomy? According to Chen and Pan (2015), learners need to practice the use of language learning strategies appropriately, flexibly, and independently, which will assist them to be autonomous learners. Many students now carry with them new devices, such as iPads, smartphones, and other handy devices, which they use to help them do their assignments, whether in the classroom or outside it. In addition, learning autonomy makes a student learn new things in life without a teacher; in other words, they engage in lifelong learning. Saudi students have experienced different types of teaching and learning, but have they come across this kind of learning?

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to discover how well known autonomous learning is among Saudi male EFL learners in the College of Languages and Translation at Imam Mohammed Bin Saud Islamic University.

Significance of the Study

The study is very important for both teachers and students in the College of Language and Translation. It gives teachers a broad vision on how to deal with their current students' needs. At the same time, it helps students find ways to use new technologies for their own learning.

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Statement of the Problem

These days, many students try to learn English on their own using new technological instruments and handy devices. These technologies are used to log on to the Internet anytime and anywhere to help them do homework, search for the meaning of a new vocabulary term, translate phrases, etc. Although this can be seen as a learning strategy, some see it as learning autonomy. However, are our students in the College of Languages and Translation aware of this type of autonomous learning? From my experience as a teacher in the department for many years, I see that most of the teachers dominate the classroom and do not give much time for students to be autonomous. Actually, most of the students rely heavily on the teachers for their information about a lesson. Although most of the teachers use different teaching strategies and the students use different learning strategies, this does not justify a whole study for any specific course independently or, in other words, autonomously. Since I have been away from the department for a few years, the question that needs an answer, bearing in mind the great development in technology, is to what degree Saudi male students in the Department of Languages and Translation are ready to be autonomous learners.

Research Questions

1. To what extent are Saudi male students aware of learning autonomy?
2. Are male students in the Department of Languages and Translation autonomous learners?
3. What kinds of learning autonomy principles do Saudi Learners consider more than others?

4. Are there any differences between male and female students in the college of Languages and Translation at Imam University?

Literature Review

Learning Autonomy

Learning autonomy (LA) has been defined by many scholars in the field of language teaching and learning. In order to understand the entire picture of this term, we should first try to understand what is meant by *autonomy* in learning. Bailly and Ciekanski (2006) said this term refers to different shapes of self-directed or independent learning in which teachers have a lesser role in the process. Of course, these traits are not inborn within a person; he or she must work on acquiring these traits either by formal teaching or naturally. Other researchers, such as Wenden (1998) and Hiemstra (as cited in Sidhu, Kur, & Yuen, 2011), have said that autonomy is the ability, capacity, or power to do something and that a learner who can take responsibility for his or her own learning is known to be an *autonomous learner*. Thus, we can now define what is meant by learning autonomy. Holec (1981), who is known to be the most famous person concerned about this type of learning, defined autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). In this sense, Holec explained that learning autonomy is the ability of the student to choose appropriate devices and methods, figure out goals, and assess his/her own development and that learning skills is done sequentially.

In the field of language learning, there are other related terms to autonomy and autonomous learning that can be used interchangeably. Terms such as *independence*, *andragogy*, *self-directed*, *language awareness*, *self-*

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regulation, and *self-centered* are synonyms of autonomy and autonomous learning (Candy, 1991; Sheerin, 1991). All of these share some characteristics. As Gremmo (1998) mentioned, students are the controllers of their learning settings. Also, Holec (2007) stated that learners make their own choices in regard to the methods and techniques used to complete their own tasks. Riihimaki (2013) added that learners become active when working autonomously. Other researchers have mentioned other characteristics of LA. Kelly (cited in Kaur, 2014) indicated that learners work in groups or individually using different sources and materials to learn their assigned topics. Here, the obligation of learning lies on the students to control and manage their progression. Therefore, these characteristics, if found in a learner, will help him/her be able to plan, choose, and decide his/her process in learning any topic.

Still, despite these characteristics of LA, there are many disadvantages. As mentioned by Balcikanli (2010), if teachers are not well trained to use LA in classroom situations, they will face problems and difficulties preparing the classroom environment for such classes. Negative effects may occur for the learners if their teachers have not been taught by the same LA strategy. Furthermore, as Balcikanli (2010) mentioned, some political issues, educational rules, assigned textbooks, and school syllabi may affect the use of LA in classrooms. Moreover, teachers' beliefs may hinder the use of it in their classrooms. Smith (2008) said that some teachers believe that students are dependents rather than independents, and therefore, teachers do not use LA in class. As a result, teachers do not give more freedom in class for their students to use LA. Another important disadvantage that may obstruct students from using LA is their belief that

such a strategy will burden their shoulders and put too much responsibility on them (Sidhu, Kaur, & Fook, 2001).

Students' Role in LA

Students play a major role in their own learning. If they are guided appropriately by their teachers, they are capable of planning, applying their plans, taking care of their learning, evaluating the application of the strategy, observing, and, if needed, coming up with any changes necessary for what they have planned (Jingana, 2011). However, Jingnan (2011) believed that this would not be possible without two important elements: willingness and capability. Another task that students should take part in is to expose themselves to the environment of language, such as mingling with native speakers and watching and listening to English radio and TV to learn efficiently.

Wenden (1998) presented seven roles of autonomous learners: Learners should have a vision about their style, take risks, take care of form and content, be active with learning tasks, study the language step-by-step, be a good guesser, and, finally, be patient during the process. Earlier researches such as Dorneye (2001) mentioned that students should search for a suitable method to encourage themselves to have a positive attitude and value toward learning a language.

Students in traditional teaching contexts are dependent on teachers' role (Little, 1995). However, in modern classrooms, a part of students' own role is to be trained on how to use the appropriate tasks and materials to enhance their autonomous learning. McCarthy (1998) said that the aim of training for students is to improve their leaning efficiency, which is part of autonomous learning.

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Studies Related to Learning Autonomy

Using LA in teaching English has encouraged many researchers to investigate its benefits on both learners and teachers.

Cotterall (1995) investigated groups of beliefs. These included beliefs about language learning, attitudes, and those that affect learning behavior as a result of improvement due to learner autonomy. She distributed these beliefs into six factors: learners' independence, teachers' role, learners' confidence, feedback's role, learning experience, and studying approach. The results showed that all factors should be considered by teachers when teaching English.

Chan (2001) further investigated the above factors in Hong Kong students. He found that they could not cope with this principle of LA because they were traditional learners. Yet, Chan found numerous factors that influence the readiness of students for autonomous learning, including attitudes, knowledge, and past experience of learning. Also, the results showed that students presented positive behavior toward autonomous learning.

Moreover, other studies have tried to discover the beliefs of student teachers about LA. For example, Balcikanli (2010) used a questionnaire, which was prepared by Camilleri (as cited in Barillaro, 2011), to investigate the beliefs of future teachers about learning autonomy. Most of the student teachers thought that learners should not interfere with decisions about the material, books, or even place and time regarding a course. Therefore, Balcikanli's (2011) study suggested that future teachers should be trained by their professors and instructors to get involved in tasks outside classrooms to train themselves on how to make decisions about their own teaching and learning processes.

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Joshi (2011) investigated learners' perception and teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy in language learning. He found that the participants made good practice of autonomous activities. They believed their role was as important as the teachers' role in learning. In addition, he found that the learners and teachers had high positive attitudes toward autonomous learning.

Qmar (2016) examined the effect of learners' autonomy on achieving oral skills to prove that student-centered classrooms help in teaching and developing oral skills and a good environment in which to use the communicative approach. She concluded that when students had access to learning autonomy, their learning process developed greatly.

Another unpublished study by Alwahibee (2015) investigated autonomous learning for female EFL learners at Imam University. She found that female students and their teachers were ready for LA on a large scale. She attributed that to a few aspects. First, female students did not have the opportunity to go to libraries to search for books; therefore, they used modern technology to look for study material and learn it. Second, female students had lots of spare time to view and review learning and teaching websites on the Internet. Third, female students' readiness helped their teachers to present new strategies, which the students already knew, in classrooms. Finally, although female students used learning autonomy on a large scale, the mean score indicated that they were not highly autonomous. In the end, Alwahibee (2015) suggested that this study be conducted again on male students to compare them with her results.

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Finally, Riihimaki (2013) tried to find out if learning autonomy was known by teachers and learners in Finland; at the same time, she wanted to discover if autonomous learning was a characteristic of EFL classes there. The results revealed that Finland's learners and teachers did not know much about LA and that it was not a characteristic found in English classrooms in Finland.

Methodology and Instruments

Participants

Ninety-four students from different levels in the College of Languages and Translation at Imam Mohammed Bin Saud Islamic University participated in this study.

Instrument

An 18-statement questionnaire was adopted from Joshi (2011), as modified by Alwahibee (2015). The frequency of responses and the mean score for each item as well as the total mean for all items were calculated. The frequencies indicated students' choices on the continuum line. The mean score calculated how autonomous the students were. The questionnaire was distributed to students at the beginning of the third week of the first semester (fall) of 2016.

Results and Discussion

Results

Students' perspectives about their learning autonomy were investigated by their responses to the questionnaire. The frequencies in the following table are meant to show the students' independent learning activities and plans that they used to learn the English language.

Table 1
Frequencies of Students' Activities and Plans and Mean Score for Each Item

S.N.	Autonomous Learning Activities and Plans	1. Never	2. Rarely	3. Sometimes	4. Often	5. Always	Mean score
1.	I think I have the ability to learn English well.	26	30	10	18	10	2.5
2.	I make decisions and set goals for my learning.	13	38	16	15	12	2.7
3.	I make good use of my free time in studying English.	30	19	17	20	8	2.5
4.	I preview before the class (e.g., look at summaries, lessons etc.).	21	28	20	17	8	2.6
5.	In the class, I try to use every opportunity to take part in the activities where and when I can speak in English.	12	24	25	20	13	2.9
6.	I speak confidently in front of people.	17	27	23	17	10	2.7
7.	I make notes and summaries of my lessons.	15	20	25	10	24	3.0
8.	I talk to teachers and friends outside the class in English.	19	21	20	20	14	2.8
9.	I practice English outside the class by, for example, recording my own voice and speaking to other people in English.	20	19	23	12	20	2.9
10.	I use the library to improve my English.	22	18	19	25	10	2.8
11.	I use audiovisual materials to develop my speech, such as listening to BBC, watching English movies, reading English newspapers, etc.	24	20	18	21	11	2.7
12.	I attend different seminars, training courses, and conferences to improve my English.	23	21	20	17	13	2.7
13.	I take risks in learning the English language.	13	20	17	24	20	3.1
14.	I note my strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improve them.	19	25	21	19	10	2.7
15.	I revise lessons and seek reference books.	20	21	22	21	10	2.7
16.	Besides the content prescribed in the course, I read extra materials in advance.	19	21	22	20	12	2.8
17.	When I make progress in learning, I reward myself, such as by buying new things, celebrating with parties, etc.	18	19	28	19	10	2.4
18.	I use the Internet and computers to study and improve my English.	12	17	23	22	20	3.2
Average Mean Score	2.8						

The table above can be divided into three main sections on the continuum line: the negative side, which contains *never* and *rarely*; the neutral side, which includes *sometimes*; and the positive side, which contains *often* and *always*. The analysis of each statement can reveal some of the perspectives of Saudi male EFLs.

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Statement 1 shows that most of the responses fell on the negative side of the continuum. Fifty-six students thought that they did not have the ability to learn English well. The mean score of 2.5 suggests that the students were not ready to be autonomous learners.

For Statement 2, 51 students' responses fell on the negative side. This means that the majority of them did not know how to make decisions and set their own goals for learning. The mean score for their responses on this item, 2.7, suggests that they did not have signs of being autonomous learners.

For Statement 3, 49 students', which was more than half the participants, choices fell on the negative side of the continuum. This means that the students did not make good use of their free time in studying English. The mean score here, 2.5, suggests that they were not ready to be autonomous learners.

Results for Statement 4 were similar to Statement 3: 49 students' choices fell on the negative side, indicating that they did not preview before coming to class. Looking at the mean score, which was 2.6, indicates that they were not autonomous learners.

For Statement 5, 36 students fell on the negative side, 25 students in the neutral position, and 33 students on the positive side. For this statement the students showed almost equal opportunities. However, students on the negative side were slightly higher, which generally indicates that the students did not take opportunities to take part in activities where and when they could speak in English. The mean score of 2.9 reflects some autonomous sense.

For Statement 6, again 49 students chose responses on the negative side. This means that students did not speak confidently in front of people. The mean score, 2.7, indicates that they were not autonomous.

For Statement 7, there were 35 students on the negative side and 34 students on the positive side. They were close in their choices. This suggests that some students took notes and summaries for their lessons and some did not. The mean score can be used to evaluate whether this is considered a use of autonomous learning; at 3.0, the mean score here indicates they had the ability to be autonomous learners.

On Statement 8, the majority of the students fell on the negative side: 40 students said they did not talk to their teachers and friends outside class in English. The mean score was 2.8, which indicates that they did not have the characteristic to be autonomous learners.

For Statement 9, 39 students were on the negative side, while 32 students were on the positive side. This indicates that most of the students did not practice English outside the class. However, the mean score of 2.9 was close to being autonomous. Yet, because a score of 3 is the neutral position, they cannot be said to have been autonomous learners.

On Statement 10, most of the students (40) fell on the negative side, while 35 fell on the positive side. In other words, most of the students did not use the library to improve their English. Looking at the mean score of 2.8 indicates that they cannot be considered autonomous learners.

For Statement 11, 44 students fell on the negative side, while 32 students fell on the positive side. This

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indicates that most of the students did not use audiovisual materials to develop their speech. Looking at the mean score of 2.7 suggests that they were not autonomous learners.

On Statement 12, 44 students fell on the negative side, while 30 students fell on the positive side. In other words, the majority of students did not attend seminars, training courses, or conferences to improve their English. The mean score was 2.7, which indicates that they did not have the ability to be autonomous learners.

For Statement 13, 33 students fell on the negative side, while 44 students fell on the positive side. This indicates that most of the students took risks in learning English language. The mean score was 3.1, which indicates that they showed the ability to be autonomous learners.

On Statement 14, 44 students fell on the negative side, while 29 students fell on the positive side. This indicates that the majority of the students did not note their strengths and weaknesses in learning English in order to improve them. The mean score of 2.7 indicates that they were not autonomous learners.

For Statement 15, 41 students fell on the negative side, while 31 students fell on the positive side. This indicates that the majority of students did not revise lessons and seek reference books. The mean score of 2.7 indicates that they were not autonomous learners.

On Statement 16, 40 students fell on the negative side, while 32 students fell on the positive side. In other words, most of the students did not read extra materials in advance to improve their learning of English. The mean score was 2.8, which indicates that they were not autonomous learners.

For Statement 17, 37 students fell on the negative side, while 29 students fell on the positive side. This indicates that most of the students did not reward themselves when they made progress. Looking at the mean score of 2.4 suggests that they were not autonomous learners.

On Statement 18, 29 students fell on the negative side, while 42 fell on the positive side. This indicates that the majority of the students used the Internet and computers to study and improve their English.

Out of the 18 items in the table above, only three items showed a mean score greater than 3.0. The rest of the items were below 3.0. The average mean score for all items was 2.8, which indicates that the Saudi male students did not show signs of being autonomous learners.

Discussion

Looking at the continuum line, most of the responses for all the items fell on the negative side, which suggests that a great number of male Saudi students do not know about autonomous learning. The reasons behind that can be explained in a few points: First, Saudi male students can be considered dependent learners because they wait to receive information from their teachers. Thus, they do not want to exert effort to obtain information about any subject, including the English language. Unfortunately, this is the effect of the system used in public Saudi schools, where teachers dominate the classes. Second, during their time in public schools until they are enrolled in universities, students are not trained to make decisions and teachers do not give them the chance to make decisions. Third, since some shops and private student centers have opened near most universities and websites have begun to provide services such as doing homework, assignments, or writing research

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papers, Saudi students have become very dependent and lazy. Fourth, Saudi male students have not been trained to attend seminars or conferences, which in turn negatively affects them. In fact, the college itself does not encourage such activities.

Answering the Research Questions

Question 1: To what extent are Saudi male students aware of learning autonomy? By referring back to the items on the questionnaire, one can see that all responses fell on the negative side of the continuum. This means that male students in the English department in the College of Language and Translation at Imam Mohammed Bin Saud University were not aware of learning autonomy.

Question 2: Are male students in the Department of Languages and Translation autonomous learners? Looking at the mean score for the items, 15 items were below 3 and only three items were above 3. The grand average mean score for all items was 2.8. This means that the Saudi male students in this department were not autonomous learners.

Question 3: What kinds of learning autonomy principles do learners consider more important than others? Only three items showed a mean score above 3.0, indicating what the Saudi male students considered most important in terms of principles of learning autonomy. These items were Statement 7, which read, "I make notes and summaries of my lessons"; Statement 13, which proclaimed, "I take risks in learning the English language"; and Statement 18, which read, "I use the Internet and computers to study and improve my English." The rest are not considered here because the students were not aware of their importance for autonomous learning, as shown in the answer of Question 1.

Question 4: Are there any differences between male and female students in the College of Languages and Translation at Imam University? To answer this question, I reviewed the unpublished paper by Alwahibee (2015), who investigated language learning autonomy for Saudi female learners. Her results showed that half of the responses from female students fell on the positive side, while in this research all of the responses from male students fell on the negative side. In addition, the mean score for all items in her study was 3.02, while in this study it was 2.8, which can be interpreted to mean that female students have greater ability to be autonomous learners than male students.

Suggestions and Recommendations

From the above results of this study and reviewing the answers to the questions of this research, as well as comparing them to Alwahibee's (2015) study, a few important suggestions and recommendations can be made.

First, departments of English in Saudi universities need to review the strategies for teaching and learning used by their teachers and give them special training to make them aware of the new trend in language teaching toward learning autonomy. Administrators need to develop a framework to develop autonomous learning in classrooms. As stated in the Literature Review, Reinder (2010) presented eight stages for building such a framework: identifying students' needs, setting goals, planning learning, selecting resources, selecting learning strategies, practicing, monitoring progress, and, finally, assessing and revising.

Second, departments of English should provide teachers with special training because they are the most important part in applying learning autonomy in classrooms. Thus, if teachers are aware of LA, it will be reflected in the

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way they teach their students. Little (1995) stated that learners' autonomy depends on teachers' teaching autonomy. Therefore, in any training program for teachers, autonomous skills should be presented very clearly (Balcikanli, 2010). In addition, the curriculum should give teachers the chance to teach the way they want to teach as well as give them the material to foster autonomy for both students and themselves (Aoki, 2002).

Third, before graduation, student teachers should be exposed to positive beliefs about learning and teaching that are essential to bringing LA to their future classrooms. This should be done through special training. McCarthy (1998) stated that the aim of such training is to develop students' efficiency of learning, which is part of autonomous learning.

Fourth, English departments or colleges should be responsible for supplying classes with the appropriate tools to promote LA. Training students will make them more autonomous. Therefore, teachers should present to students explicit techniques, and universities should provide centers that students can access by themselves to develop their learning.

Fifth, English departments should include a course not less than 3 credit hours to teach language learning strategies and emphasize learning autonomous skills. Unfortunately, the only course assigned to students in the English department to teach language learning skills focuses on vocabulary building alone. This should be revisited by all similar departments.

In conclusion, I have emphasized the fact education has shifted from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one. In the Literature Review of this paper I also revealed that autonomous learners are more efficient than

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non-autonomous learners. Moreover, this study revealed that Saudi male students are not aware of learning autonomy. In fact, they are not autonomous learners. In addition, this study indicated that female students are more ready than male students to use learning autonomy. Finally, I presented suggestions and recommendations as a result of the above findings.

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Appendix A

A letter to all participants

Dear Respondent,

This questionnaire is part of a research study on learner autonomy (students' ability to manage their own learning process). Your answers to the questionnaire are highly appreciated. Kindly, mark the appropriate answers.

Thanks for your cooperation,

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Appendix B

Learner Autonomy in Language Learning

Section One: General Information

1. Age: 2. Study Year: 3. No. of
Years Involved in Studying English:

Section Two: Autonomous Learning Activity Scale

This scale is meant to learn about your own independent learning activities and plans that you adopt for learning the English language. Please mark the answers according

to
your true
opinions.

1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Sometimes
4 = Often 5 = Always

S. N.	Autonomous Learning Activities and Plans	1. Never	2. Rarely	3. Sometimes	4. Often	5. Always
1.	I think I have the ability to learn English well.					
2.	I make decisions and set goals for my learning.					
3.	I make good use of my free time in studying English.					
4.	I preview before the class (e.g., look at summaries, lessons etc.).					
5.	In class, I try to use every opportunity to take part in the activities where and when I can speak in English.					
6.	I speak confidently in front of people.					
7.	I make notes and summaries of my lessons.					
8.	I talk to teachers and friends outside the class in English.					
9.	I also practice English outside the class by, for example, recording my own voice and speaking to other people in English.					
10.	I use the library to improve my English.					
11.	I use audiovisual materials to develop my speech, such as listening to BBC, watching English movies, reading English newspapers, etc.					
12.	I attend different seminars, training courses, and conferences to improve my English.					
13.	I take risks in learning the English language.					
14.	I note my strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improve them.					
15.	I revise lessons and seek reference books.					
16.	Besides the content prescribed in the course, I read extra materials in advance.					
17.	When I make progress in learning, I reward myself, such as by buying new things, celebrating with parties, etc.					
18.	I use the Internet and computers to study and improve my English.					