

LEARNER AUTONOMY AMONG MALAYSIAN ADULT LEARNERS THROUGH ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

Ranjit Kaur Sidhu
Mohamed Amin bin Embi

Abstract

The use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in course offerings in institutions of higher learning (IHLs) is seen as the catalyst towards producing autonomous lifelong learners. This paper explores Malaysian adult learners' views of participating in asynchronous online discussions, one mode of asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC), in a private university in Malaysia as a means of aiding them to become autonomous learners in the areas of planning, monitoring and decision making. The sample population comprised sixteen third-year adult course respondents (n=16) enrolled in the Listening and Speaking Course (LSC) for their Bachelor in Education (TESL) degree program. The sample comprised six (n=6) case respondents and one tutor (n=1). This descriptive case study employed a mixed method approach. Quantitative data were collected through a survey questionnaire, whereas qualitative data were obtained by analysing threaded asynchronous online interactions (AOI), conducting semi-structured interviews and analysing case respondents' learning logs. The findings revealed that generally course respondents rated their abilities in planning, monitoring and decision making as average. In-depth analysis of six case respondents' abilities also showed average abilities (overall average score = 3.3) in all three aspects of learner autonomy. This study has shown that online discussions have the potential in aiding learners in taking charge of their own learning, thus paving the way for learner autonomy. These findings augur well for local and global IHLs as ACMC is seen as the next e-wave of the future. However, for students to benefit from quality asynchronous online discussions, it must be accompanied by an effective follow-up system backed by dedicated educators.

Key-words: Learner autonomy, computer mediated communication, asynchronous computer mediated communication, asynchronous online discussions/interactions, Virtual Learning System, adult learning.

Introduction

Today, accessing information via the Internet is a common feature in most homes, offices, schools and institutions of higher learning (IHLs). Hence, the use of networked communication technology via Internet and Web in education is considered a necessity. In line with this, as local and foreign institutions of higher learning struggle to compete for students locally and worldwide, the demand for new delivery systems and learning media has become more urgent. More importantly, in line with anticipating a future where more students will require independent learning, new technologies and opportunities are being developed and explored by IHLs to capture student interest that will allow greater flexibility, autonomy and learner centredness without diminishing students' learning experiences. This

has called for a change in how education can and will be delivered. One such tool that has spread to many local and foreign IHLs is computer-mediated communication or CMC (Harasim, 2000; Jonassen, 2000; Selwyn, 2000; Bonk, 2004).

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is seen as the hallmark of teaching and learning in both local and foreign IHLs because it has not only transformed the teaching and learning methodologies used in higher education, but, through its catalytic power, it has also broken down traditional boundaries of teaching and learning, and it plays a privileged role in developing autonomous learners (Jonassen et al., 1999; Benson, 2001). Accordingly, when defining CMC, Santoro (1990) referred to it as an umbrella term that subsumes

computer-based instruction, informatics and human-to-human communication. Berge and Collins further defined CMC as “the use of computer systems and networks for the transfer, storage and retrieval of information among humans and the computer/network system is primarily a mediator rather than a processor of the information” (1995:11). In a similar vein, Levy defined CMC as “concerned with the communication between two or more participants via a computer” (1997:79) covering technological tools such as radio counselling, teleconferencing, bulletin board systems (BBSs), Internet, electronic mails (e-mails), online discussions/e-forums, audio-conferencing, interactive messaging (IRC/Chat), video conferencing and multi-user domains (MUDs) (Barron and Orwig, 1993; Schramber, 1998; Berge & Myers, 2000; Jonassen 2000).

Palloff and Pratt (1999) opined that in the CMC milieu there are basically two modes of web-based communication, asynchronous (delayed, anytime, any pace, any place) and synchronous (same time, real time), through a computer technology that “combines computers, modems and telephone or electronic network linkages” (Hiemstra, 1994:12). Compared to synchronous communication, researchers argue that asynchronous communication gives learners more time to reflect on their own ideas, which supports critical thinking and learner autonomy (Gunawardena, 1995; Harasim, 2000; Jonassen, 2000; Swan; 2001; Bonk, 2004). Today, both these preferred modes of learning have helped to enhance and support the development of autonomous lifelong learners (Knapper, 1998; Yumuk, 2002). As Hirsch very aptly stated, The goal of present day education is to produce students with higher-order skills who are able to think independently in the information age, who have become problem solvers and have learned how to learn and who are on their way to becoming critical thinkers and autonomous learners” (1998:5). Bonk (2004) further contends that CMC technologies will pave the way for new opportunities in online learning environments in the future. These technologies will ultimately pave the way towards creating autonomous lifelong learners and knowledge workers capable of controlling their future whilst pursuing and continuing professional development over the course of their life span.

The Malaysian Context

Against this backdrop, as Malaysia stands at the threshold of a new era of technological learning, without doubt it has to embrace these new technological changes if it wants to remain competitive in the global market. So far, the development of networked communications in Malaysia is encouraging. Given the dynamics of the global economy, the need for lifelong learners and knowledge workers has never been stronger. Hence, we must ask whether Malaysian learners are equipped with the necessary skills on how to compete in today’s competitive global economy. Are IHLs empowering learners with the right skills to pursue their learning skills and competencies for self-directed learning that will enable them to adapt and change with the times? In this context Klopfenstein, stressed that “by being taught to reflect on how they learn and by developing their skills to pursue their learning goals, students will be empowered to change from passive recipients of information to active controllers of their learning” (2003:15).

Concurrent with all these ICT developments, IHLs in Malaysia are keeping pace with these latest trends as online learning is currently believed to be a potentially significant area of development in Malaysia. Through all these developments, it is hoped that students will benefit from course materials made available online. Locally, many institutions of tertiary education and IHLs have taken the first step and are making headway in this new “e-storm” set to blaze the Malaysian e-learning horizon. Ziguras reported that in Malaysia “...many educationists see educational technologies as a means to encourage greater self-direction and creativity on the part of students...the appeal of educational technologies is that they will require learners to be more proactive and autonomous and these personality traits are increasingly important in the knowledge economy...” (2001:6). Therefore, this study is significant as it will shed light on the current state of CMC in Malaysia. More importantly, it will specifically showcase the extent to which one mode of asynchronous computer mediated communication (ACMC), i.e., online discussion, is able to promote learner autonomy among adult learners.

A Recent Study

A study was carried out to investigate the extent to which online discussions promoted learner autonomy among adult learners in a private university in Malaysia. Two common asynchronous modes of communication are email and online discussions. In the context of this study, the APMC mode of communication used was online discussions. In fact, all threaded online interactions/discussions via the learning management system called Virtual Learning System (VLS) for the Listening and Speaking Course (LSC) were analysed. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate whether online discussions via the VLS promoted learner autonomy in the areas of planning, monitoring and decision making.

This descriptive case study employed a four-pronged data collection procedure. The data collection techniques employed both quantitative and qualitative methods that included administering a survey questionnaire, analysing threaded asynchronous online interactions (AOI), conducting semi-structured interviews and analysing learning logs. Purposive sampling was the preferred technique as it enabled the researcher to study one intact class of 16 third-year students taking the Listening and Speaking Course (LSC) for their Bachelor in Education (TESL) degree program. These instruments enabled the researcher to obtain respondents' views regarding the extent to which online discussions promoted learner autonomy among adult learners.

The survey questionnaire, which used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low to 5 = very high), was administered to all 16 adult part-time third-year students pursuing the B. Ed. (TESL) course at the Faculty of Education in a private university in Selangor, Malaysia. The survey questionnaire was administered once and had a return rate of 100% (n=16). Here, through open-ended questions, the researchers were able to investigate respondents' views regarding their online discussions. The SPSS version 11.5 WIN software was used to analyse the quantitative data. Data were reported using frequencies, means and standard deviations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all six case respondents and the course tutor who composed the 'sample within the case' (Merriam, 2002). Interviews were deemed appropriate as they provided in-depth understanding, information, perspectives and

clarification regarding case respondents' views of their participation in online discussions. In addition, analysis of threaded AOI between the tutor and students, as well as analyses of the six case respondents' learning logs, were also analysed to further trace students' views. The qualitative data were analysed using the NVivo Version 7 software. Finally, all qualitative data obtained from the interview schedule, analyses of learning logs and threaded AOIs were triangulated with students' responses from the survey questionnaire to report the research findings.

Profile of Respondents in Study

The total number of students in the one intact class that formed the sample population for this study was 16. All 16 course respondents were female and were enrolled in the course on a part-time basis. In terms of qualifications, all respondents had obtained their diplomas in teaching and were currently pursuing their degree program. However, the 'sample within the case' (Merriam, 1998) comprised six case respondents (Respondent 1 – Respondent 6) and one tutor. The six case respondents were randomly selected from the sample population. Data for the case respondents were obtained through semi-structured interviews, analysis of learning log entries and threaded AOIs. Finally, the other case respondent for this study was the course tutor, Liz (pseudonym), with whom an interview session was conducted. All six case respondents were primary school English language teachers, and their ages ranged from 32 to 45 years. In terms of ethnicity, one respondent was Indian (16.7%), two were Chinese (33.3%), and the rest were Malay (50%).

Findings and Discussions

i. Learner Autonomy in Planning

In an attempt to gather information on the course respondents' abilities in planning, data were obtained from the analysis of the survey questionnaire. The area of planning investigated learners' ability to determine their own learning objectives, using planners/diaries/time tables, deciding upon the time to accomplish learning tasks, and planning suitable learning materials, strategies and techniques to accomplish their learning tasks.

Data analysis showed that generally seven (44%) course respondents rated their abilities in

planning as high, and nine (56%) rated their abilities in planning as just average. A further analysis of various aspects of planning showed that course respondents rated their abilities as average (Table 1). Their abilities to determine own learning objectives (M = 3.4, SD = .51); to use planners/diaries/time tables to set learning goals (M = 3.0, SD = .63); to decide on the time to achieve their learning tasks (M = 3.3, SD = .48); to locate and use suitable learning materials (M = 3.2, SD = .54) and learning strategies (M = 3.2, SD = .54) as well as to decide techniques to accomplish their learning tasks (M = 3.0, SD = .36) all recorded average mean scores (M < 3.4). This showed that a majority of learners in this study rated their abilities in planning through ACMC as average (Overall M = 3.2, SD = .51)

Ability in Planning	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ability to decide on techniques to accomplish learning tasks	3.0	.36
Ability to use planners/diaries/time tables to set learning goals	3.0	.63
Overall Mean Score in Planning	3.2	.51

TABLE 1 : Mean scores and standard deviation of course respondents' abilities in various aspects of planning (n =16).

Ability in Planning	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ability to determine own learning objectives	3.4	.51
Ability to decide on the time to achieve learning tasks	3.3	.48
Ability to locate suitable materials for learning	3.2	.54
Ability to use suitable learning strategies to achieve learning tasks	3.2	.54

Scale: 1 - very low, 2 - low, 3 - average, 4 - high, 5 - very high

When investigating how their tutor, Liz, rated her learners' abilities in planning through on-line discussions, data showed different perceptions. Liz rated all learners as "high" [Tutor_Interview/Para23], whereas more than half (56%) of the course respondents perceived their abilities in planning as average. An investigation into the six case respondents' interviews and learning log entries revealed that three case respondents (R1, R2 and R4) rated their planning level as high, one respondent (R5) rated it as above average and the remaining two respondents (R3 and R6) rated it as average (Table 2 and Figure 1). In other words, three of the six case respondents formed part of the 44% course respondents who rated their planning abilities through AOI as high in the questionnaire. These findings showed that the level of planning ability among respondents varied. Furthermore, respondents who applied planning in their learning tasks achieved higher levels of learner autonomy compared to those who were just aware of planning.

The following discussions further exemplify case respondents' abilities in the area of planning through online discussions obtained from interviews, threaded AOI and learning log entries. Since this was a short semester (a 12-week course), it tested students' abilities in

planning their learning tasks towards becoming autonomous learners through online discussions. Generally, all six case respondents agreed that online discussions had aided them in planning their learning. They also agreed that, as adult learners, what to learn was most important and when and how to learn depended on the individual. Data indicated that case respondents planned their learning tasks. In fact, they agreed that planning was part and parcel of their daily routine. Hence, they were

comfortable and understood the importance of planning on a daily basis in an effort to take responsibility of their learning. In addition, they emphasised that participation in ACMC helped them plan their learning tasks. Below is an interview excerpt that shows how R1 planned her learning tasks through online discussions.

“The forum had titles and we follow the discussion titles like we have discussions of general topics, then we have assignment and also for each tutorial if we have any questions we want to ask we post them online. This way actually and indirectly I also am formulating and planning for this course. Then we also have dead lines where we remind each other and then when there is new information we tell our friends also “[R1_Interview/Para144].

Table 2 : Interview and learning log analysis of case respondents’ abilities in planning (n = 6)

Ability in Planning	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
Awareness in Planning	4	4	3	4	4	3
Application in Planning	4	4	3	4	3	3
Determining own learning objectives	4	5	3	5	3.5	3
Using planners/diaries/time tables	4	4	3	3	4	4
Locating suitable learning strategies	4	4	3	4	3	3
Deciding on learning techniques	4	4	3	5	3	3
Locating suitable materials	3	3	3	4	4	4
Deciding on time for learning tasks	5	5	3	4	4	3
Overall Average Score	4.0	4.1	3.1	4.1	3.6	3.3

Scale: 1 - very low, 2 - low, 3 - average, 4 - high, 5 - very high

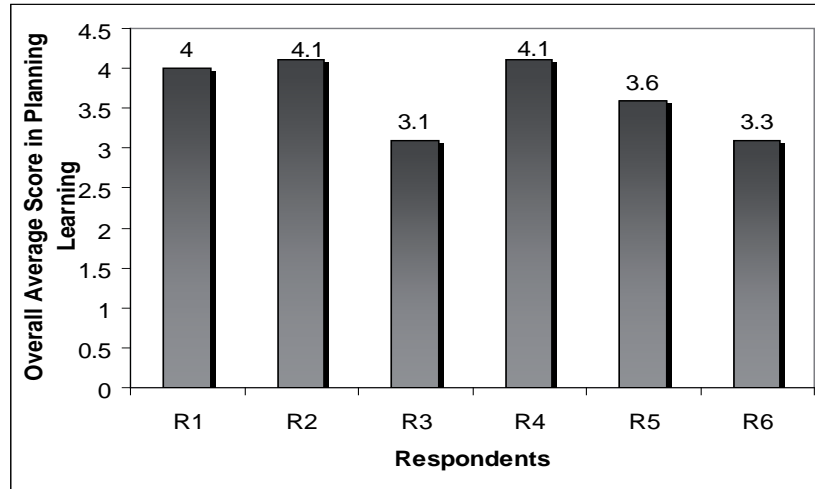


FIGURE 1 : Case respondents' overall abilities in planning their learning tasks

R1 basically resorted to memorising the contents of the module in order to obtain a good grade for the LSC. She emphasised the importance of planning her learning tasks when she said:

"The most important is reading the course module. If you know we are given modules for all the courses that we take every semester and so I allocate some time at night to read them. I also try to find out what are the assignments right from the start. I know that I have to plan on my own too so that I will not suffer at the end of the semester....for me especially I think planning is everything" [R1_Interview/Para48].

When asked to address the planning of her learning tasks through online discussions, R5 said, "I don't really spend much time studying. Just that I make sure at least two hours each day I do some work" [R5_Interview/Para39]. She further added that the VLS was able to help her plan her learning tasks because

"We are given a duration from the first tutorial to the last tutorial and then before final exam. So then what I do is to make sure I interact and take part in the online discussions. As for the place, I work at home and access things from the home-lah that's all" [R5_Interview/Para119].

Respondent 6 also planned her learning tasks to some extent. During the interview, she said that she believed that with the VLS she was able to plan her learning because it had been arranged according to different discussion topics according to tutorials. She emphasised:

"For example before we have a tutorial class we will discuss some topics and we must plan this also. Then after the tutorial after we discuss some things in class we will also go back and read and then also discuss online what we not sure....mmmm... it's like that. So I think this way we can also plan what to discuss and what to do like if there is assignment or quiz or others. We ask and check with tutor and friends also" [R6_Interview/Para97].

Finally, when Liz stated that online discussions had helped her learners in planning their learning tasks, she opined:

"I think if they utilise it, if they make use of it, prepare in advance you know.... if they have the time or they make the time to read it before hand I think .yes, yes I think it would help them to plan their learning" [Tutor_Interview/Para116].

On the whole, data analysis exhibited that learners perceived their abilities in planning through online discussions as average. In-depth investigation into various aspects of planning learning showed that learners' overall abilities were also average. The data showed that the overall mean score recorded for planning was 3.2. Closer analysis of case respondents' learning log entries, interviews and threaded AOI revealed that the planning ability differed between case respondents. This corroborated the results of other studies that investigated learner autonomy (Farmer & Sweeney 1994; Nunan 1997; Sheerin 1997; Gurnam 2000). While some case respondents rated their ability in certain aspects of planning as very high, others rated their ability as just high and average. However, none of the six case respondents in this study rated their ability as low in any of the mentioned aspects of planning. All six case respondents admitted that through ACMC they were able to improve their abilities in planning their learning, which allowed them to manage and take responsibility for their learning. This agreed with another study by Feden and Vogel (2003), which showed that when students participate actively in the learning process, learning becomes deeper and more lasting, thus paving the way for meaningful learning and self-directedness.

ii. Learner Autonomy in Monitoring

Dickinson (1995), McGarry (1995), Gurnam (2000) and Wolthers et al. (2003), when discussing the characteristics of autonomous learners in their respective studies, mentioned that autonomous learners have the ability to monitor their own learning. In line with this, the second area of learner autonomy investigated was learners' abilities in monitoring their learning, i.e., their abilities to check, verify and correct themselves when performing a learning task through online discussions. Table 3 presents course respondents' perceptions regarding their ability in monitoring learning.

Table 3: Course respondents' perceptions of their ability in monitoring learning (n = 16)

Ability in Monitoring Learning	Frequency	Percent
Average	13	81.0%
High	3	19.0%
Total	16	100%

The data in Table 3 show that 13 course respondents (81%) perceived their abilities in monitoring their learning tasks through online discussions as average. In contrast, only three respondents (19%) perceived their ability to monitor their learning as high. Upon closer investigation, questionnaire data analysis revealed that the overall mean score recorded for monitoring learning was 3.2 (Table 4). This score indicated that generally, course respondents were able to monitor their learning via the VLS. A further analysis of various aspects of learning monitoring showed that the highest mean score recorded was for learners' ability in correcting themselves in their learning tasks ($M = 3.3$, $SD = .48$). This was followed by learners' ability to verify performance in learning tasks ($M = 3.2$, $SD = .54$); ability to overcome problems in learning tasks ($M = 3.2$, $SD = .40$); ability to check learning progress ($M = 3.1$, $SD = .34$); ability to overcome problems without tutor's help ($M = 3.1$, $SD = .50$) and finally, ability to regularly check progress with tutor ($M = 3.1$, $SD = .68$).

Table 4: Mean scores and standard deviation of course respondents' ability in monitoring learning (n = 16)

Abilities in Monitoring Learning	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ability to correct learning tasks	3.3	.48
Ability to verify performance in learning tasks	3.2	.54
Ability to overcome problems in learning tasks without friends' help	3.2	.40
Ability to check own learning progress	3.1	.34
Ability to overcome problems in learning tasks without tutor's help	3.1	.50
Ability to regularly check progress with tutor	3.1	.68
Overall mean score in monitoring learning	3.2	.40

Scale: 1 - very low, 2 - low, 3 - average, 4 - high, 5 - very high

The data obtained from the questionnaire corroborated with the case respondents' learning log entries and interviews. Generally, case respondents' ability in monitoring learning through online discussions ranged from average to very high. Liz expressed similar views and stressed that she would rate her learners' abilities in monitoring their learning between high to very high, and maybe 1% to 2% as average [Tutor_Interview/Para173]. Liz further added that her learners were able to monitor their learning through online discussions. She said, "The first 50% is based on quizzes, participation or interaction and the assignment. I post them (meaning the grades through VLS).... I don't know whether they can access it or not. But we have to put it...ya...If its accessible then it's okay...

ya... they'll know [Tutor_Interview/Para163].
 Table 5 Interviews and learning log analysis of case respondents' ability in monitoring (n = 6)

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(n = 6)

Aspects of Monitoring Learning	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
Awareness in Monitoring	4	4	4	4	4	4
Application in Monitoring	4	5	3	5	3	3
Monitoring to check learning tasks	4	5	4	4	4	4
Monitoring to verify learning tasks	4	4	3	4	3	3
Monitoring to correct learning tasks	3	5	4	3	3	3
Overall Average Score	3.8	4.6	3.6	4.0	3.4	3.4

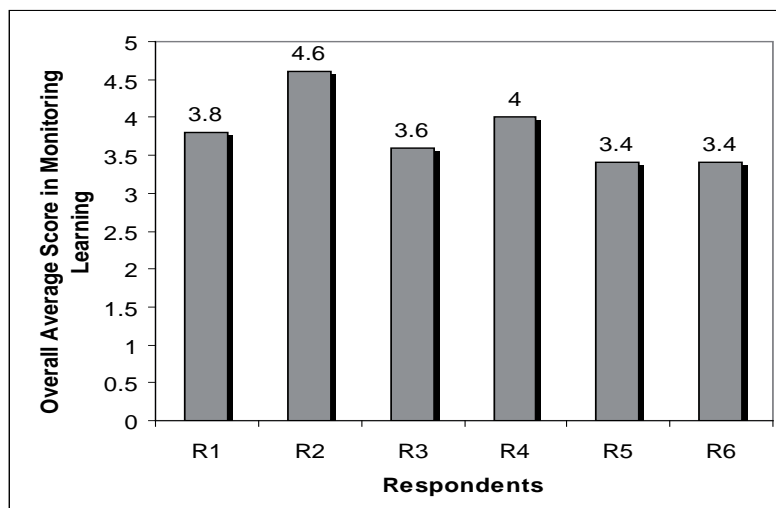


Figure 2: Case respondents' overall ability in monitoring their learning tasks

On the whole, course respondents perceived their ability in monitoring learning as average ($M = 3.2$). In-depth investigation into various aspects of monitoring learning showed that course respondents' overall ability in all aspects of monitoring learning was also average. This suggested that they were able to monitor their learning through online discussions. A further analysis of various aspects of monitoring learning revealed that the two aspects of monitoring learning that recorded the highest mean score were learners' ability to learn when their friend helped them ($M = 3.7$) and ability to learn on their own ($M = 3.6$). This finding indicated that learners were able to learn independently. However, they not only preferred to learn when their friends helped them but also preferred to check their progress with their tutor ($M = 3.1$), as well as to overcome problems with the tutor's help ($M = 3.1$). In addition, three other investigated aspects of monitoring learning were learners' ability in correcting themselves in their learning tasks ($M = 3.3$), ability to verify performance in learning tasks ($M = 3.2$) and ability to check learning progress ($M = 3.1$). These three aspects of monitoring learning recorded low average mean scores ($M < 3.5$).

Figure 2 shows that, among all six case respondents, R2 obtained the highest overall average score for monitoring learning in this study (average score = 4.6). The data also showed that she scored achieved high to very high scores for all aspects of monitoring learning. Analysis of learning logs showed that she not only showed awareness but also applied monitoring in her learning tasks. In terms of checking, correcting and verifying learning tasks, R2 showed high ability. For example, in her first learning log entry, R2 wrote: "As an English teacher I am faced with some of these problems too when I teach my pupils. Perhaps now that I have learnt the details of listening and speaking I will try to be a better teacher and effective teacher" [R2_Log1/Para36]. Then she went on further and gave a suggestion of how Liz could have delivered the topic she was teaching: "I thought it would have been better if we had kind of acted it out and seen the effect of L1 and L2 in action" [R2_Log1/Para38]. In short, R2 showed a high level of confidence in her ability to monitor her learning tasks through AOI. During the interview she said:

Of course especially in grading for our on-line discussions. It is actually all there, our grades. I mean our Test 1, Test 2 grades are all there. From here we know how well we have fared..mm..whether we get an A1 or B etc. It's all there [R2_Interview/Para159].

The next highest overall average for monitoring learning in this study was obtained by R4 (average score = 4.0). R4 scored average to very high scores for the various aspects of monitoring learning (Table 5). Analysis of learning logs showed that she not only showed a high awareness but also very high ability in applying monitoring in her learning tasks. In terms of checking, correcting and verifying learning tasks, R4's ability ranged from average to high. Findings presented many examples of both reflective thinking in R4's learning log entries. More importantly, these entries showed evidence of application of monitoring. For example, in her second learning log she wrote:

Frankly, I like it when we do test questions. For me it is a chance to think aloud, to do some self reflecting, reasoning and to try to understand what we have learnt and to apply our knowledge. The exam questions are like that too. So when we do test questions we can practice and improve our study skills. This is also a chance for us to get some immediate feedback from the tutor because she rarely does that online also [R4_Log2/Para28].

R1, R3, R5 and R6 all obtained overall average scores for monitoring learning in this study. Among these four respondents, R1 scored the highest average score (average score = 3.8), and R3 ranked second, with an average score of 3.6. This was followed by R5 and R6, who both obtained an average score of 3.4 (Table 5.11). Compared to R3, R1 showed a higher ability and confidence in monitoring her learning tasks compared to R3. Analysis of learning logs showed that she showed a high awareness and also a high ability in applying monitoring in her learning tasks. In terms of checking and verifying learning tasks, R1 rated her ability as high. With respect to correcting her learning tasks, she rated her ability as average. For example, in her first learning log she wrote: "On the whole I think I could understand the aspects covered in this topic quite well and found

it to be useful as I could use it when teaching my learners English" [R1_Log1/Para18].

Similarly, R3 also showed evidence of application of monitoring in her learning. However, compared to R1, R2 and R4, her awareness in this aspect was much higher. In terms of checking and correcting learning tasks, R3 rated her ability as high. Generally, R3 rated her ability in monitoring her learning from average to high in most aspects of monitoring (Table 5). She showed awareness of monitoring learning when she said:

I can see how many times I have gone through the system. It is a very useful feature. Until now I have participated between 13-14 times already [R3_Interview/Para139].

In addition, R3 said that the system enabled her to monitor her grades, especially for Quizzes 1 and 2 and assignments for which the students were given an overall result and a final grade [R3_Interview/Para136]. R5 and R6 obtained similar scores for their ability in monitoring learning (score = 3.4). The two respondents showed a high ability in awareness of monitoring their learning. However, their ability in applying monitoring of learning was just average. In terms of checking learning tasks, R5 and R6 rated their ability as high. In the aspect of verifying and correcting their learning tasks, they rated their ability as average. R6, in a similar vein, also made remarks about her learning log entry when she wrote:

"It is good if she can go slow and only pick the important things that we need to focus on for our exam and maybe give more examples in class or maybe we discuss more test questions or do more thinking. I think this way is better for adult learners" [R6_Log1/Para18].

In the same learning log she also wrote: "It would have been interesting if we could pick some related experiences from our classroom situations or maybe even from other context and relate it to the topics that we learned today. Then maybe the class interaction would be more active and lively and we could share and talk more on it in the online forum. This has given me an idea for online discussion" [R1_Log1/Para20].

Later, in her third learning log, she wrote: "I thought this was interesting and new information for me and felt I could apply it when I speak as well as also teach my own teenage children and my pupils in school" [R1_Log3/Para22].

These findings indicated that course respondents' ability in monitoring learning through ACMC was just average. Closer analysis of case respondents' learning log entries and interviews revealed that the ability in monitoring learning differed between case respondents. While some case respondents rated their ability in certain aspects of monitoring learning as very high, others rated their ability as just high and average. However, none of the six case respondents in this study rated their ability in monitoring learning as low in any of the mentioned aspects of monitoring learning. All six case respondents admitted that, through the Online Discussion Monitoring feature and My Academic Progress in the VLS, they were able to monitor their learning progress and performance, which allowed them to manage and take responsibility for their learning. In terms of case respondents' ability to monitor learning tasks through ACMC, R1, R3, R5 and R6 rated it as average, whereas R2 and R4 rated it as high. In comparison, R1 and R3 (average score = 3.8 and 3.6 respectively) were on the higher end of the scale, thus suggesting that they showed higher average abilities compared to R5 and R6 (average score = 3.4 respectively). Even though R2 and R4 both rated their abilities as high, R2 (average score = 4.6) showed an overall higher ability than R4 (average score = 4.0). Generally, respondents who rated their ability to monitor their learning tasks through AOI as high were not only aware but had applied and used the online monitoring feature in the VLS to monitor their learning tasks. This finding corroborates the findings of McAnear (2002), who stressed that learning systems with CMC facilities, which provide flexibility and convenience, help students to monitor their own learning, thus fostering learner autonomy.

iii. Learner Autonomy in Decision Making

According to Holec (1981), one is said to be an autonomous learner when one is able to plan, monitor and make decisions regarding one's own learning. Little (1991) further added

that one important aspect of an autonomous learner is the capacity in decision making. He further expounded that this capacity should not just be displayed in the way that the learner learns but must be transferred to a wider context through learning activities. Moore (1980) and Holec (1981) exerted that evaluating or decision making enables a learner to judge the appropriateness of newly acquired skills, ideas and knowledge. In the ACMC realm, making decisions about learning tasks was important as it fostered autonomy skills in learners. Therefore, having looked at the respondents' abilities in planning and monitoring, the next area of learner autonomy investigated was decision making. This area investigated respondents' abilities to judge, evaluate and make decisions regarding their learning tasks through AOI.

TABLE 6 : Course respondents' perceptions of their abilities in decision making (n=16)

Ability in Decision Making	Frequency	Percent
Average	10	62.5%
High	6	37.5%
Total	16	100%

The data in Table 6 highlight that ten course respondents (62.5%) perceived their abilities

in decision making as average and that six respondents (37.5%) perceived their abilities as high. In short, a majority of the course respondents generally perceived their ability in decision making as average. Closer investigation of questionnaire data further revealed that the overall mean score recorded for monitoring learning was 3.4 (Table 7). This low average mean score ($M < 3.5$) further confirmed earlier findings that learners perceived their ability in decision making as average. A further analysis of various aspects of decision making through ACMC showed that the highest mean score recorded was for learners' abilities to become independent learners ($M = 3.6$, $SD = .51$) and learners' ability to make own decision in achieving learning tasks ($M = 3.5$, $SD = .52$). Both these factors recorded high mean scores ($M > 3.5$). All other factors recorded low average mean scores ($M < 3.5$). This included learners' ability to evaluate their own performance in learning tasks ($M = 3.4$, $SD = .50$); ability to grade oneself in learning tasks ($M = 3.4$, $SD = .50$); ability to give a grade that is similar to the tutor's ($M = 3.3$, $SD = .45$) and finally, ability to check and correct errors in assignments ($M = 3.1$, $SD = .62$).

TABLE 7: Mean scores and standard deviation of course respondents' ability in decision making (n = 16)

Ability in Decision Making	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ability to become an independent learner	3.6	.51
Ability to make own decisions in achieving learning tasks	3.5	.52
Ability to evaluate own performance in learning tasks	3.4	.50
Ability to grade oneself in learning tasks	3.4	.50
Ability to give a grade that is similar to tutor's	3.3	.45
Ability to check and correct errors in assignments	3.1	.62
Overall mean score in decision making	3.4	.50

Scale: 1 - very low, 2 - low, 3 - average, 4 - high, 5 - very high

The questionnaire findings corroborated the case respondents' learning log entries and interviews. Generally, case respondents' ability in making decisions regarding their learning tasks through AOI ranged from average to high. When posed this question, Liz rated all her learners' abilities as 'High', 'Not very high' or 'Just high' [Tutor_Interview/Para195]. This view differed from learners' perceptions, as the majority of them perceived their abili-

ties as average. Among the case respondents, again, a majority rated their abilities as average, whereas four out of the six case respondents rated themselves as just average and two rated themselves as high (Table 8). The following discussions will focus on the case respondents' perceptions via interviews and learning log entries of their abilities to make decisions regarding their performance in their learning tasks

TABLE 8 : Interviews and learning log analysis of case respondents' ability in decision making (n = 6)

Aspects of Decision Making	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
Awareness in Decision Making	3	4	3	3	4	3
Application in Decision Making	4	4	3	4	3	4
Ability to Judge	4	4	4	4	4	4
Ability to Evaluate	4	5	3	5	3	3
Overall Average	3.8	4.3	3.3	4.0	3.5	3.5

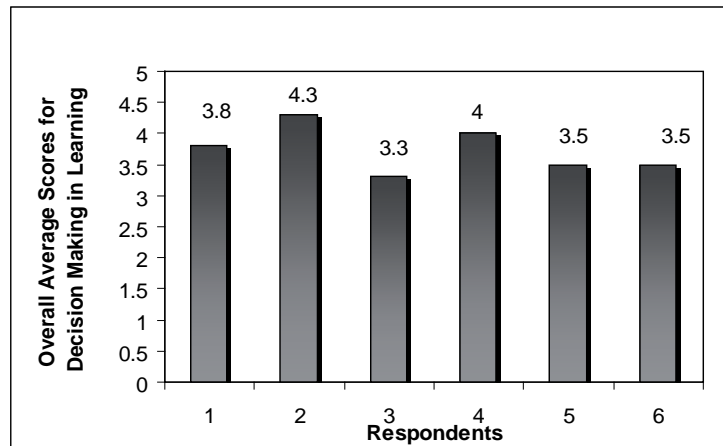


FIGURE 3 : Case respondents' overall ability in decision making

Generally, all respondents were able to evaluate their performances on their learning tasks. They knew where they stood personally and what they had to do in order to improve their understanding as well as their grades. It was either doing more self-study or carrying out discussions through the VLS. Figure 3 shows that among all case respondents, R2 and R4 obtained the highest overall average score for decision making. R2's score was 4.3, and R4's was 4.0. Data analysis showed that R2 achieved high to very high scores, whereas R4 achieved average to very high scores for all aspects of decision making. Analysis of both respondents' learning logs showed that they were not only aware of making decisions in their learning tasks but were also capable of applying these abilities to making decisions regarding judging and evaluating their learning tasks. One example from their learning log is presented below:

"I really enjoyed this topic because it made sense as it covered poor listening habits. I must say I am guilty of some especially defensive listening as well as knowing that there is a difference between listening and hearing" [R2_Log3/Para44].

The third highest overall average score in decision making was obtained by R1 (average score = 3.8). The data showed that R1 achieved average to high scores for all aspects of decision making. Analysis of R1's learning logs showed that she displayed a

high level of applying judging and evaluating skills to her learning tasks through AOI. An analysis of R1's learning logs showed application of decision making when she wrote:

"I thought the other topic on listener roles was also interesting. At least for me this was new knowledge to add on. On the whole I think I could understand the aspects covered in this topic quite well and found it to be useful as I could use it when teaching my pupils English" [R1_Log1/Para18].

R3, R5 and R6 all achieved average overall scores in decision making. However, compared to R3 (average score = 3.3), R5 and R6 achieved higher scores (average score = 3.5). All three respondents achieved more average than high scores in key aspects of decision making. In terms of application of decision making, R6 was the only one who obtained a high score, whereas both R3 and R5 showed average scores. The following are some verbatim excerpts that illustrate the application of decision making in their learning logs:

"I feel sometimes I can write well but I have problem in speaking. That is why the part on guidelines for effective conversations was very useful to me. I think I will apply it to myself and to teaching my learners" [R3_Log3/Para21].

“This topic was good to me because I think I can apply it to myself and also when I teach in school. Another topic we discuss was self and communication. This topic also I find interesting and useful and helpful to all especially us teachers because we are communicating with learners, teachers, tutor, family and other people everyday” [R6_Log3/Para23].

On the whole, the ability to make decisions regarding their learning tasks varied between respondents. All six case respondents were aware of the importance of making decisions regarding their learning tasks through online discussions. Their awareness level ranged between average and high. More importantly, their ability to apply decision making skills to their learning tasks showed encouraging results, as four respondents indicated a high ability (R1, R2, R4, R6), whereas two respondents (R3 and R5) indicated an average ability. Finally, in terms of their ability to make decisions regarding their learning tasks, R2 and R4 recorded high scores, whereas R1, R3, R5 and R6 had average scores. However, R2 obtained an overall score that was higher (average score = 4.3) than that of R4 (average score = 4.0). In comparison, of R1, R3, R5 and R6, R1 was on the higher end of the scale; this suggested that she showed higher average abilities in decision making compared to R3, R5 and R6. Even though R3, R5 and R6 all rated their abilities as average, R5 and R6 (average score = 3.5 respectively) showed an overall higher average ability compared to R3 (average score = 3.3). Generally, case respondents who rated their abilities to make decisions as high were not only aware of but had also applied them to their learning tasks through ACMC to improve their performance.

It is also interesting to note that the findings of this study with regards to learners' autonomy abilities in planning, monitoring and decision making through online discussions were rather similar to the final grades that these case respondents obtained for the LSC. The researcher was only able to view these results after she had completed her study. Henceforth, it can be concluded that the levels of autonomy were reflected in their final grades. For example, R1 and R2 obtained a grade of A, whereas R4 obtained

an A – (minus). On the other hand, R5 obtained a B, whereas R3 and R6 obtained a B – (minus)

Conclusion

Although the findings of this descriptive case study are not generalisable, it has succeeded in providing in-depth insights and in showcasing Malaysian adult students' views of asynchronous online discussions. The findings conveyed that, generally, course respondents perceived that asynchronous online discussions promoted learner autonomy and aided them in managing their own learning. This augurs well for local and global IHLs as CMC is seen as the next e-wave and trend of the future. However, one needs to understand that for students to benefit from quality asynchronous online interactions, an effective follow-up system backed by dedicated educators must always accompany it (Ranjit & Mohamed Amin, 2007). Once learners have been equipped with the right learning tools, they can learn to take responsibility for their own learning and perhaps they will be able to participate more effectively in today's online learning experiences.

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Correspondence Author: Ranjit Kaur Sidhu
ranjitk_kbm@yahoo.com