



## Fostering Autonomy: Korean Elementary and Middle School Students' Perceptions and Readiness for English Learning

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### Abstract

This study examines the perceptions and readiness of Korean elementary and middle school students for autonomous English learning, emphasizing its broader implications for English education in changing educational environments. Conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic—a time that disrupted traditional learning systems and required hybrid and independent learning—this research highlights the challenges and opportunities associated with fostering learner autonomy. A quantitative survey was administered to 205 participants from elementary and middle schools. The results indicate that readiness for independent learning varies by age and proficiency, with elementary students demonstrating greater preparedness than their middle school peers. Additionally, proficient learners showed a higher level of readiness, highlighting the important relationship between skill level and autonomy. Notably, students expressed a preference for teacher-led instruction, with many relying on educators for both materials and motivation for autonomous learning. These findings underscore the ongoing need for effective strategies, such as motivational support and teacher facilitation, to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and independent learning in various educational contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of this study is to explore the perceptions and readiness of Korean elementary and middle school students toward autonomous learning and extensive learning in English during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a rapid transformation in educational practices worldwide, serving as an unintentional experiment in autonomous learning—requiring students to take more control over their own educational processes in the absence of direct and continuous teacher oversight. In South Korea, where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a critical component of the curriculum, the public education system traditionally places a strong emphasis on teacher-centered instruction, often relying on rote learning and grammar-translation methods (Littlewood, 1999; Sakai et al., 2008). The shift to hybrid and remote learning challenged traditional models, requiring students to develop autonomy. Therefore, the pandemic became the pivotal moment to examine whether learners were adequately prepared for this shift and how they perceived their own readiness and autonomy in English language learning.

Autonomous learning, as defined by Holec (1981), is the ability to take charge of one's own learning. This concept has gained increasing attention in language learning research, particularly in settings where learners must engage in both in-class and out-of-class learning activities (Benson, 2013; Little, 2007). In this study, autonomous learning is specifically defined as a construct that emphasizes extensive learning—an approach that includes practices like extensive reading and extensive viewing. Extensive learning allows learners to independently select and engage with large amounts of language input, whether through reading or media consumption. This approach not only enhances language exposure but also fosters a habit of self-directed learning (Krashen, 2003; Nation & Yamamoto, 2012). Recent studies have shown that digital technologies, which have become more prevalent during the pandemic, play a crucial role in facilitating both learner autonomy and extensive learning. Online platforms have expanded access to reading materials and media, enabling students to engage in extensive learning independently (Reinders & White, 2016; Stockwell & Reinders, 2019).

However, the development of learner autonomy, including the adoption of extensive learning practices, is not uniform across all learners. Research has shown that factors such as age, language proficiency, and prior learning experiences influence the degree to which students are capable of autonomous learning (Little, 1991; Tok, 2011). In the South Korean context, younger students may be less accustomed to self-directed learning due to the structure of the educational system, which relies heavily on teacher direction. Conversely, older students may be more familiar with independent learning practices, particularly those preparing for high-stakes exams. Studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic have further highlighted the challenges and opportunities of online learning environments in promoting autonomy and extensive learning, emphasizing the need for sufficient self-regulation and motivational strategies among learners (Lin, 2021a).

This research is particularly important because the long-term impacts of the pandemic on educational practices are still unfolding. As hybrid and online learning models become more entrenched in education systems worldwide, understanding students' readiness for autonomous learning and their engagement with extensive learning will be crucial for designing effective curricula and support systems. By focusing on the South Korean EFL context, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how cultural and educational factors influence autonomous learning and extensive learning during a global crisis. Thus, the research questions stand as follows: (1) What are Korean elementary and middle school students' perceptions toward autonomous learning and extensive learning? (2) How do students perceive the role of their teachers in promoting autonomy and extensive learning during the pandemic? (3) What role do individual differences such as age and proficiency play in shaping these perceptions?

While this study was conducted during that period, its findings transcend the pandemic context, offering enduring insights into the development of learner autonomy and the evolving role of teachers in fostering independence. As education systems increasingly integrate hybrid models and technology-driven approaches, understanding student readiness and perceptions becomes critical for sustainable English education practices. Through this investigation, the study aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of current educational practices in fostering learner autonomy and extensive learning and to offer practical implications for supporting students in becoming more independent learners in future educational contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Autonomous and Extensive Language Learning

Autonomous learning has been a central topic in language education research for several decades. Despite the extensive research, a universally agreed-upon definition of autonomy in language learning remains elusive. This is partly due to the varying contexts in which learning occurs, with autonomy taking on different forms in classroom settings compared to out-of-class environments (Dickinson, 1994). Holec (1981) offers one of the most widely recognized definitions, describing

autonomous learning as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. This concept has been elaborated in subsequent research, which views autonomy as a constructivist approach where learners actively engage with new information to build upon their existing knowledge base (Little, 2007).

Autonomous learning encourages learners to take control of their own learning (Çakici, 2015; Holec, 1981) and has been examined in contexts both inside (Dickinson, 1994; Little, Dam, & Legenhausen, 2017) and outside (Lamb, 2006) of the classroom. In the context of language learning, autonomous learning is closely associated with extensive learning practices, such as extensive reading and extensive viewing. Extensive learning is characterized by learners independently selecting and engaging with large amounts of language input, whether through reading or media consumption. This approach allows learners to control the pace, content, and mode of their learning, fostering a deeper engagement with the language (Krashen, 2003; Nation & Yamamoto, 2012). Research has shown that extensive reading, for example, can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition and overall language proficiency by providing learners with meaningful and varied language exposure (Bell, 2001; Lao & Krashen, 2000). Similarly, extensive viewing, which has gained popularity with the rise of digital media, allows learners to experience language in context, supporting both listening comprehension and cultural understanding (Webb, 2015; Webb & Rodgers, 2009).

Recent technological advancements have further enabled autonomous learning by providing greater access to resources for extensive learning. Digital platforms such as e-libraries, streaming services, and educational apps allow learners to engage in extensive reading and viewing more easily, thereby promoting self-directed learning (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Moreover, the integration of these technologies into learning environments has shown to enhance learners' engagement and motivation, contributing significantly to their autonomous learning capabilities (Lin, 2021b).

In addition, research by Lin (2021a) highlights the role of online and mobile learning platforms in promoting language learner autonomy during the pandemic. These platforms have facilitated both extensive reading and viewing by providing learners with access to a wide array of materials tailored to their individual interests and proficiency levels. Similarly, Chik and Breidbach (2011) emphasize how digital language learning histories contribute to community building and support autonomous learning, further showcasing the importance of digital tools in this context. By synthesizing these findings, this study builds on the concept of autonomous learning by examining how Korean students engage with extensive learning practices within a hybrid educational framework.

## Individual Differences and Language Independence

Research on autonomous learning has consistently shown that individual differences play a significant role in determining learners' readiness for independent learning and their ability to engage in self-directed learning practices. Key factors such as age, language proficiency, and prior experience with autonomous learning significantly influence how effectively a student can take charge of their learning (Little, 1991; Tok, 2011).

Age and proficiency are pivotal individual differences that influence language learning independence. Little (1991) posits that the manifestation of autonomous learning behaviors differs based on learners' age and their progression in language learning. Supporting this notion, Poupore (2014) emphasizes the role of individual differences, such as age and proficiency, in determining learners' capacity for self-regulation and autonomous learning. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) further explore how individual differences, including age and proficiency, shape learners' experiences of anxiety and enjoyment in the language classroom, both of which are critical to developing autonomous learning strategies. Little (2007) extends this idea, suggesting that as learners enhance their language proficiency, their autonomy in language learning also escalates. Tok (2011) corroborates this by showing a positive correlation between English proficiency, motivation levels, and autonomous activities.

Anderson and Garrison (1998) caution that independent learning environments often lack sufficient support, emphasizing the need for adequate contextual scaffolding for learners to thrive. This concern became especially pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, where students and educators had to adapt rapidly to remote learning environments, often with minimal preparation (Kormos, 2020). The challenges of this transition highlighted the importance of developing both learners' and educators' capacities for autonomy in learning environments.

Language proficiency also plays a critical role in shaping learners' attitudes towards extensive learning and their ability to benefit from it. To engage effectively with authentic texts or English media, learners require a substantial vocabulary (Nation, 2006; Webb, 2011; Webb & Rodgers, 2009). Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) emphasize the significance of individual differences, including language proficiency, in understanding second language acquisition. Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2020) provide insights into the complexities of researching the interaction between individual differences, such as age and proficiency, and their impact on learning autonomy. For instance, low-proficiency learners may struggle with extensive viewing due to the demanding nature of authentic English media, which can impede comprehension and motivation (Vidal, 2011; Wolff, 1987).

These findings underscore the importance of considering both age and language proficiency when designing educational

interventions aimed at fostering autonomous and extensive learning. Younger students and those with lower language proficiency may require more support and scaffolding to develop the necessary skills for independent learning, whereas older, more proficient students might benefit from greater autonomy and opportunities for self-directed learning. This study contributes to this body of work by investigating how age and proficiency influence the readiness of Korean students to engage in autonomous and extensive learning.

## The Role of Teachers in Fostering Autonomy

While autonomous learning emphasizes learner independence, the role of the teacher remains crucial in facilitating this process. Teachers are responsible for creating an environment that encourages autonomy by providing appropriate guidance, resources, and motivational support (Charles, 1999; Dörnyei, 2001; Hedge, 1985; Little, 1991). Dickinson (1994) emphasizes that autonomy does not imply learning in isolation; rather, it is a shared responsibility between teachers and students. In autonomous learning, teachers act as facilitators who guide students in developing the skills necessary for self-directed learning.

The transition to hybrid and online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for teachers to adapt their roles to support autonomous learning in new ways. With the reduction of face-to-face interaction, teachers have had to find innovative methods to keep students motivated and engaged, often relying on digital tools and platforms to provide support (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). Studies like those by Stockwell and Reinders (2019) and Reinders and White (2016) suggest that teachers who effectively integrate technology into their teaching practices can significantly enhance students' autonomous learning experiences. These teachers enable students to succeed independently by providing them with the necessary tools and strategies.

Moreover, Benson (2013) and Little (2020) argue that fostering learner autonomy requires teachers to continuously develop their understanding of autonomous learning strategies, particularly in the context of extensive learning. By encouraging practices like extensive reading and viewing, teachers can help students take ownership of their learning process, thus promoting greater autonomy. Furthermore, understanding the varying levels of learner autonomy and implementing targeted training programs to develop students' self-directed learning skills can significantly enhance the effectiveness of online language teaching and learning (Shin & Hwang, 2016). Building on these perspectives, this study explores how teachers' roles in fostering autonomy influence students' readiness for extensive learning. It will provide practical insights into how teacher guidance can be adapted to promote independent learning in hybrid educational settings.

## METHOD

### Participants and Context

The participants in this study were 205 Korean elementary and middle school students enrolled in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs at both public schools and private academies. Among them, 155 were elementary school students (Grades 1-6), with Grade 1 (12 students), Grade 2 (22), Grade 3 (19), Grade 4 (34), Grade 5 (42), and Grade 6 (26). The 50 middle school students (Grades 1-3) included Grade 1 (17 students), Grade 2 (18), and Grade 3 (15). The overall demographic breakdown was fairly balanced, with 103 males and 102 females, and all participants were native Korean speakers.

Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling by contacting schools and academies known for their focus on English education. Most students had several years of English education, with elementary school students averaging 3-5 years and middle school students 6-8 years. Their self-reported proficiency ranged from beginner to advanced, with the majority at an intermediate level. Most participants were accustomed to a mix of teacher-centered and communicative approaches in their English learning.

This study was conducted in September 2020, during a period when schools in South Korea had been closed since March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants had been engaged in hybrid learning formats due to the pandemic, providing a relevant context for examining their readiness for autonomous learning. During this time, both public and private education was primarily managed through online communication, telephone correspondence, and the use of online learning materials. By May 2020, live group classes were being conducted via platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. At the time of data collection, students had recently returned to in-person classes at their private academy, which was known for providing high-quality English education in Busan, an education hub in the city.

In the public educational system, elementary and middle school students in South Korea tend to receive different types of English language education. Middle school students focus on preparing for high school entrance examinations, emphasizing reading comprehension, rote vocabulary learning, and grammar. In contrast, elementary school students' English education emphasizes reading, listening input, and communication activities, with less focus on rote learning and grammar. These

educational differences extend to the private academy where the research was conducted.

## Instruments

The primary instrument used for data collection was a structured survey questionnaire especially designed for this study to measure students' perceptions and readiness toward autonomous learning and their readiness for learning English independently during the COVID-19 pause. The questionnaire consisted of 31 items covering autonomous learning perceptions, readiness for independent English learning, and extensive learning practices, followed by a separate section for demographic information including their gender, age, school grade and overall English language proficiency. Details of the questionnaire are provided in Appendix.

The questionnaire with 31 items were divided into six factors to explore whether the students:

**Factor 1:** Feel that they had more free time during the COVID-19 pause (items 1-5).

**Factor 2:** Learned English for pleasure more during the COVID-19 pause than they would under normal circumstances (items 6-10)

**Factor 3:** Feel that their English teachers provided support during the COVID-19 pause (items 11-15)

**Factor 4:** Enjoy learning English in their free time (items 16-20).

**Factor 5:** Feel capable of studying English on their own (items 21-26).

**Factor 6:** Enjoy learning English at school (items 27-31).

For the purpose of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), this study would be divided into two smaller surveys, students' perceptions toward learning English during the COVID-19 pause and students' attitudes toward English. Each survey will be referred as COVID-19 Survey and the English Learning Survey respectively.

To check whether both surveys were fit for factor analysis, a Kaiser-Meyer Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) was conducted. The KMO statistic was .867 for the COVID-19 Survey and .791 for the English Learning Survey indicating that factor analysis is an appropriate technique for further analysis of the data.

A factor analysis was then conducted on both surveys in order to explore whether the items of each factor were validly grouped together. The results can be found in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

**TABLE 1**

*Factor Analysis of the COVID-19 Survey*

	Component		
	1	2	3
AFC facets (Factor 1)			
V1		.802	
V2		.670	
V3		.781	
V4		.621	
V5		.618	
APLC facets (Factor 2)			
V6			.716
V7			.694
V8			.656
V9			.616
V10			.568
FTSC facets (Factor 3)			
V11	.520		
V12	.742		
V13	.864		
V14	.783		
V15	.512		

*Notes.* AFC = Amount of free time during COVID-19 pause, APLC = Amount of pleasure learning during COVID-19 pause, FTSC = Amount of pleasure learning during COVID-19 pause.

**TABLE 2**

*Factor Analysis of the English Learning Survey*

	Component		
	1	2	3
ELEF facets (Factor 4)			
V16		.775	
V17		.771	
V18		.519	
V19		.630	
V20		.519	
RIL facts (Factor 5)			
V21		.326	.345
V22		.268	.391
V23			.831
V24			.861
V25			.543
V26	.457		.423
ELES facets (Factor 6)			
V27	.720		
V28	.810		
V29	.846		
V30	.736		
V31	.617		

*Notes.* ELEF = Enjoy learning English in free time facets, RIL = Readiness for independent learning, ELES = Enjoy learning English at school.

Utilizing an eigenvalue of 1, three components were extracted from each of the surveys. The three components extracted for each of the COVID-19 Survey and the English Learning Survey accounted for 65.69% and 59.15%, respectively, of the total variance of their respective set of variables.

As a result of the factor analysis, it was decided that items V22 and V27 of the ‘Readiness for independent learning’ factor (see Table 2 above) would be removed from further analysis for having multiple cross-loadings. All other items were retained for further analysis for having loaded under their latent constructs.

In order to explore whether the constructs of both surveys were fit for further analysis, a reliability analysis was conducted on all six factors from both surveys. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

**TABLE 3**

*Reliability Indices of the COVID-19 Survey and the English Learning Survey*

Survey Construct	N of items	Cronbach’s Alpha
Enjoy learning English in free time	5	.84
Amount of free time during COVID-19 pause	5	.83
Readiness for independent learning	4	.79
Amount of pleasure learning during COVID-19 pause	5	.79
Enjoy learning English at school	5	.90
Feeling of teacher support during COVID-19 pause	5	.84

The Cronbach’s Alphas for the ‘Enjoy learning English in free time’ survey construct was  $\alpha = .84$  ( $N = 5$ ), ‘Amount of free time during COVID-19 pause’ was  $\alpha = .83$  ( $N = 5$ ), ‘Readiness for independent learning’ was  $\alpha = .79$  ( $N = 4$ ), ‘Amount of pleasure learning during COVID-19 pause’ was  $\alpha = .79$  ( $N = 5$ ), ‘Enjoy learning English at school’ was  $\alpha = .90$  ( $N = 5$ ), and ‘Feeling of teacher support during COVID-19 pause’ was  $\alpha = .84$  ( $N = 5$ ). All constructs are considered highly reliable for further analysis.

Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. The questionnaire was administered in Korean to ensure that all participants fully understood the questions.

## Data collection and analysis

The data was collected during the first week of September 2020 when all the students were taking part in their regular academy classes in person with following safety caution such as wearing masks and keeping certain space. First of all, the participants were briefed regarding the purpose of the research, assured anonymity regarding their responses. Then, informed consent for this study was obtained. All the items in the questionnaire were translated in Korean and the researchers were present in the classroom for the convenience of the participants. Among the explanations about the survey, the students were explicitly told that the COVID-19 pause refers to the period of time when students, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, were required to study from home rather than doing their studies at school. They were also told that when the survey refers to a teacher, it includes all of their current English teachers, as both their school and private academy were managed in the educational format of hybrid learning.

Using SPSS (version 25), the data was analyzed, and the items of the questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale were coded as follows: ‘Strongly Disagree’ = 1, ‘Disagree’ = 2, ‘Neither Agree Nor Disagree’ = 3, ‘Agree’ = 4, and ‘Strongly Agree’ = 5. In regards to the bio data, males were coded as ‘1’ and females were coded as ‘2’, and self-reported below average proficiency students were coded as ‘1’, average proficiency students as ‘2’, and above average proficiency students as ‘3.’ Coding for age reflected the students’ answers, and coding for elementary school students’ grade reflected their answers (1 to 6), while first grade middle school students were coded as ‘7’, second grade middle school students were ‘8’, and third grade middle school students were coded as ‘9.’

To answer the first research question of this study regarding students’ perceptions and attitudes toward autonomous learning, a descriptive statistical analysis was first conducted on each of the six factors of the survey. 95% confidence intervals were then utilized to explore the differences in means of the six factors. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted and 95% confidence intervals were also utilized to explore differences in means for the individual items of four of the constructs, including the ‘Enjoy learning English in free time’ factor, the ‘Readiness for independent learning’ factor, the ‘Amount of pleasure learning during COVID-19 pause’ factor, and the ‘Feeling of teacher support during COVID-19 pause’ factor. For the second research question exploring how categories of perceptions toward autonomous learning relate to one another, a correlational analysis was conducted on all six survey factors. As for the third research question, descriptive

statistical analyses were conducted to explore group differences between elementary and middle school students and between the three proficiency groups. Independent sample t-tests were then conducted in order to see if there were any statistically significant differences in means.

## RESULTS

### Attitudes toward Autonomous Learning of English

The first research question of this study is what elementary and middle school students' attitudes are toward autonomous learning of English, and the related questionnaire items are: how much they enjoy learning English in their free time, their perceptions toward how much free time they had during the COVID-19 pause, their readiness for learning English on their own, how much learning for pleasure they did during the pause, how much they enjoy English at school, and their perceptions toward how supportive their teachers were in guiding their learning during the pause. The descriptive statistics of the six factors of the survey can be found in Table 4 below.

**TABLE 4**  
*Descriptive Statistics by Factor (N = 205)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% Confidence interval for mean	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
Enjoy learning English in free time	2.79	.95	2.66	2.92
Amount of free time during COVID-19 pause	3.61	.96	3.47	3.74
Readiness for independent learning	3.05	.97	2.92	3.19
Amount of pleasure Learning during COVID-19 pause	2.60	.89	2.47	2.72
Enjoy learning English at School	3.18	1.00	3.04	3.32
Feeling of teacher support during COVID-19 pause	3.24	.90	3.12	3.67

The descriptive statistics of the six survey factors show that the participants of this study do not enjoy learning English in their free time ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = .95$ ), felt that they had more free time than usual during the pause ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = .96$ ), feel somewhat capable of studying English on their own ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = .97$ ), did not spend a lot of time learning for pleasure during the pause ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = .89$ ), find English class at school to be somewhat enjoyable ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ), and felt that the teacher was somewhat supportive during the pause ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = .90$ ).

95% confidence intervals of means were calculated in order to see if there were any meaningful statistically significant differences between the six survey factors. The results show that the participants enjoy studying at school ( $M = 3.18$ , 95% CI [3.04, 3.32]) more than they enjoy learning English on their own ( $M = 2.79$ , 95% CI [2.66, 2.92]). Furthermore, the participants felt that they had more free time than usual during the pause ( $M = 3.61$ , 95% CI [3.47, 3.74]) than they reported having increased their pleasure learning during the pause ( $M = 2.60$ , 95% CI [2.47, 2.72]).

The individual items of several of the factors were also explored in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the participants' attitudes toward autonomous learning of English. The descriptive statistics and 95% confidence intervals of each of the items for the 'Enjoy learning English in free time' factor were calculated and are presented in Table 5 below.

**TABLE 5**  
*Descriptive Statistics of the Enjoy Learning English in Free Time Factor (N = 205)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% Confidence interval for mean	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
English	2.70	1.14	2.54	2.86
Reading books	2.44	1.11	2.29	2.60
Watching movies	3.44	1.35	3.25	3.62
Watching television	2.49	1.20	2.32	2.65
Listening to audio	2.87	1.23	2.70	3.04

The results show that the participants do not particularly enjoy learning English in their free time (in general) ( $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) and reading books ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), enjoy watching movies ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ), and do not particularly enjoy watching television ( $M = 2.49$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) and listening to audio ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) for language learning.

95% confidence intervals of means for the five items show that the participants consider watching movies ( $M = 3.44$ , 95% CI [3.25, 3.62]) for language learning purposes to be statistically significantly more enjoyable than English (in general) ( $M = 2.70$ , 95% CI [2.54, 2.86]), reading books ( $M = 2.44$ , 95% CI [2.29, 2.60]), watching television ( $M = 2.49$ , 95% CI [2.32, 2.65]), and listening to audio ( $M = 2.87$ , 95% CI [2.70, 3.04]).

In order to gain further understanding regarding the participants' attitudes toward their readiness for learning English independently, the descriptive statistics and 95% confidence intervals of means for the individual items of the 'Readiness for independent learning' factor were explored. The results are shown in Table 6 below.

**TABLE 6**

*Descriptive Statistics of the Readiness for Studying on Their Own Factor (N = 205)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% Confidence interval for mean	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
Without a teacher	3.23	1.03	3.09	3.37
Movies	2.84	1.39	2.65	3.03
Television	2.73	1.33	2.54	2.91
Books	3.41	1.19	3.25	3.57

According to the results, the participants considered that they are somewhat ready for learning English without a teacher ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), not very ready for watching movies ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ) and television ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) for language learning purposes on their own, and somewhat ready for reading books ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) for language learning purposes on their own. According to the 95% confidence intervals of means for the items, the participants seem themselves to be more ready for learning without a teacher ( $M = 3.23$ , 95% CI [3.09, 3.37]) and reading books ( $M = 3.41$ , 95% CI [3.25, 3.57]) for language learning than watching movies ( $M = 2.84$ , 95% CI [2.65, 3.03]) and television ( $M = 2.73$ , 95% CI [2.54, 2.91]) for language learning.

In order to see what the participants of this study decided to learn on their own during the pause, the individual items of the 'Amount of pleasure learning during COVID-19 pause' factor of the survey were further explored. The descriptive statistics and 95% confidence intervals can be found in Table 7 below.

**TABLE 7**

*Descriptive Statistics of the Pleasure Learning during the COVID-19 Pause Factor (N = 205)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% Confidence interval for mean	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
More than usual	2.61	1.10	2.46	2.77
Reading books	2.47	1.14	2.32	2.63
Watching television	2.20	1.17	2.03	2.36
Watching movies	2.88	1.37	2.69	3.07
Writing	2.82	1.22	2.66	2.99

The results show that during the pause, the participants did not feel they learned more English ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ), read more books ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ), watched more television ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) nor movies ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ), nor wrote ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) more for language learning purposes than usual. Based on the 95% confidence intervals of means, the participants felt that they spent more time watching movies ( $M = 2.88$ , 95% CI [2.69, 3.07]) and writing ( $M = 2.82$ , 95% CI [2.66, 2.99]) than watching television ( $M = 2.20$ , 95% CI [2.03, 2.36]) for language learning.

In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of whether the teacher was helpful in supporting the learners' autonomous learning during the break, the items of the 'Feeling of teacher support during COVID-19 pause' factor of the survey were further explored. The descriptive statistics and 95% confidence intervals of means are presented in Table 8 below.

**TABLE 8***Descriptive Statistics of the Teacher Support during the COVID-19 Pause Factor (N = 205)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% Confidence interval for mean	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
Teacher was helpful	3.60	1.10	3.45	3.75
Supported how to learn independently	3.11	1.15	2.95	3.27
Motivated learning independently	3.00	1.23	2.83	3.17
Supported how to enjoy learning independently	2.84	1.22	2.67	3.01
Provided materials and videos to support learning	3.66	1.06	3.52	3.81

The participants felt that during the pause, teachers were helpful ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) and the class videos and materials that teachers provided were helpful ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) for guiding their learning. The participants also felt that teachers were not particularly helpful in supporting them how to learn English on their own ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ), motivating them to learn independently ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ), and guiding them to enjoy learning English independently ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ). According to the 95% confidence intervals of means, the participants responded that teachers were generally more helpful ( $M = 3.60$ , 95% CI [3.45, 3.75]) and the videos and materials were generally more helpful ( $M = 3.66$ , 95% CI [3.52, 3.81]) for language learning than the teachers were helpful for guiding them how to learn independently ( $M = 3.11$ , 95% CI [2.95, 3.27]), motivating them to learn independently ( $M = 3.00$ , 95% CI [2.83, 3.17]), and guiding them to enjoy learning English independently ( $M = 2.84$ , 95% CI [2.67, 3.01]).

### Relationships between Categories of Perceptions toward Autonomous Learning

The second research question of this study is how categories of perceptions of elementary and middle school students toward autonomous learning are related to one another. A correlational analysis was conducted to answer the question, and the results are shown in Table 9 below.

**TABLE 9***Correlations between the Six Survey Factors (N = 205)*

	<i>ELEF</i>	<i>AFC</i>	RIL	APLC	ELES
<i>AFC</i>	.021				
<i>RIL</i>	.511**	.061			
APLC	.746**	-.075	.515**		
ELEF	.520**	.040	.423**	.581**	
FTSC	.302**	.132	.200**	.310**	.365**

There were found to be several notable relationships between the six factors of the survey. Students who believed they are more ready for learning English on their own also tended to enjoy English ( $r = 0.511^{**}$ ), do more learning for pleasure ( $r = 0.515^{**}$ ), enjoy school ( $r = 0.423^{**}$ ), and found the teacher to be supportive during the pause ( $r = 0.200^{**}$ ). Furthermore, students who enjoy English in their free time were more likely to learn English for pleasure during the pause ( $r = 0.746^{**}$ ), enjoy English at school ( $r = 0.520^{**}$ ), and felt that the teacher was supportive during the pause ( $r = 0.302^{**}$ ). Interestingly, however, there were no statistically significant correlations between students who responded to have had more free time during the pause and any other of the factors of the survey, including most notably, learning for pleasure during the pause ( $r = -.075$ ).

### The Effect of Individual Differences on Attitudes toward Autonomous Learning

The third and final research question of this study was whether there are differences between attitudes of elementary and middle school students toward autonomous learning and whether there is a significant effect of their proficiency on attitudes toward autonomous learning. Table 10 below presents the descriptive statistics of elementary and middle school students' attitudes toward autonomous learning and independent sample t-tests.

**TABLE 10**

*Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples T-Tests of Perceptions of Elementary and Middle School Students toward Autonomous Learning*

	School	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Enjoy learning English in free time	ES (n = 106)	2.91	1.01	2.04	203	.043
	MS (n = 99)	2.65	.87			
Amount of free time during COVID-19 pause	ES (n = 106)	3.45	.98	2.53	203	.012
	MS (n = 99)	3.78	.91			
Readiness for independent learning	ES (n = 106)	3.12	1.06	1.06	200.14	.291
	MS (n = 99)	2.98	.87			
Amount of pleasure Learning during COVID-19 pause	ES (n = 106)	2.72	.93	1.98	203	.050
	MS (n = 99)	2.47	.84			
Enjoy learning English at School	ES (n = 106)	3.29	1.09	1.71	200.08	.088
	MS (n = 99)	3.06	.90			
Feeling of teacher support during COVID-19 pause	ES (n = 106)	3.37	.92	2.08	203	.038
	MS (n = 99)	3.11	.85			

*Notes.* ES = elementary school, MS = middle school.

Elementary school students indicate enjoying English more (elementary,  $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ; middle,  $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = .87$ ), having less time than usual during the COVID-19 pause (elementary,  $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = .98$ ; middle,  $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = .91$ ), being ready for learning on their own (elementary,  $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ; middle,  $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = .87$ ), doing more learning for pleasure during the pause (elementary,  $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = .93$ ; middle,  $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = .84$ ), enjoying school more (elementary,  $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ; middle,  $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = .90$ ), and feeling that the teacher was more supportive of their learning (elementary,  $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = .92$ ; middle,  $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = .85$ ) than middle school students. In addition, from the analysis of independent sample t-tests, it was found that elementary students enjoy English more than middle school students  $t(203) = 2.04$ ,  $p = .043^*$ , felt that they had more free time during the pause  $t(203) = -2.53$ ,  $p = .012^*$ , and found the teacher to be more helpful for learning than middle school students  $t(203) = 2.08$ ,  $p = .038^*$ .

The role of proficiency on attitudes toward autonomous learning was also explored. On the survey, students were asked to rate their general English proficiency in relation to their peers as either below average, average, or above average. 11 students rated their English proficiency as below average, 127 as average, and 67 as above average. Due to such a small number of students rating their English as below average, it was decided that the below average and above average groups would be combined for analysis. Thus, this section will explore how attitudes of above average proficiency students differs from other students in regards to perceptions of autonomous learning. Descriptive statistics and independent sample t-tests were then conducted, and the results are presented in Table 11 below.

**TABLE 11**

*Descriptive Statistics and Independent Sample T-Tests of Perceptions toward Autonomous Learning by Proficiency*

	English proficiency	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> -test for equality of means		
				<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Enjoy learning English in free time	Below and average (n = 138)	2.76	.93	-.55	203	.582
	Above (n = 67)	2.84	.99			
Amount of free time during COVID-19 pause	Below and average (n = 138)	3.68	.89	1.47	110.76	.146
	Above (n = 67)	3.46	1.08			
Readiness for independent learning	Below and average (n = 138)	2.94	.97	-2.29	203	.023
	Above (n = 67)	3.27	.96			
Amount of pleasure learning during COVID-19 pause	Below and average (n = 138)	2.58	.86	-.50	203	.618
	Above (n = 67)	2.64	.97			

	English proficiency	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> -test for equality of means		
				<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Enjoy learning English at school	Below and average (n = 138)	3.13	.95	-.92	203	.361
	Above (n = 67)	3.27	1.11			
Feeling of teacher support during COVID-19 pause	Below and average (n = 138)	3.28	.85	.91	203	.364
	Above (n = 67)	3.16	.98			

According to the descriptive results, above average students showed that enjoying English more (below average and average,  $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = .93$ ; above average,  $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = .99$ ), having had less free time during the pause (below average and average,  $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = .89$ ; above average,  $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ), being more ready for learning on their own (below average and average,  $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = .97$ ; above average,  $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = .96$ ), doing more pleasure learning (below average and average,  $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = .86$ ; above average,  $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = .97$ ), enjoying school more (below average and average,  $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = .95$ ; above average,  $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), and feeling that the teacher was less helpful during the pause (below average and average,  $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = .85$ ; above average,  $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) than below average and average proficiency learners. Besides, results of independent sample *t*-tests show that there was only a statistical effect of proficiency on attitudes toward the readiness  $t(203) = 2.04$ ,  $p = .043^*$  for studying English autonomously. Thus, above average students indicate being statistically significantly more ready for learning on their own than their below average and average proficiency counterparts.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored Korean elementary and middle school students' perceptions and readiness for autonomous English learning during the transition to hybrid education. First of all, despite having more free time during the COVID-19 pause, students did not significantly increase their engagement in pleasure-driven English learning activities. This highlights a lack of autonomy, motivation, or both, particularly in their ability to take charge of their own learning. Many students expressed a preference for learning English in structured, teacher-led environments rather than independently.

Correlational analyses suggest that students who felt prepared for independent learning were more likely to enjoy both English-related activities at school and pleasure-driven learning. Readiness—or even the perception of readiness—emerges as a foundational element in fostering learner autonomy and encouraging extensive learning practices among elementary and middle school students.

Middle school students reported engaging in less independent study compared to elementary students during the pause. This may be due to a lack of familiarity with self-directed learning, as middle school students often rely on teachers as the primary initiators of English language study. The intensive nature of middle school programs, which prioritize exam preparation and direct teacher guidance, contrasts with elementary education, where students are more frequently encouraged to select and read books independently. Consequently, middle school students may perceive English learning as requiring immediate teacher direction. Notably, despite being older and having more years of English education, middle school students did not consider themselves ready for autonomous learning, highlighting the need for greater emphasis on fostering independence at this level.

An analysis of the 'Enjoy learning English in free time' factor sheds light on students' preferences for learning activities. Interestingly, participants showed a stronger interest in watching movies compared to watching television, reading books, or listening to audio recordings. This preference may reflect a broader technological shift, with traditional television viewing being replaced by digital platforms such as Netflix and YouTube. Unsurprisingly, students reported engaging more with movies than with television or books during the pause. However, despite this preference, many participants indicated that they felt prepared to engage in independent book reading for English learning.

Student perceptions of their teachers provide valuable insight into why participants did not engage more in pleasure-driven learning during the pause. Although students found the class materials and videos provided by teachers to be helpful, they felt that teachers were less effective in guiding them on how to study independently, motivating them to take initiative, or helping them enjoy learning English on their own.

These findings align with previous research highlighting the role of curriculum and teacher support in fostering learner autonomy (Benson, 2013; Littlewood, 1999). Younger students, exposed to less exam-driven curricula, may develop autonomy more naturally, whereas middle school students' reliance on teacher-led instruction can hinder self-directed

learning. Similarly, the link between proficiency and autonomy supports prior findings that higher language skills boost self-efficacy in independent study (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Nation, 2006). However, despite students' preference for resources like movies and online platforms, prior studies suggest that access alone does not foster autonomy—structured guidance and motivation are essential (Reinders & White, 2016).

Several key factors emerge from this study that can guide and motivate learners of English in independent learning contexts. First, despite having more free time during the pause, participants did not use this opportunity to enhance their English language learning, suggesting gaps in motivation or self-directed learning skills. Second, readiness to learn independently played a critical role in fostering learner autonomy and extensive learning, highlighting the importance of equipping students with the necessary skills and confidence for independent study. Lastly, students felt that teachers' guidance and support in motivating and enabling autonomous learning were insufficient. This indicates a need for teachers to shift from being mere providers of learning materials to actively supporting and inspiring students to become self-directed learners.

Classroom-directed autonomous learning—where teachers play a pivotal role in fostering students' ability to self-direct their learning—has become more critical than ever. As Çakici (2015) highlights, the capacity and motivation for autonomous learning should be cultivated within the classroom to enable students to take independent action in their studies. While individual factors, such as language proficiency, influence the level of independence students can achieve, the teacher's role in facilitating autonomy is equally significant. This is particularly important for middle school students, whose language programs in both schools and private academies often rely heavily on direct teacher guidance. Thus, greater attention should be given to pedagogical strategies that equip students with the skills and confidence needed for independent learning outside the classroom.

To promote out-of-class autonomy, teachers can adopt several strategies in the classroom. First, they should actively create opportunities for students to develop independence during lessons, with the aim of fostering autonomy that extends beyond the classroom. This aligns with Little et al.'s (2017) recommendation for teachers to hand over control to students whenever possible. Second, while providing access to resources such as books, libraries, and audio-visual materials is essential, teachers must also focus on supporting and motivating learners. Spratt et al. (2002) emphasize the link between motivation and learner autonomy, recommending that teachers nurture intrinsic motivation by helping students believe in the value of their efforts. This could involve following up with students on how to effectively use self-study materials and tailoring resources to their interests. Finally, teachers can promote autonomy by modeling it themselves. Research shows that when teachers demonstrate autonomous learning behaviors, such as engaging in independent reading, it positively influences students' learning habits (Methe & Hintze, 2003; Widdowson et al., 1996). By cultivating their own interest in autonomous and extensive learning, teachers can inspire students to do the same.

Our initial investigation in understanding students' perceptions and attitudes towards autonomous and extensive learning in the context of hybrid learning, which was inevitably brought to us by COVID-19, had the goal of finding opportunities for teachers to promote autonomous and extensive learning in their students. Although it was an unexpected effort to seek the possible solutions in the given context, it has expanded the range of our study which can be applied to any online learning involved context to a certain extent. In other words, this has provided us with opportunities to reconsider the importance of students' perceptions and attitudes towards autonomous and extensive learning not only in the classroom-oriented learning but also in online learning where teachers' guidance and support should be considered more critical. In their study of teachers' beliefs and practices on language learner autonomy, Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) illustrate how teachers perceive and promote learner autonomy, arguing “what learner autonomy means to teachers will thus impact on the opportunities that learners have to become autonomous” (p. 10). This leads to the importance of raising awareness of teachers on how critical their role in the classroom could be to help their learners to be an autonomous language learner. This will be of particular importance to underprivileged students who could have less resource and support for their independent learning.

While the study was conducted during the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, its findings have far-reaching implications for modern education. Fostering learner autonomy should be a foundational goal, particularly as hybrid and technology-enabled learning environments become more prevalent. Readiness for autonomy will continue to shape student success, emphasizing the need for educational systems to equip learners with the skills and motivation necessary for self-directed learning in diverse contexts.

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample size was limited to 205 students from a specific region in South Korea, which may not fully represent the broader population. Future studies could expand the geographical scope and include a larger, more diverse sample to improve generalizability. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced biases, as students' perceptions might not accurately reflect their actual learning behaviors. Employing mixed-method approaches, such as combining surveys with observational data or interviews, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of learner autonomy.

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## Appendix

### Student Attitudes and Perceptions toward Autonomous Learning during the COVID Pandemic Break Survey

*Purpose:* This survey aims to better understand students' attitudes toward learning English independently. There are no right or wrong answers for each question, and this survey does not affect grades. Your answers are anonymous and confidential.

**Instructions:** Please respond to each statement as accurately as you can. Your honest and thoughtful responses are important to the study.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I had more free time during the pandemic pause.	5	4	3	2	1
2. I had more free time to choose what I wanted to do during the pandemic pause.	5	4	3	2	1
3. I had more free time at home during the pandemic pause.	5	4	3	2	1
4. I had more free time alone during the pandemic pause.	5	4	3	2	1
5. I had more free time to do my hobbies during the pandemic pause.	5	4	3	2	1
6. During the pandemic pause, I learned English for pleasure on my own more than I normally would.	5	4	3	2	1
7. During the pandemic pause, I read more English books than I normally would.	5	4	3	2	1
8. During the pandemic pause, I watched more English television than I normally would.	5	4	3	2	1
9. During the pandemic pause, I watched more English movies than I normally would.	5	4	3	2	1
10. During the pandemic pause, I listened to English (any form of listening) for pleasure than I normally would.	5	4	3	2	1
11. In doing class work on my own during the pandemic pause, the teacher was helpful.	5	4	3	2	1
12. In doing class work on my own during the pandemic pause, the teacher was helpful in guiding me how to study English on my own.	5	4	3	2	1
13. In doing class work on my own during the pandemic pause, the teacher was helpful in motivating me to study English on my own.	5	4	3	2	1
14. In doing class work on my own during the pandemic pause, the teacher was helpful in guiding me to enjoy studying English on my own.	5	4	3	2	1
15. In doing class work on my own during the pandemic pause, the videos and materials were helpful.	5	4	3	2	1

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
16. I'm interested in learning English in my free time.	5	4	3	2	1
17. I'm interested in reading English books in my free time.	5	4	3	2	1
18. I'm interested in watching English movies in my free time.	5	4	3	2	1
19. I'm interested in watching English television in my free time.	5	4	3	2	1
20. I'm interested in listening to English (any form of listening) in my free time.	5	4	3	2	1
21. I know how to learn English on my own.	5	4	3	2	1
22. I know how to learn English without the prompting of a teacher.	5	4	3	2	1
23. I know where and how to watch English movies for learning English.	5	4	3	2	1
24. I know where and how to watch English media for learning English.	5	4	3	2	1
25. I know where to find English books for learning English.	5	4	3	2	1
26. I know how to read English Books for learning English.	5	4	3	2	1
27. I usually enjoy learning English in English class at school.					
28. I usually enjoy doing the English class activities at school.	5	4	3	2	1
29. I usually enjoy doing speaking activities in English class at school.	5	4	3	2	1
30. I usually enjoy listening to English during English class at school.	5	4	3	2	1
31. I usually enjoy doing writing activities during English class at school.	5	4	3	2	1