LEARNER AUTONOMY AMONG MALAYSIAN ADULT LEARNERS VIA ASYNCHRONOUS COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

RANJIT KAUR A/P GURDIAL SINGH
Department of Educational Technology,
Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Bahasa Melayu (IPGKBM)
Lembah Pantai 59990, Kuala Lumpur
MALAYSIA

MOHAMED AMIN B. EMBI
NORAZAH MOHAMED NORDIN
Faculty of Education,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)
43600 Bangi, Selangor
MALAYSIA

Abstract: The use of computer mediated communication (CMC) in course offerings in institutions of higher learning (IHL) is seen as the catalyst towards producing lifelong autonomous learners. This paper explores Malaysian adult learners’ views of participating through asynchronous computer mediated communication (ACMC) in a local 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 3rd Year adult course respondents (n=16) pursuing the Listening and Speaking Course (LSC) for their Bachelor in Education (TESL) degree program. The sample within the case comprised six (n=6) case respondents and one tutor (n=1). This descriptive case study employed a mixed method approach in its four-pronged data collection procedure. Quantitative data was collected by administering a survey questionnaire and the qualitative data was 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 displayed average abilities (overall average score = 3.3) in all three aspects of learner autonomy. However, micro analysis displayed that among all case respondents R2 and R4 showed the highest level of autonomy. This was followed with R1, R5, R3 and R6 respectively. This study has shown that ACMC has the potential in aiding learners to take charge of their own learning thus paving the way for learner autonomy. These findings augur well for local and global IHL as ACMC is seen as the next e-wave and trend of the future. However, for students to benefit from quality asynchronous online interactions an effective follow-up system backed by dedicated educators must go hand-in-hand.

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

1 Introduction

Today, accessing information via the Internet is a common feature in most homes, offices, schools and institutions of higher learning (IHL). Hence, the use of networked communication technology via Internet and Web in education is considered a necessity. In lieu 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 IHL to capture student interest that will allow greater flexibility, autonomy and learner centredness yet does not diminish students’ learning experiences. This has called for a change in the way education can and will be delivered. Rising to this call, the latest technological tool to invade IHL and one that is fast becoming commonplace as well as considered to leave an indelible mark is computer-mediated communication or CMC (Bonk, 2004; Harasim, 2000; Jonassen, 2000; Selwyn,
According to Bonk, CMC technologies will pave the way for new opportunities in online learning environments in the future [5]. Today, CMC is seen as the catalyst of change that will help to converge technological, instructional and pedagogical developments [6]. The importance of this convergence cannot be denied as it will enable more people to embrace lifelong learning as a way to acquire, improve and update their knowledge or skills throughout life via formal and non-formal education, training, work and general life experiences [29]. Through the integration of CMC tools in providing online education in IHL, it is hoped that ultimately it will pave the way towards creating autonomous lifelong learners and knowledge workers capable of controlling their future and destiny whilst pursuing and continuing professional development over the course of their life span.

2 Asynchronous Computer Mediated Communication (ACMC)

Today, computer mediated communication (CMC) is seen as the hallmark of teaching and learning in both local and foreign IHL because it has not only transformed the teaching and learning methodologies used in higher education but through its catalytic power has broken down traditional boundaries of teaching and learning and plays a privileged role in developing autonomous learners [8]. In lieu with this, Santoro referred to CMC as an umbrella term that subsumes computer based instruction, informatics and human-to-human communication [30]. 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 counseling, 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) [1,4,31].

Palloff and Pratt opined that in the CMC milieu, there are basically two modes of web based communication i.e. asynchronous (delayed, anytime, any place, any pace) and synchronous (same time, real time) through a computer technology that “combines computers, modems and telephone or electronic network linkages” (Hiemstra, 1994: 12) [27]. 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 [5]. Today, both these preferred modes of learning, have helped to enhance and support the development of autonomous lifelong learners [19,36]. 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).

3 The Malaysian Context

Against this backdrop, as Malaysia stands at the threshold of a new era of technological learning, without doubt she has to embrace herself with all these new technological changes if she 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, are Malaysian learners equipped with the necessary skills on how to learn to compete in today’s competitive global economy? Are IHL empowering learners with the right skills and competencies for self-directed learning that will enable them to adapt and change with the times? “By teaching students 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” (Klopfenstein, 2003). This would most certainly lead learners to take personal responsibility for learning thus empowering them with skills that support lifelong learning.

Concurrent with all these ICT developments, institutions of higher learning 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 also hoped that students will benefit from course materials made available online. Locally, many institutions of tertiary education and IHL have taken the first step and are making headway in this new “e-storm” set to blaze the Malaysian e-learning horizon. Clearly, staying abreast of the latest developments, partnerships or opportunities in online learning is not an easy endeavour. 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 pro-active 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 computer mediated communication in Malaysia. More importantly, it will specifically showcase the extent ACMC is able to promote learner autonomy among adult learners.

### 4 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent asynchronous computer mediated communication (ACMC) promoted learner autonomy among adult learners in a private local university in Malaysia. The asynchronous mode of communication was conducted through threaded online interactions/discussions via a learning management system called Virtual Learning System (VLS) for their Listening and Speaking Course (LSC). Specifically, the study aimed to investigate whether ACMC via the VLS promoted learner autonomy in the areas of planning, monitoring and decision making.

### 5 Research Methodology

This descriptive case study employed a four-pronged data collection procedure. The data collection techniques employed both quantitative and qualitative methods which 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 sixteen 3rd 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 ACMC promoted learner autonomy among adult learners.

The survey questionnaire which used a five point Likert scale (1 = very low to 5 = very high) was administered to all 16 adult part-time 3rd Year students pursuing the B. Ed. (TESL) course at the Faculty of Education in a local private university in Selangor. The questionnaires recorded a return rate of 100 percent (n = 16). The survey questionnaire was administered once. Here, through open ended questions, the researcher was able to investigate respondents’ views regarding ACMC. The SPSS version 11.5 WIN software was used to analyse the quantitative data collected statistically. This method of analysis limits to the general statistical analysis. Data was reported using frequencies and percentages in examining the accuracy of the raw data as the initial step. A semi structured interview schedule was administered to six case respondents and one course tutor. Interviews were deemed appropriate as it provided in-depth understanding, information, perspectives and clarifications regarding case respondents’ views of their participation through ACMC. In addition, analysis of threaded AOI between the tutor and students as well as analyses of six case respondents’ learning logs were also analysed to further trace students’ views. The qualitative data was analysed using the NVivo Version 7 software. Finally, all qualitative data obtained from the interview schedule, analyses of learning logs and threaded AOI were triangulated with students’ responses from the survey questionnaire to report the research findings.

### 6 Profile of Respondents in Study

The total number of students in the one intact class that formed the sample population for this study were 16 (n=16). Statistical analysis of the sample population showed that all 16 course respondents were females and pursued 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 (n=6) were all females who were randomly selected from the sample population (n=16). Data for the case respondents was obtained through semi-structured interviews, analysis of learning log entries and threaded AOI. Finally, the other case respondent for this study was the course tutor, Liz (pseudo name) with whom an interview session was conducted. All six case respondents were females who 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 Malays (50%). Finally, the tutor, Liz had obtained a Masters degree in TESL and had been teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) for the last fifteen years in a local university in Selangor. She had been employed to teach English language since 2006 in this local private university.

### 7 Findings

In an attempt to investigate the extent ACMC promoted learner autonomy among adult learners, this study looked into the following areas of learner autonomy i.e. planning, monitoring and decision making. Each of these areas was then explored further by looking at more specific areas of learners' abilities. The data for this section was obtained from the survey questionnaire, interviews, threaded AOI and learning logs.

#### 7.1 Learner Autonomy in Planning

In an attempt to gather information on learners’/course
respondents’ abilities in planning, data was obtained from the analysis of the survey questionnaire. The area of planning investigated learners’ ability to determine own learning objectives, using planners/diaries/time tables, deciding upon time to accomplish learning tasks, 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 just 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 just average (Overall M = 3.2, SD = .51) (Table 1).

When implored further on how their tutor, Liz rated her learners’ abilities in planning through ACMC, 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 just average. An investigation into the six case respondents’ interviews and learning log entries divulged 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 in the questionnaire perceived their abilities in planning as average. An investigation into the six case respondents’ interviews and learning log entries divulged 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 in the questionnaire perceived their abilities in planning as average. These findings exhibited that the level of planning ability between 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 ACMC obtained from interviews, threaded AOI and learning log entries. Since this was a short semester (12 week course), it tested their abilities in planning their learning tasks towards becoming autonomous learners through ACMC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability in Planning</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to determine own learning objectives</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to decide on the time to achieve learning tasks</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to locate suitable materials for learning</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to use suitable learning strategies to achieve learning tasks</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to decide on techniques to accomplish learning tasks</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to use planners/diaries/time tables to set learning goals</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Mean Score in Planning</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Generally, all six case respondents agreed that ACMC 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 by participating in ACMC they were able to plan their learning tasks. Below is an interview excerpt which shows how R1 planned her learning tasks through ACMC.

‘the forum had titles and we follow the discussion titles like we have discussions of general topics, then we have assignments 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 datelines...”

The following discussions further exemplify case respondents’ abilities in the area of planning through ACMC obtained from interviews, threaded AOI and learning log entries. Since this was a short semester (12 week course), it tested their abilities in planning their learning tasks towards becoming autonomous learners through ACMC.
where we remind each other and then when there is new information we tell our friends also’
[R1_Interview/Para144].

In the case of R1, she 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 aspect of planning her learning tasks through ACMC, R5 said basically, "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, she believed that with the VLS she was able to plan her learning because it had been arranged according to different topics of discussions 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].

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

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

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

Fig. 1 Case respondents’ overall ability in planning their learning tasks
Finally, Liz stated that ACMC 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 ya..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 ACMC as average. In-depth investigation into various aspects of planning learning showed that learners’ overall abilities were also average. 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 ability in planning learning between case respondents differed. This corroborated with other studies that investigated learner autonomy [8,26,33,11]. 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 thus allowed them to manage and take responsibility of their learning. This corroborated with another study by Feden and Vogel which expounded that when students participate actively in the learning process, learning becomes deeper and lasting thus paving the way for meaningful learning and self-directedness [9].

### 7.2 Learner Autonomy in Monitoring

Dickinson, McGarry, Gurnam and Wolthers et al. in their respective studies when discussing the characteristics of autonomous learners mentioned that autonomous learners have the ability to monitor their own learning [7,23,11,35]. In lieu with this, the second area of learner autonomy investigated was learners’ abilities in monitoring their learning i.e. their ability to check, verify and correct themselves when performing a learning task through ACMC. Table 3 presents course respondents’ perceptions regarding their ability in monitoring learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability in Monitoring Learning</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Data in Table 3 show that thirteen course respondents (81%) perceived their abilities in monitoring their learning tasks through ACMC 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 through ACMC via the VLS. A further analysis of various aspects of monitoring learning 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).

Data obtained from the questionnaire corroborated with case respondents’ learning log entries and interviews. Generally, case respondents’ ability in monitoring learning through ACMC ranged between 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 ACMC. She said: "the first 50% is based on quizzes, the 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 its okay...ya... they’ll know [Tutor_Interview/Para163]."
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 ACMC. A further analysis of various aspects of monitoring learning revealed that two aspects of monitoring learning that recorded the highest mean score was 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 overcome problems with the tutor’s help (M = 3.1). In addition, three other aspects of monitoring learning investigated 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 show that among all six case respondents, R2 obtained the highest overall average score for monitoring learning in this study (average score = 4.6). Data also showed that she 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 a 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 on how Liz could have delivered the topic she was teaching because she wrote: "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 online 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 between 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 all 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 respectively (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. In the aspect of 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 than her application in monitoring. In terms of checking and correcting learning tasks, R3 rated her ability as high. Generally, R3 rated her ability in monitoring her learning between 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 Quiz 1, 2 and assignments where they were given an overall result and a final grade [R3_Interview/Para136]. In the case of R5 and R6 both obtained similar scores for their ability in monitoring learning (score = 3.4). Both respondents showed a higher 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 in 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 between case respondents differed. 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 of 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 suggested 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 but R2 (average score = 4.6) showed an overall higher ability compared to 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 with McAnear (2002) findings where he stressed that learning systems with CMC facilities which provide flexibility and convenience help students to monitor their own learning thus fostering learner autonomy.

### 7.3 Learner Autonomy in Decision Making

According to Holec, a learner is said to be an autonomous learner when the learner is able to plan, monitor and make decisions regarding one's own learning [15]. Little further added that one important aspect of an autonomous learner is the capacity in decision making [21]. He further expounded that this capacity should not just be displayed in the way the learner learns but must be transferred to a wider context through learning activities. Moore and Holec compounded that evaluating or decision making enables a learner to judge the appropriateness of newly acquired skills, ideas and knowledge [25,15]. In the ACMC realm making decisions about learning tasks was important as it fostered learner autonomy abilities. 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' ability to judge, evaluate and make decisions regarding their learning tasks through AOI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability in Decision Making</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data in Table 6 highlights that ten course respondents (62.5%) perceived their abilities in decision making as average and six respondents (37.5%) perceived their ability 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 divulged that the highest mean score recorded was for learners’ ability 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 aspects recorded high mean scores (M > 3.5). All other aspects recorded low average mean scores (M < 3.5). This included learners’ ability to evaluate 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 tutor’s (M = 3.3, SD = .45) and finally ability to check and correct errors in assignments (M = 3.1, SD = .62).

The questionnaire findings corroborated with case respondents’ learning log entries and interviews. Generally, case respondents’ ability in making decisions regarding their learning tasks through AOI ranged between average to high. When posed this question, Liz rated all her learners’ ability as "High. Not very high. Just high" [Tutor_Interview/Para195]. This view differed from learners’ perceptions as majority of them perceived their ability as average. Among case respondents again a majority rated their ability 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 case respondents’ perceptions via interviews and learning log entries on their abilities to make decisions regarding their performance in their
Generally, all respondents were able to evaluate their performance in their learning tasks. They knew where they stood personally and what they had to do in order to improve their understanding as well as grade. It was either doing more self-study or carrying out discussions through the VLS. Figure 3 show that among all case respondents, R2 and R4 obtained the highest overall average score for decision making. R2’s score was 4.3 whilst R4’s was 4.0. Data analysis showed that R2 achieved high to very high scores whereas R4’s 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 in making decisions regarding judging and evaluating her 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). 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 in 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, both R3 and R5 showed average scores. The following are some excerpts of verbatim that exhibit 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 between respondents varied. All six case respondents were aware of the importance of making decisions regarding their learning tasks through ACMC. Their awareness level ranged between average to high. More importantly, their ability to apply decision making in 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 scored average scores. However, between R2 and R4, R2 obtained an overall score that was higher (average score = 4.3) than R4 (average score = 4.0). In comparison, between R1, R3, R5 and R6, R1 was on the higher end of the scale thus suggested 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 but 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 ability to make decisions as high were not only aware but had applied them in their learning tasks through ACMC to improve their performance.

It is also interesting to note that the findings obtained from this study with regards to learners’ learner autonomy abilities in planning, monitoring and decision making through ACMC 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 Grade A whereas R4 obtained an A – (minus). On the other hand, R5 obtained a B whereas R3 and R6 obtained a B – (minus).

8 Conclusion

Although the findings of this descriptive case study are not generalisable, it has succeeded in providing in-depth insights and showcased Malaysian adult students’ views of ACMC. Findings conveyed that generally course respondents perceived that ACMC promoted learner autonomy and aided them in managing their own learning. This augurs well for local and global IHL since ACMC is seen as the next e-wave and trend of the future. However, one need to understand that for students to benefit from quality asynchronous online interactions an effective follow-up system backed by dedicated educators must always go hand-in-hand [28]. Otherwise, adult students will become frustrated and open and distance learning will fail. 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.

References:


