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STUDENT'S VOICES ON LANGUAGE LEARNER AUTONOMY IN DISTANCE LEARNING

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Abstract: Learner autonomy is a complex construct which becomes the focus of language learning, consisting of four dimensions which later are summed up into three, such as initiating, monitoring, and evaluating. The study aimed to know students' perception and behaviors on learner autonomy in distance learning. The data was gathered from 187 students in the population, but only 43 returned the questionnaire. The 61 items questionnaire was analyzed and found that in the initiating category, most students perceive the learner autonomy positively and indicate the behavior of dreaming to be a good English speaker. While the monitoring category shows the item of modifying methods to find which suits them best. The third category is reflected in their being eager to find out their English proficiency by taking TOEFL tests and the like, voluntarily. While the behavior which is related to ICT or online learning is their willingness to use English to communicate with strangers on the Internet.

Keywords: *language learner autonomy, learner autonomy questionnaire, Indonesia, higher education, survey*

INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy has so far been regarded as an ultimate goal for learning. Not only that it supports the lifelong learning, learner autonomy is also an important attribute of a learner when facing dynamic challenges in life. The term itself has been defined differently by some scholars. One that remains popular since its first coinage is perhaps the definition by Holec (Ezzaidi, 2020). Holec defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". This definition is then broadened and at the same time, narrowed. Learning, in this definition, involves a more complicated process than just to sit down and understand any given topics or materials. It involves being able to determine learning goals, to understand and comprehend learning materials needed to achieve the goals, to keep track of the progress, to decide learning strategies to achieve the goals, as well as to evaluate learning or achievement. Benson (2012), therefore, highlights in his paper that learner autonomy is not a natural attribute that requires training. This is where the presence of teacher is important.

Learner autonomy is a life skill because it is vital for the development of learners. Teacher as a person who holds the authority in class is being responsible for creating autonomous learners. Particularly there have been many practices in language classrooms intended to strengthen the learner autonomy, or some prefer the term language learner autonomy (Benson, 2012). One of the most common teaching practices that enhance learner autonomy is collaborative learning. Such learning involves group work and project where students need to decide their own job description in the group as well as manage the time in

order to complete the task. This is because learners need to be trained by getting along with a social and cooperative environment in order to allow their sense of autonomy emerge (Ezzaidi, 2020). A couple of decades ago, Benson (1996) repositioned his definition of learner autonomy by stating that "greater control over the learning process, resources and language cannot be achieved by each individual acting alone according to his or her own preferences". His idea means that a learner has to be a part of a supportive community in order to inspire him to gain control over his own learning. In a classroom context, this idea is manifested in collaborative learning where learners are grouped to achieve one common goal. Through communication and cooperation, for instance, they will learn each other's values and take them to accommodate the goal achievement.

Many attempts have been made to understand teachers, students, and student-teachers' perspective on learner autonomy in various contexts (Khotimah, et al., 2019; Swatevacharkul and Boonma, 2020; Eneau and Develotte, 2012; Gholami, 2016; Borg and Alshumaimeri, 2019). For example, Swatevacharkul and Boonma (2020) who studied the attitudes of graduate students in ELT in Thailand towards language learner autonomy. The study found that the subjects possess positive attitudes towards learner autonomy in which they believe that learner autonomy is somehow an ability which involves psychological, technical and political aspects. They believe that as learners they play the crucial role in order to perform autonomy. However, teachers also play as a major factor that can either promote or hinder learner autonomy in a learning process. Despite being the most contributing factor, Khotimah, et al. (2019) found a quite contrasting finding. Their finding of teachers' perceptions towards autonomous learning reveals that about 20% of the teachers misunderstood the concept of autonomous learning. In their view, autonomous learning is independent learning or a condition in which students learn English independently without teacher's assistance or the condition where students have full responsibility in the learning process, while initiating and evaluating the process in learning are of teachers' responsibility. Such misconception could be seriously misleading especially when students are not well-trained in being autonomous learners.

As language classrooms have now been borderless through online delivery, learner autonomy seems to have evolved. Zhong's (2018) case study of a Chinese learner who studies in New Zealand has revealed that his subject's autonomy has evolved from the time he used technology to support his learning to the time when he used technology as a main means of his learning. The former involves activities such as downloading free materials, using online materials to work on his pronunciation, vocabulary, and listening. These activities seem to supplement his learning without he actually planned his learning. While the latter involves more varied online learning activities such as reflecting on his strengths and weaknesses in learning English thus initiating learning based on his reflections, and making plans for his self-directed language learning. This suggests that there should be a different point of view of learner autonomy in online learning since the environment has now shifted from classical class where students gather at one place to distance learning where students are learning in isolation.

Distance learning has been around in English language teaching, however, in Indonesia, distance learning was not popular until 2020 where the government issued the regulation which force schools nationwide to be conducted online. Many have tried to reflect on this phenomenon in Indonesia although mostly are limited to challenges and perceptions of online learning from teachers and students' point of view (Situmorang, et al., 2021; Rifiyanti, 2021; Nartiningrum and Nugroho, 2021; Ayu and Pratiwi, 2021) or to focus on improving learner autonomy (Octaberlina, et al., 2021; Iswandari and Gultom, 2021; Ariebowo, 2020), studies on

students' voices of learner autonomy during online learning is limited. Whereas since online learning is popular and every class is now online, it is worth to examine whether students understand their important roles in their learning success, instead of simply waiting for intructions from their teachers.

Given that learning success in distance or online learning is dependent on many factors, it is worth to investigate whether language learner autonomy develops during the emergent online learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the question of the research, the study employed survey quantitative approach. The approach was used in order to draw on conclusions on students' perception on learner autonomy especially in a distance learning environment. The quantitative data was obtained from the total population of 200 students majoring at English Language Education program. The study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic where all classes were moved to online platforms.

The instrument used to gather the data was a Learner Autonomy questionnaire which was adapted from Tin (2012). The instrument consisted of 62 items using a five-point Likert scale, from 1 to 5, with 1 point describes never or almost never true and 5 point describes always or almost always true. The questionnaire was distributed online through Google Form where one respondent could online fill out the questionnaire once.

Research methodology can be understood as a way to systemically solve or answer the research problem. Thus essentially, it can be understood as the process of studying how research is done in a scientific manner. Through the methodology, we study the various steps that are generally adopted by a researcher in studying his/her research problem and the underlying logic behind them. The selection of the research method is crucial for what conclusions you can make about a phenomenon. It affects what you can say about the cause and the factors influencing the phenomenon. Do not write the theory of the methodology. State why you choose your research methodology; why it is suitable for your type of research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The valid questionnaire data was collected from 43 students of English Language Education. The students varied from the first- to the fourth-year students. The instrument was distributed using online form in which students were only allowed to fill out once.

This chapter presents the results of data analysis based on the questionnaire distributed to 200 students of English Language Education Program. Of the 200 questionnaires distributed, 43 provided their consent and returned the questionnaire. These students were all taking English Language Education program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember. They were from the first-year students, sophomores, third, and final year students.

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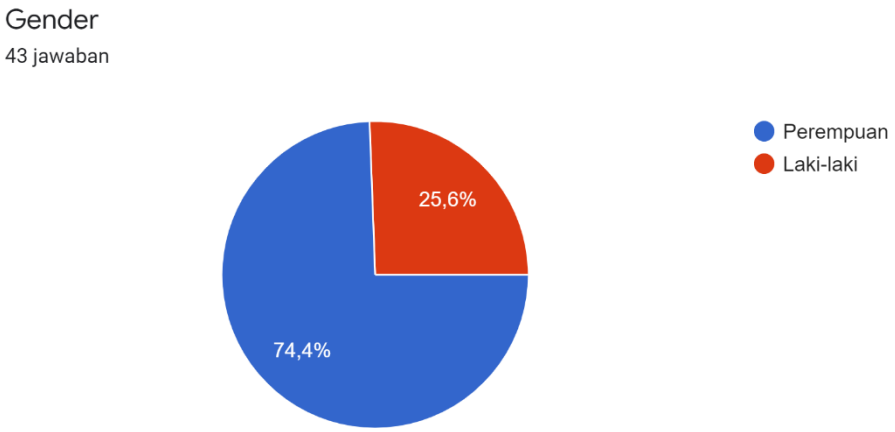

Figure 4.1 Gender of respondents

The first section gathered the data of gender, year of study, general computer skills and length of online learning experience. As shown in Figure 4.1, most of the respondents were female (74.4%), while the male were only 11 or 25.6%. This amount is explained by the fact that most students of the 187 population were female (F: 135, M: 52). Meanwhile, based on the college class variable, most (60,5%) were the first-year students, followed by the fourth year (20,9%) and the third-year students (11,6%). These students have experienced online learning during the pandemic with different length, but most of them were experiencing online learning for 1-2 semesters. The first section also informed students' general computer skills, indicating that they mostly identify themselves as skilled in using computer technology (51,2%), and very skilled (18,6%), both for general uses and educational uses, as depicted in Figure 4.3.

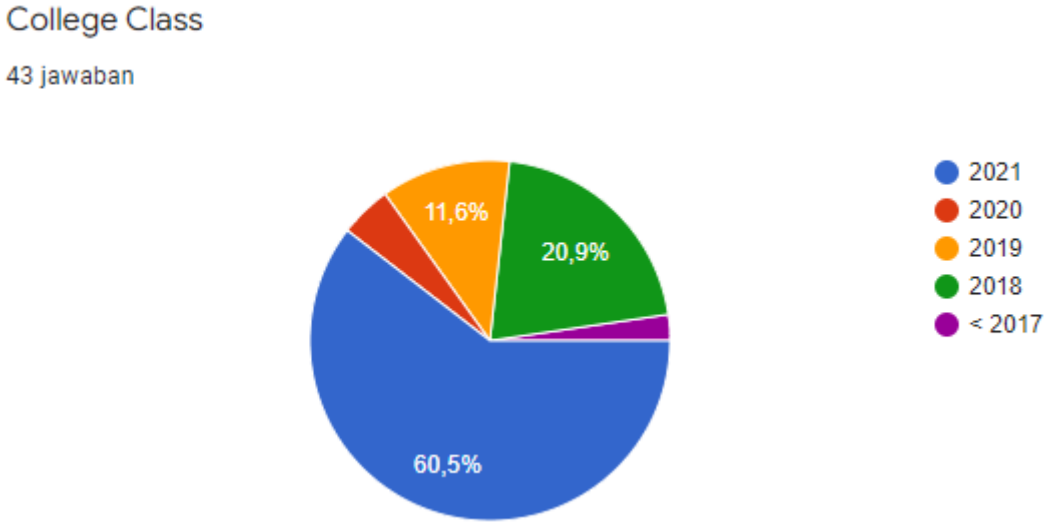

Figure 4.2 College Class of respondents

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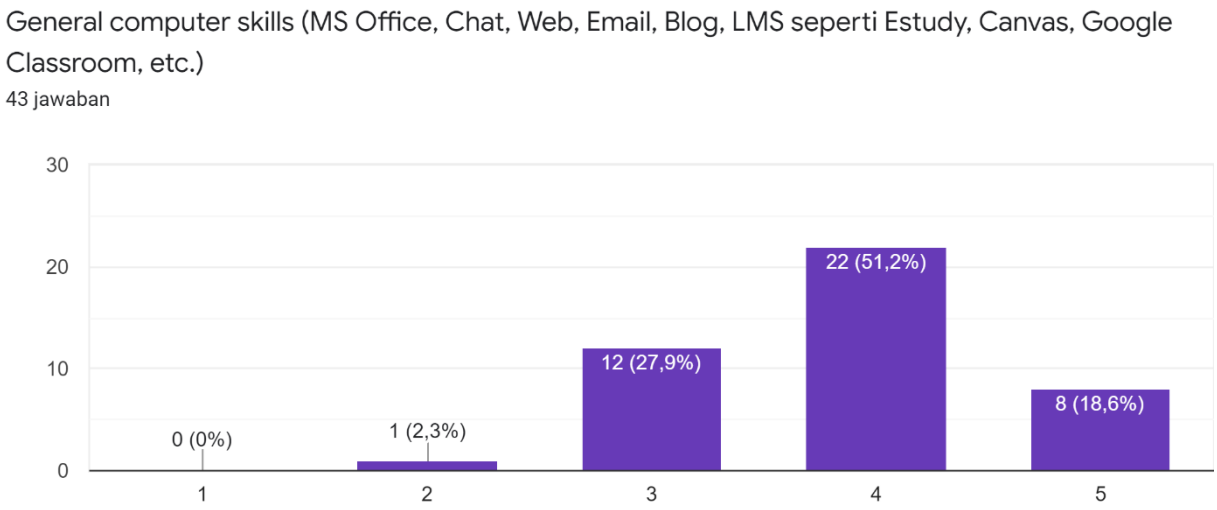

Figure 4.3. General computer skills of respondents

The second section contains 61 items which gathered student's perception on their learner autonomy. Of the 61 items, 22 items reflect the initiating behaviors, four of which also describe other behaviors like monitoring, evaluating, and behaviors in online/ICT related behaviors. Meanwhile, 22 of them reflect the monitoring behaviors, five of which reflect initiating and evaluating, and four others reflect ICT related behaviors. 13 items describe the evaluating behaviors, seven of which also reflect initiating and monitoring behaviors, and one also describes the ICT related behavior. Nine of the total items were intentionally written in negative forms. The total 61 items were all given responses and have been calculated for the descriptive statistics. Table 5.1 presents the summary of descriptive statistics.

Table 5.1 An Extract of Descriptive Statistics Result of 61 Questionnaire Items

	[belajar Bahasa Inggris dengan sukarela]	*[memberikan penghargaan diri saat performa mereka baik dalam Bahasa Inggris]*	*[menggunakan internet untuk mempelajari hal-hal yang tidak diajarkan di kelas]*	*[ingin berkomunikasi dengan orang/turis asing dalam Bahasa Inggris]*	*[melaksanakan rencana belajar yang telah dibuat]*	*[tidak memanfaatkan materi dan sumber belajar dengan baik ketika belajar Bahasa Inggris di rumah]*	*[mencari kesempatan untuk menggunakan Bahasa Inggris sebanyak mungkin]*
Mean	3,28	3,33	3,63	3,58	3,53	2,44	3,44
Median	3	3	4	4	4	2	3
Mode	3	3	5	5	3	3	3
Min.	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Max.	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Sum	141	143	156	154	152	105	148
Count	43	43	43	43	43	43	43

From the descriptive statistcs, the results were further classified based on the categories, namely; initiating, monitoring, evaluating, and online/ICT related autonomous

behaviors. Because some items belong to more than one category, the total items calculated are 71. This calculation is necessary to identify students' perception and behaviors in every category of learner autonomy. In order to provide a comprehensive figure to present the result of the data, every item is numbered (See Appendix).

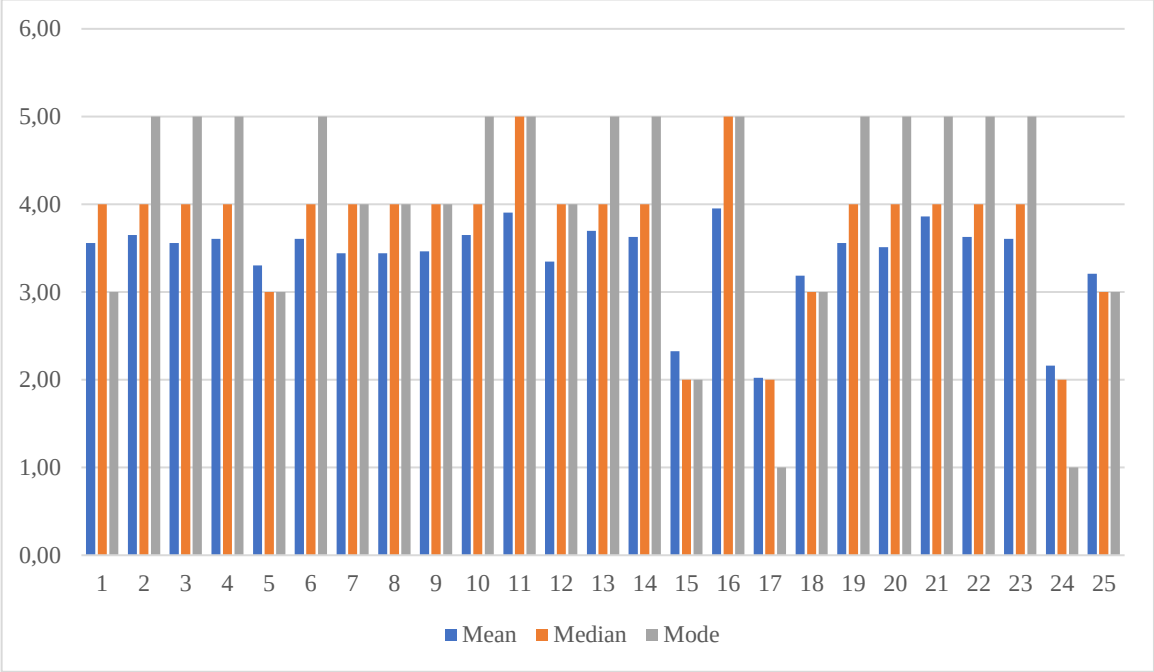

Figure 5.1 Summary of the Initiating Category

The initiating autonomous behaviors of 43 students were gathered. From the total of 22 items, item No 16 has the highest average score (3,95), namely *[bermimpi menjadi pembicara Bahasa Inggris yang baik]*. The item has median and mode scores of 5 (always or almost always true). This indicates positive behaviors of the students towards their learner autonomy in which they have the strong desire to become a good English speaker. Meanwhile, the item with the lowest average score, 3,3, is *[berupaya membentuk lingkungan belajar Bahasa Inggris yang baik sebelum belajar di rumah]*. This is probably because such behavior is not really familiar to the students in Indonesia where mostly the local environment is not supportive to learning English. This later becomes explains why in previous studies found that many Indonesian parents assign their children to join extra classes for English subject.

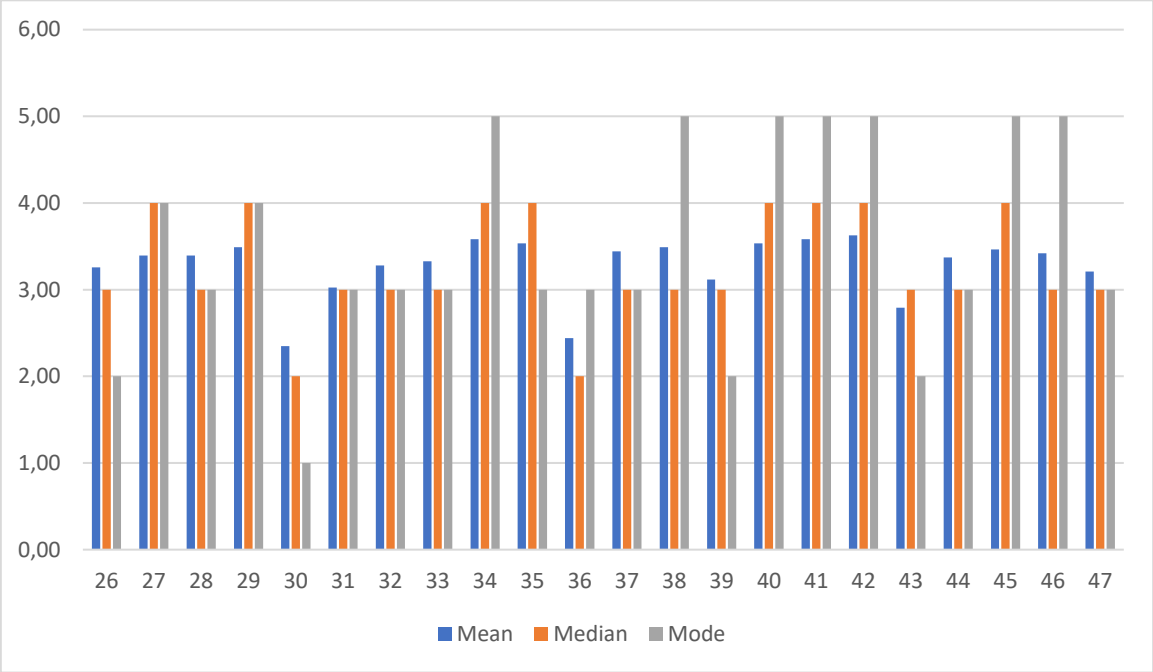

Figure 5.2 Summary of the Monitoring Category

Furthermore, the students show positive autonomous behaviors indicating the second category that is monitoring, as seen in Figure 5.2. The study found that the item *[mencoba metode belajar Bahasa Inggris lain jika satu metode tidak cocok]* presents a high average score of 3,62, while the mode and median scores of this item are 4 (usually true) and 5 (always or almost always true), respectively. This item indicates a strategy which most students agree on in their autonomous behavior. Meanwhile, the item with the lowest mean score is *[berfokus pada belajarnya sekalipun mereka mendengar orang lain berbicara]* with the value of 3,02.

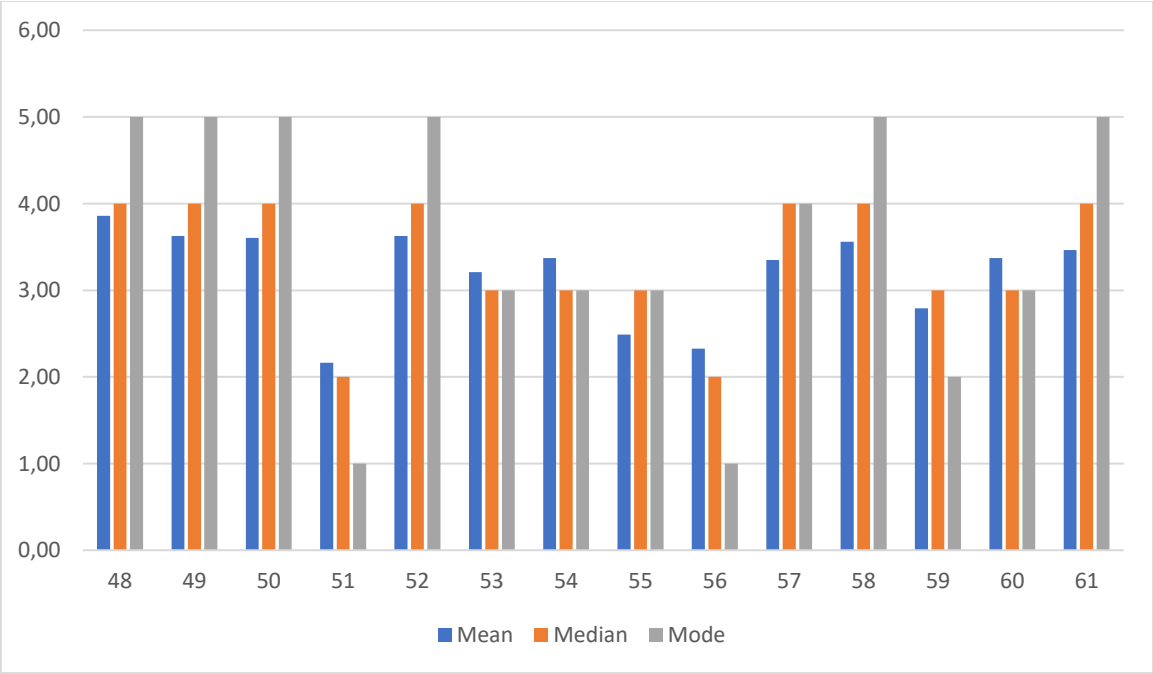

Figure 5.3 Summary of the Evaluating Category

The third category indicates the evaluating autonomous behaviors of the students. The highest mean score is presented in the item *[mencari tahu kemampuan Bahasa Inggrisnya dengan mengambil TOEIC, TOEFL, atau IELTS secara sukarela]* with the value 3,55, which is relatively lower the other categories. The median and mode of this item are 4 and 5, respectively, indicating positive perception towards the autonomous behavior. On the contrary, the item *[memberikan penghargaan diri saat performa mereka baik dalam Bahasa Inggris]* shows the lowest mean score of 3,2, with both median and mode value of 3.

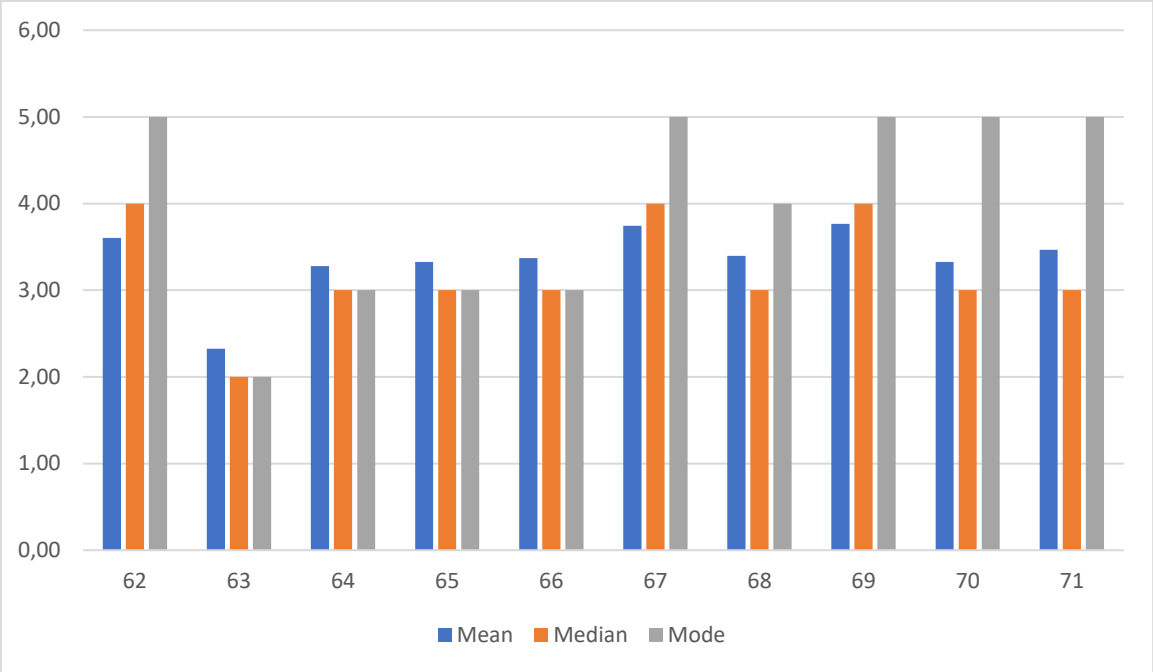

Figure 5.4 Summary of the ICT/Online-related Behaviors

The final category indicates the autonomous behaviors which are integrated with ICT tools or online setting. The item with the highest mean score (3,76) [akan menggunakan Bahasa Inggris untuk berkomunikasi jika bertemu orang asing di Internet]. The median and mode of this item is 4 and 5. On the contrary, the lowest mean score is reclected in the item [berbagi perasaan tentang pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris dengan teman-teman secara online] with the score of 3,32. Most students perceive this item with only 3 or sometimes true.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate students' perception on their learner autonomy and their behaviors. From 187 total students in the population, 43 gave their consent and filled out the survey questionnaire which was distributed online. The instrument consisted of two main sections. The first was intended to collect data of independent variables such as college class, general computer skills, and online learning experiences. The first section was analyzed in

descriptive statitstics. The result returned with less satisfactory result, that of 43 students, 60,5% were from the first-year students. Most were also female students (74,4%).

The second section consisted of 61 items which were distributed into four categories of autonomous behaviors. First, the initiating category revealed that most students agree on reflecting the perception and behavior onto dreaming to be a good English speaker. The second category, meanwhile, shows the trend to modify methods in order to suit them. Third, one mostly agreed behavior of evaluating is to check their English proficiency by taking TOEFL or the like, voluntarily. Finally, the behavior which indicates autonomous learning especially in distance learning is to use English to communicate if they meet a stranger in the Internet.

The findings of the study imply that Indonesian learners, especially English Language Education students have the potentials to develop their learner autonomy. The findings may contribute to help teachers decide which behavior they can improve in every dimension. However, because the study could not gather a massive data from large population, its generalizability may be low. It is therefore suggested that further studies include a larger population in order to strengthen the findings.

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