



## Self-Language Learning Strategies of Taiwanese Adult Learners: Input to Online Instructional Guide

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### ABSTRACT

This study looked into the self-directed learning strategies of Taiwanese adult learners and the challenges they face while learning English online. The study utilized online classroom observations of the participants. Semi-structured interview data from the participants and ESL teachers to Taiwanese learners through a qualitative research approach was used to identify the self-directed learning strategies of Taiwanese adult learners, specifically how learners diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources, implement strategies, and evaluate their outcomes. Results reveal that Taiwanese adult learners have their self-directed strategies such as listening to English podcasts, using AI tools like ChatGPT and Google Translate, watching TED Talks and YouTube videos, and practicing speaking through free conversation practice in their online English classes. Taiwanese adult learners' autonomy in selecting their learning tools has various effectiveness based on the strategy they utilized. The challenges they faced are the following: difficulty in comprehending native speaker accents, pronunciation difficulty, speaking difficulty based on the topics, and vocabulary retention. These learners, especially at the beginner and intermediate levels, lacked structured systems for vocabulary retention and understanding, and long-term English learning progress tracking. While online resources provided broad access to language input, the findings indicate that these alone were insufficient without interactive, feedback-rich support. Taiwanese adult learners benefited most from contextual vocabulary learning, scaffolded speaking activities, and structured instructional methods that addressed their specific learning needs and bridged their confidence gaps. These learners' career goals, motivation, and cultural factors also played significant roles in their ability to maintain consistent stability throughout their learning journey. This study aids in designing an ESL instructional guide tailored to Taiwanese adult learners. The proposed instructional guide emphasizes a balance between autonomy and structured support, goal-setting tools, integrating real-world content, pronunciation drills, and task-based speaking activities. The online instructional guide aims to address common barriers, promote speaking engagement in class, and support Taiwan's broader bilingual education goals. This study affirms that effective self-directed language learning requires guided autonomy, contextual relevance, and culturally responsive instructional design.

### RESUMO

This study explored the self-directed language learning strategies of Taiwanese ESL learners and the challenges they faced in their language learning journey. A qualitative case study design was used involving five Taiwanese adult learners residing in Taiwan. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews from Taiwanese adult learners and three (3) ESL teachers and online class observations. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings of the study. Results revealed that Taiwanese adult learners actively used self-directed learning strategies such as diagnosing their own learning needs, setting personal goals, identifying resources, applying tailored strategies, and evaluating learning progress. Taiwanese adult learners used tools like Google Translate, TED Talks, YouTube, and AI platforms such as ChatGPT to enhance their English skills. Despite their efforts in self-language learning, challenges such as difficulty understanding native accents and retaining vocabulary, lack of speaking confidence in real-life situations, and weak progress tracking and evaluation of their learning progress were observed. The study underscores the importance of an instructional guide. A structured yet flexible framework to support learner autonomy is crucial in online classes. Recommendations include contextualized grammar practice, integration of real-world tasks, scaffolded instruction, and vocabulary track. These contribute to fostering an effective self-directed learning environment for the learners. The findings of the study support Taiwan's bilingual policy by suggesting practical insights for ESL curriculum designers and instructors. The study affirms the learners' readiness for autonomous learning and highlights the importance of having materials that merge technology, task-based learning, and contextual engagement to support English language learning among Taiwanese adult learners.

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## Introduction

English has become the global lingua franca, playing a vital role in international communication, business, science, technology, and education (Harmer, 2015). Its widespread use has heightened the importance of English language education, especially in non-native English-speaking countries. English proficiency enables individuals to engage in global markets, enhance socio-economic opportunities, and foster cross-cultural understanding.

In Taiwan, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), and most Taiwanese people do not use English in their daily lives. This limits learners' exposure to authentic English environments (Chang, 2018). As a result, English instruction in Taiwan has traditionally relied on translation-based methods and exam-oriented teaching (Su, 2006), a common feature of many EFL systems.

However, Taiwan is undergoing a shift in language education policy. In response to globalization and national goals, the Ministry of Education launched the Bilingual Nation 2030 initiative, promoting bilingual education and increasing the use of English across public and private sectors (Ministry of Education, 2021). The policy has led to the development of more ESL-oriented programs, especially in adult education, with a focus on practical language use over test performance (Lin, 2019).

According to World English classifications, Taiwan belongs to the "Expanding Circle," where English is learned primarily as a foreign language and is not widely used in official domains. Yet, the landscape is evolving. Since 2001, English instruction has been introduced at the primary level, and universities have increasingly adopted bilingual policies (National Development Council, 2018). These changes signal a shift toward integrating English into daily life, education, and the workforce, aligning Taiwan more closely with global communication standards.

Adult learners in Taiwan represent a growing demographic in ESL education. Many pursue English learning to enhance career prospects and engage with the international community (Chang & Hsu, 2021). However, adult learners face unique challenges, including limited time due to work and family obligations, lack of access to tailored resources, and low motivation influenced by cultural attitudes toward language learning (Lin & Chiu, 2023).

As a response, adult learners often turn to self-directed learning strategies, such as using online materials, setting personal goals, and practicing with language partners (Huang, 2019; Chang, 2021). The rise of online ESL programs has made learning more flexible, but also introduces challenges like limited digital literacy, inadequate self-discipline, and unequal access to technology (Chen & Wu, 2021; Lin & Lee, 2022).

Despite these difficulties, self-regulated learning has proven essential in developing language competence. It supports learner independence, especially in adult education, where

personal motivation and learning styles vary widely (Oxford, 2017). Adult learners benefit from strategies such as goal-setting, reflection, time management, and tailored practice activities. These approaches enable learners to take ownership of their education and align learning methods with individual needs.

However, research reveals a gap between learners' self-directed efforts and formal instructional practices. ESL teachers often lack guidance on how to support or incorporate these strategies into their teaching (Wang & Chen, 2021). While learners apply effective self-learning methods, few studies address how educators can integrate these techniques into online or classroom instruction, especially in ways that are culturally and contextually appropriate.

Moreover, the transition from traditional, teacher-centered EFL methods to learner-centered ESL approaches is not always smooth. Taiwanese learners may struggle with self-regulation and confidence, often relying heavily on teacher guidance (Huang & Benson, 2013; Chou, 2014). This underscores the importance of culturally responsive instructional design that bridges EFL and ESL frameworks in Taiwan's unique educational context.

Given these issues, this study investigates the self-directed learning strategies used by adult Taiwanese learners in online ESL programs. Drawing on Knowles' (1975) theory of andragogy, which emphasizes self-concept, motivation, and relevance, the research aims to understand the challenges learners face and identify strategies that enhance learner autonomy.

This case study explores how Taiwanese adult learners plan, implement, and reflect on their English learning experiences. It examines their use of online tools, goal-setting practices, time management, and self-monitoring across language skills, including vocabulary, reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The study also evaluates how learners adapt their strategies based on feedback and outcomes.

Ultimately, the findings contribute to developing instructional guides that support adult learners through culturally attuned self-directed learning models. By understanding learners' needs, strategies, and constraints, educators can design more effective ESL lessons and promote inclusive, learner-centered education. The study also addresses the social dimension of language learning by reducing stigma around low proficiency and empowering learners to take ownership of their development within Taiwan's evolving bilingual context.

## **Materials and Methods**

A qualitative case study design was adopted (Yin, 2018) to examine self-language learning strategies among five adult Taiwanese ESL learners residing in Taiwan. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, online classroom observations, and lesson material analysis. Convenience sampling was employed, prioritizing accessibility and willingness to

participate (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach.

This study looked into a self-language learning phenomenon in depth. The primary goal is to identify patterns, generate insights, and build a deeper understanding of the subject matter by observing and analyzing the learning strategies of five Adult Taiwanese learners who are residing in Taiwan. At the same time, to gather input from an ESL teacher to ESL Taiwanese adult learners who are residing in the Philippines, by employing convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with Taiwanese adult learners and ESL teachers to Taiwanese adult learners. Convenience sampling was used to select participants based on accessibility and willingness. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and observations were guided by an observation guide.

## **Results and Discussions**

This study examined the self-directed learning strategies of the Taiwanese adult learners and the challenges they face when learning English online. The findings reveal that Taiwanese adult learners employ a range of self-directed learning strategies, including diagnosing one's needs, formulating learning goals, identifying resources, choosing and implementing strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.

Findings show that Taiwanese adult learners engage in a variety of self-directed learning strategies like the use of online listening platforms, watching TED talks and YouTube videos, using Google Translate, and utilizing ChatGPT. Taiwanese adult learners showcased autonomy in selecting resources for their learning and creating study routines. Most of the learners' goal-oriented learning plans are aligned with their personal and professional goals and aspirations.

However, the study revealed challenges that Taiwanese adult learners' experiences, namely: difficulty understanding native speaker accents, limited speaking confidence, and vocabulary retention issues. Many learners lacked in evaluating their progress and sustaining their learning habits. Overreliance on translation tools and having unstructured (free talk) sessions often led to shallow engagement rather than deeper speaking engagement. Additionally, motivational and time-management barriers are seen as factors that hindered their progress.

The study's discussion highlighted the need for a balanced online instructional guide and design that combines structured support for learners' autonomy. Learners benefit from interactive, real-world content, task-based speaking activities, and personalized feedback. Scaffolded instruction with contextualized grammar practice activities, goal-setting tools, and

vocabulary tracking methods was found to be crucial in promoting self-directed learning for Taiwanese adult learners.

These findings affirm that Taiwanese adult learners have the readiness and motivation to learn English independently. The use of an instructional framework can aid in enhancing the learner’s language acquisition by providing flexibility and guidance. The present study contributes to giving practical insights for ESL curriculum designers, instructors, and policymakers supporting Taiwan’s 2030 bilingual policy.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Themes for Self-directed learning strategies of Taiwanese Adult learners*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Findings</b>
<b>Diagnosing Learning Needs</b>	Learners identified speaking, vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening comprehension (especially with native accents) as primary challenges.
<b>Formulating Learning Goals</b>	Learners set personal goals, often tied to career or academic needs. Some lacked clear goal-setting frameworks, especially beginners.
<b>Identifying Resources</b>	Learners used diverse resources, including podcasts (CNN, BBC), YouTube, TED Talks, Google Translate, and ChatGPT to supplement learning.
<b>Choosing and implementing Strategies</b>	Learners employed strategies like repetition, note-taking, app use, and speaking practice. Scheduling and consistency varied by learner.
<b>Evaluating Learning Outcomes</b>	Learners used informal evaluations (e.g., guessing meanings, self-reflection), but often lacked structured systems to monitor progress.

Diagnosing learning needs is one of the five self-directed learning strategies of Knowles' theory of andragogy. This strategy is focused on learners recognizing gaps in their knowledge and skills. This serves as the starting point of their learning journey. This strategy has several sub-strategies, mainly recognizing specific skill gaps, requesting feedback from peers, teachers, and mentors, and seeking clarification. In this study, online class observation data and interview data from the Taiwanese adult learners and ESL teachers revealed the Taiwanese adult learners' areas of challenge, specifically in grammar, speaking, and vocabulary.

Observation data showed that the majority of the participants struggled in expressing themselves in the language due to a lack of vocabulary words that they would use in real-world conversation. They often paused to think and find the right words as they hesitated to say the words they knew, because they may not reflect the exact idea that they wanted to express. These behaviors from the learners showed a clear awareness of what they were struggling with, as it was revealed and validated during the interviews.

Across the participants observed data in the recorded online class, the interviews with the Taiwanese adult learners and ESL teachers identify their learning gaps and challenges in their English learning journey. This awareness about their weakness and areas for improvement showed that grammar concerns, speaking confidence, and vocabulary retrieval are the three main challenges that they have. These Taiwanese adult learners can assess their own learning needs when their learning environment allows space for them to reflect.

In conclusion, the triangulation of the observed data from the recorded online class, interview excerpts from the Taiwanese adult learners, and ESL teachers confirms that diagnosing one's needs is a learner-driven process and a self-directed learning strategy. When guided through feedback, interacting during English classes, and reflecting on their work, learners are starting to recognize where they are and where they need to improve – a foundational step of being a self-directed learner.

Formulating learning goals of Knowles emphasizes that adult learners are taking an active role when setting their learning goals—especially when these goals are connected to their life responsibilities, personal relevance, and professional aspirations. This study's observation and interview data from both Taiwanese adult learners and ESL teachers showed awareness of the participants in their language learning needs and career goals.

Classroom observations revealed that P2 remained active in each major skill area (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) all the time. P2 acted independently and handled challenges with confidence. P2, P4, and P5 demonstrated different ways in which adult learners, specifically Taiwanese adult learners, formulate learning goals. Some focused on developing career plans towards job-specific outcomes, some focused on improving their skills, and some focused on improving their learning through class materials and speaking practice.

These findings support the self-directed learning theory of Knowles that adult learners thrive towards their goals when they take part in formulating their learning plan. The data gathered suggests that Taiwanese adult learners, when encouraged to share their personal learning goals—whether about improving their English fluency, desiring career promotion, or learning more vocabulary through structured classes—these learners are more likely to engage in their learning process. Observational data validated with interview data from both Taiwanese adult learners and ESL teachers confirmed that a personalized goal-driven type of learning leads to a deeper learning motivation.

One of the five key strategies of Knowles' theory of andragogy is that learners strive to identify and use the available resources around them to meet their learning needs. In the study, it was found that the participants had taken necessary measures and initiative in their learning goals. They often blend traditional media with the readily available online resources and apps to aid their English learning.

Based on the observation data, Taiwanese adult learners frequently mentioned how they reinforce and use external resources in their online classes. These behaviors were then validated during interviews with the learners and the ESL teachers. This confirms that the identification of resources by learners is not just incidental during the observation but a crucial part of the Taiwanese adult learner's language learning strategies.

Overall, the self-directed learning strategies of these Taiwanese adult learners showed they are active managers and curators of their language learning. They align their usage of digital apps, digital content, and translation tools with their personal goals, limitations, and preferences. This validates Knowles' assertion that adult learners are capable of identifying learning resources effectively and using materials autonomously, especially when given support by their teachers.

Knowles' fourth self-directed learning strategy is choosing and implementing strategies is focus on giving autonomy to adult learners by selecting methods that suit their goals, lifestyles, and preferences. This strategy has four sub-categories: mainly practicing spaced repetition, role-playing or using contextual language, summarizing and paraphrasing, and trial and error. Adult learners apply strategies and create routines that match their personal learning preferences. Both observational and interview data revealed that Taiwanese adult learners are highly aware of the importance of using strategies in their language learning. However, these learners have their individualized way of adjusting, committing, and testing those strategies introduced to them.

Taiwanese adult learners showed different self-directed learning strategies: P1 uses repetition, P3 uses app integration, P4 time-management and scheduling, and P5 speaking practices. These Taiwanese adult learners were highly active in applying these methods to their lifestyles. These findings highlight Knowles' theory, adult learners can choose and hone their

skills when encouraged by what they learn outside the classroom, equipped with helpful resources, and given time to reflect.

Self-assessment, reflection, and emerging is the fifth self-directed learning strategy under Knowles' andragogical model. This involves evaluating one's learning outcomes. This includes comparing past to present abilities, journaling or checklists, recording and re-evaluating performance, and reviewing past mistakes. In this study, Taiwanese adult learners showed different ways of evaluating their learning progress. The differences in their approaches show how adult learners track their language growth and identify their learning gaps.

Unlike the other participants, P5 did not keep track of her results. During lessons, P5 reviewed vocabulary terms by using Google Translate; however, they did not pay attention to memorizing the words regularly. Although P5 concedes that they do not have a way to retain the information long-term. Without a formal evaluation plan, it seems that P5's frequent checks of their work did not help them maintain an organized method for checking their progress. In any case, noticing this gap helps us take the first step in evaluation, as it shows us when we need to use new approaches.

From reviewing their progress as they go through the process to taking time to look back on their studies, adult learners check their outcomes in several ways. Also, to evaluate our progress, we looked at personal things like being able to speak well, express views with confidence, and speak in common situations with no problems. P1 sometimes tested how much they understood by using what they learned daily, P4 scheduled review times to adjust, and P5 stressed how important it was to find proper methods for checking long-term progress.

## **Conclusion**

Taiwanese adult learners' self-directed learning strategies were analyzed using thematic methodology from the perspective of ESL instructors within this study. The study demonstrates the diverse aspects of independent language learning coupled with instructional support while showing the challenges learners encounter in their independent online study.

The study revealed that many Taiwanese adult learners who are actively engaging in independent learning faced notable challenges, particularly confidence in speaking, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary retention. These learners also employ multiple self-study techniques that include watching English media materials and taking part in immersive foreign language environments, together with using artificial intelligence tools. The optimal learning experience of these learners underscores the importance of using technology with structured learning approaches, as well as social expectations and digital interferences.

Taiwanese adult learners expressed a strong preference for discussion and interactive learning over traditional textbook learning. These learners benefit most from dual teaching methods, which combine group discussions with real-world assignments, accessible learning resources, along customized comments that show their improvement. For instance, news articles, podcasts, TED talks, and YouTube videos were used by P1-P5. However, unstructured materials could lead to limited vocabulary retention and superficial engagement. Some learners expressed a need for topic-based vocabulary support and a desire for pronunciation guidance, all of which are aligned with their personal learning needs and goals.

Creating a balance between controlled facilitation and student-centered approaches maximizes self-guided language mastery. The study found that Taiwanese adult learners benefit most from blended learning. To enhance spoken and written fluency, students should participate in guided conversations, pronunciation drills, role-playing exercises, situational dialogues, and structured speaking activities. Some learners prefer free talk, reported to have some gains in their speaking fluency. But other learners highlighted that unfocused and random conversations resulted in inconsistent learning progress and poor vocabulary.

The online instructional guide should have a balance between free conversation and structured content, such as grammar-integrated lessons and vocabulary-building speaking activities. These topics include rich and purposeful context aligned to real-world topics such as casual conversation, customer service dialogues, and job interviews. The activities need to include exposure to various accents, together with structure-based assignments like transcription work and shadowing practice, and comprehension assessment. The instructional design should incorporate structured speaking activities that include role-plays as well as guided conversations and pronunciation drills, and confidence-building exercises. The described methods can enhance students' abilities to understand spoken language and speak fluently.

The learners emphasized the importance of meaningful context in learning new vocabulary through daily conversation and workplace communications. These findings suggest that speaking fluency improves dramatically through the practical application of the new vocabulary words. The instructional guide needs to incorporate three evidence-based retention methods: spaced repetition, vocabulary journals, and interactive word-mapping activities. Learners should focus on contextual vocabulary learning through the incorporation of real-life scenarios, such as workplace conversations, as well as common expressions from both workplace interactions and current events. New vocabulary growth improved through meaningful context usage that allows learners to maintain and permanently acquire new words.

Based on the findings of the study, the online instructional guide should promote scaffolding learning. For instance, a systematic listening exercise progression should start with

simple dialogues, which advance to authentic, complex conversations for better comprehension. A combination of structured speaking activities, such as pronunciation drills and role-play situations, together with directed discussion sessions, should be provided to improve spoken fluency. ESL Teachers should incorporate grammar education into contextual learning initiatives rather than separating it from meaningful communication activities, so students can understand grammar effectively.

Lastly, learners sought structured improvement through goal-setting and self-monitoring by asking reflection prompts (e.g., “What did I learn this week? What did I improve this week?”), Having peer discussion forums and writing study planners. These tools will aid learners’ thorough development of their self-directed learning habits by addressing irregular study pattern concerns and low motivation among beginner learners and those learners who have limited time to study due to their personal responsibilities and work commitments.

The design of an online ESL instructional guide should leverage the use of technology (e.g., AI tools and language apps) in addressing their limitations and learning English. The online instructional guide must use task-based learning (TBL) because it suits student preferences. Educational activities under this framework need to integrate tasks that recreate professional scenarios involving business communications and presentations. The implementation of practical activities would let learners develop their language abilities while building their confidence levels.

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