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Learner Autonomy and English Proficiency among, Alternative Learning System (ALS) Learners

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy is crucial to the success of Alternative Learning System (ALS) programs, particularly in developing English proficiency. Autonomy promotes increased participation, deeper learning, and improved language skills, enhancing proficiency levels. This study emphasizes the importance of considering the diverse characteristics of ALS learners, such as prior learning experiences, age, and motivation, and how these factors influence language skills development within this unique educational setting. Using a descriptive-correlational design, the study analyzed data from 158 ALS Junior High School learners to determine the relationship between autonomy and English proficiency. The results showed a weak positive correlation ($r = 0.219$, $p = 0.006$) between autonomy and proficiency, emphasizing the potential impact of autonomy on the outcome of language learning. Sex ($p = 0.099$) and time out of school ($p = 0.408$) had no significant impact on autonomy or level of English proficiency. It provides valuable insights into how learner autonomy affects the English language learning experiences of ALS junior high school learners. Future research should deal deeper with specific factors influencing learner autonomy and its relationship with English proficiency to optimize support for diverse learners within the ALS framework.

Keywords: learner autonomy, English proficiency, junior high school, Alternative Learning System, language skills development.

INTRODUCTION

Republic Act No. 11510, also known as the "Alternative Learning System Act," serves as the legal foundation for the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the Philippines (DepEd, 2020). Enacted in July 2020, this Act institutionalizes the ALS program to enhance opportunities for out-of-school youth and adults, including Indigenous peoples, to attain basic literacy and life skills, offering an alternative pathway to complete their primary education (DepEd, 2020). This study investigates the relationship between learner autonomy and the development of English proficiency among learners enrolled in the ALS at the Junior High School level.

Learner autonomy, as described by Benson (2018), involves learners taking control of their educational journeys. This concept has advanced parallel with recent developments in language education, particularly the increasing acknowledgment of sociocultural factors (Benson, 2018). The sociocultural aspects of autonomy underscore the importance of the social context in learning. Additionally, teacher autonomy is crucial in fostering learner autonomy, emphasizing the need to train educators to support autonomous learning within the classroom (Benson, 2018). Technological advancements have also revolutionized autonomous language learning, enabling independent and collaborative learning beyond traditional classroom settings (Benson, 2018). Despite these advancements, the core definition of learner autonomy—learners taking charge of their learning—remains consistent. The notion that learners who naturally assume control of their learning tend to develop autonomy and that autonomous learning is effective persists (Benson, 2018). In the ALS context, English proficiency is vital for accessing further education and employment opportunities (Benson, 2018).

Research indicates that promoting learner autonomy is essential for success in ALS programs (Aikenhead, 2019). Studies in the Philippines emphasize the importance of enhancing ALS learners' autonomous learning skills through personalized learning strategies, self-regulated learning techniques, and collaborative learning activities

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(Santos & Koo, 2023; Bayucca, 2021). Factors such as learner motivation, self-efficacy, and access to learning resources also influence the development of learner autonomy (Santos & Koo, 2023).

English proficiency is a critical competency for ALS learners and is crucial for navigating educational and professional realms (Bautista & Abuzo, 2020). The research underscores the need for ALS programs to prioritize the development of communicative competence alongside basic grammar and vocabulary skills (Giron, 2018). Practical English language instruction in ALS should accommodate diverse learning styles and backgrounds, reflecting the non-traditional educational experiences of ALS learners (Santos & Koo, 2023).

Studies in various educational contexts have consistently demonstrated a positive correlation between learner autonomy and English proficiency. Autonomy fosters increased engagement, deeper learning, and improved language skills (Benson, 2018; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2019). For instance, Wang and Sun (2018) found that Chinese university students with higher levels of autonomy exhibited more excellent English proficiency compared to their less autonomous peers. Similarly, research by Chang and Wu (2020) with Taiwanese EFL learners revealed a positive relationship between learner autonomy and proficiency in vocabulary, listening, and speaking skills.

Specific factors such as diverse prior learning experiences, age, and motivations within the ALS context influence the relationship between autonomy and proficiency (Bautista & Abuzo, 2020). The limited instructional time and resources in ALS programs present challenges in fostering learner autonomy and achieving high English proficiency levels (Bayucca, 2021).

While previous studies have established a positive correlation between learner autonomy and English proficiency across various educational settings (Benson, 2018; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2019; Wang & Sun, 2018; Chang & Wu, 2020) and emphasized the importance of autonomous learning skills for ALS learners (Santos & Koo, 2023; Bayucca, 2021), a specific examination of this relationship within the ALS context is lacking. Understanding the dynamics and implications of this relationship in the ALS setting could provide valuable insights for enhancing the effectiveness of ALS programs and supporting the development of learner autonomy and English proficiency among ALS learners.

Research Questions

The study's main purpose was to investigate the relationship between the degree of learner autonomy in learning English and the level of English proficiency of Junior High School learners enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS).

Specifically, this investigation sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the degree of learner autonomy in learning English of ALS Junior High School learners when they are taken as a whole and grouped according to sex and the number of years they left school?

2. What is the level of English proficiency of ALS Junior High School learners when they are taken as a whole and grouped according to the aforementioned variables?

3. Is there a significant difference in the degree of learner autonomy in learning English of ALS Junior High School learners when grouped and compared according to sex and the number of years they left school?

4. Is there a significant difference in the level of English proficiency of ALS Junior High School Learners when grouped according to the aforementioned variables?

5. Is there a significant relationship between the degree of learner autonomy in learning English and the level of English proficiency of ALS Junior High School learners?

Framework

This study investigates the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency among Junior High School learners enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS). To understand this connection, the

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researcher draws upon two vital theoretical frameworks: Benson's (2011) concept of Learner Autonomy and Krashen's (1985) Second Language Acquisition Theory.

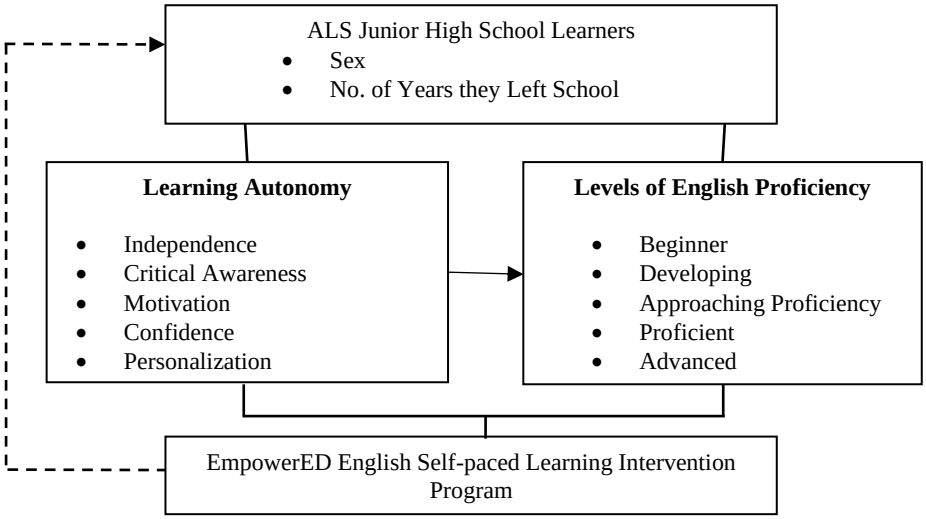
Within the context of this study, Benson's (2011) concept of Learner Autonomy is crucial. It refers to a student's ability to control their learning journey. It encompasses several key aspects: cognitive autonomy (planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning), affective autonomy (developing a positive learning attitude and managing anxiety), social autonomy (collaborating effectively while maintaining independence), and strategic autonomy (selecting and utilizing appropriate learning strategies). By fostering these aspects of learner autonomy in ALS programs, learners can be empowered to take ownership of their English language learning, which, in turn, has the potential to increase their motivation and engagement in their studies.

Krashen's (1985) Second Language Acquisition Theory provides insight into how learners acquire language. The theory centers on two key factors: comprehensible input and the affective filter. Comprehensible input refers to exposure to language slightly beyond a learner's current level (i+1). Through understanding this language, learners subconsciously develop new vocabulary and grammatical structures. The affective filter, on the other hand, is a psychological barrier influenced by emotions like anxiety and motivation. When this filter is low, learners are more receptive to comprehensible input, allowing for effective language acquisition. Promoting learner autonomy can lower the affective filter in the context of ALS programs. By taking charge of their learning, learners may experience increased confidence and motivation, creating a more receptive environment for acquiring English language proficiency through exposure to comprehensible input.

Research suggests a positive correlation between learner autonomy and proficiency (Fernanda & Munir, 2023). Autonomous learners are likelier to engage in activities that provide them with comprehensible input and manage their emotions to keep the affective filter low, facilitating language acquisition. By investigating the degree of learner autonomy and proficiency levels in ALS learners, this study aims to explore how fostering autonomy might contribute to improved English language learning outcomes.

Specifically, this research further scrutinizes the contribution of learner autonomy to the English proficiency of Junior High School learners in the Alternative Learning System (ALS). Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model of the study. The participants of this study are ALS Junior High School learners, described by variables such as sex and the number of years they have been out of school. Their autonomy in learning English is measured and analyzed by their level of English proficiency. The "Empower ED English: Fostering Autonomy for ALS Success Program" is designed to impact how these ALS Junior High School learners study English.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section describes the research design, the respondents, the instrument, the validity, the reliability, the data collection procedure, data analyses, and ethical considerations of the study.

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Design

In investigating learner autonomy and English proficiency among Alternative Learning System (ALS) Junior High School learners in 2022-2023, the researcher chose a descriptive-correlational design to understand the potential association between the two variables. A descriptive-correlational design excels at uncovering such relationships without manipulating variables and imposing changes but rather observing existing correlations (Creswell, 2018). This design allowed for the characterization of learner autonomy and English proficiency among ALS learners.

Initially, the study aimed to clearly understand learner autonomy and English proficiency levels among ALS JHS learners. This descriptive feature used the survey questionnaire to assess learner autonomy aspects like goal setting, self-monitoring, and resource selection (Dornyei & Skehan, 2020). English proficiency was similarly measured through adapted standardized tests as a reliable instrument (Chapelle & Chapelle, 2018).

The study then compared learner autonomy and proficiency levels across two groups: sex and how many years learners were out of school. This comparative component allowed for exploring potential differences between these groups, shedding light on how these factors might influence language learning experiences (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2020). Learner autonomy, acting as the independent variable, was hypothesized to influence the dependent variable of English proficiency (Ushioda, 2018).

Finally, the core of the design lies in exploring the presence and strength of the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency. The researcher employed statistical analyses to quantify the association between these variables. This correlational feature provided valuable insights into whether and to what extent learner autonomy played a role in determining ALS learners' English proficiency. (Dornyei, 2022)

In particular, the researcher used an adapted, modified tool to collect data on junior high school learners' autonomy in learning English, which was assessed using a measuring instrument on learner autonomy. It consisted of 55 items from the original 87 statements from the Measuring Instrument of Language Learning Autonomy (MILLA) developed by Fumiko Murase.

The 87-item version of the instrument was tested for internal consistency of each sub-construct and the instrument as a whole, which yielded a reasonable level of reliability of $\alpha = .936$.

Hence, it can be concluded that the recommended version of the instrument is valid and reliable for measuring learner autonomy (Murase, 2015). Of the 12 items removed, six are specific to Western and Japanese cultures; five statements are Japanese people's perceptions of authority and figures in authority; and an item the researcher considers invalid is "I want to study overseas in the future."

The researcher adopted a standardized English proficiency test Salvador (2021) used in his study titled *Language Learning Strategies: Use and English Proficiency of Senior High School Students*.

The first two questions described autonomy and proficiency levels, while the latter two aimed to compare these levels across groups and, most importantly, correlate learner autonomy with English proficiency.

In conclusion, the chosen design proved ideal for the ALS learner study. It allowed for a detailed examination of learner autonomy and English proficiency levels, exploration of potential differences between groups based on sex and schooling duration, and, most importantly, statistical assessment of the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency. This comprehensive approach offered valuable insights into the factors influencing ALS learners' language acquisition journeys.

Participants of the Study

The respondents of this study were 158 ALS Junior High School learners from a total of 266 learners in a non-government organization for School Year 2022-2023. The sample size was calculated using the Raosoft Calculator. Convenience Sampling was employed to select participants who participated in the research. This sampling technique was appropriate because the respondents in the ALS program were geographically dispersed

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or have limited resources for researcher access (Acharya et al., 2013). Convenience sampling allows data collection from readily available respondents within manageable timeframes and resource constraints (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Instrument

The Learner Autonomy Measuring Instrument utilized in this study was an adapted version of Murase's (2015) validated Measuring Instrument for Language Learning Autonomy (MILLA). As Murase noted, the MILLA" had proven to produce valid and reliable measures of learner autonomy across language learners" (p. 184).

The adapted instrument contained two sections. Section I encompassed the learner's demographic profile, gathering data on sex and the years they left school. Capturing background factors allowed for examining subgroup trends in the analysis stage (Lee, 2022).

Section II comprised 55 Likert-scale statements on learner autonomy across key dimensions, including the "capacity to take control of one's own learning" and "behaviors that follow from having such a capacity" (Dafei, 2018). Learners responded using a 6-point scale for behavioral items, with options ranging from "Very Strongly Agree" to "Extremely Disagree." Belief-based items utilized frequency options from "Always" to "Never."

This multidimensional approach aligned with Oxford's (2021) argument that learner autonomy depends on both contextual factors and internal capacities, requiring "active involvement, intrinsic motivation, metacognitive strategies, and pathways for self-regulation" (p. 88). Thus, the instrument captured the essence of autonomous learning.

The English proficiency test was adopted from Salvador's (2021) study, *Language Learning Strategies and English Proficiency of Senior High School Students.* Salvador aimed to assess the language learning strategies used and the level of English proficiency of the Senior High School students enrolled in a private institution in Bacolod City for the School Year 2020-2021. Moreover, the study's salient findings served as the basis for constructing a model lesson plan for teaching English as a second language.

The English proficiency levels in the Philippines are generally categorized into five levels, following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). These levels are often used to assess language proficiency across various language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. (Santos, Fernandez, and Ilustre, 2022; Manuel, 2022).

Learners with scores between 0 and 24 demonstrated a basic understanding of everyday phrases, placing them at the Beginner (A1/A2) level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Those scoring 25–44 exhibited Elementary (B1) skills, handling simple conversations and familiar topics. Moving onwards, scores of 45–64 indicated Intermediate (B2) proficiency, showcasing the ability to communicate effectively in a broader range of subjects. Learners within the 65–84 range displayed Upper Intermediate (B2/C1) skills and confidence in navigating most situations encountered in English-speaking environments. Finally, those achieving scores between 85 and 100 reached the Advanced (C1/C2) level, characterized by fluency and spontaneous expression of complex ideas.

Table 1: Interpretation Scale for the Level of English Proficiency

Score	Level	Verbal Description	Verbal Interpretation
51-60	C2	Proficient User (Mastery or Proficient)	The learner exhibits excellent knowledge and understanding of language structure and meaning.
41-50	C1	Proficient User (Effective Operational Proficiency or Advanced)	The learner exhibits very good knowledge and understanding of language structure and meaning.

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31-40	B2	Independent User (Vantage or Upper Intermediate)	The learner exhibits good knowledge and understanding of language structure and meaning.
21-30	B1	Independent User (Threshold or Intermediate)	The learner exhibits acceptable knowledge and understanding of language structure and meaning.
11-20	A2	Basic User (Waystage or Elementary)	The learner exhibits below knowledge and understanding of language structure and meaning.
0-10	A1	Basic User (Breakthrough or Beginner)	The learner exhibits little to no knowledge and understanding of language structure and meaning.

Validity and Reliability

For validity, the Learner Autonomy Measuring Instrument was subjected to face and content validity using Lawshe's Content Validity Ratio. Fifteen (15) experts in the field requested to validate the instrument. The researcher specifically asked for the professional assistance of educators with master's or Doctorate degrees who had expertise in English in checking the content and face validity of the partially modified tool.

They were tasked with dividing each instrument statement into three categories: essential, Useful but not Essential, and Not Necessary. Items marked "essential" by a critical number of panel members and falling within a Content Validity Ratio of 0.790 were included in the final instrument.

A CVI overall score of 0.94 with 15 experts indicated excellent content validity for the Learner Autonomy Measuring Instrument. The high CVI score of 0.94 exceeded the minimum recommended value for 15 experts (0.30). It signified that most experts (probably more than 14 out of 15) judged the instrument items as essential or helpful in measuring the intended construct. This score provided strong evidence that the instrument accurately reflected the content domain it was designed to assess. Thus, the researcher can be confident that the instrument was likely to generate valid and reliable data for the research purposes.

For reliability, thirty (30) ALS Junior High School learners enrolled in School Year 2022-2023 from the Division of Bacolod City were asked to respond to the instrument through pilot testing to determine its reliability. The Cronbach alpha for the pilot test resulted in 0.797, which was interpreted as highly reliable. It meant that the items in the instrument measured the same underlying construct very well.

The adapted English Proficiency Test employed in this study is valid and reliable through content validity assessment and internal consistency analysis (KR-20).

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

As this study was unprecedentedly conducted in the new typical learning environment, the researcher adjusted the data collection procedures to fit the needs of the time. The following steps were undertaken in the conduct of the study: upon approval of the request for permission from the program director, identified participants were scheduled for a virtual orientation where they were sufficiently informed as to the nature and objectives of the study, their participation, and the means of answering the instruments. Informed consent forms were handed out to participants under 18 years old with sufficient information about the risks and benefits of participating in the study. These informed consent forms were administered electronically or in printed form. Upon the administration and accomplishment of the Informed Consent Forms, the link to the adopted English proficiency test was provided to ALS Junior High School learners to answer. At the same time, the Learner Autonomy Measuring Instrument was administered to them electronically or in printed copy so they could accomplish the task in a given timeframe through scheduled virtual sessions with the assistance of their teachers, if necessary.

Data Analyses

Various descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were utilized to analyze the study data in alignment with the research questions.

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For the first research question, descriptive statistics are appropriately used to summarize the degree of learner autonomy, including measuring central tendency (mean) and variability (standard deviation) for the overall sample and subgroups. As Ary et al. (2022) state, "Descriptive statistics are used to transform a set of observations into indices that characterize or describe the data" (p. 189). Reporting these indices for autonomy allowed precise examination and comparison of scores.

For the statement in the second problem, the researcher employed descriptive statistics, specifically the mean and standard deviation, to analyze English proficiency scores in this study (Salkind, 2017). Descriptive statistics are valuable for summarizing and condensing extensive data sets into a more manageable format (Field, 2018). In this case, calculating the mean score for English proficiency overall provided a clear picture of the average level of proficiency within the entire ALS learner population. Calculating the mean and standard deviation for subgroups (e.g., by sex or duration out of school) facilitated comparisons between these groups (Pallant, 2020).

For the third research question, the Shapiro-Wilk test first assesses normality, an essential initial analysis ensuring appropriate subsequent testing aligned with the distribution of autonomy scores (Razali & Wah, 2011). In detecting non-normality, the researcher used the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test for subgroup comparisons rather than relying on a parametric test that assumes normality (Nahm, 2016). This alignment of statistical tests with the underlying data enhances validity.

For the fourth statement of the problem, the researcher employed the Mann-Whitney U test, a nonparametric test, to compare English proficiency scores between subgroups (Sheskin, 2007). This choice was likely due to the data's non-normality, as confirmed by normality assumption checks (Field, 2018). Parametric tests, like the t-test, rely on assumptions of normality in the data distribution. When these assumptions are violated, nonparametric tests like the Mann-Whitney U test are crucial (Pallant, 2020). These tests offer robust alternatives, providing reliable results even with non-normal data.

For the last research question, the Pearson correlation coefficient was ideally suited for quantifying and testing the strength and direction of the relationship between the two continuous variables of autonomy and proficiency (Schober et al., 2018). Selecting the appropriate technique for the research question and variable types demonstrates command of statistical tools.

To describe the degree of learner autonomy in learning English of ALS Junior High School learners based on the results or descriptors yielded, the following rubric will be used:

Table 2: Basis for Measuring Learners' Degree of Autonomy

	Verbal Description	**Mean Range**	**Degree of Autonomy**
6	Strongly Agree/Always	5.50 – 6.0	Complete Autonomy
5	Agree/ Very Frequently	4.50 – 5.49	Mostly Autonomous
4	Slightly Agree/Sometimes	3.50 – 4.49	Moderately Autonomous
3	Disagree/Rarely	2.50 – 3.49	Less Autonomy
2	Slightly Disagree/Very Rarely	1.50 – 2.49	Much Less Autonomy
1	Extremely Disagree/Never	1.00 – 1.49	Not Autonomous at All

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the investigation's core, exploring the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency among Alternative Learning System (ALS) Junior High School learners during the School Year 2022-2023. Understanding this relationship was valuable for fostering effective English language learning

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among this unique population.

This study's main inquiry was how learner autonomy influenced English proficiency in ALS settings. The study pursued the following objectives: quantifying learner autonomy, measuring English proficiency, exploring group variations, and examining the correlations between the variables.

This investigation employed a descriptive-correlational design, utilizing surveys and standardized English proficiency tests to gather data from the ALS JHS learner population. Statistical analyses allowed for quantitative comparisons and exploration of correlations between the key variables.

In the subsequent sections, the findings gleaned from the data will be unveiled, examining learner autonomy levels, English proficiency profiles, potential group differences, and, ultimately, the nature of the relationship between these crucial factors.

By carefully navigating these results, valuable insights into how learner autonomy played a role in shaping the English language learning experiences of ALS Junior High School learners will be gained.

Table 3 presented the learner autonomy levels in English learning for the ALS Junior High School learners participating in the study. Analyzing the data offered critical insights into this sample's overall degree of autonomy.

Table 3: Learner Autonomy in Learning English of ALS Junior High School Learners as a Whole

	n	**Mean**	**SD**	**Interpretation**
ALS Learner Autonomy in Learning English	158	3.32	0.561	Less Autonomous

Table 1 examined the degree of learner autonomy in English language learning among ALS Junior High School learners as a whole. The analysis revealed a mean score of 3.32 out of 5 for learner autonomy across all 158 participants, with a standard deviation of 0.561. This score suggested that, on average, ALS learners in this study exhibited moderately low autonomy in their English language learning.

These findings aligned with the concept of learner autonomy proposed by Holec (cited in Bayucca, 2021) and Benson (2018), which emphasizes control over various aspects of learning. The concept suggests a higher level of autonomy than the average score indicates.

The statistically significant standard deviation (0.561) highlighted a noteworthy aspect of the data. This variation underscored ALS learners' unique learning styles and preferences, resonating with the evolving nature of learner autonomy (Dörnyei, 2020; Ushioda, 2018).

Despite the moderately low average score, the observed learner autonomy might indicate effective learning strategies employed by some individuals. This possibility aligns with research on the positive relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency development (Thắng, 2018; Nguyen, 2018). The observed autonomy also corresponds with studies on self-regulation and language proficiency (Zheng & Skehan, 2021; Li & Xiao, 2022). Little (2019) highlights the role of learning strategies in fostering autonomy, suggesting that some ALS learners in this study might possess such strategies.

This study shed light on the prevalence of moderately low learner autonomy among ALS Junior High School learners, with significant individual variations. These findings highlighted the need for ALS programs to consider learner autonomy while catering to the unique learning styles and preferences of their learners.

Table 4 investigated potential variations in learner autonomy based on sex. The analysis aimed to determine if male and female learners exhibited differences in their autonomy when learning English. This exploration aligned with the research question on potential group-based variations by sex and aimed to refine the understanding of how learner autonomy manifested in this diverse educational context.

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Table 4: Learner Autonomy in Learning English of ALS Junior High School Learners According to Sex

	Sex	**n**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Interpretation**
ALS Learner Autonomy in Learning English	Male	93	3.33	0.576	Less Autonomous
	Female	65	3.32	0.542	Less Autonomous

An examination of learner autonomy scores by sex revealed a striking similarity. Both male (n = 93) and female (n = 65) learners displayed near-identical mean scores (3.33 and 3.32, respectively). The standard deviations for males (0.576) and females (0.542) were also very close, suggesting that sex did not significantly influence the degree of learner autonomy among these ALS learners. Both male and female learners exhibited moderately low autonomy in learning English, as discussed previously.

This finding suggested that educational programs designed to promote learner autonomy in ALS settings could be inclusive, targeting both male and female learners with similar strategies. This aligned with the perspective that learner autonomy is shaped by individual contexts and preferences, rather than solely by sex (Dörnyei, 2020; Ushioda, 2018).

The results further supported the notion that learner autonomy is a general aim for education and that strategies can be implemented to foster learner independence regardless of sex (Winch, 2020). This aligned with previous research by Alieto and Torres (2019) and Baker (2019), who reported minimal influence of sex on autonomy development.

Table 4 demonstrated that sex is not a differentiating factor in learner autonomy among ALS Junior High School learners. This finding emphasized the potentially universal nature of learner autonomy and the possibility of designing inclusive educational programs that promote self-directed learning for all ALS learners.

Table 5 delved deeper into learner autonomy by examining potential variations associated with the number of years ALS learners were out of school. This analysis aligned with the research question on group differences based on the number of years a learner is out of school, aiming to understand how the duration away from formal education might influence learner autonomy in this context.

Table 5: Learner Autonomy in Learning English of ALS Junior High School Learners According to the Number of Years They Left School

	Years Left School	**n**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Interpretation**
ALS Learner Autonomy in Learning English	5 & below	89	3.29	0.480	Less Autonomous
	6 & above	69	3.37	0.651	Less Autonomous

The analysis compared ALS Junior High School learners who left school five years ago (n = 89) with those who left six years ago (n = 69). Their mean autonomy scores were 3.29 and 3.37, respectively. While the group out of school for six years scored slightly higher on average, the difference was statistically insignificant. It suggested that the number of years out of school had minimal impact on these participants' overall degree of learner autonomy.

Interestingly, the standard deviation for the group out of school for five years (0.480) was lower compared to the group out of six years (0.651). It indicated greater variability in autonomy levels within the latter group. While the number of years out of school might not significantly affect the average level of learner autonomy, it appeared to be associated with some variation within this population.

These findings suggested that educational programs designed to promote learner autonomy in ALS settings can

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be designed for learners regardless of how long they have been out of school. It aligned with the perspective that learner autonomy is a process that can be developed over time through appropriate instruction (Winch, 2020; Dörnyei, 2020).

While the number of years out of school may not be a major differentiating factor, the variation in autonomy levels underscored the importance of using a personalized approach to fostering learner autonomy in ALS programs. This aligned with the view of learner autonomy as a dynamic process (Winch, 2020), requiring instructional strategies that cater to the unique needs and learning styles of individual students (Zheng & Skehan, 2021).

Table 5 demonstrated that the number of years out of school had minimal impact on the average level of learner autonomy among ALS learners. However, it highlighted potential variations within this population. It emphasized the need for educational programs that promote learner autonomy and utilize a personalized approach to cater to the diverse needs of ALS learners.

Before exploring the details of learner autonomy and English proficiency, it is essential to briefly review the second objective: assessing the English proficiency levels of ALS Junior High School learners collectively and within the identified groups, namely sex and the duration they were out of school. Recognizing their proficiency levels established a vital groundwork for later exploration of the relationship between autonomy and proficiency.

Table 6: English Proficiency of ALS Junior High School Learners as a Whole

	n	**Mean**	**SD**	**Interpretation**
ALS Learner Autonomy in Learning English	158	20.60	0.420	Independent Users

Table 6 illustrated the English proficiency of the 158 ALS Junior High School learners. The table showed an average EPT score (mean) of 20.60, with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.420. Based on the interpretation scale, this average score corresponded to "Independent Users."

These findings suggested that the ALS learners, on average, achieved a level of English proficiency that allowed them to express themselves fluently and spontaneously without much difficulty. However, the standard deviation of 0.420 indicated a moderate level of variability within the group.

This variability in proficiency scores highlighted the need for considering individual learning styles, motivation levels, and prior language experiences when designing instruction (Winch, 2020; Dörnyei, 2020).

While the average proficiency level suggested the effectiveness of ALS programs in developing English language skills, the variability underscored the importance of individualizing instruction to cater to diverse learning needs and styles. This aligned with Dörnyei's (2020) model, which acknowledged the interplay between internal and external factors in shaping learning outcomes.

Table 6 "Independent Users" on the interpretation scale, with some variation among individuals. This finding underscored the importance of individualizing instruction in ALS programs.

Table 7 discussed the English proficiency of the ALS Junior High School learners when grouped according to sex.

Table 7: English Proficiency of ALS Junior High School Learners According to Sex

	Sex	n	Mean	SD	Interpretation
ALS Level of English Proficiency	Male	93	20.46	0.407	Independent User
	Female	65	20.80	0.435	Independent User

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Table 7 compares English proficiency scores among ALS Junior High School learners based on sex. The table showed that male learners (n = 93) achieved an average EPT score (mean) of 20.46, with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.407. This score translated to Independent Users on the CEFR scale. Female learners (n = 65) had an average score of 20.80 (mean), with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.435, which also corresponded to Independent Users based on the interpretation scale.

Although the average score for female learners was slightly higher than for males, the difference (0.34) was minimal. Furthermore, the standard deviations of both groups were comparable, indicating similar score variability within each group. These findings suggested that sex had a negligible influence on English proficiency levels among these ALS learners.

It aligned with research that emphasized the minimal influence of sex on language proficiency (Alieto & Torres, 2019). Studies like those by Syafiq et al. (2021) and Meinawati (2020) highlighted that motivation, autonomy, and individual learning styles were more critical factors in language acquisition than sex.

Instructional strategies in ALS programs can be effectively designed to address the learning needs of all learners, irrespective of sex. An individualized approach that considers motivation, autonomy, and learning styles is likely to be more beneficial than focusing solely on sex.

Table 8 presents the English proficiency levels of ALS Junior High School learners based on the number of years they left school. The table provides data on the mean and standard deviation for learners who left school five years and below and six years and above. This analysis offers insights into the distribution and variability of English proficiency within the specified groups.

Table 8: English Proficiency of ALS Junior High School Learners According to the Number of Years They Left School

	Years Left School	n	Mean	SD	Interpretation
ALS Level of English Proficiency	5 & below	89	19.98	0.395	Basic User
	6 & above	69	21.48	0.454	Independent User

Table 8 compared English proficiency scores among ALS Junior High School learners based on the years they had been out of school. The table shows that learners who were out of school for five years (n = 89) achieved an average EPT score (mean) of 19.98, with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.395. This score translated to Basic User on the interpretation scale. Learners who were out of school for six years (n = 69) had an average score of 21.48 (mean), with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.454, which corresponded to Independent Users.

The average scores (1.50) between the two groups were slightly different, but the standard deviations indicated some overlap in the score ranges. This suggested that the number of years out of school may not significantly influence current English proficiency levels among these ALS learners.

These findings aligned with research that emphasized motivation, learner autonomy, and individual learning styles as being more important than the duration of absence from formal education (Winch, 2020; Dörnyei, 2020). Educators in ALS programs can design instruction that addresses the specific needs of each learner, regardless of how long they have been out of school.

Focusing on fostering learner autonomy and motivation can be beneficial as these are more critical factors in proficiency development than the number of years out of school (Zheng & Skehan, 2021; Li & Xiao, 2022).

Table 8 highlighted that the number of years out of school appears to be a minor factor in English proficiency among ALS learners. It aligned with understanding language learning as a complex process influenced by various factors beyond classroom time (Zheng & Skehan, 2021; Li & Xiao, 2022). Studies like those by Zheng and Skehan (2021) and Li and Xiao (2022) highlighted that factors like self-directed learning strategies and

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motivation can significantly contribute to proficiency gains outside traditional educational settings. Dörnyei's (2020) model of learner autonomy emphasizes the interplay between internal and external factors such as motivation, learning styles, and pre-existing language experiences, which can significantly impact proficiency development.

Although there was a slight difference in average proficiency scores based on the number of years out of school, the results suggested that this difference is not a significant factor. This finding reinforced the importance of individual learner needs and personalized approaches in ALS programs.

Table 9 employed the Mann-Whitney U Test to examine ALS learner autonomy in learning English based on sex.

Table 9: Mann-Whitney U Test for ALS Learner Autonomy in Learning English According to Sex

		Statistic	**p**	**Interpretation**
ALS Learner Autonomy in Learning English	Mann-Whitney U	2985	0.896	Not Significant

Note. H_a $\mu_{Male} \neq \mu_{Female}$

Table 9 presented the outcome of the Mann-Whitney U Test, revealing that the result was not statistically significant ($U = 2985$, $p = 0.896$). It indicated no significant difference in learner autonomy in learning English between male and female ALS Junior High School learners.

The Mann-Whitney U test statistic is 2985, with a p-value of 0.896. A p-value greater than 0.05 indicated that the observed difference between males and females is likely due to chance rather than an actual difference in learner autonomy.

Instructional strategies in ALS programs can address the autonomy needs of all learners, irrespective of sex. It aligned with the view that motivation, learning styles, and individual contexts were more critical factors in shaping learner autonomy (Dörnyei, 2020; Ushioda, 2018). Educators can focus on fostering learner autonomy, which seems more critical for language development than sex.

The results resonated with the understanding that learner autonomy is multifaceted and dynamic, influenced by factors beyond sex (Dörnyei, 2020; Ushioda, 2018). Studies by Alieto and Torres (2019) and Baker (2019) also found minimal sex-based differences in autonomy levels among language learners.

A study by Yildiz et al. (2021) found a positive correlation between learner autonomy and self-directed learning strategies in adult learners (including ALS populations). It suggested that learners with greater autonomy might be more likely to engage in independent learning activities, potentially impacting their English proficiency.

A study by Chen (2020) explored the impact of time out of school on learner autonomy in Chinese university students. While unrelated to ALS, it suggested a potential link between longer absences and lower autonomy due to reduced learning habits.

Another study by Xie et al. (2019) investigating learner autonomy in Chinese secondary school students found no significant gender differences. This suggests that sex might not be a major factor in learner autonomy for all age groups.

Contextual factors influence the relationship between years out of school and learner autonomy. Research by Gültekin (2018) suggested that socio-economic background and learning motivations can play a significant role.

Table 9 highlighted that sex does not significantly influence learner autonomy in English language learning among ALS learners. This finding emphasized the importance of focusing on individual learner needs and

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personalized approaches in ALS programs to promote learner autonomy and language development for all students.

Table 10: Mann-Whitney U Test for ALS Learner Autonomy in Learning English According to the Number of Years They Left School

		Statistic	**p**	**Interpretation**
ALS Learner Autonomy in Learning English	Mann-Whitney U	2960	0.699	Not Significant

Note. $H_a\ \mu_5 \neq \mu_6$

Table 10 presented the results of the Mann-Whitney U test (p-value = 0.699), indicating a non-significant association between the number of years ALS learners were out of school and the degree of learner autonomy. This finding aligned with the literature on learner autonomy, emphasizing the intricate and context-dependent nature of autonomy development.

The observed inconsequential relationship between years out of school and learner autonomy resonated with contemporary perspectives on the multifaceted nature of self-directed learning. Dörnyei's (2020) model emphasizes that autonomy transcends time in formal education. It encompassed motivational, cognitive, and strategic components shaped by a complex interplay of individual characteristics, past experiences, and sociocultural contexts. This aligned with studies by Zheng and Skehan (2021) and Li and Xiao (2022), showcasing how learners can develop self-directed learning strategies independently of traditional educational settings.

Furthermore, the dynamic and evolving nature of learner autonomy highlighted by Ushioda (2018) suggested that individuals navigate different phases of dependence and independence throughout their learning journeys. The study's lack of a significant association underscored the possibility that ALS learners, regardless of their time away from formal schooling, may already possess or be actively developing self-directed learning skills through diverse experiences and community engagement. The non-significant result from the Mann-Whitney U test underscored the complexity of autonomy development, suggesting that the duration of time away from formal schooling may not determine the degree of learner autonomy. This resonated with the idea that autonomy is a multifaceted construct influenced by many internal and external factors.

In response to the violation of normality assumptions, the Mann-Whitney U test also reflected a methodological consideration rooted in the understanding of autonomy as a non-normally distributed phenomenon. This methodological decision aligned with the literature's call for flexibility in statistical approaches when studying complex constructs like learner autonomy.

A study by Tran (2023) explored factors influencing English proficiency in Vietnamese secondary school students. They found a positive correlation between learner autonomy and English proficiency scores. This aligned with the potential for autonomous learners to engage in self-directed learning activities that enhance English skills.

Research by Yildiz et al. (2021) suggested a possible indirect effect of years out of school on English proficiency mediated by learner autonomy. Learners with longer absences might have lower autonomy, leading to lower proficiency scores.

On the other hand, sex might not be a significant factor in English proficiency for all age groups. A 2020 meta-analysis by Cheng et al. (2020) found mixed results regarding gender differences in English language learning outcomes.

The impact of years out of school on English proficiency might depend on the specific skills and learning strategies employed during the absence. A 2018 study by Benson and Farragher (2018) suggested that some learners may retain or improve specific skills through informal learning experiences.

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Table 11: Mann-Whitney U Test for the Level of English Proficiency of ALS Junior High School Learners According to Sex

		Statistic	**p**	**Interpretation**
ALS Level of English Proficiency	Mann-Whitney U	2555	0.099	Not Significant

Note. $H_a\ \mu_{Male} \neq \mu_{Female}$

Table 11 presented the outcome of the Mann-Whitney U test, revealing that the proficiency data did not yield a statistically significant result ($U = 2555$, $p = 0.099$). According to this analysis, it indicated that, despite a slight advantage in scores for males, there was no significant difference in proficiency between male and female respondents.

The analysis's non-significant result aligned with current research on sex differences in language proficiency. Recent studies by Alieto and Torres (2019) and Baker (2019) found minimal sex-based differences in autonomy levels among language learners, further echoing findings. It suggested that individual factors beyond sex, such as motivation, learning styles, and access to resources, might play a more prominent role in shaping proficiency outcomes.

Furthermore, the choice of the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test due to non-normal data distribution resonated with contemporary perspectives on analyzing language proficiency data. As Dörnyei (2020) posited, proficiency is a complex and multifaceted construct influenced by individual characteristics, learning experiences, and sociocultural contexts. This complexity can lead to non-normal distributions of proficiency scores as learners exhibit diverse strengths and weaknesses and progress at different paces.

Studies like those by Zheng and Skehan (2021) and Li and Xiao (2022) highlighted language development's dynamic and context-dependent nature, reinforcing that proficiency evolved through individual learning journeys and independent efforts.

Table 12: Mann-Whitney U Test for the Level of English Proficiency of ALS Junior High School Learners According to The Number of Years They Left School

		Statistic	**p**	**Interpretation**
ALS Level of English Proficiency	Mann-Whitney U	2834	0.408	Not Significant

Note. $H_a\ \mu_5 \neq \mu_6$

Table 12 presented the result of the Mann-Whitney U test, indicating that the difference in English proficiency between ALS Junior High School learners who left school five years and below as well as those who left six years and above is not statistically significant ($U = 2834$, $p = 0.408$). This finding aligned with the broader literature on language learning, which emphasized the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of proficiency development.

Dörnyei's (2020) model posited that proficiency encompassed cognitive, motivational, and strategic components, each influenced by individual characteristics, learning experiences, and sociocultural contexts. This complexity can lead to diverse proficiency trajectories regardless of time out of formal education, resonating with recent studies by Zheng and Skehan (2021) and Li and Xiao (2022), highlighting the impact of learner factors beyond formal schooling on proficiency outcomes.

Moreover, this study contributed to the evolving discussion on the temporal aspects of language development by adding a nuanced layer of analysis. While prior research (e.g., Alieto & Torres, 2019; Baker, 2019) had explored the influence of factors like motivation and learning strategies on proficiency, investigating time away

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from school expands the understanding of this intricate relationship. By demonstrating that time out of formal education may not hold significant sway over proficiency, the findings highlighted the importance of focusing on learner-centered approaches that cater to individual needs and diverse learning paths.

Table 13 exhibited the correlation between learner autonomy and English proficiency in ALS Junior High School learners.

Table 13: Correlation between Learner Autonomy and English Proficiency in ALS Junior High School Learners

		ALS Learner Autonomy in Learning English	**ALS Level of English Proficiency**	**Interpretation**
ALS Level of English Proficiency	Pearson's r	0.219	—	Significant
	df	156	—	
	p-value	0.006	—	

Table 13 presents the analysis of the relationship between the degree of learner autonomy in learning English and English proficiency levels among ALS Junior High School learners. The Pearson correlation test, conducted due to the continuous nature of autonomy and proficiency scores, revealed a statistically significant, positive correlation between the two variables ($r = 0.219$, $n = 158$, $p = 0.006$).

The observed positive correlation between learner autonomy and English proficiency resonated with current research emphasizing the pivotal role of self-directed learning in language development. Studies by Alieto and Torres (2019) and Baker (2019) found positive associations between autonomy and proficiency levels, mirroring the findings. However, the modest correlation coefficient ($r = 0.219$) suggested that learner autonomy, while positively influencing proficiency, was just one piece of a complex puzzle.

It aligned with Dörnyei's (2020) model, which conceptualized proficiency as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing cognitive, motivational, and strategic components, each influenced by individual characteristics and diverse learning experiences. Similarly, recent studies by Zheng and Skehan (2021) and Li and Xiao (2022) showcased the impact of factors beyond autonomy, such as individual motivation and learner agency, on proficiency development.

Multiple studies supported a positive relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency. Research by Tran (2023) in Vietnam and Yildiz et al. (2021) in Turkey found positive correlations between these variables in secondary and adult learners, respectively. It suggested that learners who take charge of their learning will likely achieve higher English proficiency.

The strength of this relationship might vary depending on the context and learner characteristics. Research by Gültekin (2018) highlighted the importance of considering factors like learning motivations and learner support systems. Learner autonomy may not have the same impact on all individuals.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the relationship between learner autonomy in learning English and the English proficiency levels of ALS Junior High School learners. The findings suggested that, on average, ALS learners demonstrated less autonomy in their English learning endeavors. The analyses based on sex and the number of years out of school revealed no significant differences in autonomy levels, indicating that these factors do not substantially influence learner autonomy in the ALS context.

Moreover, the study identified a moderately high overall proficiency level among ALS learners, with no noteworthy disparities based on sex or time out of school.

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Statistical analyses affirmed the absence of significant differences in learner autonomy and English proficiency. The weak, positive correlation between learner autonomy and English proficiency implied a limited association, with autonomy explaining only a tiny portion of proficiency variability.

Therefore, while autonomy played a role in proficiency outcomes, it was just one facet of a complex interplay of factors influencing language learning success among ALS Junior High School learners. These results emphasized the importance of adopting a holistic approach to language education, considering diverse elements contributing to learners' language proficiency.

The study provided valuable insights for curriculum experts, learning resource developers, ALS teachers, school administrators, and future researchers to enhance educational strategies and interventions in the ALS setting.

Overall, the findings contributed to the ongoing discourse on learner autonomy and language proficiency, particularly in the Philippines' unique context of ALS education.

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