



Developing learner autonomy through situated practice: A multiliteracies-informed study in higher education English as a foreign language

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is widely valued in higher education English as a foreign language (EFL), but it does not develop simply through expectations that students should learn independently. Less is known about how situated practice, a component of multiliteracies pedagogy that anchors learning in experience, social interaction, multimodal resources, and purposeful communication, supports autonomy in classroom activity. This study examined students' perceptions of learner autonomy and how situated practice was experienced in an Indonesian university EFL course using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. Questionnaire data from 39 students were followed by interviews and reflective journals from 10 students. Students viewed the learning environment positively and associated situated activities with meaningful engagement, responsibility, confidence in expression, communicative decision-making, and greater awareness of themselves as learners. However, autonomy was guided and task-dependent: students made meaningful choices within lecturer-designed activities but had limited control over the wider learning sequence. The study shows that situated practice may support autonomy when tasks require learners to connect materials with personal experience, negotiate meanings with peers, and produce texts for recognisable audiences and purposes.

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Introduction

Learner autonomy is a continuing concern in higher education EFL because university students are expected to move beyond dependence on teacher direction and take greater responsibility for learning. This expectation is connected with self-regulation, strategic learning, and active participation in knowledge construction. Yet students' readiness to set goals, select strategies, monitor progress, and use resources is often uneven and shaped by prior educational experience, classroom culture, and pedagogical design (Boonma & Swatevacharkul, 2020; Daflizar, 2021; Oussou et al., 2024). In Indonesia, positive attitudes towards autonomy may coexist with teacher-centred habits, limited strategic awareness, and uncertainty about independent learning (Daflizar, 2021). Autonomy should therefore be understood not as reduced teacher involvement, but as participation made possible by appropriate classroom conditions.

Multiliteracies pedagogy offers one way of creating such conditions. Developed by the New London Group (1996), it responds to linguistic and cultural diversity and to communication across written, visual, oral, digital, gestural, and spatial modes. Its four complementary orientations are situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, 2016; The New London Group, 1996). In higher education EFL, multimodal and participatory designs can widen opportunities for engagement and meaning-making, although their value depends on purposeful task design and teacher scaffolding rather than technological novelty alone (Rahmanu & Molnár, 2024; Veliz & Nguyen, 2026; Zhou et al., 2025).

Situated practice, the component examined here, connects learning with students' lifeworlds, social contexts, authentic or semi-authentic materials, and recognisable communicative purposes. It may involve drawing on prior experience, interpreting familiar situations, collaborating around multimodal texts, and producing responses for audiences beyond the exercise itself (Misa, 2023; The New London Group, 1996). These activities may support autonomy because learners must contribute personal meanings, negotiate interpretations, select linguistic and semiotic resources, and reflect on their participation. Multiliteracies does not therefore promote autonomy merely by adding digital or visual materials; the relationship depends on how tasks distribute responsibility and create room for learner action.

Recent studies connect multiliteracies-informed learning with agency, choice, and self-efficacy. Dewi et al. (2025) found that tertiary EFL learners took more active roles and made more learning choices, while Zhou et al. (2025) reported enhanced agency in a translanguageing-multiliteracies course. Dan and Li (2024) further showed that learner action depends on the discourse space

available for involvement, intervention, and creation. These findings are promising, but they do not fully explain how students experience situated practice as a classroom-level process or whether it produces broad control over learning or more limited choices within teacher-designed activities.

The present study addresses this gap by examining how situated practice was enacted in one Indonesian higher education EFL classroom and how students perceived its relationship with autonomy. It focuses on the interplay among meaningful multimodal materials, personal experience, peer interaction, contextualised production, and learner decision-making. It also distinguishes responsibility from the broader construct of autonomy and considers the constraints of guided choice, task difficulty, and uneven technological readiness. The study was guided by the following questions:

- RQ1. What are students' perceptions of learner autonomy in a multiliteracies-informed Indonesian higher education EFL classroom?
- RQ2. What forms of situated practice are enacted in the multiliteracies-informed learning activities?
- RQ3. In what ways do students perceive situated practice as supporting learner autonomy in this classroom context?

Literature review

Learner autonomy in higher education EFL

Learner autonomy has been conceptualised as learners' capacity to participate deliberately in planning, managing, monitoring, and evaluating learning. A long-established understanding emphasises taking charge through goal setting, strategy selection, progress monitoring, and evaluation. Revisiting this tradition, Little (2022) describes language learner autonomy as a teaching-learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate learning as far as possible in the target language. Recent scholarship adds that autonomy is shaped by contextual affordances, including teacher support, task design, discourse space, and opportunities for reflection and action (Dan & Li, 2024; Gupta et al., 2024; Hua & Le, 2024). It is therefore both an individual capacity and a socially and pedagogically mediated process.

This contextual perspective is especially relevant in higher education EFL. Students may be expected to work independently while continuing to rely on teacher direction because earlier schooling offered limited opportunities for self-regulation (Daflizar, 2021; Lengkanawati, 2017). Where exposure to English outside class is uneven, autonomy can extend learning through resource selection, independent practice, and strategic action. However, tertiary teachers promote autonomy not by withdrawing support but through collaboration, authentic materials, reflection, technology, contextualised instruction, and personalised feedback (Hua & Le, 2024).

Empirical findings nevertheless show uneven development. Boonma and Swatevacharkul (2020) found that a structured autonomous-learning process improved autonomy in an undergraduate public-speaking course, and Dewi et al. (2023) reported a relationship between autonomy and motivation. Indonesian students in Daflizar's (2021) study valued responsibility and self-directed effort but remained influenced by teacher-centred habits. Oussou et al. (2024) similarly found positive beliefs among Moroccan university students, although readiness varied across dimensions and depended on contextual support. Language-learning strategies also correlate with autonomy among Indonesian graduate students (Redjeki & Widyantoro, 2024). Together, these studies indicate that autonomy develops through interactions among learner readiness, pedagogical support, and opportunities to make and evaluate decisions rather than through instructions to work independently.

Responsibility, agency, and self-regulation overlap with autonomy but are not equivalent to it. Responsibility concerns ownership of learning actions; self-regulation concerns the management of goals, strategies, and progress; and agency concerns learners' capacity to influence activity. Autonomy includes these capacities while also involving reflective judgement about when and how to act within particular social and pedagogical conditions (Gupta et al., 2024; Little, 2022; Mameli et al., 2023). This distinction is important for classroom research because students may complete tasks responsibly without having substantial influence over task selection, or may exercise meaningful agency within a limited range of lecturer-defined options.

Multiliteracies pedagogy

Multiliteracies pedagogy emerged in response to linguistic diversity and the growing importance of multimodal communication. Literacy is understood as participation in meaning-making across written, visual, oral, digital, gestural, and spatial resources (The New London Group, 1996). Cope and Kalantzis (2009, 2016) describe learning as designing and redesigning meaning through processes of experiencing, conceptualising, analysing, and applying. These processes correspond broadly to situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. Situated practice immerses learners in meaningful experience; overt instruction provides explicit scaffolding and metalanguage; critical framing examines social and ideological purposes; and transformed practice applies or redesigns meaning in new contexts. The elements overlap rather than form a rigid sequence.

In EFL classrooms, the pedagogy may involve multimodal input, teacher modelling, collaborative interpretation, critical discussion, and production in written, oral, visual, or digital forms. Misa (2023) documented situated practice through visual media, personal experience, questioning, and interaction, while Zhou et al. (2025) combined translanguaging, multimodal resources, and learner choice. Veliz and Nguyen (2026) emphasise that implementation is relational: teachers select texts, modes, and technologies in response to learners' linguistic, cultural, and technological resources.

Multiliteracies is therefore not simply the use of several media but the organisation of how students experience, analyse, discuss, and redesign meaning.

Accordingly, the pedagogical value of multimodality should be judged through participation rather than the number of modes present. A task becomes multiliteracies-informed when modes are connected with learners' resources, communicative purposes, explicit support, and opportunities to redesign meaning. This distinction prevents digital products from being treated as evidence of learner agency when the content and procedure remain entirely predetermined.

This orientation is relevant to autonomy because learners who interpret multimodal texts, select resources, collaborate, and produce for particular audiences must make decisions about content, language, mode, and strategy. Puteh-Behak and Ismail (2018) report greater collaboration and links with contemporary communication, while Nabhan (2019) shows broader engagement with writing processes. Dewi et al. (2025) and Zhou et al. (2025) connect multiliteracies-informed designs with choice and agency. Yet these benefits are conditional. A multimodal task can remain teacher-controlled when learners have little influence over content, process, or expression; autonomy is more likely when learner contribution and decision-making are necessary.

Situated practice is most productive when connected with the other orientations. Experience and multimodal production can engage learners, but overt instruction may be needed to make genre, language, and design choices explicit; critical framing helps learners examine whose perspectives and purposes texts represent; and transformed practice supports transfer to new situations. This broader framework prevents personally meaningful activity from being mistaken for complete multiliteracies pedagogy and clarifies why the present study isolates one component while acknowledging its dependence on complementary forms of support.

Implementation also presents practical challenges. Teachers require knowledge to select modes purposefully, scaffold interpretation, and assess products combining different resources. Indonesian research identifies uneven pedagogical readiness, digital access, and teacher preparation (Andriyati et al., 2025; Kusumaningrum et al., 2024). Additional representational options may therefore benefit some learners while disadvantaging those with less access, confidence, or design knowledge. These constraints matter when multiliteracies is linked with autonomy because opportunity does not guarantee equal capacity to act.

Situated practice in language learning

Situated practice places learning within meaningful social, cultural, and communicative activity. In the original framework, it refers to immersion in practices connected to learners' lifeworlds and authentic forms of meaning-making (The New London Group, 1996). Language learning is thus anchored in use, interaction, and purposeful activity rather than decontextualised transmission. Working with relevant texts, drawing on experience, collaborating, and producing for recognisable

purposes can connect language forms with the situations in which they function (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

Authenticity in this study is not treated as an inherent property of materials produced by native speakers or taken unchanged from the real world. Breen (1985) locates authenticity in texts, learners' interpretations, tasks, and classroom social situations; Widdowson (1978) argues that it is realised through engagement; and Gilmore (2007) describes a relationship among materials, learners, tasks, and context. Recent studies retain this relational view. Adaptation to learners' proficiency, experiences, and cultural contexts may strengthen engagement, although mismatched difficulty can restrict participation (Hanifa et al., 2024). Authentic materials may also increase relevance while introducing linguistic, cultural, and cognitive demands (Alamri, 2025). Here, a task is authentic when students can connect it with present or future communicative purposes and receive sufficient support to engage with it.

This relational account of authenticity also complicates its connection with autonomy. A real-world text may be inaccessible and leave learners dependent on teacher explanation, while an adapted text can support more independent action when its language and purpose are comprehensible. Authenticity and autonomy are therefore linked through participation: materials become autonomy-supportive when learners can interpret them, make consequential choices, and use them as resources for their own communication.

Research suggests that situated practice can widen participation. Takeuchi (2015) found that multiple communicative resources enabled English learners to contribute to classroom mathematics despite developing academic language. Huang (2024) showed that engagement with disciplinary texts depended on the resources and participation conditions available, and Misa (2023) demonstrated how experience-sharing and visual resources supported critical reading. In EFL pedagogy, these conditions may also support autonomy when learners interpret texts, connect topics with experience, discuss alternatives, and produce contextualised outputs. Authentic assessment has been associated with self-regulation, autonomy, and self-efficacy (Ismail et al., 2023), while Hua and Le (2024) identify real-life scenarios, collaboration, reflection, and technology among autonomy-supportive strategies.

The three constructs therefore intersect but should not be conflated. Multiliteracies pedagogy is the broader orientation towards diverse modes and purposes, while situated practice anchors those engagements in experience and social context; and autonomy is expressed through responsibility, strategic choice, reflection, and independent meaning-making. Their relationship is not automatic. Authentic or multimodal materials support autonomy only when tasks provide meaningful room to select, interpret, negotiate, produce, and reflect, while supplying enough guidance for those actions to be achievable. The study examines both these opportunities and the limits of autonomy within teacher-designed activity.

Materials and method

Research design

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Questionnaire data were analysed first to identify general patterns in students' perceptions, followed by interviews and reflective journals that explained how stronger and weaker patterns were experienced in classroom activity. The design therefore connected descriptive quantitative evidence with qualitative accounts of situated practice. Integration occurred during interpretation, when the qualitative themes were used to explain why relevance and perceived autonomy were rated more strongly than broad choice and independent task management.

Research context and participants

The study was conducted in a third-semester undergraduate EFL course at an Indonesian university. The course developed English literacy and communication through reading, writing, discussion, reflection, and multimodal production. Its design included authentic or semi-authentic materials, links with students' experiences, collaborative interpretation, and communication for recognisable purposes. The activities were completed as part of regular course instruction rather than as an additional experimental programme.

Situated practice was operationalised through newspaper articles, real or adapted complaint emails, and short social-media videos. Students first interpreted the materials and discussed their purposes, then connected the topics with personal or social experience and produced personal narratives, complaint emails, or one-minute reels. These activities anchored language learning in experience, interaction, and communicative purpose. Although the course drew on multiliteracies pedagogy broadly, the analysis focused on situated practice rather than evaluating all four components.

Thirty-nine students from one intact class completed the questionnaire. Ten volunteers from this cohort participated in semi-structured interviews and contributed reflective journals. They were selected from students who had completed the questionnaire and were willing to elaborate on classroom experiences. The study is therefore a small-scale classroom investigation rather than a basis for statistical generalisation. Participants gave informed consent, and ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of Universitas Riau Kepulauan, approval number 023/IV/PBI/Unrika.

Instruments

The study used a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journals. The 20-item questionnaire measured five dimensions on a five-point scale: personalised learning and choice, learner responsibility, decision-making and agency, situated-practice experience, and perceived development of autonomy. The questionnaire addressed RQ1, while the interviews and journals

addressed how situated practice was enacted and how students interpreted its relationship with autonomy.

The dimensions drew on autonomy as choice, responsibility, strategic decision-making, self-direction, monitoring, and reflection (Gupta et al., 2024; Little, 2022), and were contextualised through situated participation, meaningful tasks, multimodal meaning-making, and contextualised production (Cope & Kalantzis, 2016; The New London Group, 1996). Personalised learning and choice represented opportunities to select strategies or approaches; responsibility represented ownership of learning actions; decision-making and agency represented planning and organisation; situated-practice experience represented engagement with relevant and experience-connected activity; and perceived development represented growth in independence, confidence, and self-awareness.

Item validity was examined through Pearson product-moment item-total correlations. Coefficients ranged from 0.396 to 0.814 and met the criterion at $p < .05$. Cronbach's alpha was 0.728, indicating acceptable internal consistency for the classroom-based scale. These procedures supported use of the questionnaire for describing perceptions in this cohort, although the instrument was not intended as a standardised measure for wider populations.

Interviews explored which activities students found meaningful, the decisions they made, and their perceptions of responsibility, confidence, participation, and self-direction. Reflective journals were completed after selected activities and asked students to record actions, choices, challenges, and learning. The journals captured experiences close to the time of participation and allowed comparison between immediate reflections and later interview explanations.

Data collection

The questionnaire was distributed after students had completed the multiliteracies-informed activities so that responses were based on direct classroom experience. Interviews followed the survey and focused on the patterns requiring explanation, including strong ratings for relevance and perceived growth and lower ratings for choice and independent management. Reflective journals were collected after selected activities to document participation, decisions, and challenges before the interviews were conducted.

Data analysis

Questionnaire data were analysed in SPSS 23 using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations at item and dimension levels. Interview transcripts and journals were analysed thematically with NVivo. After repeated reading, codes were generated for participation, choice, responsibility, relevance, strategy use, confidence, decision-making, and learner self-understanding. Codes were grouped and refined into themes aligned with the research questions.

The qualitative analysis then explained how students experienced the autonomy-supportive features identified quantitatively and where those experiences remained constrained.

Results

RQ1. What are students' perceptions of learner autonomy in a multiliteracies-informed Indonesian higher education EFL classroom?

The questionnaire showed generally positive perceptions of learner autonomy. The 20 items represented personalised learning and choice, learner responsibility, decision-making and agency, situated-practice experience, and perceived development of autonomy. These dimensions captured general autonomy and the ways it was experienced through meaningful, participatory, and experience-connected activities. Table 1 summarises the dimension-level results and their relationship with multiliteracies and situated practice.

Table 1. Dimension-level results of learner autonomy in the multiliteracies-informed EFL classroom.

Dimension	Related items	Mean	SD	Link to multiliteracies and situated practice
Personalised learning and choice	Items 1–4	3.87	0.60	Reflects students' opportunities to select strategies, connect learning with experience, and receive support for individual learning needs.
Learner responsibility	Items 5–8	3.76	0.58	Reflects students' ownership of task completion, problem-solving, progress monitoring, and learning improvement.
Decision-making and agency	Items 9–12	3.85	0.56	Reflects students' active role in approaching tasks, choosing strategies, identifying learning needs, and directing learning processes.
Situated practice experience	Items 13–16	4.00	0.54	Reflects students' engagement with relevant, meaningful, experience-connected, and participatory learning activities.
Perceived development of autonomy	Items 17–20	4.04	0.61	Reflects students' perceived growth in independence, confidence, self-awareness, and readiness for future independent learning.

All dimensions were evaluated positively. Perceived development of autonomy received the highest mean ($M = 4.04$), followed by situated-practice experience ($M = 4.00$). Students therefore responded most strongly to perceived growth in independence and to the relevance, participation, and experience-connection offered by the activities. Autonomy was not understood only as freedom to work alone; it was associated with structured opportunities to use English meaningfully and become more aware of oneself as a learner.

Personalised learning and choice ($M = 3.87$) and decision-making and agency ($M = 3.85$) were also positive. These results indicate that students could select strategies and make decisions, but largely within lecturer-designed tasks. Learner responsibility was the lowest dimension ($M = 3.76$), though still positive. Ownership of task management and self-regulation therefore appeared less strongly developed than perceived relevance and autonomy growth, suggesting that meaningful engagement did not automatically produce full independence.

At item level, means ranged from 3.51 to 4.36, with an overall mean of 3.89. The strongest item concerned relevance to real academic or communicative situations ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.49$). Students also rated highly becoming a more independent learner ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.63$), connecting lessons with experience ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.58$), and active participation rather than receiving information ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.48$). Confidence in managing learning and responsibility for improvement both received $M = 4.05$. Items on strategy selection, support for individual needs, and awareness of strengths and weaknesses each received $M = 3.95$.

The lower-rated items concerned opportunities to choose learning activities ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.51$), completing tasks independently ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.51$), attempting to solve difficulties before seeking help ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.49$), and drawing on prior knowledge and experience ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.46$). Although positive, these scores reveal a difference between meaningful participation and wider learner control. Students appeared to decide how to respond within tasks, while selection and sequencing of those tasks remained lecturer-directed.

The pattern across dimensions also clarifies how the questionnaire related to the theoretical framework. Situated-practice items captured relevance, participation, and experience-connection, whereas choice, responsibility, and agency items captured the learner actions expected within those activities. The stronger ratings for the former suggest that students recognised the learning environment as meaningful before they experienced equally strong control over its organisation.

Taken together, the quantitative results indicate guided and task-dependent autonomy. Relevance, participation, personal connection, and perceived growth were stronger than broad choice or independent management. The qualitative analysis therefore examined why situated activities were experienced as meaningful, how task design produced different decision-making opportunities, and how responsibility, confidence, and self-awareness developed within structured classroom conditions.

RQ2. What forms of situated practice are enacted in the multiliteracies-informed learning activities?

The thematic analysis identified four interrelated forms of situated practice: authentic and semi-authentic multimodal materials, connections with personal and social experience, collaborative interpretation, and contextualised multimodal production. These were not fixed stages. Across activities, students encountered English in real or realistic communication, connected it with experience, negotiated meanings, and produced texts for specific purposes.

Working with authentic and semi-authentic multimodal materials.

Newspaper articles, real or adapted complaint emails, and short social-media videos made English use more recognisable and purposeful. One student contrasted a complaint email with textbook language: “I could see how English is used in an actual situation. It was different from textbook examples because the email sounded more natural and more useful for real life” (S4, interview). Another said that a news article connected English with “how people express opinions and report events” (S7, interview). The two texts served different purposes, but both positioned English as communication rather than isolated vocabulary or grammar.

The materials mattered not merely because of their sources but because they embodied communicative purposes. The complaint email demonstrated how a problem could be expressed politely and clearly, whereas the news article presented English as a resource for reporting and evaluation. A reflection described learning “expressions that people really use” because the text had “a real purpose” (R3). The value of the materials therefore lay in the relationship among text, task, and use. Students encountered language forms alongside reasons for using them, which made authenticity part of classroom participation rather than a property of the text alone.

Connecting classroom learning with personal and social experience.

Model texts also became starting points for students’ own meanings. After reading or viewing them, students developed personal narratives and experience-based responses. One student explained, “After reading the story in the news, I was asked to write about my own experience. It was easier for me because I already knew what I wanted to say” (S2, interview). Personal knowledge reduced the demand to invent content, shifting attention towards finding English that communicated an existing meaning.

This relationship with content increased involvement. A student described a personal narrative as “not just an assignment” because the event belonged to her life (S9, interview). Another reflected that familiar experience made her more confident because she could remember the event clearly and focus on expression (R6). Situated practice thus treated learners’ lifeworlds as legitimate resources rather than background information unrelated to language learning. At the same time,

familiarity did not make production effortless; students still had to select vocabulary, organise events, decide what could be shared, and make personal experience understandable to others.

Participating in collaborative discussion and interpretation.

Situated practice was also enacted through discussion. Students compared interpretations, shared experiences, and received suggestions before completing their work. One student reported that group discussion provided different opinions and “better ways to explain my story” (S1, interview). Another used peers to check whether an idea was clear and to organise it before the final task (S5, interview). Collaboration therefore supported both comprehension of source texts and development of students’ own responses.

Peer interaction extended personal relevance into social meaning-making. A reflection noted that comparing experiences showed how one topic could be explained in different ways (R2). Students were not simply exchanging answers; they were encountering alternative perspectives, judging whether their own meaning was intelligible, and revising how it was expressed. This interaction did not replace individual responsibility. Rather, it provided a temporary space for testing and refining meaning before each learner produced a response, illustrating that autonomy can be socially supported rather than solitary.

Producing contextualised and multimodal texts.

Personal narratives, complaint emails, and one-minute reels required different communicative decisions. Narratives foregrounded lived experience; complaint emails required attention to tone and politeness; reels combined language, voice, images, pacing, and message design. A student said that the reel allowed her to use “my own words, my voice, and pictures” and felt more real than writing a paragraph (S8, interview). Another had to decide what message to share and how to make it understandable to other people (S10, interview).

The tasks therefore offered different forms of situated production. The reel allowed relatively broad choices of content and mode, whereas the complaint email constrained expression through genre and interpersonal purpose. One reflection described the need to be “polite but clear” and to think carefully about tone and word choice (R7). Another student valued combining speaking and writing because the video allowed her to share something meaningful rather than merely complete an exercise (R5). Both tasks moved beyond form-focused practice, but they did not provide identical autonomy: each made particular decisions necessary while leaving other aspects lecturer-defined.

Across the four themes, participation developed through a movement from encounter to response. Students first interpreted materials with recognisable purposes, then connected them with experience, tested meanings socially, and redesigned those meanings in a new text. The movement was not identical in every task, and lecturer scaffolding remained present, but the sequence made

student contribution increasingly necessary. Situated practice was therefore visible not only in individual materials or activities, but in how the classroom connected input, personal knowledge, interaction, and production.

The contrasts among outputs are analytically important. The personal narrative drew mainly on memory and sequencing, the complaint email required genre awareness and interpersonal control, and the reel required coordination across linguistic, visual, and oral modes. Students could therefore experience situated practice through different combinations of familiarity, constraint, and design freedom. Collectively, the themes show that situated practice resided in the relationships among text, experience, interaction, and production, explaining why relevance and participation were strongly endorsed in the questionnaire.

RQ3. In what ways do students perceive situated practice as supporting learner autonomy in this classroom context?

Students perceived situated practice as supporting autonomy by changing their role within classroom activity. They did not describe learning without guidance; they described more active participation inside lecturer-designed tasks. Responsibility, confidence, decision-making, and self-awareness were related but distinct aspects of this experience.

Developing responsibility for learning.

Responsibility appeared when students moved from waiting for explanation towards preparing and contributing their own responses. One student stated, “I could not just wait for the lecturer’s explanation. I had to read the material, understand it, and think about my own response” (S3, interview). The contrast between waiting and preparing indicates a change in the learner’s position. The tasks required students to arrive with an interpretation rather than receive one fully formed from the lecturer.

Personal narratives made this ownership visible because the result depended on the learner’s choice of story, organisation, and clarity. A student explained that she needed to decide “what story to choose and how to tell it clearly” (S6, interview), while a reflection noted, “I had to prepare my own ideas and improve my own work” (R4). Responsibility here referred to ownership of learning actions and task completion. It formed part of autonomy but did not encompass broader decisions about strategy, audience, expression, and reflection.

Building confidence in independent expression.

Confidence was tied to expressing familiar and personally meaningful content. One student contrasted personal expression with repetition: “I was not just repeating information from the book. I was expressing something that came from me” (S1, interview). Knowing the content gave the learner a stronger basis for communication and reduced uncertainty about what to say, although English formulation remained challenging.

The reel extended this confidence through multimodal choice. A student said that using “my own voice and my own message” showed that she could communicate in English in her own way (S9, interview). Another reflection connected confidence with speaking and writing about something familiar and reduced dependence on lecturer examples (R2). Familiar content and multiple modes did not remove support; they enabled students to use support without reproducing a model. Confidence therefore reflected perceived capacity to communicate, whereas independent expression referred to producing and organising meanings that originated with the learner.

Encouraging decision-making and strategic choice.

Decision-making was evident in choices about content, organisation, vocabulary, tone, audience, and mode. In the reel, one student had to choose the life event, select important details, and make the message clear within one minute (S8, interview). The time limit required judgement about relevance, sequencing, and audience rather than language use alone. Students had freedom over some representational choices, but the duration and overall task remained lecturer-defined.

The complaint email required a narrower but equally purposeful set of decisions. A student explained that she had to “sound polite but still show the problem clearly” (S10, interview). Another reflection distinguished the activity from grammar practice because it required choosing ideas, vocabulary, and audience (R6). The contrast shows that autonomy was task-dependent: the reel afforded wider representational choice, while the email concentrated decision-making on genre and interpersonal meaning. Autonomy therefore appeared in the quality and purpose of choices, not simply in the number of available options.

Increasing awareness of learning processes and learner identity.

Reflection and production also increased awareness of learning processes. One student recognised that experience-connected tasks helped her find ideas and remain motivated (S5, interview). Another described moving from waiting for instructions to trying “to think first by myself” when the topic felt personally connected (S7, interview). These accounts indicate emerging awareness of the conditions that supported participation and of changes in students’ own classroom behaviour.

Self-awareness matters because autonomy involves recognising how learning occurs, not only completing work independently. Students identified personal strengths, useful forms of support, and participation habits, and one reflection connected involvement with the courage to make decisions and express ideas (R8). This awareness was still situated within the course and cannot be treated as evidence of lasting self-direction. Nevertheless, it shows that students were beginning to evaluate how relevance, interaction, and personal contribution affected their learning.

The four themes also operated cumulatively. Responsibility made students accountable for contributing; confidence made contribution feel possible; decision-making gave it communicative direction; and self-awareness enabled students to evaluate how they participated. A student could

therefore act responsibly without exercising broad autonomy, or feel confident without controlling the task. Autonomy became more evident when these aspects converged in purposeful action. This explains why students could report growth in independence while rating freedom to choose activities less strongly.

Students' accounts also show that lecturer guidance and autonomy were not opposites. Models, instructions, discussion, and time limits structured what could be done, while students decided how to use those resources. The resulting autonomy was guided: support reduced uncertainty and made action possible, but also set boundaries around learner control. Overall, students had meaningful room to decide how to respond, but less control over which tasks were selected or how the learning sequence was organised.

Discussion

This study examined how students perceived learner autonomy in a multiliteracies-informed EFL classroom and how situated practice shaped those perceptions. Across the questionnaire, interviews, and reflections, the three central constructs formed a layered relationship. This reading is informed by scholarship that treats autonomy as a socially and pedagogically mediated process shaped by classroom affordances, task design, and learner agency (Dan & Li, 2024; Gupta et al., 2024; Little, 2022). Multiliteracies pedagogy provided the broader orientation for working across modes and communicative purposes; situated practice organised those activities around experience, interaction, and contextualised production; and autonomy appeared in the responsibility, choices, reflection, and meaning-making students exercised within those conditions. Students did not become autonomous because lecturer guidance was withdrawn. They acted within structured activities by interpreting materials, contributing personal content, negotiating meanings, and producing for particular audiences. This interpretation is consistent with Little's (2022) view of autonomy as a teaching-learning dynamic rather than the absence of pedagogical support.

The quantitative pattern indicates autonomy-supportive opportunities without full transfer of control. Perceived development of autonomy and situated practice received the highest dimension means, whereas responsibility, choice, and independent task completion were comparatively lower. Students therefore valued relevance, participation, and perceived growth but were less certain that they controlled learning activities or managed tasks independently. Similar research shows that learner action depends on discourse space and opportunities to move from involvement towards intervention and creation (Dan & Li, 2024). In the Indonesian university EFL classroom examined in this study, autonomy was practised through guided participation: students made decisions within tasks, while macro-level decisions about task selection and sequence remained with the lecturer.

The mixed-methods integration is important to this interpretation of autonomy as guided and task-dependent. The questionnaire alone might suggest uniformly strong autonomy because all dimensions were positive, while the interviews alone might foreground successful individual experiences. Reading the two strands together reveals a more differentiated pattern: students valued meaningful, experience-connected participation, yet their autonomy was concentrated in decisions made during task performance. The qualitative accounts therefore explain not only the higher ratings but also the comparatively weaker areas, showing where the design enabled action and where lecturer control remained dominant.

The qualitative accounts explain why those structured activities were nevertheless experienced as autonomy-supportive. Authentic and semi-authentic multimodal materials, personal experience, collaborative interpretation, and contextualised production made English available for public, interpersonal, and personal communication. Multimodal learning can widen opportunities for participation, but its benefits depend on teacher scaffolding and responsiveness to learners' linguistic, cultural, and technological resources (Rahmanu & Molnár, 2024; Veliz & Nguyen, 2026). The present findings add that multimodality supported autonomy only when students had to contribute meanings and make communicative decisions; a digital or visual activity with predetermined content would not necessarily have the same effect.

Authenticity was likewise relational rather than inherent in the materials. News texts, complaint emails, and short videos supported communicative action because students could connect them with experience and respond for recognisable purposes. This interpretation accords with Breen (1985) and Gilmore (2007), who locate authenticity in relationships among text, task, learner, and context. Recent work adds that adaptation can support culturally relevant engagement, while mismatched difficulty may restrict participation (Hanifa et al., 2024). Authentic materials may also introduce linguistic, cultural, and cognitive demands (Alamri, 2025). The activities in this study were therefore valuable not simply because they resembled real-world texts, but because learners could interpret and redesign them with contextual support.

Students' accounts further distinguish responsibility, confidence, decision-making, and self-awareness. Responsibility appeared when students prepared ideas and improved work without waiting for explanation. Confidence developed when familiar content gave them something personally meaningful to communicate. Decision-making involved choices about content, organisation, vocabulary, tone, audience, and mode, while self-awareness involved recognising learning preferences and participation patterns. These aspects overlap but are not interchangeable. Responsibility concerns ownership of learning actions; autonomy is broader because it also includes strategic choice, reflective evaluation, and independent expression. Contemporary accounts of agency likewise emphasise action, reflection, and context-sensitive participation (Gupta et al., 2024; Jang, 2022; Mameli et al., 2023).

Personal meaning and social interaction worked together rather than representing opposing forms of autonomy. Narratives and reels reduced the distance between language and content because students began with experiences they understood, while peer discussion provided a space for testing clarity and reorganising ideas before final production. Collaboration did not replace individual choice; it supported better-informed choices. This interpretation resonates with research linking learner voice, participation, and opportunities to influence learning with self-efficacy and agency (Zhou et al., 2025). Independent expression in this study therefore meant organising personally meaningful content without relying exclusively on lecturer-provided examples, not working in isolation.

The study's distinctive contribution lies in showing that autonomy within situated practice was uneven and task-dependent. High ratings for perceived autonomy and task relevance coexisted with lower ratings for choosing activities and managing tasks independently. Students exercised micro-level autonomy within activities while macro-level curricular control remained with the lecturer. Different tasks also afforded different decisions. The reel offered broad choices about personal content, voice, images, pacing, and mode; the complaint email constrained content through genre but required decisions about politeness, tone, and audience; and personal narratives placed responsibility on students to select and organise lived experience. Situated practice therefore did not produce one uniform form of autonomy. Its effects depended on the representational and communicative decisions made necessary by each task.

This task-dependent interpretation also reveals tensions in implementation. Guided choice can increase participation while limiting genuine learner control, as reflected in the lower questionnaire ratings for choice and independent completion. Authentic or semi-authentic texts can increase relevance but may require linguistic and cultural adaptation. Multimodal production offers additional routes for expression, yet students may differ in access to technology, technical confidence, and design knowledge; Indonesian studies continue to report unequal readiness and a need for teacher preparation (Andriyati et al., 2025; Kusumaningrum et al., 2024). Situated practice alone may also provide insufficient explicit language support, critical analysis, or transfer. It should therefore be integrated with overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice rather than treated as a sufficient condition for autonomy.

For practice, the findings suggest that autonomy can be designed at different levels rather than treated as an all-or-nothing condition. Lecturers may retain responsibility for course goals while gradually widening student control over topic selection, mode, audience, sequencing, or evaluation criteria. The task comparisons also show that choice need not be unrestricted to be meaningful: a genre-constrained email can support autonomy through decisions about tone and audience, while a reel can offer broader representational freedom. However, these opportunities require explicit modelling, accessible technologies, and reflection on why particular choices are effective. Designing situated practice therefore involves balancing structure with progressively greater learner influence, not simply replacing teacher guidance with independent work.

The findings remain contextually bounded. The quantitative phase involved 39 students in one class, and the qualitative phase involved ten volunteers who may have been more willing to speak or more positive about the course. Consistently positive responses may also reflect social desirability, favourable attitudes towards the lecturer, or the novelty of the activities. Moreover, the study measured perceptions rather than sustained autonomous behaviour. Students may feel responsible or agentive during one unit without transferring those practices to later contexts. Longitudinal and multi-site research should examine whether different task affordances produce durable changes and whether classroom-based autonomy transfers to other academic work.

Conclusion

This study suggests that learner autonomy in an Indonesian higher education EFL classroom may be supported through a multiliteracies-informed pedagogy centred on situated practice. Students associated meaningful materials, personal experience, collaborative interpretation, and contextualised production with responsibility, confidence, decision-making, and self-awareness. Autonomy was nevertheless guided and task-dependent: learners made meaningful choices within activities but had limited control over task selection and sequence. The contribution lies in showing how different task affordances produced different forms and degrees of participation rather than confirming only that multiliteracies supports autonomy. Effective implementation requires material adaptation, explicit scaffolding, attention to unequal digital readiness, and integration with overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. Further research should examine whether these classroom experiences transfer to sustained autonomous learning across contexts.

AI use declaration

The author used generative AI as a language-support tool to improve clarity, grammar, and wording. All analysis, interpretations, and final decisions remain the author's own.

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