

Enhancing English Proficiency Through Self-Directed Learning Strategies Among Grade 9 Students of Gulod Integrated School, Batangas City

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Abstract

This action research examines the effectiveness of self-directed learning (SDL) strategies in enhancing English proficiency among Grade 9 students at Gulod Integrated School, Batangas City. Anchored in the Philippine K–12 curriculum and aligned with DepEd policies, the study responds to concerns over declining functional literacy and limited English proficiency among junior high school learners. It explores how SDL, through autonomy, goal-setting, and reflective practice, empowers students to take ownership of their learning and improve performance in teacher-made assessments. A mixed-method design was employed involving 40 Grade 9 students, with data gathered through tests, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative results were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were examined through thematic analysis.

Findings reveal that SDL fosters learner autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and intrinsic motivation, leading to improved fluency, comprehension, and confidence in English. Students showed notable progress in performance-based tasks and developed stronger habits of autonomy, goal-oriented learning, and reflective practice. Despite these gains, several challenges limited full effectiveness. Learners struggled with low motivation, weak time management, and psychological barriers such as fear of failure and low self-esteem. Difficulties in self-evaluation and low confidence in speaking further hindered their progress.

The research concludes that it contributes to the growing body of literature advocating learner-centered approaches in education. It underscores that effective SDL implementation requires teacher scaffolding to balance autonomy with support. Practically, it offers research-based strategies for educators to cultivate globally competent, self-directed learners equipped with essential language skills and character values. The findings reinforce that SDL, when paired with structured guidance, can drive academic achievement and foster lifelong learning.

Keywords: *self-directed learning, English proficiency, learner autonomy, reflective practice, lifelong learning*

Introduction

Background and rationale

English proficiency is essential for academic success and global communication. However, many junior high school learners demonstrate low levels of functional literacy and difficulty in expressing ideas effectively. This issue is evident in national and international assessments, highlighting the need for innovative teaching strategies.

Self-directed learning (SDL) has emerged as a learner-centered approach that promotes autonomy, goal-setting, and reflective practice. Studies suggest that SDL enhances motivation, engagement, and language acquisition. However, many learners still rely on teacher-directed instruction and struggle with independent learning.

This study aimed to determine the effectiveness of SDL strategies in enhancing the English proficiency of Grade 9 students. Specifically, it sought to assess students' proficiency levels, examine SDL features, evaluate its impact on performance, and identify challenges encountered by learners.

Review of Related Literature

Self-directed learning (SDL) is recognized as an effective approach in improving students' English proficiency, particularly in developing speaking skills. SDL emphasizes learner autonomy, goal-setting, reflection, and active engagement, allowing students to take responsibility for their own learning process. Through structured SDL activities such as reflective journaling, performance-based tasks, and self-monitoring strategies, learners are able to enhance both their confidence and competence in using the English language.

Jimenez (2022) found that students who engage in structured self-directed learning (SDL) speaking tasks tend to perform better in assessments due to improved planning and strategy use. This suggests that learner performance in teacher-made tests is influenced by how well students apply learning strategies during SDL activities.

Moreover, in terms of learning autonomy, Benson (2021) explained that SDL is characterized by learner autonomy, where students take responsibility for setting goals, selecting strategies, and evaluating their own progress. This highlights SDL as a learner-centered approach that promotes independence in learning.

Similarly, regarding learner engagement, Barzilai and Ka'adan (2023) emphasized that SDL enhances engagement and self-regulation when learners are given opportunities to select learning resources and manage their own learning process. This integration allows students to take active control of their English learning development.

However, in spite of its benefits, Garrison (2020) identified that learners often experience difficulties such as low motivation, poor time management, and weak metacognitive skills in SDL environments. These challenges may hinder the effectiveness of self-directed learning if not properly addressed.

Therefore, to address these challenges, Diaz (2023) stressed that effective SDL activities should include scaffolding strategies such as guided goal-setting, feedback, and progress monitoring. These teacher-supported structures help learners gradually develop independence and improve their English proficiency.

Statement of the problem

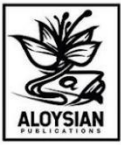
This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of self-directed learning (SDL) strategies in enhancing the English proficiency of Grade 9 learners at Gulod Integrated School during the second quarter of SY 2025–2026.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the distinct features of self-directed learning (SDL) activities as a strategy in terms of:
 - 1.1. Learner autonomy;
 - 1.2. Goal-oriented learning;
 - 1.3. Reflective practice?
2. What is the English proficiency level of grade 9 learners as measured by a teacher-made test?
3. How does the integration of SDL strategies enhance learners' English proficiency in terms of:
 - 3.1. Performance-based tasks;
 - 3.2. Quarterly assessments?
4. What challenges do learners encounter in utilizing SDL strategies?
5. Based on the analysis, what SDL activities may be proposed to further enhance learners' English proficiency?

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to enhance English proficiency among Grade 9 students of Gulod Integrated School, Batangas City through self-directed learning (SDL) strategies.



2. Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study will employ a mixed-method design. The quantitative phase will use a teacher-made English proficiency test and a researcher made questionnaire to measure learners' proficiency and challenges in self-directed learning. The qualitative phase will involve semi-structured interviews with selected students to gain deeper insights into their experiences.

Participants

Participants were forty (40) Grade 9 students, equally divided by gender, will be purposively selected from one intact class to avoid disruption of other sections. Grade 9 learners are selected for this study as they are at a foundational stage in developing essential English proficiency skills, which are critical for academic achievement across subject areas. From this group, ten (10) students will be randomly chosen for interviews. The study will be carried out during the second quarter of the 2025–2026 academic year.

Research Instrument

The study utilized:

- Teacher-made English proficiency test
- Researcher-made questionnaire (Likert scale)
- Semi-structured interview guide

A combination of Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions were used to gather both quantitative and qualitative data.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher conducted a pre-test, implemented SDL strategies (goal-setting, journaling, speaking logs, graphic organizers), and administered post-intervention assessments. Interviews were conducted with selected students.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, weighted mean, and standard deviation) were used to summarize the data on test scores and questionnaire responses. Additionally, thematic analysis was employed to examine qualitative data from interviews.

Results

Distinct features of SDL activities

1.1 Learner autonomy

Table 1 showed that students generally demonstrated learner autonomy in self-directed learning activities (composite mean = 2.88, Agree). The highest-rated behavior was goal-setting (3.10), followed by reflection on learning (2.98), while monitoring progress and selecting materials both obtained 2.95. The least manifested was completing tasks within the given time frame (2.43), indicating difficulty in time management.

Table 1
Weighted Mean Distribution of SDL activities in terms of Learning Autonomy Feature

Learning Autonomy	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I set personal goals when working on SDL activities.	3.10	Agree	1
2. I monitor my own progress without relying on teacher reminders.	2.95	Agree	3.5
3. I select learning materials that help me understand the topic.	2.95	Agree	3.5
4. I complete SDL tasks within the given time frame.	2.43	Disagree	5
5. I reflect on what I learned after completing SDL activities.	2.98	Agree	2
Composite Mean	2.88	Agree	

1.2 Goal-oriented learning

Table 2 presents the results of goal-oriented learning as a feature of self-directed learning.

Table 2
Weighted Mean Distribution of SDL activities in terms of Goal Oriented Learning Feature

Goal Oriented Learning	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I clearly define my learning goals before starting an SDL activity.	2.13	Disagree	5
2. I set deadlines for completing different parts of my learning tasks.	2.18	Disagree	4
3. I track my progress toward specific goals I have set.	2.95	Agree	2
4. I plan my SDL activities based on long-term learning goals relevant to my personal growth	2.93	Agree	3
5. I feel motivated to complete SDL activities because I have clear goals to reach.	2.98	Agree	1
Composite Mean	2.63	Agree	

Results show that students agreed that SDL supports goal-oriented learning, with a composite mean of 2.63. The highest-rated item was “feeling motivated to complete SDL

activities because of clear goals” (WM = 2.98), followed by “tracking progress toward specific goals” (WM = 2.95) and “planning SDL activities based on long-term goals” (WM = 2.93). However, “clearly defining learning goals before starting” (WM = 2.13) and “setting deadlines for completing tasks” (WM = 2.18) received the lowest means, indicating that students still struggle with goal-setting and time management.

1.3 Reflective practice

Table 3 presents the results of reflective practice as a feature of self-directed learning (SDL). The findings show that students generally agreed on the importance of reflection, with a composite mean of 2.75.

The highest-rated items were “After completing an SDL activity, I take time to think about what I have learned” and “Reflecting on my learning helps me become a more independent learner,” both with a mean of 2.98, indicating strong appreciation of reflection in the learning process. Meanwhile, “I identify my strengths and weaknesses” followed with a mean of 2.95. On the other hand, the lowest-rated items were “I use my reflections to improve future learning” (WM = 2.45) and “I consider how knowledge applies to real-life situations” (WM = 2.38), suggesting difficulties in applying reflection for improvement and real-world use.

Table 3
Weighted Mean Distribution of SDL activities in terms of Reflective Practice Features

Reflective practice	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. After completing an SDL activity, I take time to think about what I have learned.	2.98	Agree	1
2. I identify my strengths and weaknesses after finishing SDL activities.	2.95	Agree	3
3. I use my reflections to improve how I approach future learning activities.	2.45	Disagree	4
4. I consider how the knowledge gained from SDL activities applies to real-life situations.	2.38	Disagree	5
5. Reflecting on my learning helps me become a more independent learner.	2.98	Agree	1
Composite Mean	2.75	Agree	

Table 4 presents the results of students’ English proficiency levels based on the pre-test scores. The findings show a varied level of performance among Grade 9 students.

Table 4
Performance Level in English Proficiency on Pre - Test

Scale	Frequency	Percentage	Verbal Interpretation
24 – 30	1	2.50 %	Advanced
16 - 23	4	10.00 %	Proficient
8 - 15	12	30.00 %	Approaching Proficiency
0 - 7	23	57.50 %	Needs Improvement
TOTAL	40	100	

Most of the students (23 out of 40) were categorized under Needs Improvement (0–7), indicating difficulties in basic English skills such as grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, and speaking. Meanwhile, 12 students fell under the Approaching Proficiency range (8–15), showing a developing understanding of the language but still requiring further enhancement. The results suggest that while a small group already demonstrates foundational skills, the majority still needs targeted support and intervention.

Table 5 presents students' self-perceived English proficiency. The findings show an overall lack of confidence in using English, with a composite mean of 2.40.

The highest-rated item was "I can present ideas clearly in English during group activities" (WM = 3.10), followed by understanding texts (WM = 2.63) and writing clear sentences (WM = 2.58), all interpreted as Agree. Meanwhile, the lowest-rated items were feeling confident in class discussions (WM = 1.83) and responding in spontaneous conversations (WM = 1.88), both indicating strong disagreement and highlighting difficulty in spontaneous speaking tasks.

Table 5
Distribution of students' Self-perceived English Proficiency

Self-perceived English proficiency	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I feel confident expressing myself in English during class discussions.	1.83	Strongly Disagree	5
2. I can present ideas clearly in English during group activities.	3.10	Agree	1
3. I understand English texts and instructions without difficulty.	2.63	Agree	2
4. I can write clear and grammatically correct sentences in English.	2.58	Agree	3
5. I can respond appropriately in English during spontaneous conversations or oral recitations.	1.88	Strongly Disagree	4
Composite Mean	2.40	Disagree	

Table 6 presents the weighted mean distribution of students' integration of self-directed learning (SDL) strategies in relation to English proficiency. Results show that students generally agreed that SDL strategies supported their learning, with a composite mean of 3.06.

The highest-rated item was "I can analyze characters and themes better after completing SDL tasks" (WM = 3.28), followed by "SDL activities help me interpret texts and express my ideas clearly" (WM = 3.25). Meanwhile, two items both rated 3.23 showed agreement on using gestures and facial expressions during presentations and analyzing characters during performance tasks. The lowest-rated item was "I feel confident delivering a monologue in English" (WM = 2.30), indicating difficulty in independent oral performance.

Table 6
Distribution of students' Integration of SDL Activities

Integration of SDL strategies	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I use appropriate gestures and facial expressions when presenting in English.	3.23	Agree	2
2. I feel confident delivering a monologue in English.	2.30	Disagree	5
3. I can analyze characters and themes better after completing SDL tasks.	3.28	Agree	1
4. SDL activities help me interpret texts and express my ideas clearly.	3.25	Agree	3
5. SDL activities help me identify themes and analyze characters more effectively during performance tasks.	3.23	Agree	2
Composite Mean	3.06	Agree	

Table 7 presents the weighted mean distribution of students' personal challenges in utilizing self-directed learning (SDL) strategies. The findings show that students generally agreed that they experience challenges in SDL, with a composite mean of 2.71.

The highest-rated challenge was difficulty in evaluating their own learning progress (WM = 2.90), followed by lack of motivation (WM = 2.85) and struggling to set learning goals (WM = 2.70). Time management was also identified as a concern (WM = 2.65), while the lowest-rated item was feeling overwhelmed without teacher supervision (WM = 2.45).

Table 7
Student's Personal Challenges Encountered in utilizing SDL Strategies

Personal Challenges	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I find it difficult to manage my time when completing self-directed tasks.	2.65	Agree	4
2. I lack motivation to complete self-directed activities.	2.85	Agree	2
3. I struggle with setting learning goals on my own.	2.70	Agree	3
4. I have difficulty evaluating my own learning progress	2.90	Agree	1
5. I feel overwhelmed when working independently without teacher supervision.	2.45	Disagree	5
Composite Mean	2.71	Agree	

Table 8 presents the weighted mean distribution of students' resource challenges in utilizing self-directed learning (SDL) strategies. The findings show that students generally agreed they experience resource-related challenges, with a composite mean of 2.37.

The highest-rated challenges were lack of a quiet or comfortable study space at home and difficulty in locating reliable online resources for English learning, both with a mean of 2.83. This was followed by limited access to reference materials or books (WM = 2.53). Meanwhile, internet connectivity issues (WM = 2.23) and lack of access to necessary.

Table 8
Student's Resource Challenges Encountered in utilizing SDL
Strategies

Resource Challenges	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I lack access to the necessary materials or technology	2.00	Agree	5
2. I do not have a quiet or comfortable space to study at home.	2.83	Disagree	1.5
3. I experience internet connectivity issues that affect my SDL tasks.	2.23	Agree	4
4. I do not have access to reference materials or books for SDL activities.	2.53	Disagree	3
5. I find it hard to locate reliable online resources for English learning.	2.83	Disagree	1.5
Composite Mean	2.37	Agree	

Table 9 presents the weighted mean distribution of students' challenges in utilizing self-directed learning (SDL) strategies in terms of teacher support. The findings show that students generally agreed they experience teacher-related challenges, with a composite mean of 2.37.

The highest-rated challenges were difficulty understanding instructions without teacher guidance and feeling discouraged when efforts are not acknowledged, both with a mean of 2.83. This was followed by the need for more examples or models from teachers (WM = 2.53) and uncertainty in completing SDL tasks correctly (WM = 2.23). The lowest-rated item was not receiving enough feedback, also reflected in the distribution of responses.

Table 9
Student's Teacher Support Challenges Encountered in utilizing SDL
Strategies

Teacher Support Challenges	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I do not receive enough feedback from teachers on self-directed work.	2.83	Disagree	5
2. I find it hard to understand instructions without teacher guidance.	2.00	Agree	1.5
3. I feel unsure about whether I am doing SDL tasks correctly.	2.23	Agree	4
4. I need more examples or models from teachers to guide my SDL activities.	2.53	Disagree	3
5. I feel discouraged when teachers do not acknowledge my efforts in SDL tasks.	2.83	Agree	1.5
Composite Mean	2.37	Agree	

Proposed SDL Activities to Further Enhance Learners' English Proficiency

The study proposes modular, learner-centered SDL activities designed to enhance Grade 9 students' English proficiency. These focus on:



- Reflective writing and journaling for vocabulary and self-awareness
- Goal-setting and progress tracking to strengthen learner autonomy
- Peer collaboration and study circles to improve speaking confidence
- Performance-based tasks such as role-play and oral presentations
- Independent reading activities for comprehension and critical thinking
- Use of multimedia tools to support interactive and engaging learning

These enhancements emphasize clear instructions, regular feedback, flexible tasks, and accessible resources to support students' communication skills, fluency, and overall language development.

Discussion

The findings indicate that SDL strategies positively influence students' English proficiency, particularly in comprehension and performance-based tasks. The improvement aligns with previous studies emphasizing the role of autonomy and reflective learning. However, students' low confidence in speaking highlights the need for more structured support. Challenges such as poor time management and limited motivation suggest that learners are not fully prepared for independent learning.

These results imply that while SDL promotes independence, teacher scaffolding remains essential. Guidance in goal-setting, continuous feedback, and emotional support are necessary to ensure successful implementation.

Conclusion

The study concludes that self-directed learning strategies are effective in enhancing English proficiency among Grade 9 students. SDL fosters autonomy, improves comprehension, and enhances performance in English tasks. However, challenges such as low motivation, difficulty in self-regulation, and lack of confidence must be addressed. It is recommended that teachers provide structured support, integrate motivational strategies, and gradually transition students toward independent learning. Future research may explore SDL implementation across different grade levels and subject areas.

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