

Challenges to Learner Autonomy in Online Speaking Classes: Insights from University Students in Indonesia

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

learner autonomy;
online learning;
speaking class

Article history:

Received 2024-11-14

Revised 2025-05-18

Accepted 2025-06-23

ABSTRACT

Although online English language learning has been widely praised for its flexibility and accessibility, its effectiveness in developing speaking skills—where learner autonomy is essential—remains underexplored. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a sudden shift to online formats, exposing significant challenges in how learners independently manage speaking practice. This qualitative study investigated the impact of online learning environments on learner autonomy in speaking classes. Data were collected through purposive sampling from two lecturers and twelve students at two state universities in Palembang, Indonesia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in self-directed learning behavior. Analysis revealed five key barriers to learner autonomy in online speaking courses: (1) lack of goal-setting, (2) poor time management, (3) absence of structured study plans, (4) limited application of communication strategies during speaking tasks, and (5) minimal use of available learning resources. These interconnected issues suggest that current online formats fall short in supporting the autonomous development of speaking skills. The findings underscore the limitations of fully online learning in fostering autonomous language development, particularly in speaking. Learners often struggle without structured support and direct interaction. To enhance learner autonomy in speaking classes, a blended learning model is recommended. By integrating the flexibility of online tools with the engagement of face-to-face instruction, this approach provides a more supportive and balanced environment for autonomous learning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most essential yet challenging language skills to master, particularly for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). The development of speaking proficiency requires not only linguistic competence but also the ability to express thoughts spontaneously, respond in real-time, and manage paralinguistic elements such as tone, pauses, and intonation. It is further complicated by affective factors such as anxiety, lack of confidence, and limited classroom interaction (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Derwing & Munro, 2015). In the context of formal education, speaking classes aim to build these competencies through guided practice, peer interaction, and feedback. However, the abrupt transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted conventional speaking instruction and created new pedagogical challenges, particularly in promoting learner-centered approaches.

Speaking is considered one of the four core skills in English language learning and plays a crucial role in everyday communication. Hornby (1995) describes speaking as using words in a natural voice, expressing oneself through language, and demonstrating the ability to utilize linguistic elements effectively. It is regarded as the most essential skill for maintaining conversation (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Torkey (2006) emphasizes that speaking represents a secondary yet critical stage in learners' ability to communicate orally in a coherent, fluent, and contextually appropriate manner, incorporating accurate pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and the pragmatic rules of spoken discourse. These perspectives highlight that speaking is both a linguistic and a social skill, essential for interaction and personal expression.

Online learning has rapidly evolved, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated the closure of educational institutions globally. This crisis tested the readiness of universities to implement digital learning systems that depend on reliable hardware and software (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Information technology played a vital role in supporting distance education during the pandemic (Pakpahan & Fitriani, 2020). Online learning, defined as the use of computer-based platforms to provide educational content and resources (Carliner, 2004), offers several benefits, including expanded access, enhanced quality, and lifelong learning opportunities (Appana, 2008). However, its effectiveness during the pandemic was mixed. While it enabled continuity under constrained circumstances, it also introduced challenges such as increased costs compared to offline formats (Silalahi & Hutauruk, 2020).

Learner autonomy, a key element in successful language learning, refers to the capacity of learners to take charge of their educational process (Chik, 2018; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). It involves both managing the learning process and making decisions about content, as outlined by Little (1991). Smith (2008) further defines it as the ability to self-manage practical and theoretical learning. Learner autonomy can be cultivated through activities like independent study, self-access learning, and internet-based tasks outside the classroom (Lengkanawati, 2017). According to Little (2003), learners become autonomous when they reflect on their learning, take responsibility for their progress, and use the target language actively. Additionally, Holec (1979) and Deci and Vansteenkiste (2003) argue that autonomy can be developed through structured and self-directed approaches, supporting intrinsic motivation and engagement. While formal educational materials such as textbooks and syllabi provide structure, learner-driven efforts are crucial for achieving autonomy and language mastery (Muhammad, 2020).

The shift to online platforms has transformed how learners engage with speaking tasks. While digital tools offer flexibility and access to language resources, they often limit opportunities for spontaneous communication, delay feedback, and reduce the presence of social cues, all of which are crucial for developing fluency and confidence (Jeong & So, 2020; Haniya & Paquette, 2020). In asynchronous and video-conference-based speaking classes, students may become passive participants due to minimal turn-taking, poor internet connectivity, and limited teacher supervision. In such environments, students are expected to take more responsibility for their learning processes, especially in practicing and refining speaking skills outside the virtual classroom.

This context foregrounds the concept of learner autonomy, which refers to learners' capacity to take charge of their own learning. According to Benson (2013), autonomy involves making informed decisions about learning goals, strategies, and assessment practices. In language learning, especially speaking, autonomy enables learners to extend practice beyond structured lessons, monitor their own progress, and engage in self-correction. Little (1991) emphasizes that autonomy is not merely about working independently but also entails reflective engagement with learning objectives and the means to achieve them. In online speaking classes, where direct interaction with teachers and peers may be limited, autonomy becomes a critical determinant of learning success.

Despite its recognized importance, fostering learner autonomy in online speaking classes is fraught with challenges. Students may lack the metacognitive skills, motivation, or digital literacy required to manage their speaking development effectively (Zimmerman, 2008; Hurd, 2007). Studies have shown that learners often struggle to set meaningful goals, plan regular speaking practice, or evaluate their own speaking performance when left without structured support (Lengkanawati, 2017; Zou & Wang, 2022). These limitations can be especially pronounced in developing contexts such as Indonesia, where students may also face technical constraints such as unstable internet connections, limited access to devices, and low digital infrastructure (Churiyah et al., 2020; Hamid et al., 2020).

Although some research has explored learner autonomy in online environments, relatively few studies have examined its role specifically in speaking classes. Most existing literature tends to focus on reading or writing skills, or on general online learning satisfaction, without delving into the distinct demands of speaking instruction. Moreover, the Indonesian higher education context remains underrepresented in the scholarly discourse on digital language pedagogy and learner autonomy. This creates a critical gap in understanding how university students manage their speaking skill development in remote learning settings and what support systems might enhance their autonomy.

Therefore, this study investigates the challenges and practices associated with learner autonomy in online speaking classes at two state universities in Palembang, Indonesia. Specifically, it explores the extent to which students take responsibility for setting speaking goals, planning and executing speaking tasks, using communication strategies, and utilizing learning resources during online learning. Data were gathered through interviews with lecturers and students, and analyzed thematically to uncover patterns of autonomy-related behavior. The findings aim to identify key barriers to autonomous speaking development and to offer practical recommendations for improving learner autonomy in similar educational contexts.

By focusing on autonomy within the speaking skill domain, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of online language learning. It highlights the complex interplay between learner agency, instructional design, and technological limitations. Ultimately, the study advocates for the implementation of blended learning models that combine the benefits of online platforms with the interpersonal richness of face-to-face instruction, thereby providing a more supportive environment for developing both speaking proficiency and learner autonomy.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore learner autonomy in online speaking classes, with a focus on how online learning influences students' ability to manage and develop their speaking skills independently. This approach was chosen for its capacity to explore participants' lived experiences and provide rich, in-depth insights into complex educational phenomena.

2.1. Research Setting and Focus

The research was conducted at two English Education Study Programs in state universities in Palembang, Indonesia, both of which hold comparable levels of accreditation. These programs were purposefully selected to reflect a broader view of online speaking instruction within higher education.

The study centered on speaking skills, which are widely regarded as essential but difficult to cultivate in virtual classrooms due to limited interaction and delayed feedback. The core objective was to assess whether online environments support or hinder learner autonomy in speaking, particularly in areas such as goal setting, practice, and resource utilization

2.2. Participants and Sampling Technique

Participants included two lecturers and twelve fourth-semester students enrolled in online speaking classes. The sample was selected through purposive sampling, ensuring participants had relevant, firsthand experience with the phenomenon under investigation. The relatively small sample size reflects a common practice in qualitative studies aimed at generating deep, contextual understanding rather than broad generalizations. The number was also influenced by considerations of data saturation and logistical constraints during data collection.

All participants were anonymized using codes (e.g., Student 1 to Student 12; Lecturer 1 and Lecturer 2) to encourage honest responses and maintain confidentiality. This ethical step was critical for protecting participants' perspectives and fostering trust during interviews.

2.3. Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, enabling open-ended, flexible inquiry while maintaining consistency across participants. Each interview included 15 core questions addressing various aspects of learner autonomy, including goal-setting behavior, speaking practice routines, use of resources, and self-regulation strategies. Secondary data such as previous course evaluations, institutional learner autonomy assessments, and student performance summaries were also examined to provide contextual background and complement the interview findings. This dual-source approach supported triangulation and added depth to the study's interpretations.

2.4. Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was conducted following Creswell's (2014) guidelines. The process began with verbatim transcription of all interviews, followed by multiple readings of the texts for familiarization. Initial coding identified recurring words and concepts relevant to learner autonomy in online speaking instruction. These codes were then grouped into broader themes such as goal-setting, time management, use of communication strategies, engagement with speaking tasks, and access to learning resources.

As part of the analysis process, member checking was employed by sharing initial themes with participants to confirm their accuracy and resonance. The use of secondary data—such as course feedback and student progress reports—further supported triangulation, enhancing the validity of interpretations by linking participant responses with documented patterns. Thematic categories were refined through peer debriefing and iterative review, with emphasis on how each theme directly related to challenges and behaviors specific to speaking skill development in autonomous online learning contexts.

2.5. Validity and Reliability

To ensure the credibility of the findings, this study employed several measures to enhance the validity and reliability of the data. First, member checking was conducted, wherein participants reviewed the themes and interpretations to verify their accuracy and resonance with their own perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, triangulation was applied by using both interview data and any available statistical data, which allowed the researcher to cross-validate findings and reduce potential biases. Finally, peer debriefing involved sharing the coding and thematic analysis with a peer researcher for feedback and verification of the findings' coherence and relevance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

By following these rigorous qualitative methods, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive and trustworthy understanding of how online learning environments influence learner autonomy in speaking classes, particularly in relation to self-regulation, engagement, and technology use. This methodological

approach not only captures the complex experiences of students and lecturers but also contributes valuable insights to the growing body of literature on autonomous language learning in digital contexts.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study, which were obtained through in-depth interviews with twelve students and two lecturers from two English education study programs at state universities in Palembang, Indonesia. The data revealed five main issues that hinder the development of learner autonomy in online speaking classes: (1) lack of speaking learning objectives; (2) absence of time planning for speaking practice; (3) absence of structured study planning; (4) limited application of communication strategies; and (5) underutilization of learning resources. Each theme is discussed in detail, supported by direct participant quotes, and followed by analytical interpretation in the context of language education and learner autonomy theory.

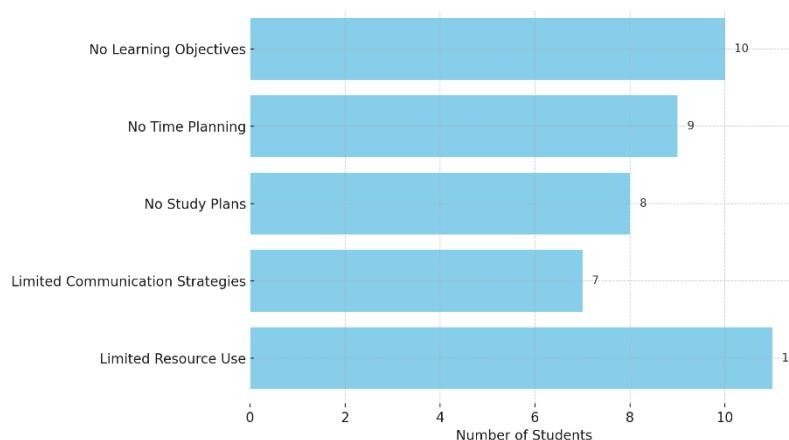


Figure 1. Key challenges to Learner Autonomy in online speaking

3.1 Lack of Speaking Learning Objectives

A significant number of students admitted that they did not formulate clear objectives for learning speaking in the online context. This finding reflects a fundamental gap in learners' understanding of how goal-setting influences self-regulated learning and long-term skill development. Rather than initiating their own learning targets, students generally followed lecturer instructions without engaging in reflective or proactive planning.

"I just realized that speaking is important. That is why I am taking the speaking class. I want to pass this subject and finish my study as soon as possible. If I have finished my study, I can help my parents earn money... If you asked me my objectives in learning speaking, honestly, I don't know. I have no idea. I just follow my lecturer's instruction in online learning." (S1)

"I never set up my objectives in learning speaking in the online class. I think it doesn't affect my achievement in speaking class. I just do what my lecturer assigns us. So far, I have succeeded in finishing all assignments from her. I will not fail this subject just because I don't know my objectives in learning speaking." (S5)

"I think it is useless if I set up my learning objective in speaking class. I feel I have limited time to practice speaking... I borrow my brother's handphone. I mostly go to 'Warnet' and spend money using the WIFI... Sometimes the learning process in online learning is almost over when I can rejoin the class." (S11)

"I'm not sure whether they have their objectives in the classroom. However, initially... I asked them about their motivation... they expect to improve their speaking skill, but I do not know if they have concrete goals." (L2)

These statements indicate a lack of metacognitive awareness among students regarding the role of goal-setting in learning. From a pedagogical perspective, this highlights the need for explicit training in learning strategies. Lecturers should integrate scaffolding tools such as reflective journals, digital learning contracts, or personalized learning goals at the start of each course to promote autonomous learning behaviors.

3.2 Absence of Time Planning for Speaking Practice

The second theme concerns the lack of student-initiated time management for practicing speaking skills. The majority of students completed speaking tasks reactively—based on assignment deadlines—rather than through a planned schedule that fosters consistent language use and improvement.

"No, I never made time plans. The speaking practice was limited by time allocation in online learning. It is impossible if everyone speaks... Our speaking class consists of more than sixty students." (S3)

"My friends and I will do the activities assigned by the lecturer based on the submission deadline. We call it priority scales... Honestly, the inspiration and ideas for doing the assignments will come one night before the submission deadline." (S12)

"I don't speak voluntarily. If my lecturer asks, 'Who can answer the question?' I won't answer immediately... I get bored with the situation of online learning, where I cannot see my friends physically." (S4)

"I think if I made a time plan to practice speaking in online learning, I would not use it. But because I got bored of the monotonous situation... and lack of interaction with my friends in Zoom." (S1)

"I don't think so, because I believe they are all overwhelmed with the assignments from any other courses." (L2)

The absence of scheduled time for speaking practice reveals a critical lack of self-regulatory behavior. In an academic setting, the ability to plan, monitor, and reflect on one's learning is essential for developing autonomy. To mitigate this, educators should incorporate speaking calendars, peer accountability groups, or platform-based reminders to encourage regular, deliberate speaking practice.

3.3 Absence of Structured Study Planning

In addition to lacking time planning, students also failed to develop structured study plans for speaking tasks. This led to a reliance on impromptu speech and contributed to frequent mistakes in grammar, pronunciation, and content delivery.

"Since there are more than 32 students in my class, the activities done were limited. I can only monitor ten to fifteen students... That's why I give them assignments they have to do outside the class, like making a speaking vlog and uploading it to YouTube." (L1)

"I don't make a study plan in a written form. So, I speak impromptu... Sometimes I think I have to speak in one online meeting... but my connection is lost, so I cannot do the practice speaking I have planned." (S5)

"Maybe because I do not determine a study plan... I make grammar, pronunciation, and content mistakes when I speak. Very often, my speaking contains invalid information. I get the information from the internet... from people's blogs." (S2)

"The same answer, I'm not sure. It's fully achieved during online learning. The students have technical problems... the connection is bad, electricity is off, and then they feel reluctant if they're asked to speak." (L2)

These insights confirm that without a study roadmap, students are unable to engage in focused and consistent learning. Academically, lecturers must emphasize planning as a skill. Activities like study plan worksheets, self-assessment forms, and targeted feedback on preparation routines can nurture planning habits among students.

3.4 Limited Application of Communication Strategies

Students reported minimal use of communication strategies to support their speaking performance. Most resorted to reading prepared texts or code-switching when encountering linguistic difficulties, rather than employing strategies like paraphrasing or clarification.

"Among the 16 meetings, the only strategy we use is just presentation. The students deliver materials, and we have question-answer sessions." (L1)

"I think I use communication strategy when answering my friends' questions... Sometimes if I don't know a certain vocabulary, I open my online dictionary... But I often change my language from English to Bahasa Indonesia for practicality." (S5)

"I think the students use communication strategy; they use paraphrasing. They use their own words. They sometimes imitate their friends' words in their own words." (L2)

"I didn't use any communicative strategies when speaking activities. I just need to be more confident. I will motivate myself to be brave enough to speak when I feel unconfident." (S11)

The limited use of adaptive strategies reflects a shortfall in communicative competence, which is central to speaking development. Educators should explicitly teach a range of speaking strategies and embed their use in classroom tasks. Role plays, negotiation tasks, and strategy reflection logs can help students internalize and apply these skills in real-time communication.

3.5 Underutilization of Learning Resources

Finally, students struggled to access and utilize digital learning resources due to poor internet connections, outdated devices, and unsupportive home environments. This significantly hindered their ability to study independently and practice speaking outside of class.

"For certain students, not really; they depend on me as their lecturer to provide the learning resources. They only do what I ask them to do. That is it." (L1)

"If the signal is getting a problem, I cannot search and download online materials... Besides, I cannot concentrate on attending online learning because my surroundings are not supportive." (S12)

"To open online resources, we need internet. Sometimes it's not stable. The electricity in my village is often off. I just use the resources delivered by my lecturer on WhatsApp group." (S6)

"It is difficult for me to store many files... My gadget is not very good. The memory is full rapidly... The video freezes many times. My parents cannot afford to buy me a new smartphone." (S4)

"My study problem is not about speaking English but connection... With poor connection, I could not practice speaking... I was out of the online classroom and needed to rejoin, but I could not." (S2)

These responses underscore the digital divide experienced by many learners in rural or low-income settings. In terms of academic implications, institutions must design technology-inclusive policies. Providing downloadable resources, printed modules, and asynchronous speaking activities that do not rely on high-speed internet can significantly expand access to learning.

Discussion

The findings of this study yield essential insights into the extent to which online learning environments support or hinder the development of learner autonomy in speaking classes. Based on the thematic analysis of interviews with students and lecturers, five core issues were identified: the absence of learning objectives, poor time management, lack of structured study planning, limited application of communication strategies, and underutilization of learning resources. This discussion elaborates on each of these findings in the context of theoretical frameworks and practical implications. First, the lack of learning objectives among students illustrates a fundamental gap in their metacognitive engagement. Learners failed to articulate clear goals for their speaking development and relied heavily on external direction from lecturers. This condition reflects the early stages of autonomous learning as defined by Holec (1981), where responsibility for learning remains largely with the instructor. Benson (2013) emphasized that autonomy requires learners to make informed decisions about their learning goals, methods, and assessments. Without explicit instruction in goal-setting, learners in this study lacked the agency to shape their own academic trajectories. To address this, educators should integrate scaffolding mechanisms such as digital goal-setting templates, self-directed learning logs, and reflective prompts into online platforms to help students internalize the importance of personal objectives.

Second, the inability to manage time for speaking practice revealed an alarming deficiency in learners' self-regulation skills. According to Zimmerman's (2002) self-regulated learning model, effective learners must be capable of forethought, performance, and self-reflection. The absence of time planning among students—who instead prioritized assignments with imminent deadlines—demonstrates a lack of intentional learning strategies. This behavior compromises the long-term development of speaking fluency, which requires consistent and structured practice. In response, educators should model time management practices and embed time-based speaking tasks (e.g., weekly speaking diaries, time-bound speaking prompts) into the curriculum to develop learners' habits of planning and persistence.

Third, the lack of structured study planning further underscores the students' dependency on external cues and their limited strategic awareness. Many learners in this study admitted to engaging in impromptu speaking activities without preparation, which often led to poor performance and a lack of progress. Little (1991) stressed that autonomy requires the ability to monitor and evaluate one's learning over time. The absence of planning behaviors among students suggests a need for pedagogical intervention that fosters not only awareness but also ownership of the learning process. Teachers should consider implementing process-oriented tasks that require learners to outline their study schedules, articulate expected outcomes, and assess the quality of their speaking engagements.

Fourth, the restricted application of communication strategies indicated limited strategic competence, a core component of communicative language ability as proposed by Canale and Swain (1980). Rather than experimenting with various strategies such as paraphrasing, circumlocution, or clarification requests, students tended to rely on reading from slides or code-switching to Bahasa Indonesia when encountering difficulties. This finding highlights the lack of explicit instruction in strategy use, which is critical in developing speaking fluency, especially in asynchronous or low-interaction settings. Strategy-based instruction (SBI), as advocated by Oxford (1990), should be a central component of online speaking courses. By incorporating reflection on strategy use into assignments and feedback sessions, instructors can cultivate a repertoire of techniques that learners can draw upon in diverse communicative situations.

Fifth, the underutilization of learning resources due to limited access and poor digital infrastructure presents a major challenge to equitable and inclusive education. Many students reported that they could not access additional materials beyond what was provided by the lecturers due to unstable internet connections, low-spec devices, and unsupportive learning environments. These barriers reflect what Warschauer (2004) described as the "second-level digital divide"—not merely

access to technology but the ability to use it meaningfully. Addressing this issue requires systemic intervention beyond the classroom. Universities and education authorities must prioritize the distribution of offline resources, mobile-friendly platforms, and local access points (e.g., school-based internet centers) to ensure all learners, regardless of geographical or socioeconomic status, can engage autonomously with their education.

Finally, the findings of this study challenge the often-assumed narrative that online learning inherently fosters autonomy due to its flexibility and learner-centeredness. As this research demonstrates, autonomy must be intentionally cultivated. This is where the role of blended learning becomes crucial. Combining face-to-face interaction, which supports immediate feedback and emotional connection, with the flexibility of online tools offers the most comprehensive environment for promoting autonomy. The preference of lecturers in this study for a 70% offline and 30% online model reflects an understanding of the need for balance between structure and independence.

In sum, the development of learner autonomy in online speaking classes cannot be left to chance. It must be systematically embedded in the instructional design, supported by institutional infrastructure, and facilitated by responsive and well-trained educators. The five barriers identified in this study point to the need for a multidimensional approach that integrates metacognitive training, strategic instruction, access equity, and a pedagogically sound learning environment. Only through such intentional and collaborative efforts can learner autonomy truly thrive in digital language education.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored how online learning environments affect the development of learner autonomy in speaking classes at two state universities in Palembang, Indonesia. Using qualitative data from twelve students and two lecturers, it identified five major barriers to autonomy: the absence of clear learning objectives, poor time management, unstructured study planning, limited use of communication strategies, and the underutilization of learning resources. These challenges were both personal and systemic, reflecting issues such as digital inequality and the lack of pedagogical frameworks that promote autonomous learning. The findings emphasize that providing digital tools alone does not foster autonomy; instead, it must be intentionally developed through targeted pedagogical strategies, institutional responsiveness, and inclusive policies. To address these issues, the study proposes several strategies: scaffolding goal-setting through digital learning plans and reflective tools; integrating time management features like digital calendars and peer accountability; offering structured study support with pre-task planning and self-assessment rubrics; teaching communication strategies through simulations and debates; and ensuring inclusive access to resources, especially for students facing connectivity issues. The research also highlights the value of blended learning models—specifically, a 70% offline and 30% online ratio—as an effective approach to gradually build learner autonomy while maintaining support and interaction. These insights have practical implications for curriculum designers, teacher educators, and policymakers aiming to promote student-centered, technology-enhanced education that prepares learners to become independent and lifelong learners.

Acknowledgements: We would like to express our gratitude to the faculty and students of the English Education Study Programs at the participating universities for their invaluable contributions to this study. Their insights and experiences were instrumental in helping us understand the nuances of learner autonomy in online speaking classes. We also thank the research assistants and coordinators who supported data collection and analysis. Additionally, we acknowledge the support of Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang and Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung in facilitating this research.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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