Teacher Educators' Perspectives on the Sociocultural Dimensions of Self-Directed Learning

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Abstract

The concept of self-directed learning (SDL) has been extensively studied; however, the majority of studies have explored learners' perspectives on SDL, with less attention paid to investigating SDL from educators' perspectives. Moreover, although there is a growing body of literature investigating the cultural dimension of SDL, most of these studies are limited to examining the formation of SDL among individuals influenced by Western or Confucian cultures, ignoring the existence of other cultural groups. This study, which investigates Malaysian teacher educators' conceptualisations of SDL, begins to address these gaps. Twenty Malaysian teacher educators were interviewed to obtain their views on SDL. A constructivist grounded theory approach was used to inform the methodological framework of this study, whilst a hybrid inductive and deductive analysis approach was used to analyse the interview data. The findings of this study suggest that a more comprehensive conceptualisation of SDL is required that recognises the fundamental role of both the self and of educators in SDL, and acknowledges the impact of the sociocultural context on SDL. Informed by the existing SDL literature, and derived from fine-grained analysis of the interview data, the proposed definition of SDL foreground SDL as socially constructed learning where the learner takes control of his or her own learning processes within complex sociocultural contexts. This study concludes by recommending that future research investigates the impact of various cultures on learning, in order to develop a broader and more nuanced understanding of SDL.

Keywords

Culture, Educators' Perspectives, Learners' Control, Self-Directed Learning, Sociocultural Contexts

1. Introduction

Self-directed learning (SDL) has attracted a significant amount of attention from educationists and researchers. Although there has been a great deal of research carried out to investigate SDL and propose different ways of helping us to understand and promote effective SDL, it remains very much a contested educational concept. An extensive review of the research literature revealed that most previous research has focused on examining learners' perceptions and readiness for SDL and there has been little research to explore educators' understanding of SDL, especially in higher education. Moreover, while previous research has highlighted the cultural dimensions of SDL as one of the most important factors influencing society's views and practices in SDL, this influential factor remains less well researched, especially among ethnic groups other than Western and East Asian Chinese communities. These gaps in the previous research literature informed my decision to investigate the impact of Islamic and Confucian values in SDL.

This paper begins with a review of existing research literature related to the sociocultural dimensions of SDL, before presenting a detailed account of the Malaysian context. This discussion focuses on the cultural values held by the two main ethnic groups in Malaysia that have had a significant impact on learning. Next, the research design adopted in this study is presented with a specific focus on the procedures of data collection and the process of data analysis. After discussing the research methodology, this paper continues by outlining the results of the data analysis. Finally, it ends by drawing the findings discussed to a conclusion and proposing a refined definition of SDL.

2. Critical Review of Literature

The following section begins with a general discussion of 1) the sociocultural dimensions of SDL, 2) the similarities and differences between Western and Asian cultural perspectives on teaching and learning, and concludes by, 3) reflecting on the Malaysian cultural context.

2.1. Sociocultural Dimensions of SDL

In order to develop an understanding of SDL, it is most useful to review Brockett and Hiemstra's (1991) understanding of SDL that forms the foundation of their Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model. According to Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), SDL can be regarded as both a process and a goal. With the former, SDL is viewed as a process in which learners take responsibility for, and control of, their learning, while with the latter, SDL is viewed as a goal which focuses on learners' desire and tendency for self-direction. Bringing together both process and goal perspectives in the PRO model, Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) emphasise that their model focuses extensively on SDL in relation to the instructional process and a learner's characteristics. The PRO model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Describing their PRO model, Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) stress that personal responsibility is a key element which guides the learner self-direction and SDL process, while the oval shape encompassing the elements signifies that self-direction in learning takes place within a social context. However, Hiemstra and Brockett (2012) state that the social aspect of SDL stressed by the PRO model is overshadowed by the "Personal Responsibility" aspect, leading many researchers to misinterpret and misuse the PRO model (e.g. Andruske, 2009; Garrison, 2003).

Responding to the criticism and combined with their expanding experience and knowledge about SDL, Hiemstra and Brockett (2012) further developed and updated the PRO model, and named it the Person-Process-Context (PPC) model. The most important characteristics of the PPC model are the inclusion of the PRO's three basic elements: "the person or learner, the teaching-learning transaction or process, and the social-context" (p. 157), with particular attention being paid to highlighting the importance of the sociocultural context in SDL. The PPC model is depicted in Figure 2.

The PPC model postulates that SDL will be most effective when: (a) the learner is highly self-directed; (b) the instructional process encourages learners to take responsibility and control of their own learning; and (c) the sociocultural context as well as the learning environment offer a conducive atmosphere for SDL.

The PPC model, which has further clarified and expanded on the earlier conceptualisation of SDL by acknowledging the influence of the sociocultural context in SDL,
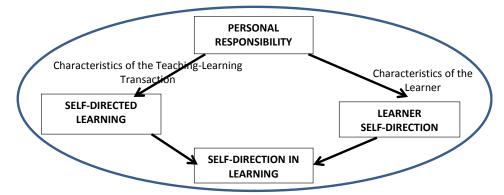

Figure 1. The Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model. Source: Hiemstra and Brockett (2012: p. 156).
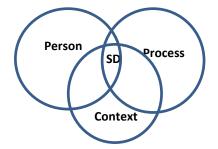

Figure 2. The Person-Process-Context (PPC) model. Source: Hiemstra and Brockett (2012: p. 158).

suggests that educators can and do play an important role in both promoting and hindering SDL. Incorporating the psychological, pedagogical and sociocultural dimensions of SDL, the PPC model has become the key reference for this study exploring learners' attributes, pedagogical strategies and the impact of the sociocultural context in relation to SDL.

The following section discusses the similarities and differences between Western and Asian cultural perspectives on teaching and learning.

2.2. Western and Asian Context

A plethora of literature has reported on the differences between West-Asian conceptions of learning and which are attributed to their distinctive cultural characteristics (e.g. Kim, 2002, 2008; Paulhus, Duncan, & Yik, 2002; Hau & Ho, 2008). The key differences between West-Asian discussed in the literature, and which are deemed crucial in regard to understanding SDL, are verbalisation (Kim, 2002, 2008), shyness (Paulhus, Duncan, & Yik, 2002) and achievement motivation (Hau & Ho, 2008).

The desire and ability of learners to participate actively and critically in class discussion are identified by many SDL researchers as one of the important strategies in creating a lively and engaging learning atmosphere that promotes SDL (Douglass & Morris, 2014). Therefore, Kim's (2002, 2008) research on verbalisation would seem relevant to this study. Kim (2002, 2008) helpfully highlights the different levels of importance of verbalisation within Western and Asian education contexts. According to Kim (2002, 2008), in a Western educational context, talking and thinking are interconnected educational dimensions as they portray individual cognitive processes. However, she reports that a state of silence is favoured by Asian learners as it is considered to be more beneficial for higher-order thinking.

Interestingly, Paulhus, Duncan and Yik's (2002) study, which further explored how shyness affects learners' willingness to participate in classroom interaction, seems to be closely linked to Kim's (2002, 2008) verbalisation study. Paulhus, Duncan and Yik's (2002) comparison of Asian and European learners sheds light on the fact that Asian learners exhibit significantly higher levels of shyness compared to their European counterparts. In addition, shyness is reported by many researchers as one of the prevailing features of Asian learners and that contributes to participation anxiety, failure avoidance and unassertiveness.

It would appear that the shyness factor proposed by Paulhus, Duncan and Yik (2002) leads most Asian learners to be less communicative, an observation that has also been made by Kim (2002, 2008). A review of literature on verbalisation and shyness is important, as these factors has a substantial power to influence learners' preference for SDL, or for submission to an authority figure.

Hau and Ho's (2008) analysis of seven empirical studies focusing on achievement motivation reveals an increasing focus on the social achievement motivation dimension which is considered to be an important feature of Asian learners' motivation. According to these researchers, Asian learners' motivation to learn is closely related to peer af-

filiation and social approval in comparison to their Western counterparts. Addressing this issue, Asma (2006) suggests that most Asian people are essentially from a collective society that prioritises the needs of the group over the needs of the individual. As a result, Asian people consider their actions carefully before taking any decisions to ensure that those actions will bring honour rather than shame to their family and country. This is especially true when it comes to learning, as success in learning would most probably lead to pride, whereas failure is relatively unacceptable as it would embarrass the family and suggest that the learners are not putting adequate effort into achieving the goal (Li, 2005).

A point to note is that, although the cultural dimension has received increasing attention from researchers, most researchers tend to make a simplistic assumption that most Asian learners possess Confucian values (e.g. Wang, 2013; Ho & Hau, 2010). In addition, the overly simplified classification of East vs West (e.g. Kim, 2002, 2008; Van Petegem et al., 2008) or Socratic vs Confucian (e.g. Chuah, Singh, & Goh, 2014; Peters, 2015) which attempts to explain various features of learners, has failed to take into account the diverse cultural variations that exist in the world. This is because the complexity and variations of cultural differentiations are, in fact, greater than the oversimplification of a West-East and Socrates-Confucian ideology. Nevertheless, this study would suggest that neither learning orientation is superior to the other.

This current study, which takes into account—the Malay-Islamic perspective and Malaysian-Chinese-Confucian values is hoped to 1) offer an insight into the significant variations of culture which currently exist in Malaysia, and, 2) provide an alternative way of understanding SDL.

2.3. The Influence of Malay-Islamic Values in Learning and Teaching

Based on researcher critical review of the literature on Malaysian learners, two noticeable gaps are evident. First, most of the researchers tend to regard Malaysian learners as a homogeneous group of learners. This assumption is erroneous as it ignores the fact that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country (Tengku Kasim, 2012). Second, Malaysian learners are commonly equated with Asian learners, who have inherited Confucian heritage values (e.g. Biggs, 1998; Chuah, Singh, & Goh, 2014). However, this study would argue that it is inappropriate to suggest that all Malaysians adhere to and practise Confucianist values. This is because Islam is Malaysia's official religion, and Islamic values may have a greater influence on Malaysian society (Mastor, Jin, & Cooper, 2000).

Drawing from the literature on Islamic philosophy or Islamic views on education, it is apparent that Islam emphasises the need to continually gain knowledge, upgrade one's educational level and stay current (Wan, 2013). Finally, in Islam, educators are held accountable not only for imparting worldly knowledge, but also for instilling good values by guiding and teaching their learners' religious knowledge (Wan, 2013). With regard to the educator-learner relationship, Islam rejects the autocratic role of educators and suggests that educators should be mentors, facilitators and, to a great extent, parents to their learners by dealing with them with kindness, tolerance, justice and

wisdom.

This section has demonstrated the centrality of Islamic values in the Malaysian education system; however, there is a lack of literature on the Malay-Islamic perspective of learning compared to the impact of Confucian values of learning on the Malaysian Chinese. The following sub-section discusses the dominant Confucian values in the Malaysian education context.

2.4. The Influence of Malaysian-Chinese-Confucian Values in Learning and Teaching

Chinese are second-largest ethnic group in Malaysia and they have preserved their Chinese traditions, cultures and identity by practising their beliefs and customs (Tengku Kasim, 2012). Over the past few years, many researchers have reported that the Confucian values practised by Hong Kong Chinese, Korean Chinese, Vietnamese Chinese, Thai Chinese, Singaporean Chinese, Malaysian Chinese and even Chinese in Western countries may vary slightly due to the influence of their local culture and nationality (e.g. Tengku Kasim, 2012; Peen & Arshad, 2014). Hence, it is reasonable to suggest that the oversimplified view of Chinese learners as a homogenous group of learners is inaccurate.

Based on researcher experience and other writers' reports on the Confucian values practised by Chinese learners in Malaysia, the Confucian values held by the Chinese in Malaysia may differ to a certain extent from those of the Chinese in China. This may be because of the need to maintain national unity, something which forces the Malaysian-Chinese to adapt to the Malaysian context and which consequently indirectly influences their actions. Po Li (2005) claims that Confucian values are practised passively by Malaysian-Chinese learners. According to this writer, this passivity is crucial to maintaining social unity, especially in multi-ethnic Malaysia where ethnic groups must work together to preserve national harmony and the country's prosperity. A critical review of literature on teaching and learning in Malaysia (e.g. Tengku Kasim, 2012; Peen & Arshad, 2014) revealed three dominant Confucian concepts practised by Malaysian learners regardless of their ethnic groups. These include:

1) respect for experts and authority;

2) the concept of "face"; and

3) a belief that all individuals can succeed through perseverance and hard work.

In relation to the concept of "respect for experts and authority", it is first important to note that the purpose of education in the Confucian heritage is to produce the most genuine and sincere individuals (Li & Wegerif, 2014). Hence, the educator within a Confucian heritage culture is responsible for transmitting the truth and for being a good moral example (Li & Wegerif, 2014).

Another important aspect in Confucianism is the concept of "face". There are many definitions of "face" offered by researchers. However, this study would like to suggest that Ho's (1976) definition effectively captures the complexity of Confucius' concept of "face". Ho (1976) defines "face" as "the respectability and/or deference that a person

can claim for himself or herself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in the social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in the position as well as acceptably in his social conduct" (p. 883). Reflecting on the concept of "face", questioning of an educator is seen as rude, unacceptable and disrespectful and may cause a loss of "face". Therefore, to avoid losing "face", learners are not encouraged to question or criticise their educators or their friends in order to maintain a harmonious atmosphere and to avoid confrontation (Tengku Kasim, 2012).

Finally, the most important feature of Confucian teaching practised in Malaysia is the belief that everyone can succeed if they work hard. According to Li and Wegerif (2014), the Confucian idea that an individual's success depends on the effort made rather than an individual's fixed intelligence and capability is inherently more positive and motivating. My review of the literature on Confucian heritage culture has revealed that learners influenced by Confucian values are often seen to persevere more and are more hardworking. Po Li (2005) reported similar findings within a Malaysian context. According to her, hard work, perseverance, dedication and an ability to endure hardship are highly valued virtues. She added that most Malaysian learners are willing to put enormous effort into achieving their goal. In this regard, it would seem that the motivational aspect plays an important role in sustaining learning - an important aspect which drives learners' direction in learning.

Although Chinese are the second-largest ethnic group in Malaysia, Confucian values are practised by most Malaysians regardless of their ethnic group. This shows that the influence of cultural aspects in learning and teaching should be considered carefully, especially when seeking to expand and develop further understanding of SDL.

2.5. Conclusion to the Cultural Influences on Learning and Teaching

In conclusion, in developing a culturally responsive higher education institution, the sociocultural context should be taken into account. Although the preceding discussion on Islamic and Confucian values on education was separated into two distinctive parts, this is not to suggest that both perspectives are different; in fact, they share many similar features. For example, producing morally good individuals is regarded as the ultimate goal of education from both the Islamic and Confucian perspectives. An important point emphasised by the preceding section is the urgency in revising the tendency of many researchers to simply regard Asian learners, or Malaysian learners in particular, as a homogeneous group of learners regardless of their nationality. This study, considering the diversity of Malaysian culture, has investigated Malaysian teacher educators' views of SDL, which is essential to my desire to provide an alternative way of understanding SDL and broaden our understanding of SDL as essential educational strategies in assisting learners to be competent learner.

3. Methodology

This study which is expected to provide a broader way of understanding and practising SDL is guided by three research questions: 1) How do teacher educators in Malaysia

conceptualise learning?, 2) How do teacher educators in Malaysia conceptualise SDL?, and, 3) To what extent do teacher educators in Malaysia perceive themselves as self-directed learners? The following sections describe and provide a rationale and justification for the research design and data-gathering approaches that were adopted for this study.

3.1. Research Design

In designing an appropriate research method, Creswell (2013) suggests that researchers take into account the constraints of the study, such as time, costs and access to participants and that they should compare their "ideal" research plan with the possible and workable research plan. Therefore, after considering the opportunities and constraints which could influence how research activities would be conducted for this current study, seven phases were devised: Phase 1: Reviewing the existing literature; Phase 2: Identifying a gap in the existing literature; Phase 3: Developing research questions; Phase 4: Formulating questions for interview guides; Phase 5: Conducting semi-structured interviews; Phase 6: Analysing the interviews; and Phase 7: Reporting research findings. Further discussion of all seven phases is presented later.

3.1.1. Data-Gathering Approach: Semi-Structured Interviews

Adopting a constructivist grounded theory position, which places great value on research participants' stories and stresses the importance of a collaborative and mutual relationship between the researcher and research participants in co-constructing the knowledge, it was decided that the semi-structured interview would serve as the best approach to gathering data for this current study because: 1) it provides a focused yet flexible approach for gathering data, 2) it guides researcher in covering the important areas pertinent to this current study, while at the same time allowing space and opportunity for me as a researcher to seek further explanation in understanding vague responses (Doody & Noonan, 2013), and 3) it allows researcher to develop a positive relationship with my research participants through an informal and conversational interaction, which will indirectly lighten the atmosphere and ease my anxiety (Doody & Noonan, 2013).

Four interview questions were specifically designed to help me find answers to the key research questions. The interview topics were as follows:

1) Demographic information including gender, educational qualification, where research participants were educated and their teaching experience;

2) Teacher educators' conceptualisations of learning;

3) Teacher educators' conceptualisations and understandings of SDL; and

4) Teacher educators' perceptions of themselves as learners and self-directed learners.

Researcher opted to pilot the interview schedule to two Malaysian teacher educators who volunteered to participate (they were not involved as main respondent in this research study). Piloting of the interview schedule ensures that the interview questions

would successfully explore the important areas pertinent to SDL, before embarking on the actual interview session.

3.1.2. Sampling Approaches

Snowball sampling was chosen for this study for several reasons: (a) it is very efficient and economical (Cohen & Arieli, 2011), and (b) it allowed researcher to get in touch with "hard-to-reach" research participants by asking current research participants to nominate potential research participants from their academic and social networks (Cohen & Arieli, 2011).

Despite these clear advantages, snowball sampling has a number of limitations. The most significant problem with this sampling approach is the potential for bias (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). By asking the initial research participants to suggest additional research participants, there is a risk of including only individuals connected to this interrelated circle, while excluding others. Although the majority of the final group of interviewees were teacher educators in universities, their backgrounds and experiences were sufficiently diverse to suggest that a range of opinions would be gathered during interview, and this was indeed the case, as becomes clear in the *Findings* section. Regardless of this key limitation, snowball sampling was identified as the best sampling approach for use in this study, as it is a practical and effective way of contacting potential research participants.

3.1.3. Research Participants' Profiles

A total of twenty teacher educators (five males and fifteen females) were recruited from the schools of education at three Malaysian Research Universities. One out of the twenty research participants was Chinese, and the remainder were Malays. The research participants were informed that their identities would remain confidential and would not be disclosed to any parties, and that a pseudonym would be assigned to each research participant to maintain their anonymity. The Table 1, outlines each research participant's pseudonym, gender, ethnic group, highest education qualification, teaching experience and, educational background.

3.1.4. Approaches to Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse data gained from the semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was chosen for several reasons. First, it is a flexible and useful approach to analysing qualitative data (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). Second, thematic analysis has the potential to provide insightful, rich and detailed data by capturing the complexity that exists in the data (Crowe, Inder, & Porter, 2015). Third, thematic analysis is simple to use as an approach to qualitative analysis, particularly for beginners, as it does not require advanced theoretical and technological knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Despite the advantages of thematic analysis, it is not immune from criticism. For instance, the researcher's personal values and beliefs may influence the interpretation process, resulting in a lack of rigour (Vaismoradi, Bondas, & Turunen, 2013). Tackling

Table 1. Research participants' pseudonym, gender, ethnic group, highest educational qualification, teaching experience and educational background.

Name	Gender	Ethnic group	Highest education qualification	Teaching experience – School level – Primary ≤5 years	Primary ≥6 years	Secondary ≤5 years	Secondary ≥6 years	University 5-10 years	University 11-16 years	University ≥17 years	Educational background – Local 1st deg	Local Master deg	Local PhD	Overseas 1st deg	Overseas Master deg	Overseas PhD
1. Dr Affandi	M	M	PhD			X			X		X	X				X
2. Dr Jamal	M	M	PhD						X		X	X				X
3. Dr Khairiah	F	M	PhD					X			X	X	X			
4. Dr Rahim	F	M	PhD				X		X		X		X		X	
5. Dr Amalina	F	M	PhD							X	X	X	X			
6. Dr Zaki	M	M	PhD						X		X	X	X			
7. Dr Azlina	F	M	PhD			X			X			X	X	X		
8. Dr Hidayah	F	M	PhD						X		X	X				X
9. Dr Nabilah	F	M	PhD			X				X	X	X	X			
10. Dr Raihan	F	M	PhD					X			X	X	X			
11. Dr Siti	F	M	PhD		X		X	X				X	X			
12. Dr Salima	F	M	PhD			X			X					X	X	X
13. Dr Rokiah	F	M	PhD		X	X				X	X	X				X
14. Dr Mazlan	M	M	PhD	X					X		X	X				X
15. Dr Chew	F	C	PhD						X		X	X	X			
16. Dr Asma	F	M	PhD				X			X	X	X	X			
17. Dr Rosnah	F	M	PhD				X			X	X	X	X			
18. Dr Liyana	F	M	PhD	X			X			X	X	X	X			
19. Dr Farahin	F	M	PhD			X				X	X	X	X			
20. Dr Asri	M	M	PhD	X			X	X						X	X	X

this issue, Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that the interpretation process within thematic analysis can never be free from the researcher's personal subjective understanding and perspective. In a similar vein, Attride-Stirling (2001) convincingly suggests that issues of misinterpretation are preventable if the researcher knows the aim of their research, has clear research questions to guide their procedure of data gathering and analysis and knows an appropriate way to collect and analyse data. Taking into account Attride-Stirling's (2001) suggestions, the research questions in this study were clearly and explicitly formulated, which guided the adoption of a clear research design and appropriate approaches to data analysis.

Despite having the option of adopting either an inductive or deductive thematic analysis approach or deductive thematic, researcher believe that the process of data

analysis moves beyond either of these approaches on their own (e.g. Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In this study, Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach using both inductive and deductive analysis was used. Both the inductive and deductive approaches in Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's hybrid approach (2006) act not only to complement each other but they also prevented me from missing important data. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that the "hybrid approach of inductive and deductive thematic analysis" (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006: p. 4) improved the rigour of the thematic analysis and offered a better standpoint for analysing complex data.

The following section—*Findings*—will report the findings of this study and the *Discussion* and *Conclusions* section outlines the reconceptualisation of SDL within the Malaysian context.

4. Findings

Table 2 summarises the key themes and subthemes which emerged following analysis of the data. Detailed discussion and interpretation of these themes and subthemes are presented in the following sections.

4.1. Theme 1: Prevailing Culture Which Inhibits/Facilitates SDL

The *Prevailing culture which inhibits/facilitates SDL*, recognises the cultural context and its impact on learning. This theme consists of the *Respecting wiser individuals* and *The value of face* subthemes. This theme highlights the impact of the Malay-Islamic perspectives and the Malaysian-Chinese-Confucian perspectives on learning that have significantly contributed to broadening and expanding current knowledge concerning the cultural dimension of SDL.

In relation to the *Respecting wiser individuals*, Dr Rahim, in his extracts below, reports that the feeling of respect towards wiser persons, especially educators, is shown by

Table 2. Summary of the findings of the interview analysis.

	Theme	Subtheme	
1.	Prevailing culture which inhibits/facilitates SDL	Respecting wiser individuals The value of face	
2.	SDL as a balance in learning	Freedom Being in control	Taking responsibility Having choices Decision-making Sharing power
3.	SDL as a social, interdependent process	SDL as learning for your "self" SDL as learning on your own SDL as learning with others: the concept of a learning project The need for a guide from the educator (Ta'lim)	
4.	SDL as a dynamic developmental process	SDL as the "wanting" to learn phenomenon	

obeying their instructions and not questioning their actions. The effect of such a culture can be seen in learners not daring to question educators' actions or disagreeing with educators because they worry that they might be labelled disrespectful. In this regard, Pham and Renshaw (2013) reported that Asian educators, who are greatly influenced by the value of respecting wiser individuals, tend to view educators as authority figures to be respected and followed by learners.

> …when somebody comes to your house, let's say your uncle…your parents will ask you to go to your room…you are not allowed to ask questions…your mother will stare at you if you show any reaction of disagreement with your uncle. This is how we are trained…we are brought up to think that any argument with older people or those superior should be avoided…what happens if you argue? People will label you as being rude. (D130-D138)

Aside from respecting the educator, the act of not questioning the educators' actions is closely associated with maintaining and protecting the learners' self-pride, that is, the value of face. According to Dr Khairiah, most Malaysian learners refuse to be actively involved in class discussion because they want to protect their self-pride as well as their peers' self-pride (e.g. Tengku Kasim, 2012; Ahmad & Majid, 2014). Dr Khairiah suggests that the act of asking for explanations shows that learners do not understand the topic, which indirectly reflects adversely on their intellectual capabilities. Furthermore, Dr Khairiah also argues that learners do not question their peers because they worry that it will be embarrassing if their peers are not able to answer the questions and, most importantly, they want to maintain a harmonious classroom atmosphere by avoiding any potential confrontation.

> our students, they rarely take part in class activity…our students, they [the learners] are so afraid if they [the learners] make mistakes, because our culture…when you make mistake, it shows that you do not know…it shows that you are not intelligent…people will look down at you…this is our culture…in the presentation session, …they keep quiet…when I ask why, they say they [the learners] do not want to be seen as betrayers…they [the learners] are afraid that their friends might feel embarrassed if they cannot answer the question. (C216-C228)

4.2. Theme 2: SDL as a Balance in Learning

The second main theme, *SDL as a balance in learning*, comprises two subthemes, *Freedom* and *Being in control*. This theme highlights the need to blend SDL and conventional learning approaches to provide the best learning experience for learners. As was stated by the majority of the research participants, both contemporary and conventional approaches to learning are important and should exist in tandem, especially in Malaysia. Two reasons were identified for this: the requirement to meet the needs of stakeholders, such as society, parents and even learners who are still confined to an exam-oriented system; and equipping learners with essential skills such as decision-making, time-management skills, and taking responsibility for updating existing skills

which is essential for survival.

The first subtheme for *SDL as a balance in learning* is *Freedom*, and includes *Taking responsibility* and *Having choices*, while the second subtheme, *Being in Control*, comprises two components, namely *Decision-making* and *Sharing power*. Although *Freedom* and *Being in control* emerged as two distinct subthemes, they are interconnected. For example, research participants believed that to be in control, learners should be given the freedom to decide their learning approaches. To complicate this situation even further, research participants emphasised that enabling learners to take control, and be in control of their learning by granting freedom in learning, is only achievable through a learner-oriented curriculum. Dr Affandi suggests that educators should be more creative and innovative in incorporating SDL within a rigid educational setting.

> total freedom is not possible…at an education institution…Lecturers must know how to creatively design learning and teaching activities…if they wish to promote self-directed learning. (A185-A190)

With regard to *Being in Control*, or in specific the *Decision-making* subtheme, Dr Azlina stresses that the ability to be in control is very important for self-directed learners because when they are in control other parties will not have the opportunity to impose anything on their learning process. In her view, being in control is one of the significant elements that distinguishes other-directed learning from SDL. She adds that when the learner is able to control his or her own learning, the learner is much better positioned to decide what, when and how to learn.

> self-directed learning, whereby you [the learner] take control of what you [the learner] want to learn, …you [the learner] make your [the learner's] own learning objectives …you [the learner] chart your [the learner's] own learning progress…. you [the learner] choose your [the learner's] method, you [the learner] choose your [the learner's] material, you [the learner] choose your [the learner's] resources, you [the learner] even choose how you [the learner] want to learn. The important thing is, you [the learner] are in control of your [the learner's] learning in self-directed learning, nobody is forcing you [the learner] to do anything. (G217-G228)

Taking this discussion further, attention will now turn to one of the components of *Being in control*, and that is *Sharing power*. From Dr Jamal's point of view, when learners take pride in the ownership of their own learning processes, this may nurture their "wanting" to learn desire, which is suggested by the majority of the research participants as one of the essential ingredients required to become a successful self-directed learner. As reported by Dr Jamal, empowering learners to be in control and take charge of their learning is achievable by granting a certain degree of freedom and flexibility:

> if you [the educator] want to include the students as active learning partners. You [the educator] must be flexible with your teaching approaches…you must offer various learning alternatives for them to choose from. Then, when they choose, it shows that you [the educator] are actually empowering them [the learners] to take

control and responsibility for their [the learners'] learning. (B450-B455)

The sharing of power between the learner and educator reflects an interdependent relationship, a theme which will be explored discussed in the following section, *SDL as a social, interdependent process.*

4.3. Theme 3: SDL as a Social, Interdependent Process

SDL as a social, interdependent process, recognises learning as a social process which does not happen in isolation. The *SDL as a social, interdependent process* theme has four subthemes: 1) *SDL as learning for your "self"*, 2) *SDL as learning by your "self"/on your own*, 3) *SDL as learning with others*, and 4) *The need for a guide from the educator*. A point to note, the first two subthemes recognise the importance of individual learning. In addition, individual learning was not characterised by these research participants as isolated learning, but rather as self-determined and self-planned learning, which is similar to how previous literature has described it.

A majority of the research participants agreed that SDL is a type of learning conducted by an autonomous and independent individual. Taking this idea, Dr Jamal, in his extracts below, suggests that apart from SDL being a learning approach directed by individual learners, it is also driven by individual learning interests and a desire for personal growth (Douglass & Morris, 2014):

in self-directed learning, the students are …directing their learning to improve themselves…as self-directed learning is managed by the students …the learning to be driven by the students' interests… the wanting to learn desire to improve oneself is important in self-directed learning. (B107-B114)

One of the most important element emphasised by most research participants with regard to *SDL as learning on your own* is the learner's willingness to take responsibility for their own learning, especially in the process of planning their learning strategies. In discussing this idea, Dr Mazlan states that it is important for learners to be aware that the responsibility for ensuring successful learning depends on them and not on external factors:

…if the person chooses to pursue a self-directed learning activity, that person should be aware that the responsibility of the learning lies within themselves, not others. (N161-N164)

The third—*SDL as learning with others: The concept of a learning project* and fourth —*The need for a guide from the educator* (*Ta'lim*), subthemes of *SDL as a social, interdependent process*, describe social interaction with capable people as an effective way of developing effective SDL skills and strategies. The importance of the role of others in learning echoes Vygotskys' account of what he calls the Zone of Proximal Development (1978), where Vygotsky (1978) believes that appropriate support given at the right time will assist learners in achieving a learning task which would otherwise be unattainable.

Dr Affandi believes that successful self-directed learners usually shape their own thinking in response to others' comments, thoughts, perspectives and experiences. Highlighting the "Ta'lim" emphasis in Islamic teaching, Dr Affandi explains that in the "Ta'lim" concept, educators are not there to control, but simply to facilitate learning, and most importantly to help the learners avoid becoming distracted and digressing from true learning. Dr Affandi, as demonstrated in the extract below, is convinced about the paramount role of the educator in supporting SDL:

> …need to have an educator…to teach you principle, philosophy of learning from teachers, …when we self-directedly try to understand religion, …sometimes we get distracted, we tend to digress from the true teaching and this is when you need a "guru" or educator to come and guide…having educator, not to control totally but to facilitate and empower the learners…we cannot be very teacher-centred or we cannot be very student-centred, we have to have both, balanced. So that you can eventually have a comprehensive and more holistic learning and teaching process. (A375-A394)

4.4. Theme 4: SDL as a Dynamic Developmental Process

The fourth theme, *SDL as a dynamic developmental process*, as emphasised by most research participants, focuses on the learning process rather than on the content of learning. Three essential features of the learning process highlighted by this theme were: (a) learning skills will gradually improve with practice, (b) the learning process should be in accordance with the learner's ability and (c) the learning process should be determined and driven by both the learner's interest and needs.

The main subtheme for *SDL as a dynamic developmental process* is *SDL as the "wanting" to learn phenomenon*. This subtheme stresses the importance for the learners themselves to have the desire to learn and to proceed in a self-directed approach to learning. As has been stated by a number of researchers (e.g. Winstead, 2013; Douglass & Morris, 2014), self-motivation is one of the most important elements for successful self-directed learners. Dr Jamal repeatedly asserted that if learners themselves have the "wanting" to learn desire, then this type of learner is more likely to willingly pursue an SDL activity by increasing their level of effort and successfully enduring hardship and challenges with positivity and perseverance, compared to those who are forced to learn.

The *Findings* section has presented this study key contributions to knowledge advancement by highlighting the need for thorough investigation on the cultural dimension of SDL for a comprehensive reconceptualisation of SDL.

5. Discussion

This section provides answers to the research questions by highlighting the emerging findings. However, because of the complexities of the findings that emerged, they will not be discussed in a simple, straightforward linear fashion; rather, key issues will be discussed in an integrated way.

Defining SDL

Exploring the research participants' perceptions of the learning process is essential in redefining and reconceptualising my SDL framework as it is apparent that the research participants' complex understanding of the nature of learning as a social, interdependent process has significantly influenced their conceptualisation of SDL. Therefore, as a result of both researcher critical review of various proposals made by researchers on the key elements of SDL, and having been significantly informed by my fine-grained analysis of the interview data, this current study proposes the following definition of SDL:

> SDL embraces a balance in 1) learner-directed and teacher-directed approaches, and 2) the power relationship between learner and educator. SDL is a dynamic developmental learning process which is internally driven and at the same time is socially interdependent. Most importantly, SDL places the learner as an active agent of learning who takes control of his or her own learning goals.

In contrast to the views of the majority of the researchers on the ultimate goal of SDL, which is to produce self-reliant learners who can effectively direct their own learning with minimal guidance from others, my analysis of the research participants' accounts revealed that they were reluctant to step back and allow the learners to take control of their learning, as most of them strongly believed that educators have a significant role to play in ensuring the learning process does not deviate from the original goal of learning. According to research participants, the role of the educator should not be set aside, something that reflects the remarkable influence of one of the fundamental principles of both Islamic and Confucian perspectives on education. Although all of the research participants stressed the importance of educators' presence in learning, at the same time they stated that learners' active involvement in the learning process is essential for successful and meaningful learning.

This view of the learner as an active agent of learning and of the educator as a facilitator of learning suggests that the majority of the research participants valued a balance in SDL, whereby they strive to achieve a harmonious blend of both learner-directed and teacher-directed approaches. They added that this ideal and promising learning situation, which they propose could assist the development of learners' SDL skills, is only achievable if the learner is granted greater autonomy to take control of their learning and if a balanced power relationship between the learner and educator is established.

Therefore, based on researcher fine-grained analysis of the research participants' accounts, it is reasonable to suggest that for successful implementation of SDL, it is important to recognise the fundamental role of educators in supporting SDL while at the same time acknowledging the significant mutual interdependence that exist between learner and educator.

6. Future Research

As this paper have repeatedly enunciated in the previous sections, the majority of the research on SDL has been particularly concerned with exploring Western and Confu-

cian values in SDL, this current study, which has foregrounded the significant role that culture has on SDL, has highlighted the impact of Malay-Islamic and Malaysian-Chinese-Confucian values on the understanding and practice of SDL. In an effort to comprehensively capture the significant impact of culture on SDL, future studies may consider investigating the cultural aspect among other ethnic groups in various national settings.

7. Conclusion

This study has provided new insights into our understanding of SDL, especially from the educator's point of view, and has begun, albeit in a tentative way, to address some of the gaps in the literature. Whilst this current study supports the existing literature on SDL by confirming the significant role that the self has in directing one's own learning, it also moves beyond the current focus of Western vs Confucian culture categorisation by offering Malay-Islamic and Malaysian-Chinese-Confucian perspectives on SDL. Furthermore, this study has foregrounded the fact that the learner whose behaviour and ways of thinking are greatly impacted by the local culture is the single most important influence on SDL.

Finally, since this study investigates SDL in the Malaysian context with particular attention paid to highlighting the influence of Malay-Islamic and Malaysian-Chinese-Confucian perspectives on SDL, it can be argued that the reconceptualisation of SDL offered in this study can be of distinct value in helping us to fully understand SDL within diverse ethnic groups.

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