



Saudi English as a Foreign Language University Students' Readiness for Autonomous Language Learning

Preparación de estudiantes universitarios saudíes de inglés como lengua extranjera para el aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas

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Abstract

Autonomous language learning is considered to be a step to prepare students for their future. It is one aspect of the learner-centered approach. Therefore, investigating students' readiness for ALL could be of paramount importance. This study aimed at revealing Saudi English major students' readiness for ALL. More precisely, the study sought to identify the students' perspectives on their personal responsibility and that of their professors towards English learning, their ability to act autonomously, and their real application of ALL outside the classroom. A questionnaire was adopted for data collection. The participants were 105 students majoring in English language at a public university in Saudi Arabia. The results showed a relationship between the participants' responsibility towards the process and that of their professors. However, the students assigned more responsibility to their teachers. It was also found that the participants were not confident in their capability to act autonomously in the process of learning English. Finally, the results showed that the participants do not autonomously practice several extracurricular activities mentioned in the questionnaire. Generally, the participants were not ready for ALL, and the study recommended that students' awareness of the advantages of ALL be raised.

Keywords: autonomous language learning, autonomy, awareness, directed study, learners

Resumen

El aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas (ALL) se considera un paso para preparar a los estudiantes para su futuro. Es un aspecto del enfoque centrado en el alumno. Por lo tanto, investigar la preparación de los estudiantes para el ALL podría ser de suma importancia. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo revelar la preparación de estudiantes saudíes de la licenciatura en inglés para el ALL. En particular, el estudio buscó identificar los puntos de vista de los estudiantes sobre su responsabilidad personal y la de sus profesores hacia el aprendizaje del inglés, su habilidad para actuar de manera autónoma y su aplicación real de ALL fuera del aula. Se adoptó un cuestionario para la recopilación de datos. Los participantes fueron 105 estudiantes del énfasis en idioma inglés en una universidad pública en Arabia Saudita. Los resultados mostraron una relación entre la responsabilidad de los estudiantes y la de sus profesores. Sin embargo, los estudiantes asignaron más responsabilidad a sus profesores. También

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se encontró que los participantes no estaban seguros de su capacidad para actuar de forma autónoma en el proceso de aprendizaje del inglés. Finalmente, los resultados mostraron que los participantes no practican de manera autónoma varias actividades extracurriculares recogidas en el cuestionario. En general, los participantes no estaban preparados para el ALL, y el estudio recomendó que se sensibilizara a los estudiantes sobre las ventajas del ALL.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas, autonomía, conciencia, estudio dirigido, estudiantes

Introduction

The implementation of the learner-centered approach in English language teaching (ELT) has shifted the attention from the instructor to the learner. This transformation has led to the rise of two important teaching concepts: *learner involvement* and *independent learner* (Littlewood, 1996). Ahmed and Hasan (2020), Yildirim (2008), Thanasoulas (2000), and Littlewood (1996) agree that the shift from focus on the teacher to focus on the learner have paved the way for the concept of *learner autonomy* (LA), which has become dominant in ELT. Consequently, more emphasis has been made on learners and their learning because it contributes to preparing them to be lifelong learners, engage them in their learning, and develop their skills and abilities (Weimer, 2002; Shujun, 2006). Rogers (1969) points out that any schooled person is the one who knows how to adjust knowledge, becomes aware of knowledge insecurity, and considers searching for knowledge as a foundation of securing it. Learners' awareness of knowledge instability and their seeking to resolve it call for promoting their 'how to learn' ability, thus leading them to become independent learners (McDevitt, 1997), implying that education should target preparing learners to oversee their learning. Nevertheless, learners may not be willing to be accountable for their learning due to a lack of readiness for autonomous language learning (ALL). This could also be attributed to the teacher-centered approach adopted in most situations involving English as a foreign language (EFL), as is the case in Saudi Arabia. Saudi EFL learners were found to be heavily reliant on their instructors in learning

(Alonazi, 2017). Accordingly, this may represent a risk for ELT, and Saudi EFL learners might not become life-long learners.

Literature review

By attracting researchers' interest, autonomy has recently found solid ground among them. Additionally, a wide range of terms are currently used as synonyms of autonomy (Everhard, 2012). These terms include *self-directed learning*, *learner independence*, and *self-managed learning* (Everhard, 2012). For example, Holec (1981) defines it as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (p. 3). Littlewood (1996) refers to autonomy as a *capacity* to think and perform separately in any position including cases of learning. Another definition is proposed by Benson (2001, 2003, 2006) who suggests that autonomy is an individual's ability to manage learning. Little (2007) points out that autonomy entails learners doing things for themselves. ALL can be considered as a learning approach that students follow in order to be in charge of their learning and to manage it (Ahmed and Hasan, 2020). This study favors Littlewood's definition of ALL, as it covers both the ability to think and perform personally in all situations including learning; it relates reality to educational settings.

According to Benson (2001, p. 50), other aspects of autonomy are abilities related to autonomy, thus allowing students to:

- program their study tasks,
- observe their advancement,
- assess their results,
- manage their learning on a daily basis, and
- direct the content of their learning.

Autonomy could be harnessed in various ways according to Benson and Voller (1997). It could be used for cases in which students study by themselves or for a group of abilities that are acquired and used in autonomous learning. It could also be adopted for innate abilities restrained by formal education or for learners' practice of taking charge of their learning. Finally, it could be used for learners' prerogative to decide on the way of their learning.

Moreover, autonomy has some degrees, as proposed by [Nunan \(1997\)](#). This author provides a five-degree model of learner autonomy features that are classified into stages of development. Firstly, *awareness*, where learners are aware of the educational aims and the material they learn. Then, *involvement*, which refers to learners' involvement in choosing their own objectives from a range of offered objectives is the second phase. Next, *intervention*, which requires learners that participate in adjusting the aims and subject matter of the course. After that comes the stage of *creation*, when learners are expected to formulate their special goals and objectives. Finally, there is the stage of *transcendence*, where learners move beyond the borders of the classroom to connect between the class material and the real world.

An autonomous learner can be described, according to [Littlewood \(1996\)](#), as the possessor of private *capacity* to execute options in controlling his deeds. This capacity has two main parts: *ability* and *knowledge*. The former relies on knowledge about the options between which learners must choose and the skills needed for making suitable choices. The latter is based on possessing motivation and confidence to be responsible for said selection. Together, all these parts are required for a person to act autonomously.

As with the definition of autonomy, many scholars such as [Dickinson \(1993\)](#), [Breen and Mann \(1997\)](#), [Lai \(2019\)](#), and [Ahmed and Hasan \(2020\)](#) have enumerated some features of autonomous students. For instance, [Dickinson \(1993\)](#) proposes that autonomous learners can:

- recognize what was taught to them,
- create their own learning aims,
- use suitable language learning strategies,
- distinguish inappropriate learning strategies, and
- observe their own learning.

Research on students and their teachers' responsibility towards English language learning has shown a correlation between students and teachers' responsibility within the English learning process ([Yildirim, 2008](#); [Spratt, et al., 2002](#)).

Regarding learners' beliefs in their ability to behave autonomously, [Chan \(2015\)](#), [Yildirim \(2008\)](#), and [Spratt et al. \(2002\)](#) concluded that their respondents were confident in their capabilities to act autonomously in the learning of language. Research on students' real applications of ALL have revealed that learners normally engage in and out-of-class language learning tasks that were not related to their formal study courses ([Spratt et al., 2002](#); [Yildirim, 2008](#)).

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the issue of autonomy and ALL is relatively new ([Arabai, 2017](#)), which is why very few studies have been conducted on this issue. [Arabai \(2017\)](#) attempted to identify the level of autonomy and its relation to academic achievement among Saudi intermediate and secondary school and university students in four geographical regions. The study revealed that Saudi students were not autonomous and that this affected their language achievement. It also revealed that gender significantly influenced autonomy and achievement (female students were more autonomous and thus achieved better results than male students). [Alonazi \(2017\)](#) investigated the part played by teachers in upgrading Saudi secondary school students' autonomy in Riyadh. The study concluded that teachers usually encouraged autonomous learners in their classes and that teachers adopted various teaching strategies. In addition, teachers were confronted by some obstacles which hindered them in promoting their students' autonomy. These problems entailed learners' absence of individualistic learning skills, insufficient school laws, and instructors' shortage in core techniques to enhance ALL. [Alzubi et al. \(2017\)](#) aimed at identifying current practices involving learner autonomy among Saudi undergraduate students in the preparatory year at Najran University. Their study yielded several findings. First, it found that the students displayed a decreased standard of learner autonomy. Second, the participants were had a midpoint mean knowledge proficiency. Third, the students had a decreased perception regarding their learning. Fourth, they showed signs of dependence. Finally, they had a weak level of ALL dimensions such as grammar knowledge and communal distinction.

All these studies did not cater to students majoring in the English language regarding ALL, and they tackled aspects of autonomy such as Saudi EFL learners' level of autonomy and its relation to attainment, teachers' role in promoting autonomous learning, and the current practices of autonomous learning among Saudi undergraduate students. These studies ignored aspects of students and teachers' responsibility toward language learning, students' abilities to act autonomously, and their real applications of ALL outside class. Bearing this gap in mind, this paper aims to examine Saudi English major students' readiness for ALL at the Department of English of a Saudi public university. Thus, this research seeks to answer these questions:

1. How do university-level Saudi English language major students view their personal and their professors' responsibilities in the process of learning the English language?
2. What do the students think about their ability to act autonomously?
3. What are their real applications of ALL outside the classroom?

Methods

Study design

This study is descriptive in nature, and it adopted the quantitative approach regarding data collection and analysis. Its descriptive design is relevant since, according to [Tavakoli \(2012\)](#), it allows reporting, comparing, and interpreting a phenomenon or popular practices. Like the quantitative approach, a descriptive design relies on logical methods of inductive and deductive reasoning to achieve generalizability ([Tavakoli, 2012](#)). These features of descriptive research are appropriate because the study seeks to describe and report the participants' readiness for ALL through gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data.

Population and sample

The sampling technique adopted in the study was stratified sampling. It involves dividing the population into two or more homogenous groups with the same features ([Tavakoli, 2012](#); [Dornyei, 2007](#)). The strata

used in this study were the existing academic levels of the sample as arranged by the university where the participants studied and the study was conducted. This technique allows for representativeness and consistency ([Tavakoli, 2012](#)).

Participants

The subjects in this study were 105 students at the department of English at a Saudi public university. The students were all Saudi nationals, and they were all males. Their age ranged between 18 and 24 years old, and they had been learning the English language, on average, for 8 years. They were studying in levels one (the lowest level) to eight (the highest level), during the academic year 2017-2018. The proficiency levels of the participants, according to the CEFR, were A1, A2, and B1.

Instrument

For data collection, the study employed a questionnaire adapted from [Spratt et al. \(2002\)](#) to suit its objectives. The questionnaire contained four parts. The first part sought to collect personal data such as the students' age, years of learning English, and academic level. The students were given multiple choices and told to mark the appropriate option. The second part focused on exploring students' views on their responsibilities and their professors for English language learning. Part three attempted to identify students' potential to act autonomously while acquiring English. The last part covered students' actual activities involving ALL outside the classroom. A Likert scale (Agree, Agree to some extent, and Disagree) was presented to the students to choose from.

Piloting and validity

To verify the adapted questionnaire's validity, it was sent to some experts at the Department of English. They examined the questionnaire and suggested some modifications to its content in order to make it easier for the students. These changes were incorporated, and the questionnaire was translated into the Arabic language to be administered to the students in the pilot study with the purpose of guaranteeing the comprehension of its content.

The pilot study was conducted with 11 Saudi students who had been studying English for 10 years. They were instructed on how to respond to the questionnaire, which they finished in about 15 minutes. The respondents noted some difficult items in the questionnaire and suggested that they be simplified. These suggestions were implemented in the final version of the questionnaire.

Reliability

The questionnaire's reliability was 0.75, which was regarded as satisfactory for the questionnaire to be administered to conduct the study. This was based on Dornyei's proposals (2003), who suggests that, for a data collection tool to be reliable, it needs a Cronbach alpha value not lower than 0.60.

Procedures

The questionnaire was administered during the second semester for the academic year 2017- 2018 by four colleagues in the Department of English language at a public university in Saudi Arabia. These four colleagues, who were only volunteers, were selected because they were teaching students in levels (semesters) 1, 2, 3, and 7, while the researcher administered the questionnaire to the students in the levels 4, 5, 6, and 8 that he was teaching. Each of the colleagues was given copies of the questionnaire to distribute during their lectures. It took the students 10-15 minutes to fill out the questionnaire. A total of 150 forms of the questionnaire were distributed, and 105 forms were returned, accounting for 70% of the total number of the population.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, SPSS version 21 was used. The percentages were calculated for each item in the three sections of the questionnaire. Then, a chi-square test was conducted to disclose the relationship between the participants' perception of their responsibility and that of their teachers toward their learning of the English language (section 2). This relationship was regarded as significant if the p-value of the chi-square was ≤ 0.05 . In addition, percentages and means and

standard deviation were calculated for items in sections 3 and 4.

Results

Students' perception of their own responsibility and that of their teachers towards English language learning

The second section in the questionnaire asked for students' views on their own and their teachers' responsibility for learning English. The results are shown in [Table 1](#).

As can be seen from [Table 1](#), there is a relationship between the students' own responsibility and their teachers' toward learning the English language in seven out of ten items (2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10), and the p-values of the chi-square were ≤ 0.05 . The percentages of the correlated items show that students perceive that they are responsible for items 2 and 10, whereas they feel that their teachers are responsible for the activities described in items 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Students' ability to behave autonomously

The questionnaire's third section sought to collect data about the subjects' ability to behave autonomously. The results are shown in [Table 2](#).

It is made evident in [Table 2](#) that the respondents claim to have some degree of ability to behave autonomously. They believed that they could behave autonomously in items 18, 19, 12, and 11, as the means ranged between 2.63 and 2.45, although these scores are quite low. Considering the percentages of these items, their distribution is remarkable. It can be noticed that, for items 18 and 19, 68.6 and 61.0% of the students agreed that they can choose learning objectives outside the classroom and use the internet to learn more English, even though the percentages are also quite low. Moreover, for items 12 and 11, 53.3 and 51.4% of the students agreed on their ability to perform autonomously. Less than half of the respondents agreed that they can do items 17, 16, and 15. Few students (37.1 and 36.2%) agreed that they can do items 14 and 15. For almost all items, between 39.0 and 48.6% of the subjects agreed to some extent.

Table 1. Students' perception of their own responsibility and that of their teachers towards learning English

No	When you study English at XXX, whose responsibility is it to:	Students' responsibility %				Teachers' responsibility %				Chi-square p-value
		Agree	Agree to some extent	Disagree	Did not answer	Agree	Agree to some extent	Disagree	Did not answer	
1	Ensure that you improved throughout lectures	55.2	40.0	2.9	1.9	45.7	42.9	6.7	4.8	0.056
2	Ensure that you progress out of the College	65.7	24.8	8.6	1.0	22.9	36.2	25.7	15.2	0.015
3	Stimulate your interest in learning English	60.0	26.7	8.6	4.8	68.6	22.9	4.8	43.8	0.037
4	Identify your weaknesses in English	43.8	38.1	11.4	6.7	60.0	23.8	11.4	4.8	0.085
5	Make you work harder	57.1	32.4	5.7	54.8	62.9	22.9	6.7	7.6	0.032
6	Determine the aims of your English program	37.1	31.4	22.9	8.6	63.8	19.0	10.5	6.7	0.001
7	Select what tasks you should perform to acquire English in your lectures	34.3	40.0	19.0	76.7	78.1	16.2	3.8	1.9	0.019
8	Pick what subject you employ to acquire English in your lectures	28.6	46.7	22.9	21.9	65.7	19.0	10.5	4.8	0.024
9	Evaluate your learning and course	32.4	39.0	21.9	6.7	67.6	25.7	5.7	1.0	0.072
10	Decide what you learn outside class	48.6	33.3	15.2	2.9	34.3	35.2	23.8	6.7	0.029

Table 2. Students' beliefs about their ability to behave autonomously (percentages and means)

No	On my own, I think I can:	Agree	Agree to some extent	Disagree	Did not answer	Mean	Standard deviation
11	Identify my weaknesses in English	51.4	41.9	6.7	0	2.45	0.62
12	Set learning objectives in my English classes	53.3	41.9	3.8	1.0	2.48	0.62
13	Determine the content that I learn	36.2	48.6	15.2	0	2.21	0.69
14	Determine the duration of each task in English language lectures	37.1	41.9	20.0	1.0	2.15	0.77
15	Decide how much time to spend on each activity during the English lessons	41.0	40.0	19.0	0	2.22	0.75
16	Choose learning materials for my English classes	45.0	40.0	15.0	0	2.31	0.71
17	Evaluate my learning of English and the course I study	48.6	39.0	12.4	0	2.36	0.70
18	Choose learning objectives outside class	68.6	26.7	3.8	1.0	2.63	0.60
19	Use the internet to learn more English	61.0	30.5	7.6	1.0	2.51	0.68

Students actual practice of ALL outside the classroom

Section four in the questionnaire collected students' responses regarding their actual practice of ALL outside the classroom. The results are presented in [Table 3](#).

[Table 3](#) shows that, apart from using the Internet to learn English (mean=2.70) and watching English TV programs and films (mean=2.67), which corresponds to items 25 and 28, the students did not practice any ALL activities outside the classroom. The items in this section contained some other activities that may be considered more important than these two activities. Unfortunately, less than 50% of the respondents practice them, as the percentages ranged between 20 and 50%.

Discussion

Teaching the English language is of paramount importance in Saudi Arabia, and the government pays attention to this. Unfortunately, the researcher's experience in teaching Saudi EFL learners showed that their ability to rely on themselves in language learning is limited or absent. Therefore, this study aimed at investigating Saudi university EFL learners' views on their personal and their professors' responsibilities regarding the process of English language learning, their thoughts concerning their

potentials to act autonomously, and their real applications of ALL outside the classroom.

It was revealed that there was a relationship between the learners and professors' responsibilities in the process of learning regarding items 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10, where the p-values of the chi-square were ≤ 0.05 . These results suggest that the students were aware of their responsibility towards progressing outside class and determining what to learn in extracurricular contexts. Moreover, according to the results for items 3, 6, 7, and 8, the respondents seem to know that these items are part of the teachers' and the Department's responsibility. For items 1, 4, and 9, which are not correlated, the participants believed that their professors should be more responsible than them regarding items 4 and 9, and they assigned more responsibility to themselves in item 1. In general, the percentages are low, suggesting that the participants are hesitant towards their responsibility for learning English. The results imply that the participants perceive that their professors should be more responsible towards their learning than them. This indicates that the respondents believe that their professors are not only responsible for identifying their weaknesses, but that they are also solely in charge of evaluating their learning and courses. This might be due to school rules and regulations that consider teachers to be more responsible than their students ([Alonazi, 2017](#)), which contradicts what was revealed by

Table 3. *Students' actual autonomous learning practices outside the classroom (percentage and mean)*

No	Depending on myself, I have:	Agree	Agree to some extent	Disagree	Did not answer	Mean	Standard deviation
20	Read grammar books and done some exercises	42.9	46.7	10.5	0	2.32	0.66
21	Done assignments which are not compulsory	20.0	40.0	40.0	0	1.80	0.75
22	Written the meaning of new vocabulary	50.5	37.1	10.5	1.9	2.36	0.75
23	Read newspapers, books, or magazines in English	48.6	34.3	17.1	0	2.31	0.75
24	Sent e-mails in English	40.0	47.6	12.4	0	2.28	0.67
25	Watched English TV programs and films	71.4	23.8	4.8	0	2.67	0.57
26	Listened to radio programs in English	47.6	39.0	13.3	0	2.34	0.70
27	Self-studied and practiced English in a group	46.7	39.0	14.3	0	2.32	0.71
28	Used the Internet to learn English	76.2	17.1	6.7	0	2.70	0.59
29	Reviewed language items not required by the teacher	29.5	39.0	31.4	0	1.98	0.78

[Spratt et al. \(2002\)](#) and [Yildirim \(2008\)](#), who concluded that there is a relationship between their participants' responsibility and that of their teachers.

As for the students' ability to behave autonomously, it was found that the respondents believed that they could act autonomously in items 18, 19, 12, and 11 (mean scores of 2.45-2.63). These findings indicate that students majoring in English lack confidence in their ability to act autonomously while learning the English language. This may be attributed to the obstacles faced by teachers in encouraging students to behave autonomously in Saudi Arabia. These obstacles include the students' lack of skills to act autonomously, school laws, and instructors' lack of core techniques to promote ALL. However, the results contradict those found by [Alonazi \(2017\)](#). He concluded that teachers at secondary schools in Riyadh encouraged autonomous learners. The results also differ from those of [Spratt et al. \(2002\)](#), [Yildirim \(2008\)](#), and [Chan \(2015\)](#), who revealed that their students were able to completely behave autonomously.

The results also showed that, apart from using the internet to learn English (mean=2.70) and watching English TV programs and films (mean=2.67), the students did not practice any ALL activities outside the classroom, which implies that they may not be ready for ALL. Generally, these low percentages are close to those in sections 2 and 3, thus indicating that the students depend on their teachers to some extent and cannot behave autonomously. The results also indicate that students neglected several ALL practices. This is evident in the low means ranging between 1.80 and 2.31, which only reveal a few numbers of students practicing ALL activities ([Table 3](#)). It is noted that these activities have no relation to any prescribed syllabus, so students neglect them. Nevertheless, half of the participants practice English by surfing the Internet and watching TV programs and films. This implies that students tend to be closely related to technology, which could be maximized to serve them in ALL. According to [Lai \(2017\)](#) technology plays a key role in ALL, specifically beyond the boundaries of the classroom. This also indicates that ALL may play an integral part in online learning due to the availability of English language

materials online, which an autonomous language learner can access as appropriate in order to learn the language ([Ariebowo, 2021](#)). The results agree with what was revealed by [Arabai \(2017\)](#), [Alonazi \(2017\)](#), and [Alzubi et al. \(2017\)](#), who found that Saudi students either had a low level of autonomy or were not autonomous in acquiring the English language. The sample members in this study were all Saudi male students of English language, and they practiced only two ALL activities outside the classroom.

Conclusion

Recognizing students' readiness for ALL and their ability to behave autonomously could be beneficial to teachers and their students. It can provide them with more insights into the learning process, facilitate learning, and recognize the role of learners in their learning. Teachers may be informed on how to cater for, encourage, and foster students' ALL. Students can be confident enough to depend on themselves while learning English and thus become life-long learners. This study was an attempt to identify Saudi English major students' readiness for ALL. A questionnaire to which 105 students responded was adopted for collecting data. The results of the study revealed a relationship between the students' own responsibility and that of their professors for their English language learning process. However, the students assigned more responsibility to their teachers. The study also found that the students did not trust their ability to act autonomously when learning English. Finally, the results showed that the participants do not practice almost all of the out-of-class activities mentioned in the questionnaire. Overall, the participants in this study may not be ready for ALL because of their dependence on their teachers, lack of training, guidance, and encouragement.

Recommendations and implications

Based on these results, the study recommends that teachers at the Department of English language of Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University raise their students' awareness of the advantages of ALL. This could be achieved by providing some self-access

guided materials and activities to practice ALL and discussing how to benefit from them with students. In addition, the study also recommends that teachers prepare students for ALL by incorporating a variety of activities that foster autonomy in the syllabus. To encourage students, teachers need to ask their students to provide insight on how they carried out the activities, how they benefited from them, and what difficulties they faced. Teachers should also design some ALL activities and assign marks for them in the final course assessment to motivate students. They should train students in ALL by informing them about the available resources on the internet and how to use them. On its part, the College where this study was conducted must establish a self-access center and encourage students to use it. This involves preparing guides for teachers and students alike which inform them about how to carry out ALL activities. Furthermore, studies on ALL should cater for students and teachers' attitudes towards it. A study investigating teachers and students' views using other data collection tools in addition to a questionnaire are needed to compare responses. Finally, the relationship between students' gender, motivation, proficiency level, and ALL should be investigated.

This study was not without limitations. First, the sample was small. Further research employing a larger number of participants sample could be designed to obtain more insights into ALL. Another limitation in this study was the data source. Depending only on students may not provide a full view on the topic. Using other sources of information such as teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders could provide interested researchers with more information.

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