

## Non-Language-Major Students' Autonomy in Learning English in Vietnam

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### Abstract

The English language is one of the international languages used for communication and learning worldwide. In Vietnam, English is taught as a second language in schools from elementary to advanced levels. In learning a certain foreign language, the autonomy of learners has become a vital subject for the past 30 years. This research surveys the autonomy of non-language-major-students in learning English in Ho Chi Minh City University of Education. The quantitative research method uses descriptive statistics and T-test. A group of 258 students (61 males and 197 females) took part in answering two questionnaires on learners' autonomy in learning English and the roles of lecturers and students in developing learner-autonomy in learning English. The results showed that the students were not familiar with the term *learning autonomy*. However, students were aware that they played a fundamental role in improving this ability. They also believed that the lecturers determined their English learning process. Thence, we propose solutions for the non-language-majors to improve their autonomy in learning English.  
*Keywords:* Autonomy in learning English, non-language-major, Vietnamese non-language-major-students

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## Introduction

The communication between individuals, international companies, and organizations is a need, a trend in the current period. In order to achieve successful communication, languages have been used vitally. In Vietnam, it is an indisputable fact that universities started to open international joint programs at different levels of study, high-quality programs, and bilingual programs with one of the aims of directing students to integrate with national students. As a graduation requirement and learning outcome, Vietnamese students have to acquire the foreign language proficiency, specifically Level 3 of the 6-level Vietnamese Framework of Foreign Languages, equivalent to Level B1 of the Common European Framework (Prime Minister, 2008). The foreign language commonly used by universities as well as international companies, seminars, and conferences is English. Nowadays, English is recommended to be learned and used by agencies, companies, and schools. In Vietnam, English is taught at all levels, from the primary education to higher education. For the undergraduate level, students are encouraged to self-study, with and without the help of professors and lecturers within their chosen majors. They also need to prove their autonomy in their learning and life. Autonomy demonstration in learning English as a foreign language is not an exception. However, not all students are autonomous in studying English. With this information, we aim to research students' autonomy in learning English in the Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMUE), Vietnam, which focuses on non-language student autonomy. This study uses two focused questions: How autonomous are non-language-major-students in learning English in HCMUE? Moreover, what role do the lecturers and students in HCMUE play in developing non-language-major-students' autonomy in learning English?

## Literature Review

Scholars around the world frequently debate learner autonomy. Since 1970, how teachers can promote learner autonomy and increase learner independence has been studied (Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2011). According to Hedge (2001), learner autonomy was responsible for learners to plan, organize, test, and evaluate their learning activities without depending on teachers. Similarly, Little (1995) believed that autonomous learners were cast in a new perspective, had a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, and decision-making. Moreover, they took independent actions and were expected to assume greater responsibility for and take charge of their learning. Thanasoulas (2000) suggested that autonomous learners had insights into their learning styles and strategies. They took an active approach to learn the task at hand. They were good guessers and were willing to take risks, such as communicating in the target language at all costs. They developed the target language into a separate reference system and were ready to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that did not apply.

Furthermore, they had a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language. Littlewood (1996) stated that an autonomous person is the person to have an independent capacity in making and carrying out the choices which govern his or her actions. This position depends on two main components: ability and willingness. Thus, a person may have the capacity to make independent choices but feel no desire to do so. Conversely, a person may be willing to exercise independent choices but not have the necessary ability to do so. Ability and desire can be divided into two components themselves. Ability depends on possessing both pieces of knowledge about the alternatives from which choices must be made and the necessary skills for carrying out the most appropriate choices. Willingness depends on having both the motivation and the confidence to take

responsibility for the choices required. Therefore, learner autonomy also involved the notion that students must be engaged in active and productive activities in their school, and they are responsible for the selection of approaches, as well as how to conduct and evaluate such activities.

The practical research in the field of social psychology has shown that learner autonomy is a basic need (Deci, 1995; Littlewood, 1999). As in Littlewood (1996), autonomy and motivation are related. When learners take responsibility for their learning, they will be motivated to learn. Students who are motivated would do their best, leading to better results (Little, 2004). All activities in a classroom, as well as the school curriculum, revolved around the students. From this student-centered process, researchers gradually discovered the benefits of learner autonomy. Also, learning is a process in which teachers may only help and guide students in a class period. Hence, learner autonomy is a critical factor that students need.

Especially since the 1980s, autonomy in language learning has been a topic of widespread discussion (Cotterall, 2000; Littlewood, 1999). According to Benson (2007), learner autonomy in language learning is the ability to take responsibility for learning purposes and the language. Language learning processes require the active participation of students in the learning process so that the learning goal is always to develop learner autonomy. Sinclair (2000) also mentioned 13 aspects of the study that could be identified and recognized in teaching languages. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) found that learner autonomy was considered as an investment as a critical factor in the field of language teaching and learning. This capability determined the success of students who learned foreign languages. With Little (1999), the goal of language learning is the ability to use language. Therefore, the process of language learning was the process of learning how to use language to communicate (Cotterall, 1995). Learners were not only involved in the planning, monitoring, and evaluation process but also responsible for learning to use language as a means of primary communication during school (Little, 2004).

Enhancement of non-language-major-students' autonomy in learning English is especially necessary because they receive fewer contact hours with their English professors than language majors do. From the aspect of students, Yildirim (2012) concluded that some of the students might not be ready for transferring responsibility from teachers because they thought that the selection of materials, setting of learning objectives, and course evaluation was the responsibility of teachers. Ming and Alias (2007) found that most students preferred foreign language classes in which teachers are the center due to cultural factors; however, they were not dependent on the teacher. Though students were aware of the importance of learner autonomy, especially in learning languages at university, they were not guided through different methodologies of self-study. From the aspect of teachers, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) referred to 11 problems in enhancing learner autonomy in learning English.

In developing the learners' autonomy, students must present themselves as good students and be responsible for and conscious of their learning (Holec, 1981). Thus, students would become active and perform well in their learning with the recommendations and guidelines from the teachers. Moreover, Chan (2001) suggested that the students capable of learner autonomy need to stick to their learning orientation and objectives. Besides, they must have an opportunity to face difficult situations and to improve their learning. They not only need to have fun with their learning

but also to be flexible, dynamic, and willing to ask questions. Similarly, teachers are supporters, organizers, and providers of the learning resources, comments, and encouragement, creating a positive learning environment (Holec, 1981). Camilleri (1999) suggested that teachers must understand teaching methods and management skills because they will influence students; besides, they were also counselors. They need to know the academic progress of the students and help them. Little (2007) emphasized the role of the teachers in promoting learner autonomy of students. Furthermore, teachers must find out how students recognize, think about, and assess their learning and progress. Enhancement of students' autonomy is considered one of the important and deciding factors in the success of language learning. Scharle and Szabo (2000) emphasized this characteristic, autonomy enhances motivation, and motivation develops ability; that development happens through self-recognition activities and self-assessment. However, Little (1995) also emphasized the critical role, mainly in developing the ability to learn a foreign language. He stressed that learner autonomy was not what teachers make students, or students' knowledge is learned, but teachers do not teach them. Students must be active and dynamic in all situations.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Participants were selected randomly from the Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam. All participants provided informed consent after receiving an explanation of the purpose of the research. The survey instrument was distributed to 300 Vietnamese participants, of which 258 questionnaires returned, for a 86 percent return rate, which exceeds the 30 percent response rate most researchers require for analysis (Dillman, 2000). More females (76.4%) than males (23.6%) among the 258 Vietnamese undergraduate students completed the survey.

### *Instruments*

Questionnaires were designed to survey undergraduate students at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. First, social-demographic items were introduced in the questionnaire. Then, Vietnamese undergraduate students' perception of non-language-major-students' autonomy in learning English were measured by a total of 18 questions. The responses of the participants were provided in five different levels based on a Five-Point Likert Scale (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011).

### *Analysis*

All participants provided informed consent after receiving an explanation of the purpose of the research. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 was used for data analyses. The coding procedure was performed as follows: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. According to Narli (2010), the interval width of the Five-Point Likert Scale should be computed to set up the group boundary value for result discussions. Interval Width = (Upper value – Lower value)/n = (5-1)/5 = 0.8. Group boundary values are built that help to discuss research results based on the above interval width, which appear in Table 1.

Table 1. *Group boundary values of Five-Point Likert Scale*

Interval width	Value
1.00 – 1.80	Very high
1.81 – 2.60	Above Average
2.61 – 3.40	Average
3.41 – 4.20	Below Average
4.21 – 5.00	Very low

The measuring scales were assessed mainly by the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of Reliability. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient is used to eliminate unrelated latent variables. Variables with a correlational coefficient smaller than 0.3 are excluded. The measuring scale is valid when the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient is over 0.6.

Table 2. *Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of criteria*

Groups of criteria	Variables	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of Reliability
First section		
Goals, self- assessment	3	0.75
Learning	4	0.73
Instrument	4	0.68
Second section		
Role of students	3	0.74
Role of teachers	4	0.77

As shown in Table 1 of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability, all variables are over 0.6. Thus, they proceeded through the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). After testing the coefficient of reliability of the measuring scale, the researchers continued using the Exploratory Factor Analysis to evaluate the level of convergence of observed variables following specific factors.

Table 3. *Analysis of exploratory factors of groups of criteria*

Group of criteria	The number of variables after analyzing	KMO verification	Bartlett's verification	Average variance extracted
First section				
Goals, self- assessment	3/3	0.66	0.00	60.99%
Learning	4/4	0.73	0.00	57.41%
Instrument	4/4	0.74	0.00	55.62%
Second section				
Role of students	3/4	0.68	0.00	66.17%
Roles of teachers	4/4	0.76	0.00	59.38%

To sum up, the KMO and Bartlett's verification of factors showed that the KMO coefficient was significant as  $0.5 \leq \text{KMO} \leq 1$ . The significance of Bartlett's verification showed that the Exploratory Factors Analysis was suitable. The average variances extracted from the criteria were over 50 percent, so they were valid.

## Result

An independent samples t-test was used to compare the autonomy of non-language-majors-students in learning English in HCMUE between males and females. The fact that neither Shapiro-Wilk statistics nor Levene's Test was insignificant indicated that the assumption of normality was not violated, and equal variances can be assumed. There was  $t(256) = 2.20$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , two-tailed. The difference between the two group means was 0.19 and 95% CI [0.02; 0.36]. That meant the male group ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) had a better mean than the female group ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) and had got significant difference for autonomy of non-language-majors-students in learning English in HCMUE.

With the results of descriptive statistics, the authors identified four broad categories:

Defining goals, developing skills, and self-assessment (Group 1);

Learning before class (Group 2);

Autonomy in Learning English through literature search and using other instruments (Group 3);

The roles of teachers and students in developing learners' autonomy in learning English in HCMUE.

### ***Group 1: Defining goals, developing skills, and self-assessment.***

The results of the survey showed that 42.6 percent of the students said that they occasionally decided to set goals for learning English. Above half of the participants (57.58 percent) were not confident about speaking in front of a crowd in English. Meanwhile, about three quarters did not communicate with teachers and friends in English after school and use the method of recording their voice to practice or use English to talk to foreigners. However, only 5.9 percent of the students have engaged in the above activities when studying English.

### ***Group 2: Learning before class.***

In foreign language classes, 32.95 percent of students regularly reviewed lessons before they went to class. Nearly one third of the students occasionally reviewed lessons before class. Approximately half of the student participants sometimes reviewed the lessons.

### ***Group 3: Autonomy in Learning English through literature search and using other instruments.***

From the survey results, 34.8 percent of the students never improved their English by borrowing English books, CDs, or other multi-media resources from the library. However, 33.6 percent of students preferred to learn English by watching English movies, listening to the British Broadcasting Channel (BBC), and reading English newspapers. With the development of technology, 84.91 percent of the students had used the Internet, computers, and telephones to improve their English ability.

***The roles of lecturers and students in developing learners' autonomy in learning English in HCMUE.***

*The role of students:* From the results, 81.9 percent of students agreed that they played an active role in finding resources that were indispensable for improving and developing their English skills. Over 78 percent of students said that they needed to assess advantages and disadvantages when they wanted to develop their autonomy in learning English. 77.2 percent of the students ultimately agreed that they needed to build clear goals before studying English. 36.3 percent of the students admitted that their learning depended on the test.

*The role of lecturers:* Although the results showed that 41.3 percent of students disagreed that students were dependent on teachers, students confirmed the role of lecturers in assisting them to improve their English. Lecturers had the responsibility to help students understand English, point out the students' mistakes, and introduce the reference sources. Notably, 81.3 percent of the students said that the lecturers not only taught but also helped students to seek effective methods of learning. Depending on lecturers, nearly 50 percent of students were aware of the role of teachers and students who impart and acquire knowledge, respectively.

**Discussion**

From the survey, results in the evaluation of learners' autonomy in learning English and the role of lecturers and students in developing learners' autonomy in learning English in HCMUE were withdrawn. There was a significant difference in the autonomy of non-language-major-students in learning English in HCMUE between males and females at HCMUE. The males were better than the females. Besides, most students did not effectively use their spare time to practice their English skills, review lessons before class, and practice English after the lesson ends. They did not actively participate in all activities in English class, also did not usually use English to communicate with people in real life. They seemed not to apply English learning strategies and methods effectively. It is found out that in order to self-improve their English skills, students search for resources actively, assess their competencies, and build specific goals before learning English. In terms of the lecturers' role, they not only teach but also help students to find effective learning methods, point out students' mistakes, and introduce reference sources. They are the ones to impart knowledge to students. However, the study finding did not show that the students were entirely dependent on the lecturers. This result is also consistent with the research of Holec (1981) and Chan (2001) when students have identified their learning goals, they will build their learning plans and take responsibility for their choices.

**Conclusion**

Most of the non-language-majors in HCMUE did not understand what autonomy in learning a foreign language, specifically English, is. They never or seldom did any activities to show their learning autonomy, nor did they actively seek reference sources to enhance learning autonomy and improve their English proficiency. Though the libraries were always available for the students for useful and appropriate resources, students did not often use it. They used multiple online resources with the Internet and computers. However, students were aware of their role in enhancing English learning autonomy. Interestingly, although they were aware of the need to actively find ways to learn English by themselves, search for useful resources, identify goals, and

build learning plans, students still thought that teachers played a decisive role in their English learning.

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