A study on Non-English Major Students' Learner Autonomy: Difficulties and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Learning is no longer confined to the four walls of the classroom but can happen at any time and place as learners wish. Thus, promoting learner autonomy – the ability of learners to navigate their own learning - has been regarded as the focus of education because it promises successful lifelong learning. However, students' level of learner autonomy, their difficulties when regulating their own learning, and solutions for those problems are the factors that educators usually believe are out of their control. In order to promote non-English major students' learner autonomy, the current research explores those often neglected concerns. The collected quantitative data from the survey answers of 279 non-English majors at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City was analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis. The findings showed that the students are not very confident with their learner autonomy, and they have a lot of difficulties when conducting their learning on their own outside the classroom. The solutions to promote learner autonomy from their perspectives are improving their self-regulating skills, strengthening their interactions with teachers and friends, and receiving more support from society. These findings present some pedagogical implications to help students study more effectively outside the classroom.

Introduction

English is not only a major obligatory subject but also a tool for career opportunities and the advancement of students in non-English speaking countries. In Vietnam, children start to learn English earlier, and good English has been considered a lifelong target for many people. Even though students have studied English for many years and technology has provided more resources for them to practice, Vietnamese tertiary students still have a lot of difficulties in improving their English, which may directly delay their graduation and dismiss their career opportunities. Therefore, the topic of how tertiary students can have good English competence has always been of great concern.

There have been different solutions suggested to improve students' language competence, but promoting learner autonomy - 'the ability to take charge of one's learning (Holec, 1981) - has more and more been considered one of the main ones because it lets 'individual flourish and enroots lifelong learning' (Winch, 2002). Scaffolding students in order to help them have better learner autonomy has received more and more concerns in the Vietnam education system in recent years. From the policy level, national regulations on tertiary-level education reform stated that autonomy was needed to be encouraged for learners of all ages (Prime Minister, 2007). However, this requirement is very general and easier said than done. From a practical view, there is no formal training about learner autonomy in institutes. Teachers themselves can be confused in defining the notion of learner autonomy (Nguyen et al., 2014); students have been reported to have low and reactive language learner autonomy (Dang, 2012; Le, 2018), so how learner autonomy is promoted is really challenging. The situation is even harder for non-English major students, whose English training is considered peripheral in comparison to their main major. They seem to find learning at the tertiary institutions not effective. They have to find places to learn in order to obtain the required international certificate of English at level B1 to graduate, which costs a lot of their effort, time, and money. It can help if they have better learner autonomy. However, they were reported as unfamiliar with learner autonomy and believed that the lecturers determined their English learning process (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). As a result, research about this group of students' level of learner autonomy, the difficulties they are facing, and how they think the problems can be solved is needed so that pedagogical implications for promoting learner autonomy for this particular group of students can be made.

Literature Review

Definition of Learner autonomy

From the earliest definitions of autonomy by Henri Holec, who was considered the 'father' of learner autonomy, self-management skills are crucial for an autonomous learner. Learner autonomy was defined as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning, including the ability to 'determine the learning objectives, define the contents and progressions, select appropriate methods and techniques to be used, monitor the procedure of learning and finally evaluate what has been acquired' (Holec, 1981: 3). In more recent research, self-management skills are defined as 1) understanding teaching objectives; 2) setting goals and making a plan for one's studies; 3) employing learning strategies effectively; 4) monitoring the effect of one's learning strategies; 5) monitoring and evaluating the English language's learning process and 6) transcending to new learning (Xu & Zhan, 2004).

Learner autonomy does not imply the notion that learners are learning in isolation, but it takes place within a sociocultural framework. Learner autonomy entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and incorporate with others as a socially responsible person (Oxford, 2003). Therefore, the ability to maintain social interactions to seek help and maintain the interactions in the learning process, especially with teachers and peers, is also considered another important factor of learner autonomy.

'Control' and 'Responsibilities' are other important aspects of learner autonomy. Autonomous learners need to have the rights and responsibilities to make decisions on their learning. The notion of 'ownership' or 'control' has been introduced, and learners move from one end of the scale with 'teacher ownership' to the halfway point, 'shared ownership', and then to 'student ownership' at the

other end (Kohonen, 2001 cited in Everhard, 2018). It does not mean that learners are to be in control of all aspects of the learning process, but they need to be able to understand that teachers, parents, and society only have the supporting roles, and they themselves have to navigate their own learning.

In this research, learner autonomy is defined as the combination of (1) the learner's capacity to regulate the learning process from making learning goals to transcending to the next learning activity, (2) their ability to seek help from teachers and friends, and (3) their confidence in controlling their learning and expectations for the roles of teachers, parents, and society in their self-learning.

Measuring learner autonomy

Many scales have been developed and validated to measure students 'learner autonomy. Learners are asked to evaluate their own learning performance during the learning process, and the items are usually on a Likert scale from levels 1 to 5. MILLA (Measuring Instrument for Language Learner Autonomy) is a scale with 87 items to measure learner autonomy from 4 dimensions: Technical, Psychological, Political-Philosophical, and Sociocultural, and two different sets of response choices: Do and Think items (Murase, 2015). The Self-Efficacy Questionnaire of Language Learning Strategies (SEQueLLS) blends the constructs of self-efficacy and learner autonomy with 37 closed items, divided into seven categories: identifying learning needs and goal-setting, selecting an appropriate approach, seeking social support, organizing the learning environment, monitoring the learning, evaluating the learning process and outcome; transferring acquired skills or information to other contexts correspondent with the processes of the self-regulated learning (Ruelens, 2019). Most recently, the questionnaire LAPQ - Learner Autonomy Perception Questionnaire, which consists of 87 self-reported items, was designed and validated to measure university students 'learner autonomy (Nguyen & Habók, 2021). The questionnaire was based on the conceptualization of learner autonomy involving five factors - beliefs about teachers ' roles, desire, motivation, freedom, and metacognition in language learning.

The current research modifies the above scales to measure students' abilities to regulate their own learning, their interactions with teachers and friends, their confidence, and expectations about others 'roles in their own learning.

Promoting learner autonomy

There are six broad headings to classify practices associated with the development of autonomy: resource-based approaches, technology-based approaches, learner-based approaches, classroom-based approaches, and curriculum-based approaches (Benson, 2011). The rise of resource centers or self-access centers from the beginning of the 1970s marked the time when learner autonomy first became the utmost goal of education. The centers aim to provide learners with the resources needed to learn a foreign language by themselves. The problem of not having enough learning materials has been solved partly by the advancement in technology which has made learning accessible to learners anytime and anywhere they need it. Autonomous strategy training has been emphasized to help less autonomous learners, and educators choose to intervene in the student's learning process to scaffold them. Educators also focus on raising learners' awareness about their learning process so that they gradually 'accept responsibilities for their learning and learn on their own effectively' (Little, 2007).

Autonomy is sometimes regarded as a Western concept, and the imposition of this value on Asian learners contradicts their learning styles (Adamson & Sert, 2012). However, it does not mean that Asian students cannot be autonomous or can meet more difficulties in the process of becoming autonomous, but learner autonomy has to be understood differently in this particular context (Sinclair, 2000). As a country in Southeast Asia, learner autonomy is also considered a difficult notion for Vietnamese students and requires the cooperation of all involved in the teaching and learning process to promote.

Research Questions

To seek the solutions to promote non-English major students' learner autonomy, the current research investigates their level of learner autonomy, their difficulties in autonomous learning, and their suggested solutions. The research has three research questions:

1. What are non-English major students' levels of learner autonomy?

2. What are their difficulties with learner autonomy?
3. What are the possible solutions to promote learner autonomy from their perspectives?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study was conducted at a public university in Ho Chi Minh city with about 21.000 non-English major students. To graduate, students need to have international certification at level B1 of CEFR of English. The non-English major students participate in English I, II, and III, which last 45 periods each as the required English training program, depending on the score they get when taking the placement test at the beginning of the first year. Lecturers of Foreign Languages Departments conduct the training for non-English major students. The students are from different parts of the country, and they are well-behaved. The school's infrastructure is still limited; the classrooms are equipped with a blackboard, fixed rows of chairs and tables, a projector, and a microphone with no air-conditioner. Internet coverage is not good, and teachers have to prepare their own laptops. The number of students in each class is from 35 to 50 students.

To get a sample of at least 10% of the total number of students, the researchers randomly chose eight classes from the list of classes opened this school year. Two hundred ninety-five students in different years of different departments participated in the study.

Design of the Study

The research seeks to describe the current status of non-English major students' learner autonomy as well as their difficulties and suggested solutions. Therefore, the quantitative research design is selected.

The questionnaire employed in this research was modified from SEQueLLS (Ruelens, 2019), MILLA (Murase, 2015), and LAPQ - Learner Autonomy Perception Questionnaire (Nguyen & Habók, 2021). It includes four sections: Section 1 collected demographic information of participants, including gender, which year they are in, their department, and the time length of studying English; Section 2, with three questions, was used to measure students' autonomous learning capacity in terms of self-regulating skills (7 items), social interactions (4 items), belief about their learning (4 items). In this section, the participants were asked to choose one out of five closed-ended items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= disagree,

5= strongly disagree). Section 3 was designed to find difficulties students have to face when they regulate their own learning. Three checkbox questions in this part included different choices about the obstacles that students have with each aspect of learner autonomy. Open-ended questions were added after each to collect further information about their difficulties. Section 4 had one checkbox question, which let survey takers select multiple solutions from the list given for the difficulties they may have in the process of regulating their learning. An open-ended question was also added to get the other solutions from the participants. To guarantee the validity of the research, the researchers asked one expert in the field of learner autonomy for a discussion about the items. After having his comments, the items were translated into Vietnamese. The researchers gave the questionnaire to a group of 3 students to do and worked together with them going through each item to see if they had any difficulties in understanding the items. Some items were reworded to make them easier to understand. After that, the questionnaire was given to 100 students in two classes of a researcher to do in the pilot phase, and it met the requirements for reliability.

Data collection procedures analysis

The researchers contacted the teachers in charge of 8 chosen classes for assistance, and they agreed willingly to help. The researchers came to the class to inform the students about the research and ask them for help, stating clearly that their participation in the research does not affect their learning in any way. After the consent of the students, the researchers explained the study and how they could answer the questions and gave the students the link to the survey on Google Form. The researchers ensured the students had an Internet connection to access the form. It took 20 minutes for the students to complete the questionnaire.

The data was screened first to find out the outliers that can influence the research result. Sixteen outliners were identified, so the final number of participants was 279. The data is then coded in SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies (F) and percentages (%), for the collected data on the students' learner autonomy, difficulties and solutions were subsequently calculated using SPSS after checking for reliability values. Next, the answers for opened answers were read through and then grouped into specific categories.

Findings

Demographic information

Out of 279 student participants, 78.6% were female, 20.4% were male, and three students did not want to mention their gender. They come from 15 different departments, and the majority are from Office-Library, Finance, and Accounting Departments. Most of them were second-year students (71.4%), 12.5% were first-year students, 13.5% were third-year students, and eight students were in their last year. 43,8% of them have studied English for 6-8 years, 40,8% of them spent 9-12 years learning English and the rest group (15,5%) had over 12 years of English learning.

Students' level of learner autonomy

Cronbach's Alpha values for three constructs of the learner autonomy scale were .91 (self-regulating skills), .84 (interactions with teachers and friends), and .69 (beliefs about their responsibilities in learning). The value of corrected Item-Total correlation was all > .3, so they meet the requirement for reliability.

The results show that students are not very confident with their self-regulating skills, with means from 2.9 to 3.2 and Std. from .8 to .9. They were more confident with selecting learner activities and evaluating their learning outcomes, and as a result, they also found transcending to new learning. They did averagely on selecting materials and initiating self-learning. Making learning plans and especially learning goals was the hardest for them.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics about students' self-regulating skills

Self-regulating skills	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Making learning goals	1	5	2.9	.8
Making learning plans	1	5	3.0	.8
Initiating self-learning	1	5	3.1	.8
Selecting materials	1	5	3.1	.9
Selecting learning activities	1	5	3.2	.8
Evaluating learning outcomes	1	5	3.2	.9
Transcending to new learning	1	5	3.2	.8

Students thought that they were averagely confident when interacting with friends (Means= 3.5 and 3.6), and they were more confident with friends than with teachers (Means=2.9 and 3.0). They tended to ask teachers and friends for help with the problems encountered when learning rather than asking for suggestions about what to learn.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics about students' interactions with friends and teachers

Interactions with friends and teachers	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Asking friends for help	1	5	3.6	.9
Asking friends for suggestions	1	5	3.5	.9
Asking teachers for suggestions	1	5	2.9	.9
Asking teachers for help	1	5	3.0	.9

Finally, the students were also not very confident about their ability to make decisions on their learning (Mean=3.4). They believe that society and schools have more influence on their self-regulating learning than parents.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics about students' confidence in making decisions & belief about others' roles

Confidence in making decisions and belief about others' roles	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Making decisions on my learning	1	5	3.4	.9
The roles of parents	1	5	2.8	1.2
The roles of schools	1	5	3.6	1.0
The roles of society	1	5	3.9	.9

Difficulties in learner autonomy

In terms of self-regulating skills, 68,1% reported that they did not have a chance to practice self-regulating skills in the right way, while 29% of them have not had an opportunity to learn these skills. These are the main reasons why the students were not very confident about their self-regulating skills when conducting self-learning. 3.0% of the students listed the reasons for students' laziness and lack of concentration as hindrances to their self-regulated learning. For example,

I am too lazy to study myself.

I cannot highly concentrate on their autonomous learning.

I cannot set my learning discipline.

The concerns that *"I'm afraid of asking my teachers"* and "*I don't have a chance to talk about my autonomous learning with my teachers*" mainly resulted in challenges in interactions with teachers. The rates were 39.8% for these reasons. Regarding student-student interactions,15.8% identified that their friends could not support them because they were also not good at English. 4.6% of them listed the reasons students cannot take advantage of the support from friends and did not know how to work more effectively with friends. For instance,

I could not find someone who had the same interest in learning English.

I do not have a chance to use and practice English.

I am afraid that my friends gave me the wrong correction.

Finally, 64.5% of the students did not have confidence that they should be the person who needs to make their own decision about their learning outside of the classroom. 27.3% of survey takers had a very common problem of just waiting for their teachers' dictation even when self-studying, so they found it very hard to initiate their learning. 4.6% of them also experienced problems that they could not get the support from their family to manage the time to self-study effectively. 3.6% of the sample thought that they did not have the competence to learn English by themselves. They stated,

English is too hard to learn because of their linguistic and nonlinguistic knowledge.

I cannot study English by myself.

In short, the facts that students do not have effective self-regulating skills, are afraid of asking teachers and are not able to take advantage of peer support or to make decisions about their learning are the main difficulties that non-English major students are facing during their learner autonomy process.

Solutions to promote learner autonomy

To promote self-regulating skills to learn more effectively, 76.6% of students believed that they should receive some autonomous learning skills, and another 55.3% wanted to participate in seminars or talk shows about self-regulating skills. 68.8% of them stated they needed to be able to find interests in one specific learning area. Then they could dedicate more time to studying. 68.4% stressed the importance of raising awareness about the necessity of having learner autonomy, the root of life-long learning.

To take advantage of teachers and peer support in self-study, 54.3% of them thought that students needed to know how to learn with their friends effectively. 49.3% believed teachers should accompany students in their autonomous learning activities. Furthermore, 35.9% of them shared the idea that teachers should give students more chances to discuss their autonomous learning in class with friends and teachers. 39.5% of them also expected to be involved in teachers' decision-making on classroom management in the classroom.

Regarding the important roles of society and schools in promoting one's learner autonomy, 70% hoped that the encouragement from the society for students to study by themselves could be higher. 64.5% of students expected the training program for students at the tertiary level to give more opportunities for students to be supported with autonomous learning. 57.5% of students voted for project-based learning. 54.5% suggested schools create more school activities that scaffold

autonomous English learning. 54.3% pointed out that the learning materials at the self-study centers needed to be upgraded as well as 35.9% wanted to renovate the self-study area of the institution.

Discussion

The results indicated that the non-English majoring students who participated in the study were not very confident with learner autonomy. They have difficulties in self-regulating skills, particularly in making learning goals. Moreover, the support from teachers and peers was not effective. Compared to teachers' guidance, peers were chosen for more support. They also find themselves not very confident when making decisions on their learning. They think the expectations from society influence their self-studies rather than the training institutions and their parents.

The solutions suggested involved self-regulating skills training, raising the awareness of learner autonomy, and the support of teachers, peers, and school. These results are in line with previous research, which stated that tertiary students' learner autonomy is low and reactive and requires the trigger of other factors (Le, 2018; Tran, 2020).

In order to promote students' autonomous learning in English, some possible solutions are recommended for their challenges.

Firstly, in regard to solutions for self-regulating skills problems in learning English, there should be more emphasis on seeking autonomous learning skills, or students can actively take control of their learning (Benson, 2011). That explains why they themselves have to take responsibility for their English learning in and outside of the classroom. It is suggested to find their own interest in any specific areas such as vocabulary, grammar, every single skill, or even topics that they feel enjoyable in the belief that when they are motivated, they can build up their learning strategies easily. Furthermore, to enhance their self-study, strategy training courses should be conducted separately or integrated into the learning program (Zhang & He, 2015). Students should find opportunities to take part in seminars or talk shows related to learner autonomy. Thanks to experts' advice on how to learn English autonomously, they might recognize their weaknesses or strengths that they have not thought of before. As a result, they will be better prepared for their future self-regulating learning.

Secondly, with reference to interactions, the student participants predominantly encountered difficulties in seeking support from the institution and teachers with their learning outside the classroom. They also did not have opportunities to discuss their autonomous language learning with their teachers. To get started, teachers in non-English major classes are encouraged to give more chances to the students to discuss their self-regulated learning. Teachers can ask students to work in groups and discuss how the students regulate their learning. This can form an enduring learning inspiration, which is fundamental for fostering learner autonomy (Muktawat, 2016). Moreover, teachers should accompany students when students enact their self-regulating skills, especially to set their learning goals. According to Le & Le (2022), for the factor of the teacher-student relationship, the teacher's small talk was an effective way to encourage the students to learn. Once the students have had achievable learning goals, they can be more confident to initiate their learning. Then, teachers can assign students learning activities with only the needed instructions and a range of choices so that students are step-by-step scaffolded to learn by

themselves. Teachers can also create social networking groups such as Facebook or Zalo to support students instantly if they need support. It is good to get feedback from students through teachers' activities, which can help the teachers design and modify the learning activities suitably. Teachers can also apply IT tools to promote the teacher-student interactions both physically and virtually, which in the long term promotes learner autonomy (Pham, 2022).

The third possible solution to improve learning English can lie with their peers. Learning from peers might be a possible solution to promoting their autonomy. Compared to interaction with teachers, friends can be easier to ask and support each other. They can work together at all stages of self-learning, such as setting mutual learning goals, initiating learning, practicing and supporting together, and giving feedback (Thornton, 2015).

Finally, as for promoting the confidence of students to make decisions about their own learning, opportunities should be given for students to raise their voices. The educators or university leaders need to be aware of the importance of learner autonomy and encourage students to make their own choice in different aspects of the learning process. The training policymakers should encourage students' involvement in the process of choosing the materials, the learning activities, and the ways of assessments. Additionally, upgrading autonomous learning zones for students is strongly recommended because the space for self-study is still very limited. Other expectation is the materials and references at the library and self-study area should be upgraded so that students can access the latest ideas in the field. A virtual learning space such as a school meta Learning Management System with well-designed activities can be a hub for nurturing learner autonomy (Le & Dang, 2021).

Conclusion

The research has described the level of non-English major students' learner autonomy as well as their difficulties and suggested solutions to have more effective self-learning. In spite of the possible contributions of the study to the field, some limitations can be found. Firstly, most students were second-year non-English major students of a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, instead of the equal numbers of students from four years of studies and from various universities. Second, the findings would be more useful if more research instruments such as interviews with students and teachers or classrooms observation with opportunities for insightful accounts of levels of autonomous learning, difficulties, and solutions. Finally, other items in SEQueLLS (Ruelens, 2019), MILLA (Murase, 2015), and LAPQ (Nguyen & Habók, 2021) scales have not been addressed in this study. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that these aspects be explored in future research.

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Biodata

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