


Vietnamese EFL Learners' Perceptions of Abilities and Challenges of Learner Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy is a common requirement for all Vietnamese university students. However, to become a successful English autonomous learner, the students are required to perform several tasks, namely setting learning objectives, making learning plans, taking advantage of useful learning resources, having high learning motivation, adjusting their learning strategies, and interacting with others. The present survey study used one online questionnaire to investigate Van Lang University's English major's perceptions of abilities and challenges of learner autonomy in English learning. Convenience sampling strategy was employed to include 57 students, who confirmed several abilities and very few challenges of learning autonomously. The reported learner autonomy level ranged from moderate to high, with the strongest ability in using the Internet (M= 3.84) and the weakest in self-evaluation (M= 3.51). The results have practical implications for local EFL lecturers and students. The lecturers are recommended to provide explicit training in self-evaluation strategies and material selection. Students are advised to utilize all mental, physical, and psychological resources to study English more effectively.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, EFL learning, perceptions

Introduction

The emergence of numerous instructional technologies facilitates students' English learning both in and out of the classroom. Encouraging learner autonomy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has become a quintessential task (Dang, 2010; Ngo, 2020). Despite various definitions of this term, learner autonomy is commonly understood as students' ability to take control of their learning, adjust learning strategies, maintain high learning motivation, and use all available learning resources effectively (Le & Nguyen, 2022). In other words, EFL learners need to be mentally, physically, and psychologically prepared for their autonomous learning (Benson, 2011).

As English is treated as only a foreign language in Vietnam, fostering learner autonomy is not an easy task (Le & Huynh, 2019; Duong & Vo, 2024). While many previous studies in Vietnam

on learner autonomy illustrated that Vietnamese EFL learners acknowledge several advantages (i.e., language proficiency, learning motivation, learning strategies, and social interactions), their perception of abilities and practical challenges of learner autonomy in a university context seems to be underexplored.

This paper includes five main sections. After the Introduction, Section 2 reviews important literature on learner autonomy. Section 3 describes the research methodology. Section 4 reports main findings and discussion. Section 5 recapitulates the results and concludes with implications, limitations, and recommendations for further studies.

Literature Review

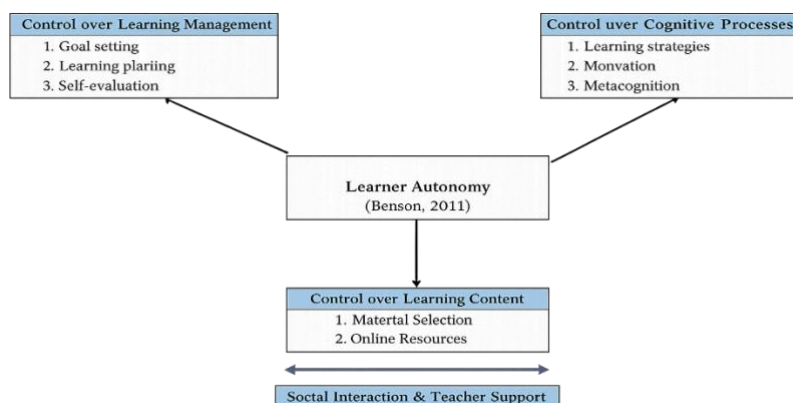
Learner Autonomy in English Education

The term “learner autonomy” has been defined in several ways across socio-cultural, political, and educational settings (Ngo, 2020). Holec (1981) defined it as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). Wenden (1991) refined the definition by viewing it as learners’ ability to control their learning strategies, knowledge, and attitudes for effective learning. According to Oxford (2003), learner autonomy is not just about learning in isolation but about learning in interaction with others as a socially responsible learner. While Holec's (1981) definition focuses on individuality, Benson's (2011) combines it with social and contextual elements. It is one’s capacity to control learning situations, behaviors, and psychology. Later, Le and Nguyen (2022) summarized that learner autonomy should be understood as the combination of learners’ ability to regulate all learning activities, both inside and outside the classroom, to seek support from others, and to enhance their self-confidence in learning management. In this study, learner autonomy is defined as learners’ ability to take charge of their learning, to develop their learning strategies, to maintain motivation for learning, and to make use of all useful resources for learning (teachers, friends, parents, learning materials, etc.).

Being an autonomous learner is a demanding task (Tran & Vuong, 2023). They should be able to and ready to set learning objectives, make learning plans, and use learning resources effectively (Duong & Vo, 2024). They can select suitable learning topics, perform language tasks, adjust learning strategies, work independently and collaboratively in learning (Wenden, 1991). They are mentally, physically, and psychologically prepared for autonomous learning (Benson, 2011). The following diagram describes the key conceptual framework of learner autonomy used in the study.

Figure 1

A Conceptual Framework of Learner Autonomy (adapted from Benson, 2011)



Learner autonomy, therefore, is a multifaceted construct in language education. It comprises four key dimensions: “technical” (learning activities inside and outside class), “psychological” (students’ readiness to take charge of learning), “political” (conditions for autonomous learning), and “social” (social interactions and collaboration in language learning).

Vietnamese EFL Learners’ Perception of Learner Autonomy

Previous studies demonstrate that Vietnamese EFL learners tend to have a positive perception of learner autonomy in English studies. When they have stronger beliefs in their learner autonomy, they can be more motivated to learn and improve their English proficiency (Le, 2018; Ngo, 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023; Phuong & Vo, 2019; Tran et al., 2020). Other studies tend to examine the reasons for such a positive perception. For example, learners can attribute their learner autonomy abilities to their teachers’ pedagogical approaches (Le & Huynh, 2019). As noted by Nguyen et al. (2022), besides teachers’ role, other factors include learners’ perceptions of learner autonomy, effective learning strategies (e.g., use of learning materials and cooperative learning), and learning conditions (see also Tran and Duong, 2018). Differently, Ho et al. (2023) and Trinh and Nguyen (2022) highlighted the significance of parental contributions to learner autonomy. Meanwhile, teachers’ instruction and appropriate technological applications can foster learner autonomy in specific language skills, such as reading comprehension (Duong & Vo, 2024).

While Vietnamese EFL learners’ positive perception of learner autonomy is apparent, they may differ in their perceptions of self-study strategies (Duong & Nguyen, 2021). They can have opposing views on their own learner autonomy and different levels of willingness (Duong & Nguyen, 2023). In particular, university students appear to be better prepared for learner autonomy in English study (Ngo & Luu, 2023).

Learner autonomy is also challenging in Vietnamese EFL contexts. Vietnamese EFL learners’ passive learning styles inhibit them from autonomous learning (Le & Huynh, 2019; Tran, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2023). Compared with teacher- and context-related challenges, student-related ones are much clearer. They tend to rely on teachers’ instruction and have low English proficiency to become effective autonomous learners. The low level of learner autonomy among Vietnamese EFL learners is also found (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023). There exist several obstacles to learner autonomy in Vietnamese EFL contexts (Tran & Duong, 2020), namely inconvenient learning conditions, students’ poor learning habits, teachers’ dominant roles, ineffective use of

learning materials, and ineffective cooperative learning. Duong and Nguyen (2021) identified additional obstacles, namely, students' fear of sharing learning difficulties in class with the teacher and their limited attention to time management in learning. Trinh and Nguyen (2022) and Le et al. (2023) confirmed that Vietnamese EFL learners' unwillingness to learn autonomously and heavy reliance on teachers' guidance in the classroom are major hindrances to their learner autonomy. Similarly, Le and Nguyen (2022) and Tran and Vuong (2023) identified common barriers to students' learner autonomy as low English proficiency, diffidence, and ineffective learning strategies. Briefly, mainly adapted from Le and Huynh (2019), the present study focuses on three groups of learner autonomy challenges, namely (1) student-related, (2) context-related, and (3) teacher-related.

Overall, a vast majority of Vietnamese studies have found that many Vietnamese EFL learners appreciate the usefulness of learner autonomy in their English learning. Learner autonomy is perceived to positively influence English proficiency, learning strategies, motivation, and social interactions between teachers and students. However, Vietnamese EFL learners' perception of their own abilities and the challenges of learner autonomy needs further exploration. Learner autonomy in Vietnamese EFL contexts, especially in higher education for English majors, remains challenging, particularly due to student-related variables (i.e., low English proficiency, low motivation, low self-efficacy, reliance on teachers' instruction, ineffective use of learning materials, and ineffective cooperative learning). As a result, it is useful to research Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions of their abilities and the challenges of learner autonomy.

Research Questions

The present survey study aims to investigate Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions of their abilities and challenges related to learner autonomy at Van Lang University. The following research questions are addressed:

1. What is the students' perception of their ability for learner autonomy in English learning?
2. What are students' perceptions of the challenges to their learner autonomy in English learning?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City. Convenience sampling, a nonprobability sampling method when participants are available and willing to participate (Creswell, 2012), was used to include 57 English majors (N=57; 17 male/40 female, 29.8%/70.2 %). It was used for many contextual reasons. In reality, these undergraduates were studying in the same faculty, which facilitated efficient data collection within time and resource constraints. Additionally, including available English majors may contribute to the existing Vietnamese findings. Most of them were 20 years old (29 students, 50.9%) and had studied English for over 10 years (20 students, 35.1%). Most of them were second-year students (33 students, 57.8%). Such demographic information was used to give the background for the interpretation. The following table reports the demographic information of the respondents.

Table 1

The demographic information of the respondents

Variable	Value	N	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	17	29.8
	Female	40	70.2
Age	18 years	9	15.8
	19 years	11	19.3
	20 years	29	50.9
	Over 20 years	8	14
	Below 3 years	6	10.5
English learning experience	3-5 years	14	24.6
	6-10 years	17	29.8
	Over 10 years	20	35.1
	First year	17	29.8
Undergraduate level	Second year	33	57.8
	Third year	6	10.5
	Fourth year	1	1.8
	Valid		57

Instruments

One online questionnaire was used to investigate the students' perception and practices of learner autonomy. It was adapted from the main conceptual framework of learner autonomy (Benson, 2011) and from Vietnamese EFL learners' challenges in learner autonomy (Le & Huynh, 2019).

The questionnaire has three main parts. Part 1 collects respondents' information on age, gender, English-learning experience, and undergraduate level. Part 2 is a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). It aims to collect respondents' perceptions of their learners' autonomy in English learning. Part 3 uses a similar Likert scale to collect respondents' perceptions of the challenges of learner autonomy in English learning.

Regarding the Likert-scale content, Part 2 consists of 6 items based on the framework by Benson (2011). Item 1 aims to collect the students' perception of their ability to set learning objectives. Item 2 aims to collect students' perceptions of their ability to develop learning plans. Item 4 aims to collect the students' perception of their ability to self-evaluate their English learning progress. These reflect the control over learning management. Item 3 aims to collect students' perceptions of their ability to study using Internet resources. This reflects the control over learning content. Item 6 aims to collect students' perceptions of their ability to understand the lecturer's instructions on English self-study. This reflects the control over cognitive processes. Item 5 aims to collect students' perceptions of their ability to collaborate with friends in learning English. This reflects the social support. Moreover, the scale includes one open-ended question to elicit further student opinions.

Part 3 contains 10 items, adapted from Le and Huynh (2019, pp. 142-144). Because of different research objectives and participants, the present study's scale includes only student-related and context-related challenges (lecturer's instruction is one of them). Items 1 to 5 belong to the student-related challenges. The respective purposes are to collect students' perceptions of the lack of language knowledge, the lack of language skills, the dearth of motivation, reliance on the lecturer's instruction, and extrinsic motivation for high scores. Items 6 to 10 belong to the context-related challenges. The purposes are to collect students' perceptions of the lack of

instructional technology in class, the lack of opportunities to use English outside class, the lack of school policy to promote English learner autonomy, the limited instruction on English learner autonomy, and the limited extra English learning materials.

Data collection & analysis

The original questionnaire was carefully proofread before its actual implementation. This helps ensure each item can represent typical traits of learner autonomy ability, adapted from Benson (2011), with three core dimensions: “control over learning management”, “control over cognitive processes”, and “control over learning content”, in addition to “social support”. The challenges of learner autonomy, adapted from Le and Huynh (2019), were examined to confirm that learner autonomy is influenced not only by individual factors but also by context-related factors. The questionnaire was revised to align with the current research context and objective. This original questionnaire was created in Google Forms, translated into Vietnamese, and delivered to a small group of volunteer students (N=13). The internal consistency reliability of the two scales was 0.852 and 0.887, respectively, both exceeding 0.6.

Table 2

Reliability statistics of the original questionnaire

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	N of items
1	.852	6
2	.887	10

The final questionnaire was delivered online to the school email addresses of the accessible student groups (N=109). It was closed one week later. The final number of questionnaire respondents was determined. The questionnaire results were analyzed by SPSS. Descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) of each scale item were extracted and presented in tables to answer both research questions. Further opinions were summarized and added wherever possible.

Results and Discussion

Research Question One

Most of the respondents affirmed that they could use Internet resources for English autonomous learning (Item 3: M=3.84, SD=.841). The second-highest ability is understanding the lecturers' instructions in English class (Item 6: M = 3.75, SD = .851). The third-highest ability is cooperating with friends for English self-study (Item 5: M = 3.74, SD = .917). The fourth-highest ability is setting learning objectives (Item 1: M = 3.56, SD = .802). The fifth-highest ability is making weekly learning plans (Item 2: M = 3.53, SD = .804). The lowest ability is self-evaluation of English learning progress (Item 4: M = 3.51, SD = .917). Moreover, among these 57 response samples, only one respondent added the ability to imitate English sentence patterns, pronunciation, lexical use, and language-use strategies.

Table 3

The statistics of the students' perception of their ability to learn English autonomously

No	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	I am able to set up my long-term and short-term English learning goals.	3.56	.802
2	I am able to plan for my English learning every week.	3.53	.804
3	I am able to self-study English via Internet after class.	3.84	.841
4	I am able to self-evaluate my English learning progress.	3.51	.869
5	I am able to collaborate with my friends for English self-study.	3.74	.917
6	I am able to understand lecturers' instruction on English autonomous learning.	3.75	.851

In general, their perceived ability in English autonomous learning is not exceptionally remarkable. Three noticeable abilities are self-study via the Internet, understanding lecturers' instructions, and collaborating with friends. Based on the framework by Benson (2011), this suggests that students tend to focus on "control over their cognitive processes", "control over learning content", and "receive social support" rather than "control over learning management".

These findings are in agreement with the following studies (Tran, 2020; Trinh & Nguyen, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023; Le et al., 2023). Vietnamese EFL learners tend to rely heavily on teachers' instruction in English. Because of low English proficiency and limited English use outside class (Le & Nguyen, 2022; Tran & Duong, 2020; Tran & Vuong, 2023), as well as passive learning styles (Oxford, 2003), they are inclined to pay close attention to lecturers' instruction in class more than others. The results also underpin the studies (Dang, 2010; Ngo, 2020) that concluded that current instructional technologies can facilitate EFL learners' autonomy outside the classroom. The boom of technological advances greatly facilitates the practice of English learner autonomy. They can preview learning materials before and after class, self-study key lessons, and refine their learning strategies. The ability to collaborate with friends in English learner autonomy agrees with (Le, 2018; Tran & Duong, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2022). Vietnamese EFL learners can be encouraged to socially interact with others in class (mostly friends) to support their learner autonomy. By interacting with others, they can improve their English knowledge and skills, learn strategies, and gain a better understanding of how to use learning resources both inside and outside the classroom. Despite an unremarkable mean, the perceived abilities to set learning objectives, develop learning plans, and self-evaluate learning progress remain noteworthy. As explained by the studies (Tran & Vuong, 2023; Duong & Nguyen, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022; Ngo & Luu, 2023), motivated and self-directed Vietnamese EFL learners who are autonomous in their learning can take the initiative in their learning process. They can clearly identify their learning goals and plan their English learning. However, as Duong & Nguyen (2021) explain, their fear of sharing learning problems with teachers in class, low English proficiency, lack of suitable learning and assessment strategies, and poor time management skills can create barriers to their self-evaluation of English learning after class.

Research Question Two

However, most students were reluctant to admit they faced several challenges in studying English independently. Regarding the student-related variables, most students did not think they were totally passive learners who relied too much on the lecturers' instruction (Item 5: $M=2.60$, $SD=1.083$). They were reluctant to state that they lack motivation to learn English autonomously (Item 4: $M= 3.23$, $SD= 1.282$). The same tendency was evident in the extrinsic

learning motivation for high English exam scores (Item 3: $M=3.32$, $SD=1.072$) and the dearth of language knowledge needed to learn English autonomously (Item 2: $M=3.33$, $SD=1.075$). The most remarkable challenge in this group is the lack of language skills for English learner autonomy (Item 1: $M=3.44$, $SD=1.053$).

Table 4

The statistics of the students' perceived student-related challenges

No	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	I lack the language skills to become an autonomous learner.	3.44	1.053
2	I lack language knowledge to become an autonomous learner.	3.33	1.075
3	I just want to pass English exams with high scores.	3.32	1.072
4	I lack motivation to learn English autonomously.	3.23	1.282
5	I want to rely on lecturers' English instruction.	2.60	1.083

Similarly, most students were reluctant to affirm the following context-related challenges of their English learner autonomy. First, they were neutral about the dearth of opportunities to use English outside class (Item 6: $M=3.05$, $SD=1.315$). Second, they were also hesitant to confirm the limited instructions in class (Item 7: $M=3.04$, $SD=1.017$). Third, they were neutral about the discouraging school policy on English learner autonomy (Item 8: $M=3.00$, $SD=1.086$). Finally, they did not think that technology (Item 9: $M=2.95$, $SD=.915$) and extra materials (Item 10: $M=2.88$, $SD=.1087$). Only one respondent offered further insight into the challenge. This student added the challenges related to inconsistent materials use outside of class. When using materials for English autonomous learning, it is necessary to have effective strategies for selecting the best materials.

Table 5

The statistics of the students' perceived context-related variables

No	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
6	I have very few opportunities to use English outside class.	3.05	1.315
7	Instructions on English autonomous learning are limited.	3.04	1.017
8	Autonomous learning is discouraged in my school.	3.00	1.086
9	Technology is insufficiently provided in my English classes.	2.95	.915
10	Extra materials for English autonomous learning are limited.	2.88	1.087

It is obvious that the students did not address all student- and context-related challenges related to their English learner autonomy. The seemingly prominent challenge is the lack of language skills to become autonomous learners. This can agree with the results of the first research question: The students do not pay much attention to their control over learning management (self-evaluation, setting learning objectives, and planning learning).

As a result, these results are different from past studies (Le & Huynh, 2019; Tran, 2020; Tran & Duong, 2020; Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Le & Nguyen, 2022; Trinh & Nguyen, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023; Le et al., 2023; Tran & Vuong, 2023). It could be explained by many reasons. First, several respondents had more than 10 years of English-learning experience. This might make it convenient for them to learn English autonomously. Second, the autonomy of English learners among these students is relatively high (as shown in the first research answer). As explained by the studies (Le, 2018; Phuong & Vo, 2019; Tran et al., 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023), Vietnamese EFL learners who are more experienced in learning English and are autonomously interested in English can better handle learning problems and be better prepared for learner autonomy. This might lead to a low level of challenges, as mentioned. As shown in the

questionnaire responses, the respondents may have sufficient motivation for autonomous English learning. This helps them prepare for English learner autonomy. Third, the facilitating conditions for English learner autonomy at the university are obvious. They are the lecturers' instructions on English autonomous learning, the supportive school policy, and available instructional technology and extra materials for English learner autonomy. This aligns with the following studies (Nguyen et al., 2022; Duong & Nguyen, 2023; Ngo & Luu, 2023), which confirmed that current Vietnamese EFL contexts offer several conducive conditions for autonomous learning. The findings do not reflect the impact of parental contributions on students' English-learner autonomy (Ho et al., 2023; Trinh & Nguyen, 2022) due to differences in research objectives. The contribution of the findings on the perceived challenges of learner autonomy in English learning is the dearth of language-material use strategies. The students need to develop their methods for selecting the best materials for learning outside class and for reflecting on the quality of the materials' content.

Conclusion

The present study revealed that the English-majored students at Van Lang University are willing to learn English autonomously. They perceived that they could take advantage of Internet resources, lecturers' instruction, and collaboration with others (lecturers and friends). They also recognized the importance of setting English-learning goals, creating learning plans, and self-evaluating learning progress. Therefore, there were no striking challenges of English learner autonomy among these students, except for their language skills and the ability to select the best materials for English learner autonomy.

Pedagogically, local EFL lecturers can encourage students to practice English autonomous learning by instructing them on how to select the best language-learning materials and develop their language skills. Useful websites and apps for English learning can be introduced. They can also share useful learning resources and give online assignments in their E-learning classes (with instructions). The students are encouraged to take advantage of all mental, physical, and psychological resources to support their English-language learner autonomy. They can cooperate with their peers to accomplish learning tasks. They can also interact more with the lecturers during their studies for further learning support.

The study has two key limitations. First, because of convenience sampling and limited time resources, the sample size is limited. The results cannot be generalized to the entire student population at this university. Second, only one questionnaire was employed; therefore, no in-depth information about the abilities and practical challenges of learner autonomy was given. As a result, future studies can include more participants and triangulate the data to yield more meaningful findings.

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Biodata

Duong Thanh Hung Duc is a current lecturer at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He has been teaching reading comprehension skills to English majors at Van Lang University for approximately 13 years. He is interested in studying language testing and MALL.

Appendix

The Questionnaire

Dear all students,

The following survey aims to collect some information about your learner autonomy abilities and the challenges in English study. All your personal information is kept confidential and used for academic purposes only.

Thank you and best regards!

Part 1: Personal Information

1. Age:

- 18 years
 19 years
 20 years
 Over 20 years

2. **Gender:** Male Female

3. English learning experience:

- Below 3 years
 3-5 years
 6-10 years
 Over 10 years

4. Undergraduate level:

- First year
 Second year
 Third year
 Fourth year

Part 2: Perception of learner autonomy abilities in English

5. Do you agree with the following statements?

1 = *Strongly Disagree*

2 = *Disagree*

3 = *Neutral*

4 = *Agree*

5 = *Strongly Agree*

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
5.1. I am able to set up my long-term and short-term English learning goals.					
5.2. I am able to plan for my English learning every week.					
5.3. I am able to self-study English via Internet after class.					
5.4. I am able to self-evaluate my English learning progress.					
5.5. I am able to collaborate with my friends for English self-study.					
5.6. I am able to understand lecturers' instruction on English autonomous learning.					

6. Do you have any other learner autonomy abilities? If yes, please specify.

Part 3: Perception of challenges in learner autonomy abilities in English

7. Do you agree with the following statements?

1 = *Strongly Disagree*

2 = *Disagree*

3 = *Neutral*

4 = *Agree*

5 = *Strongly Agree*

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
Student-related challenges					
7.1. I lack the language skills to become an autonomous learner.					
7.2. I lack language knowledge to become an autonomous learner.					
7.3. I just want to pass English exams with high scores.					
7.4. I lack motivation to learn English autonomously.					
7.5. I want to rely on lecturers' English instruction.					
Context-related challenges					
7.6. I have very few opportunities to use English outside class.					
7.7. Instructions on English autonomous learning are limited.					
7.8. Autonomous learning is discouraged in my school.					
7.9. Technology is insufficiently provided in my English classes.					
7.10. Extra materials for English autonomous learning are limited.					

8. Do you experience any related challenges? If yes, please specify.
