

## ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE FACTORS BOOSTING LEARNER AUTONOMY DEVELOPMENT

Tran Quoc Thao\* and Vo Quoc Dai

*Faculty of English, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology*

**Abstract.** This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study exploring students' perspectives on the factors boosting learner autonomy (LA) development. This study involved 393 English-majored students from a Ho Chi Minh City based higher education institution in answering open-ended questionnaires. The content analysis approach was used to analyze the qualitative data. The findings revealed that three major factors, viz. *teacher-related factors*, *school-related factors* and *parental factors* were believed to positively affect students' LA emergence. However, research participants reckoned that teacher-related factors had a major role in boosting students' LA development while *school-related factors* and *parental factors* played contributing roles in shaping students' LA.

**Keywords:** English majors; factor; student; higher education; learner autonomy.

### 1. Introduction

Learner autonomy (LA) plays one of the vital roles in learners' academic achievements [1-4]. Tran and Vo [4] state that "successful language learners cannot be non-autonomous language ones" (p. 102) because they should be able to monitor their out-of-class learning activities, and they can gradually move from dependent learners to independent ones. Notwithstanding, LA cannot be automatically built, but it emerges from interaction with different sources. Researchers [5-7] have pointed out that the emergence of LA results from the interaction with many components (e.g., learner beliefs, motivation, external guidance, the learner's sense of self, metacognitive knowledge, and language learning history) in complex dynamic systems. Murray (2019) has highlighted that the LA is an emergent phenomenon and affordance from learning environment. Seeing the emergence of LA from the ecological approach can help to trace changes in the developmental process of LA as "[LA] is not a simple construct" (p. 9) [5]. In the context of Vietnam where learners had been traditionally viewed as passive ones in the learning process, Tran and Duong [3] have mentioned LA has been gradually enhanced in the respective educational systems. In addition, with the global spread of technology, the teaching and learning of English has been much easier than before; hence, LA in English language learning has been improved accordingly. It is observed, nonetheless, that the emergence of LA can be from multifaceted interactions. Therefore, this study aims at exploring the boosting factors for LA development from the perspectives of English-majored students in the context of a Vietnamese higher education institution.

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Contact Tran Quoc Thao, e-mail address: [tranquocthaobmtc@yahoo.com](mailto:tranquocthaobmtc@yahoo.com)

## 2. Content

### 2.1. Literature Review

Scholars [8-10] have variously defined LA in education in general and in language learning particularly. Holec [9] first defined LA as “an ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p.3). That means it is the students who take charge of their learning process in terms of finding out their learning objectives, selecting materials to study, choosing their own learning strategies, monitoring and assessing their study. Meanwhile, Little [10] defines LA as “a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions” (p.4). Autonomous students utilize metacognitive skills which include the ability to reflect critically, make their own decisions, act independently and transfer what they have learned to other learning contexts. In brief, within the scope of this study independent or autonomous learners can be understood to have abilities to know their learning needs, have positive attitudes towards learning, establish their own learning goals, plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning, and explore available learning opportunities and resources. They are also able to use learning strategies and interact effectively with others.

Different researchers have pointed out different approaches for fostering LA. Cotterall [11] has revealed five components that can foster LA, (i) Learner/teacher dialogue, (ii) Learning a language study theme, (iii) Classroom tasks and materials, (iv) Student record booklet and (v) Self-access centre. She has highlighted that “dialogue is more important to autonomy than structures” (p. 226) and that “the relationship between the learner and the class teacher is central to the fostering of autonomy” (p 226). Likewise, Benson [8] has described six approaches to fostering LA. The approaches which focus on various aspects of control in the process of learning are resource-based, curriculum-based, teacher-based, learner-based, technology-based, and classroom-based. Resource-based approaches emphasize that learners be given chances to monitor their own learning process no matter what it is self-study, self-access, or distance learning. The principal instruments of resource-based approaches are materials and counseling. Curriculum-based approaches place emphasis on how teachers and learners negotiate with an aim to facilitate learners to take part in decision-making on what to learn and do as well as how to evaluate their learning. The teacher-based approaches are for developing teachers’ profession in an attempt to help teachers to be aware of autonomy and support learners’ LA. Technology-based approaches discuss various forms of technology to make learning opportunities available. Within the scope of this study, as the nature of this study is qualitative, the inductive approach is applied. Therefore, the abovementioned approaches for fostering LA are employed as a conceptual framework for data analysis.

### 2.2. Methods and results

#### 2.2.1 Methods

This qualitative study, which can analyse subjective meaning by collecting non-standardised data and analysing texts rather than number and statistics [12], was conducted at a higher education institution in Vietnam. It involved 393 English-majored students conveniently sampled from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> year (1<sup>st</sup> year: 27.5%; 2<sup>nd</sup> year: 25.4%; 3<sup>rd</sup> year: 24.7%; 4<sup>th</sup> year: 22.4%). The percentages of males and females are 31% and 69% respectively. Nearly 100% of the participants were under 30 years old and have learned English at least for five years. All of the participants reported that they self-studied English, but the length ranges from less than 1 hour to more than 3 hours per day, and most of them (77.1%) self-studied English alone.

This study employed an open-ended questionnaire which seems less threatening and free responses to respondents [13]. It includes two parts: Personal information and questionnaire content. The former includes questions relating to respondents’ personal information. The latter

consists of four questions asking respondents' perspectives on boosting factors for LA development. The questionnaire was designed based on the approaches for developing LA (See section 2). To collect data, the questionnaire was administered to 480 students in ten classes; however, 427 copies were returned, but 393 copies were valid for data analysis. Regarding data analysis, the qualitative data were analysed using content analysis approach within four steps: coding, categorising, comparing and concluding [14]. The questionnaires were labeled from S1 to S393. In order to assure the validity and reliability of data analysis, the intra-rating method was applied. Three randomly chosen pieces of data were re-analyzed, and the congruent results had to reach at least 90%.

## **2.2.2 Results**

### **2.2.2.1 Teacher-related factors boosting tertiary English-majored students' LA development in ELL**

The results revealed that English-majored students thought that the teacher-related factors which encompass *teachers' teaching techniques, methods, approaches and styles, assessment and testing, support and advice, attitudes towards students, and motivating techniques* could boost their LA development in ELL.

#### *Teachers' teaching techniques, methods, approaches and styles*

Participants reported that they could become autonomous with the effects of teachers' teaching techniques, methods, approaches and styles. Specifically, they emphasized that they were strongly influenced by their teachers' appropriate and effective teaching methods and approaches. Some significant excerpts are as follows:

...it's very meaningful if teachers know how to employ the teaching methods and approaches that can facilitate us to become autonomous learners... (S212)

...I think I will get more involved in class if my teachers can use teaching methods which can interest students a lot... (S3)

In addition, it was found out that students could learn independently when they were learning with up-to-date teaching techniques such as pair-work and group-work which include games, presentations, projects, discussions, debates and field-trips. They said "my teachers often ask my class to do oral presentations, so I have to prepare them on my own, sometimes with my peers. Although it is quite hard for me, I find myself more diligent and autonomous..." (S25), and "...my friends from other majors have many field-trips, and they have to do a lot of things individually and in groups. So, I suppose that doing field-trips and writing reports in English may help me be autonomous, to some extent..." (S377).

More homework could be a helping hand which could stimulate their LA in ELL. For example, students (e.g., S32, S45, S57, S222, S332, S349, S366) mentioned that teachers should give more homework which requires students to work individually and in groups instead of using traditional teaching methods.

Further results showed that students could improve their LA when learning lessons with meaningful and practical knowledge for later jobs. For instance, "...teachers should embed practical knowledge in lessons that we can apply in our daily life so that we will practice how to use it more frequently" (S5), and "...apart from more homework, teachers should equip students with meaningful knowledge for their future jobs... when students realize the importance of learning for their future jobs, they will study autonomously" (S200).

The type of homework (e.g., projects, assignments) could affect students' LA increment. Students (e.g., S48, S182, S296, S300, S359, S363, S87) shared that homework from translation and interpretation class should relate to practical situations because when they would allocate more time to such homework and assignments. Plus, the length of time for doing homework is a

positive matter for students' LA enhancement. Students (e.g., S35, S46, S155, S174, S185, S227, S301, S375) suggested that teachers should lengthen the time for doing homework individually and in groups so that students could have more time to search for references and figure out how to do their homework. This can be understood that the more time they have to do homework, the more autonomous they tend to be in order to accomplish their homework.

Teachers' teaching styles could influence their students' learning style. Students reported: "I often spend more time on reviewing the learned lessons and preparing for new ones when I have classes with teachers who are strict to students" (S307), and "teaching English requires teachers to be very active, so if my teachers are active, I have to be active as well" (S315).

#### *Teachers' assessment and testing*

As found from the results, the ways teachers assess and test students' ELL were reported to have impacts on students' LA augmentation in ELL.

...teachers should pay attention to the level of students' language proficiency so that they can assess and test students appropriately in accordance with students' language proficiency. Otherwise, tests will be too difficult for weak students or too easy for good ones... (S315)

...tests should not be too challenging for students. Tests should indicate that students make progress in learning so that they can focus more on their study... (S322)

What is more, students shared that the fairness in assessment and testing could affect the level of students' LA in ELL. Students (e.g., S143, S226, S276, S342, S357) stated that teachers should be fair in assessment and testing, which can have impacts on whether students get devoted in learning or not. This indicates that the fairer teachers' assessment and testing are, the more they can boost their students' LA development in ELL.

#### *Teachers' support and advice*

Results unraveled that non-English majors believed that their teachers' support and advice could help to facilitate their LA development. One of the expected supports is from their teachers' sharing experience. Some remarkable excerpts are as follows:

...learning English sometimes is challenging, and I am from a rural area, so I did not learn it well in the past. I would like my teachers to share the learning experience of how to learn English well... (S54).

...teachers should equip students with autonomous learning strategies so that students know how to learn independently well... (S182).

Furthermore, students stated that their teachers' instruction on how self-study English language skills was necessary and important for students' LA development (S117; S192; S206). Research participants responded that whether teachers should give students with techniques for searching self-study materials could contribute to students' LA increase in ELL. For instance, students (e.g., S8, S35, S156, S209, S377) revealed that teachers should support students with self-study materials by giving available self-study materials and techniques for seeking materials for self-study. Students also admitted that teachers' advice on how to learn independently effectively could be effective in boosting students' LA development, so teachers could be a counselor/resource for learners in terms of LA enhancement (e.g., S244; S368).

In another aspect, students (e.g., S35, S103, S166, S287, S341) highlighted that teachers should be supportive and helpful to students and help them to be aware of the importance of LA in ELL and know how to boost their LA development.

#### *Teachers' attitudes towards students*

Results indicated that teachers' positive attitudes towards students were one of the factors that could have impacts on students' LA development. Specifically, research participants shared

that teachers' friendliness, respect to students and understanding students are indirectly effective in enhancing students' LA. Some excerpts are as follows:

...teachers should be friendly to students...I can enjoy my learning in such class, and I love preparing for new lessons... (S143).

...I think that I will try my best to improve my English language skills when my teachers understand students' learning needs and feelings because they know how to encourage and motivate their students to learn more... (S319).

Students (e.g., S26, S136, S158, S276, S387) disclosed that teachers should care about students' in-class and out-of-class learning because this could help to promote students' LA. Additionally, it was found out that teachers should be attentive to students' learning so that they could give appropriate learning strategies to students (e.g., S34, S89, S149, S281, S349).

#### *Teachers' motivating techniques*

Results uncovered that teachers' motivating techniques, viz. learning conditions, bonus marks and compliments, and learning rules, could affect students' learning mood, which could entail their LA improvement. With respect to learning conditions, students expected:

...teachers should create a relaxing atmosphere in ELL. Students can study best when they enjoy their learning... (S235)

...if teachers are bias-free in teaching, the class will be enjoyable, and sometimes competitive among students to learn... (S366)

Regarding bonus marks and compliments, students (e.g., S1, S92, S172, S222, S361) described that students were very eager and motivated by teachers' bonus marks when they could contribute to class, do homework well, and finish assignments before due day. Students (e.g., S32, S80, S198, S253, S380) documented that teachers' compliments including praise, approval of good work could facilitate students' learning mood. Sometimes, some candies and small gifts from teachers could also trigger students' autonomous learning.

#### **2.2.2.2 School-related factors boosting tertiary English-majored students' LA development in ELL**

School-related factors consisting of *students' fellow peers* and *school administration*, were admittedly influential ones for students' English language self-study.

##### *Students' fellow peers*

Students reported that their peers could be deemed as one of the influential factors for their LA development when they self-studied in groups for practicing English skills and when they had good and studious fellow peers as motivators to study with.

...I often study with my friend who is a good student, and I learn a lot from him, not only his knowledge but also his learning style... (S346)

...I want to have friends who are studious because I can find a good learning mood in myself when seeing them learning.... (S247)

Furthermore, students confided that their peers' sharing learning materials and tips could be helpful for independent study.

Some of my friends are good, and it would be great if they could share their own learning materials with me. They know good learning materials, so it is faster for me to focus on important points in learning... (S102)

...not along ago, some of my friends shared with me their good learning tips, and I found them quite useful and motivating. I have spent more time on my study since then... (S295)

Besides, working together to find out the effective and appropriate learning approaches was meaningful for students' LA. Students (e.g., S44, S85, S183, S259, S342) shared that they did

not want to make friends with fellow students who always went out. Instead, they preferred those with whom they could study to find out effective and appropriate learning approaches in improving their English language skills.

*Students' school administration*

Students had a view that their school administration could be a motivating force for their autonomous learning by providing more meaningful academic activities such as workshops, clubs, and field trips. Significant excerpts are:

...there should be more workshops on autonomous learning so that I know how to learn independently. Learning at university is so different from that at high school ....(S70)

...learning English alone sometimes is not effective, so there should be more English language clubs such as speaking club, writing club at school...I tend to learn a lot before and after joining English language clubs... (S222)

Results disclosed that university's incentive policies for learning were admitted to impact students' independent learning. Students (e.g., S21, S54, S80, S230, S332) stated that incentive policies learning such as scholarships and tuition fee waiver could be meaningful and practical for them. Sometimes, they did not mean much in terms of finance, but they highlighted students' pride and triggered their self-study mood.

In another aspect, English-majored students confessed that the learning facilities at their university were an indirect force for self-study.

...I am currently living in a lodging room which is quite small and uncomfortable, so I always find a place for self-study at school, but it seems that it is also noisy there. I think my university should have more self-study zones for students because many of students are like me... (S247)

...the university should let students stay in the library more instead of office hours. We need more time to study there because we sometimes work part-time during daytime... (S309)

Remarkably, students suggested that university administrators should care more about the quality of lecturers and presence of native English-speaking lecturers which could be indirectly boosting factors for their independent learning style.

...I think the quality of lecturers should be high. As for me, I love learning English with teachers who have ever graduated abroad because they are quite good in terms of knowledge and English language proficiency. They are my idols for me to study... (S338)

...my university should recruit more native English-speaking lecturers for teaching courses of English language skills because they are good language models. I enjoy learning with them and spare more time on practicing my English language skills... (S381)

**2.2.2.3 Parental factors boosting tertiary English-majored students' LA development in ELL**

Results indicated that research participants believed that parents-related factors including *parents' approaches of educating children* and *support and advice* could facilitate their children's autonomous learning.

*Parents' approaches of educating children*

Research participants held a view that their parents should have appropriate approaches of educating children which can help to indirectly foster their LA development. They mentioned that parents' encouragement and care would be more effective than force and pressure on their study.

...I don't want to be forced to do this and that... I want to be encouraged to study instead of being under pressure to study well... (S11)

...parents can push children to learn, but not create too much pressure on children to study well... (S92)

Moreover, students had a belief that their parents' seriousness of study scores and achievements could hamper them from enjoying self-study. For instance, students (e.g., S118, S149, S239, S281, S333, S381) mentioned that parents should encourage their children when they did not get high study scores and achievements. They should find ways to help their children to study better.

Students further added that parents should not control their children's study so strictly. They should give children freedom to learn what they like and to self-regulate their learning habits (e.g., S05; S304). What is more, students assumed that parents should create learning conditions for their children to study rather than interfering their children's study seriously (e.g., S23, S45, S111, S281, S307). They went on mentioning that parents should respect their children's learning decisions and show them how to learn (e.g., S47, S69, S150, S234, S344).

#### *Parents' support and advice*

English majors thought that parents' support and advice could play an important role in enhancing their children's autonomous language learning. They admitted that parents' mental and material support could be a facilitating condition for their children's LA. They shared:

First, parents should help their children to get aware of the importance of independent learning. Then, they should support their children when they get stuck with what to do next... (S162)

...I reckon that parents should understand their children's learning needs, so they can buy their children more learning materials when necessary... sometimes, parents should be by their children to solve their children's learning difficulties... (S373)

Parents' advice could be worth being considered as a positive facilitator for their children's LA improvement. Students wrote:

...I always want to consult my parents' advice for solving my learning problems, which can trigger my learning willingness because I don't want to fail my parents' expectation... (S55)

...I can say that no one apart from my parents can understand me well, so I come to them for advice whenever I get stuck in learning... (S186)

A suitable learning place at home is what English majors expect from their parents' support. Students (e.g., S92, S149, S184, S219, S372) confessed that they could focus more on self-study if they could have a suitable learning place at home because they were studying the English language. They needed such a place at home to practice their English language skills.

### **2.3. Discussion**

The study has unraveled some significant findings on English majored students' perspectives on the factors boosting their LA development. Firstly, it was found out that students believed that their LA emergence was mainly influenced by teacher-related factors. Participants opined that whether their autonomous learning habit were shaped or not could be due to *teachers' teaching technique, methods, approaches and styles, assessment and testing, support and advice, attitudes towards students' ELL, and motivating techniques*. They expected that when their *teachers' teaching technique, methods, approaches and styles* were appropriate and effective, their LA could be enhanced accordingly. Similarly, the factor of *teachers' motivating techniques* was believed to contribute to such a finding which may be explained by claims by Spratt et al. [15] who have found a strong relationship between motivation and autonomy, and they have pinpointed that "motivation is a key factor that influences the extent to which learners are ready to learn autonomously, and that teachers might therefore endeavour to ensure motivation before they train students to become autonomous" (p.2). An additional factor to

amount the level of students' autonomous learning was the fairness in *teachers' assessment and testing*. Students supposed that the fairness in teachers' assessment and testing could be a positive washback which can have indirect impacts on their independent learning. This may be explained that assessment and testing in English language teaching may be sometimes subjective, especially in speaking skills; therefore, students may want to know their peers' and their true learning ability so that they may plan what to learn to tailor for learning outcomes. What is more, the factor of *teachers' support and advice* was reported to have positive impacts on students' students' autonomous learning activities. One of the facts is that although students in this context were learning English as their major, and they have learned English for at least five years, nearly 50% of them allocated less than one hour to self-study per day, an equal percentage spent from 1-3 hours daily on independent learning. This may infer that students may lack independent learning skills. That is why they may want the support and advice from their teachers in terms of techniques for effective autonomous language learning. This finding is supported by previous researchers [1], [3], [6] who have confirmed that it is teachers who should develop and train students how to become autonomous learners. *es towards students' ELL* which was expected to influence students' autonomous language learning. This can infer that teacher's personalities can affect students' LA development. This finding is supported by Jurczak and Jurczak [16] who have asserted that teacher's personality is an important element in shaping learners' personality and academic performance.

The second major finding is that students' LA in ELL could be positively affected by parental factors (*parents' approaches of educating children* and *parents' support and advice*) which were believed to positively support English-majored students' LA development in ELL. It may be understood that students' LA development can be impacted by parental behaviors. With respect of cultural context, Vietnamese children are observed to be closely attached with their parents, so their behavior development is greatly influenced by parenting orientation.

Apart from teachers and parents, the third major finding is about *school-related factors* including *students' fellow peers* and *their school administration*. Participants admitted that their fellow friends' positive personality traits (e.g., good, studious, helpful) and good academic performance could help to develop their LA. This may be explained that peer group may have effects on members' motivation and achievements. The effects may be positive and negative; however, positive ones may contribute to the enhancement of LA. This finding is corroborated by researchers such as Bankole and Ogunsakin [17] who have postulated that there is a positive correlation between the influence of peer group and group members' academic performance. Hence, it can infer that fellow peers can be a motivating factor for LA development. It was further found out that *students' school administration* was believed to be a driving force for learners' LA. In this study context, participants expected that how their school administered the teaching and learning in terms of academic activities, incentive policies, learning facilities and quality of teaching and learning could influence indirectly their autonomous language learning.

### 3. Conclusions

To sum up, it can be concluded that tertiary English-majored students in this research context thought that their LA could be emerged from interaction with three main factors (*teacher-related factors*, *school-related factors* and *parental factors*). However, *teacher-related factors* were believed to play a dominant role in supporting the students' LA, and the other two factors (*school-related factors* and *parental factors*) were also major boosting factors for shaping students' LA. Therefore, the roles of teachers, school (peer and administration) and parents cannot be ignored in developing students' LA in ELL.



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