

# Fostering learner autonomy in English language training for civil servants: a case study in Phú Yên province

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**Abstract:** This study examines the development of learner autonomy through an English language training program for civil servants in Phú Yên Province, Vietnam. Jointly supported by the U.S. Embassy and the Phú Yên Department of Foreign Affairs, the program employed task-based learning, technology integration, and reflective activities to foster independent learning. The findings indicate significant improvements in participants' communicative competence and levels of learner autonomy, despite challenges such as initial resistance and limited access to technology. The study offers practical recommendations for designing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs, with a particular focus on promoting learner autonomy within the context of public-sector education.

**Keywords:** Learner autonomy, communicative English, English for Specific Purposes, independent learning, public-sector education.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Global Need for English Proficiency in Public Service

English proficiency has become a vital skill for civil servants worldwide, particularly those involved in international cooperation, trade, and diplomacy. In Vietnam, while significant progress has been made in English education, a gap persists between academic learning and practical communicative competencies. This issue is particularly pronounced among civil servants in provincial areas, such as Phú Yên, where opportunities for advanced, context-specific English training remain limited. Addressing these gaps is crucial for fostering effective public diplomacy and international collaboration.

### 1.2 Learner Autonomy in TESOL

Learner autonomy - defined by Holec (1981) as the ability to take charge of one's own learning - has become a cornerstone of modern field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). This approach equips learners with lifelong learning skills, empowering them to sustain language proficiency even after formal instruction ends. However, fostering learner autonomy within the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) presents unique challenges. Balancing structured teaching with opportunities for self-directed learning requires innovative strategies, particularly in programs designed for professional learners.

This paper examines the integration of learner

autonomy within a communicative English course specifically designed for civil servants in Phú Yên Province, Vietnam. The program, delivered online via Zoom, was sponsored by the U.S. Embassy and the Phú Yên Department of Foreign Affairs. The course was led by a primary instructor - a U.S. Embassy expert and native English-speaking educator - and co-taught by two Vietnamese university lecturers, ensuring both global expertise and local contextualization.

The program was structured to:

1. Enhance participants' workplace communication skills in English.
2. Foster autonomous learning behaviors to support continuous language development.

## 2. Program Overview

### 2.1 Course Details

From June to October 2024, the program was implemented to enhance English language proficiency among 60 civil servants from various departments and agencies across Phú Yên Province. The cohort was diverse in terms of age and professional expertise, with participants ranging from their 20s to 50s.

The program served two cohorts of 30 learners each and focused on building communicative English skills essential for workplace interactions. Delivered virtually via Zoom, the course consisted of 60 contact hours, structured into two weekly sessions of two hours each over a 15-week period.

The teaching team blended international and local expertise, with a U.S. Embassy expert as the lead

instructor and two Vietnamese university lecturers as co-teachers. This collaborative model ensured the integration of global best practices with a deep understanding of local contexts, meeting the diverse needs of the learners and ensuring the program's relevance and effectiveness.

## 2.2 Curriculum Framework

The curriculum was developed based on three core principles to enhance both communicative competence and learner autonomy.

The first principle emphasized practical application of communication skills in professional contexts.

The second principle focused on developing autonomous learning habits.

The third principle leveraged technology for extended learning opportunities.

Together, these principles ensured the curriculum was both practical and adaptable, equipping participants with the skills and autonomy needed for sustained professional growth.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

To evaluate the program's impact on language proficiency and learner autonomy, a mixed-methods research design was adopted. This approach combined quantitative and qualitative data collection to provide a comprehensive understanding of the program's effectiveness.

Language proficiency was assessed through pre- and post-course tests, focusing on speaking and writing skills. These tests measured improvements in key areas such as accuracy, fluency, and confidence in communication. Additionally, participants maintained weekly journals to document their progress, challenges, and learning strategies.

By integrating these data sources, the research provided a holistic analysis of the program's outcomes, highlighting its influence on both linguistic competencies and the development of self-directed learning skills. This multi-faceted approach ensured a thorough evaluation of the program's impact.

### 3.2 Implementation Strategies

The program's implementation was guided by strategies designed to balance structured teaching with opportunities for autonomous learning. Task-based learning formed the cornerstone of the instructional approach. Lessons were designed around practical, real-life tasks that mirrored workplace scenarios, such as drafting emails, preparing presentations, and participating in meetings.

Weekly reflection exercises allowed participants

to assess their own progress and identify areas for improvement. Instructors reviewed these reflections, providing personalized feedback to guide the learners' efforts and address specific challenges.



Figure 1. Reflect and share: What have you learned so far?

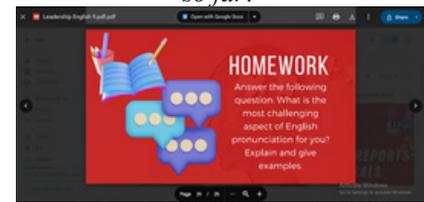


Figure 2. Reflection drives growth: Weekly reviews help learners improve with personalized feedback.

To foster autonomy, the program employed a phased approach that gradually reduced teacher intervention.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Improvement in Communicative Competence

The program achieved substantial improvements in participants' English proficiency, particularly in the areas of speaking and writing. Results from pre- and post-course assessments revealed that participants' average speaking scores increased from 4.2 to 6.8 out of 10.

In writing, a notable improvement in accuracy was observed, especially in tasks involving formal communication, such as email writing and report drafting. Participants demonstrated a better understanding of tone, structure, and grammar, enabling them to produce more professional and precise written outputs.

### 4.2 Growth in Learner Autonomy

The program also fostered significant advancements in learner autonomy, which was a primary objective of the course. Survey results and learner journals provided valuable insights into participants' evolving attitudes and behaviors towards self-directed learning. By the end of the program, 85% of learners reported feeling confident in setting their own language-learning goals and taking active steps to achieve them.

The integration of digital tools and resources was another contributing factor to this growth.

Approximately 72% of learners reported using supplementary online platforms and applications beyond the scope of the course to enhance their skills. This included tools for vocabulary building, listening practice, and grammar refinement.

### 4.3 Challenges Encountered

While the program achieved many of its goals, it also faced a number of challenges, particularly in adapting to the unique needs and contexts of the learners. One of the most significant obstacles was the initial resistance to self-directed learning.

Technological barriers also posed challenges, especially in certain remote areas where access to reliable devices and stable internet connections was inconsistent. These issues limited the ability of some participants to fully engage with online resources and participate in virtual classes.

Finally, balancing the demands of the program with participants' professional responsibilities proved to be a recurring issue. Many civil servants struggled to allocate sufficient time for language practice outside of class hours due to their workload and other obligations. This challenge highlights the need for greater flexibility in program design, as well as strategies to integrate language practice more seamlessly into participants' daily routines.

### 5.1 Fostering Autonomy in ESP Contexts

The integration of learner autonomy within an ESP program offered a unique opportunity to address the dual goals of improving immediate language proficiency and fostering sustainable learning behaviors. However, the process was not without its challenges. A phased approach, gradually transitioning learners from instructor-led activities to self-directed practices, proved essential.

### 5.2 Implications for Curriculum Design

The findings from this program underscore several important considerations for designing ESP curricula, particularly those that aim to incorporate autonomy-focused strategies. First, embedding practices such as goal-setting, reflective journaling, and self-assessment into the structured framework of the course not only enhanced language outcomes but also prepared learners for independent, lifelong learning.

Second, the use of technology played a critical role in extending learning opportunities beyond the classroom. Online platforms and language apps enabled learners to practice specific skills, such as vocabulary building or listening comprehension, in their own time.

Finally, tailoring course content to align with the specific needs of learners' workplace environments significantly increased engagement. Practical tasks such as email writing, meeting discussions, and report presentations provided learners with immediate, real-world applications for their language skills, reinforcing the relevance and value of the training.

### 5.3 Lessons for Program Adaptation

The implementation of this program also highlighted important lessons for adapting similar models in other contexts. One of the key takeaways was the importance of a comprehensive pre-course orientation. Introducing learners to the concept of autonomy and familiarizing them with the tools and methods they would use helped ease the transition to a more learner-driven approach.

Cultural adaptation emerged as another critical factor. In contexts where traditional, teacher-led instruction is the norm, programs must recognize and address these deeply ingrained educational practices.

Finally, providing sustained support after the program's conclusion was essential for maintaining momentum and fostering continued development.

## 6. Conclusion

The integration of learner autonomy into the communicative English program for civil servants in Phú Yên Province yielded significant improvements in both language proficiency and independent learning behaviors. Participants demonstrated enhanced competence in workplace communication, alongside a growing ability to manage their own learning through goal-setting, reflective practices, and the use of online resources.

This case study highlights the viability of embedding autonomy within structured ESP programs, particularly in public-sector contexts where long-term language development is essential.

By addressing both immediate language needs and fostering sustainable learning habits, the program offers a replicable model for similar initiatives in Southeast Asia and beyond. The findings emphasize the potential for learner autonomy to transform ESP education, equipping learners with the skills needed to thrive in professional and global environments.

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