STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT AGENCY IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES LEARNING

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
		This study aims to explore students' perceptions of student agency in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learning at a vocational college in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. A qualitative research design was employed for data collection. A cohort of 60 students being sampled based on the convenience sampling technique participated in answering a questionnaire. The SPSS software was run for data analysis in terms of descriptive statistics. The findings indicated that research participants were aware of their critical roles (e.g., participants, initiators and autonomous learners) in English for Specific Purposes learning. Additionally, research participants believed in their agency in learning as they got engaged in ESP learning actively thanks to their positive attitudes toward, positive personalities, and good skills in ESP learning. This study suggests pedagogical implications in an attempt to enhance the quality of ESP teaching and learning in the research context and other similar ones.

NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN VỀ NGƯỜI HỌC LÀM CHỦ TRONG VIỆC HỌC TIẾNG ANH CHUYÊN NGÀNH

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
		Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu nhận thức của sinh viên về người học làm chủ trong việc học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành (ESP) tại một trường dạy nghề ở Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu theo thiết kế định lượng được thiết kế để thu thập dữ liệu. Một nhóm gồm 60 sinh viên chọn lựa theo mẫu thuận tiện đã tham gia trả lời câu hỏi khảo sát. Phần mềm SPSS được sử dụng để xử lý dữ liệu theo phương pháp thống kê mô tả. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên nhận thấy vai trò tích cực của mình (ví dụ: người tham gia, người khởi sướng, và người học tự chủ) trong quá trình học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành. Ngoài ra, kết quả còn chỉ ra rằng sinh viên tin vào tính làm chủ trong việc học vì họ tham gia tích cực vào học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành nhờ vào thái độ tích cực đối, nhân cách tốt và kỹ năng học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành tốt. Nghiên cứu đề xuất một số giải pháp nhằm nâng cao chất lượng dạy và học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành ở nơi nghiên cứu và các ngữ cảnh tương tự.

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1. Introduction

English is an important language in today's globalized world. Over the past few decades, the number of people learning English has increased dramatically. English has many benefits for learners [1] - [4]. Firstly, learning English makes it easier for learners to communicate at work. It allows learners to communicate with others, especially those from different countries and cultures, and they can also learn a lot from their colleagues. Additionally, English is seen as a dominant business language all over the world, and speaking English is almost a necessity if learners are ready to participate in a globalized working environment. Second, English is a good opportunity for learners' careers. They can communicate with international clients and partners without language barriers, which opens up more opportunities. Being fluent in English allows learners to communicate ideas more clearly and effectively in spoken and written form so that they can more easily achieve their goals. Third, English gives learners access to an incredible amount of information. English is the most common language used in science, books, magazines, newspapers, movies, and other news or social media [5]. This is a good way to foster thinking abilities and help learners express themselves better. Most information on the internet is in English. Therefore, knowing English will help learners gain a huge amount of knowledge and experience about the world. It also helps learners better understand the documents related to their later work. With the current context of an open and integrated economy in Vietnam, more and more foreign businesses are investing in the Vietnamese market, bringing a lot of job opportunities for young workers. Foreign languages are also considered a language bridge between countries in the world, having a positive effect on the exchange of ideas and cooperation with people from other countries [6]. In another aspect, English for specific purposes (ESP) have played a vital role in students' specialised knowledge [7] - [8]. Nevertheless, it is observed that ESP students still encounter different difficulties in gaining ESP knowledge, which can harmer them from getting suitable jobs after graduation.

Scholars [9] - [14] have asserted that student agency plays an important role in the learning process. Deters et al. [9] state that the concept of agency is critical to our understanding of how we learn and who we are. Schwartz and Okita [10] highlight that student agency has intrinsic value in formal and informal learning situations. Likewise, Pavlenko and Lantolf [11] suggest that without student agency, attainment in English as a second language (ESL)/ English as a foreign language (EFL) cannot be accomplished. Richards and Rodgers [12] indicate that in a language lesson, students may play a variety of roles such as active initiators and participants. In addition, McBride and Beers Fägersten [14] add one more role as autonomous learners in the learning process. It is observed that although many aspects of the agency have been researched in different contexts, there is a scarcity of research on students' agentic engagement in ESP learning in the context of a vocational college. Therefore, this study aims at investigating students' agentic engagement in ESP learning at a vocational college in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. It aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of their roles in ESP learning?
2. What are students' perceptions of their agentic engagement in their ESP learning?

2. Research methodology

2.1. Research context and participants

This research was conducted at one of the six branches of a vocational college in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This college offers a variety of courses to meet students' needs. Basic English courses are applied to all classes, and students must take a two-and-a-half-hour class weekly. Additionally, ESP courses include communication English, cuisine and patisserie English, hotel English, and restaurant English. All students must complete the Basic English course before taking ESP ones.

A group of 60 non-English majors was recruited based on the convenience sampling method. The participants were divided into three age groups. Of 60 participants, 52 (86.7%) of whom

were under the age of 20; 7 (11.7%) students were in the age of between 20 and 23; and one person (1.7%) was more than 23 years old. Regarding the time for learning English, 21 (35%) students had been learning English for less than two years; six (10%) students had been learning English for 2-4 years; 10 (17%) students have studied English for 5-6 years; and 23 (38%) students had studied English for more than six years. In terms of English self-study time, 56 (93.3%) students reported that they spent less than one hour daily self-learning English, while only four (6.7%) students allocated more than one hour daily to English self-study. As for English language proficiency, 22 (36.7%) students' English was very poor, 16 (26.7%) students' English was poor, and 22 (36.7%) students' English was at an average level.

2.2. Research instruments

A closed-ended questionnaire was employed for data collection. It includes two sections: background information and main content. The main content is composed of 32 five-point scaled items (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) divided into two main parts: students' role in ESP learning (15 items adapted from Cholis et al. [15]) and students' agentic engagement in ESP learning (17 items adapted from Reeve and Tseng [16]). The questionnaire in English was adapted, but it was translated into the respondents' mother tongue to assure their full understanding in answering the questionnaire. The Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire was 0.76, which means the questionnaire was reliable.

2.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

For data collection, students were given copies of the questionnaire in person, and it took them around 20 to 25 minutes to finish the questionnaire. Before answering the questionnaire, respondents were given explanations of the research purposes and the questionnaire content. Regarding data analysis, descriptive statistics including mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) were computed. The interval score was interpreted as 1.00 – 1.80: Strongly disagree; 1.81 – 2.60: Disagree; 2.61 – 3.40: Neutral; 3.41 – 4.20: Agree; and 4.21 – 5.00: Strongly agree. The intra-rating method was adopted to make sure that the data analysis was valid and reliable.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Students' role in learning ESP

Students' role in learning ESP consists of three components, viz. students as participants, initiators, and autonomous learners were examined. As Table 1 shows, the average score of students' role in ESP learning is 3.53 out of 5 (SD = 0.52). Specifically, the mean scores of students as participants, initiators, and autonomous learners are 3.62 (SD = 0.53), 3.54 (SD = 0.73), and 3.41 (SD = 0.59), respectively. This could be understood that students were aware of their roles as participants, initiators, and autonomous learners in their ESP learning.

Table 1. *Students' role in ESP learning*

Student's role in ESP learning	N = 60	
	M	**SD**
Students as participants	3.62	0.53
Students as initiators	3.54	0.73
Students as autonomous learners	3.41	0.59
Average	3.53	0.52

Students as participants

As shown in Table 2, students strongly agreed that they "[reflected] on teacher's comments on [their] ESP learning" (item 6: M = 4.37; SD = 0.68). They reckoned that they "[discussed their]

difficulties in learning ESP with teachers" (item 5: M = 3.77; SD = 0.89) and "[shared] the difficulties [they faced] in absorbing ESP in class" (item 2: M = 3.57; SD = 1.01). Additionally, they "[asked] teachers questions when [they did] not understand ESP in class" (item 4: M = 3.42; SD = 0.94) and "[participated] in ESP class enthusiastically" (item 3: M = 3.42; SD = 0.82). Nevertheless, they were unsure if they could "share [their] ESP knowledge which [they] have been learning with teachers" (item 1: M = 3.20; SD = 1.03).

Table 2. *Students as participants*

Content	N = 60	
	M	**SD**
1. I can share my ESP knowledge which I have been learning with teachers.	3.20	1.03
2. I share the difficulties I face in absorbing ESP in class.	3.57	1.01
3. I participate in ESP class enthusiastically.	3.42	0.82
4. I ask teachers questions when I do not understand ESP in class.	3.42	0.94
5. I discuss my difficulties in learning ESP with teachers.	3.77	0.89
6. I reflect on teachers' comments on my ESP learning.	4.37	0.68

Students as initiators

As can be seen in Table 3, students acknowledged that they could be initiators in ESP learning by sharing their views on the ESP materials they were studying with teachers (item 7: M = 3.43; SD = 0.85) and discussing ESP issues with their teachers to understand more about them (item 8: M = 3.65; SD = 0.98).

Table 3. *Students as initiators*

Content	N = 60	
	M	**SD**
7. I share my views on the ESP materials I am studying with teachers.	3.43	0.85
8. I discuss ESP issues with my teachers to understand more about them.	3.65	0.98

Students as autonomous learners

Students reckoned that they could be autonomous learners by being "responsible for learning ESP (item 10: M = 4.05, SD = 0.83), "motivated to achieve [their] ESP" (item 15: (M = 3.83, SD = 0.99), and "[self-evaluating their] ESP learning ability based on [their] activities (item 9: M = 3.58, SD = 0.99). However, they were unsure if they could "self-practice [their] ESP knowledge by reading ESP materials" (item 14: M = 3.20; SD = 0.95) and "review [their] ESP knowledge writing daily diaries on social media" (item 13: M = 3.18, SD = 0.95), "set time to review what [they] have learned" (item 12: M = 3.27, SD = 0.97), and "lead the group's ESP-related teamwork" (item 11: M = 3.18; SD = 0.91) (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Students as autonomous learners*

Content	N=60	
	M	**SD**
9. I can self-evaluate my ESP learning ability based on my activities.	3.58	0.99
10. I am responsible for learning ESP.	4.05	0.83
11. I lead the group's ESP-related teamwork.	3.18	0.91
12. I set time to review what I have learned.	3.27	0.97
13. I review my ESP knowledge by writing daily diaries on social media.	2.78	0.95
14. I self-practice my ESP knowledge by reading ESP materials.	3.20	0.95
15. I am motivated to achieve my ESP.	3.83	0.99

3.1.2. ESP students' agentic engagement

Another major purpose of this study is to examine ESP students' agentic engagement in terms of attitudes toward learning ESP, skills in learning ESP, and personality in learning ESP. The results in Table 5 indicate that the overall mean score of ESP students' agentic engagement is

3.62 (SD = 0.54) out of five. This means students believed that they could get engaged in ESP learning as they had positive attitudes (M = 3.72, SD = 0.58) and personality (M = 3.59, SD = 0.71), and good skills in learning ESP (M = 3.55, SD = 0.55).

Table 5. *ESP students' agentic engagement*

ESP students' agentic engagement	N = 60	
	M	SD
Attitude toward learning ESP	3.72	0.58
Skills in learning ESP	3.55	0.55
Personality in learning ESP	3.59	0.71
Average	3.62	0.54

Students' attitude toward learning ESP

As seen in Table 6, students were found to be "eager to learn ESP knowledge from teachers" (item 16: M = 4.05; SD = 0.89), "try to study ESP well because of the needs of [their] future job" (item 19: M = 3.85; SD = 1.19), "try to go to class on time to learn ESP" (item 20: M = 3.85; SD = 0.93), and "like to share [their] opinion about ESP in class with teachers to make sure [they understood] the lesson correctly" (item 17: M = 3.50; SD = 0.94). Nonetheless, they were neutral whether they "[liked] to ask [themselves] questions on [their] own while studying ESP in class" (item 18: M = 3.85; M = 0.91).

Table 6. *ESP students' attitudes toward learning ESP*

Content	N = 60	
	M	SD
16. I am eager to learn ESP knowledge from teachers.	4.05	0.89
17. I like to share my opinion about ESP in class with teachers to make sure I understand the lesson correctly.	3.50	0.94
18. I like to ask myself questions on my own while studying ESP in class.	3.35	0.91
19. I try to study ESP well because of the needs of my future job.	3.85	1.19
20. I try to go to class on time to learn ESP.	3.85	0.93

Students' skill in learning ESP

Table 7 reveals that students thought that they had skills in learning ESP as they knew how to "focus on listening to the ESP teachers in class" (item 21: M = 4.05; SD = 0.79), "take notes on the ESP lesson information in class" (item 22: M = 3.98; SD = 0.72), "associate the ESP knowledge [they learned] in class with the knowledge [they] have learned" (item 23: M = 3.72; SD = 0.95), "think deeply about the ESP knowledge taught in class" (item 24: M = 3.65; SD = 0.91), and "self-assess my ability to absorb ESP knowledge in class" (item 28: M = 3.52; SD = 0.98. However, they were unsure if they knew how to "read ESP documents carefully so that [they could] master the knowledge" (item 25: M = 3.38; SD = 0.92), "analyze problems while studying ESP in class" (item 26: M = 3.27; SD = 0.91), "search for more ESP materials" (item 27: M = 3.23; SD = 0.76), and "check what to learn before going to class" (item 29: M = 3.17; SD = 0.94).

Table 7. *Students' skills in learning ESP*

I know to…	N = 60	
	M	SD
21. focus on listening to the ESP teachers in class.	4.05	0.79
22. take notes on the ESP lesson information in class.	3.98	0.72
23. associate the ESP knowledge I learn in class with the knowledge I have learned.	3.72	0.95
24. think deeply about the ESP knowledge taught in class.	3.65	0.91
25. read ESP documents carefully so that I can master the knowledge.	3.38	0.92
26. analyze problems while studying ESP in class.	3.27	0.91
27. search for more ESP materials.	3.23	0.76
28. self-assess my ability to absorb ESP knowledge in class.	3.52	0.98
29. check what to learn before going to class.	3.17	0.94

Students' personality in learning ESP

With respect to students' personality in learning ESP (see Table 8), students were "serious" (item 31: M = 3.95; SD = 0.85) and "curious" (item 30: M = 3.77; SD = 0.90) about learning ESP, and "confident in [themselves] when [they studied] ESP in class" (item 32: M = 3.07; SD = 1.10).

Table 8. *ESP students' personality in learning ESP*

Content	N = 60	
	M	**SD**
30. I am curious about learning ESP.	3.77	0.90
31. I am serious about learning ESP.	3.95	0.85
32. I am confident in myself when I study ESP in class.	3.07	1.10

3.2. Discussion

This study has indicated some results. Firstly, students believed in their roles as participants, initiators, and autonomous learners in their ESP learning. They were aware that they could play vital roles in learning ESP as they were active participants in learning ESP by reflecting on teachers' comments, discussing difficulties in learning ESP with teachers, and asking questions; they acted as initiators in sharing their views on ESP materials and discussing ESP issues with teachers; and they were autonomous in ESP learning as they could take responsibility for their ESP learning, self-evaluate their ESP learning and practice to enhance their ESP knowledge. One of the possible explanations for this could be that students in this study may be aware of the importance of ESP in their future job, so they could consider themselves as a critical agency in gaining ESP knowledge. Additionally, many of them (55%) have studied English for at least five years, so they may realize the importance of ESP in their future job. Such findings were supported by Richards and Rodgers [12] who have asserted that students can play different roles in their learning process, and when they realise their important roles in learning, they can be actively engaged in the learning activities both inside and outside of the classroom. This may imply that students' learning roles can play a vital role in deciding what and how they should learn.

Secondly, students reckoned that they could get engaged in learning ESP since they had positive attitudes, personalities, and good skills in learning ESP. As explained above, students were aware of their critical roles in learning ESP, so they may know how to get engaged in learning ESP. Additionally, participants in this study were learning at a vocational college and taking courses for their future job, so they may be aware of the benefits of ESP courses for their future work. This may be the reason why their attitudes toward learning ESP were positive, their personalities in learning ESP were positive, and they had good skills in learning ESP although many research participants did not have a high level of English proficiency. This finding resonates with Reeve and Tseng [16] who have claimed that student agency plays an important aspect in their learning engagement, which can result in students' meaningful achievement.

4. Conclusion and implications

The purposes of this study were to find out students' perceptions of their roles and their agentic engagement in their ESP learning. The findings are that students viewed themselves as an important agency (e.g., participants, initiators and autonomous learners), and they could engage in learning ESP actively thanks to their attitudes toward learning ESP, skills, and personalities in learning ESP. From such conclusions, some pedagogical implications are recommended. Regarding ESP teachers, they should pay much attention to students' roles in their learning ESP as students' agency in learning ESP was found to be critically important. When students are aware of the importance of their roles, they will be likely to know what and how to learn. That is why teachers should raise students' awareness of their roles in learning ESP. Additionally, teachers should design a variety of learning activities to get students engaged in learning ESP. As for students, they should be self-aware that they are one of the key factors in learning ESP. They

should know how to get themselves engaged in learning ESP and have appropriate and effective strategies for learning ESP. With respect to administrators, there should be ESP orientations which can highlight the importance of ESP in relation to students' future jobs so that students can reflect on their current needs and future jobs. What is more, there should be different field trips to enterprises/businesses and companies in which ESP is used so that students will be able to realise the link between what they learn in class and what they should use in work.

This study limits itself in some ways. Firstly, the sample size is small and limited to one research context. Secondly, this study was conducted quantitatively using a single research instrument. Therefore, future studies should be conducted with a larger sample size from different research settings, and more research instruments (e.g., interview, reflection, etc.) should be employed for data collection to triangulate the data.

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