



Original Article

# Learner Autonomy, Motivation and English Speaking Proficiency: A Study Among English Foreign Language University Students in Nghe An

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**Abstract:** It is well acknowledged that autonomy and motivation have significant effects on language acquisition performance. Despite considerable work on motivation and autonomy in language learning, the relationship between learners' autonomy, motivation, and English speaking proficiency has not been sufficiently investigated. This article aims to explore the link between learners' autonomy, motivation, and English speaking proficiency. 200 English Foreign Language university students at Vinh university were given questionnaires to assess their autonomy and motivation in developing speaking abilities. The association between learners' autonomy, motivation, and their English speaking proficiency was determined by comparing this data to the speaking proficiency test scores. The analysis of the acquired findings revealed that learners with lower speaking grades reported being less independent than those with better English speaking proficiency. Similarly, the results indicated a correlation between learners' speaking grades and motivation levels. Some pedagogical implications thus should entail modifications to the language instruction curriculum to facilitate the development of learner autonomy and motivation.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, motivation, English speaking proficiency, English Foreign Language learners.

## 1. Introduction

Learning English as a Foreign Language is seen as a very difficult process that requires deliberate effort from language learners because there are few opportunities for learners to

practice it outside of the classroom. Speaking is frequently seen as the most challenging talent to master out of the four primary language abilities (listening, speaking, writing, and reading). Despite its critical role in communication, it is an underappreciated language ability that is merely seen as practicing vocabulary and words in the right order. Speaking indeed involves more than just uttering words and arranging lexical items in a

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logical order; it also involves knowing the grammar of the target language, paralinguistic speaking skill components, such as stress, intonation, non-linguistic elements of communication (e.g., gestures and body language), discourse, and sociolinguistic competence [1]. Thus it deserves great attention in teaching and learning. Coupled with this, it is a general fact that though Vietnamese students have learnt English for over a decade from the early start of primary school, the number of them who can confidently communicate and have good speaking competence is marginal. Therefore, it is vital to explore what may be done to give students opportunity to develop their speaking skills both in and out of class. Moreover, despite the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of English communication skills in Vietnam, it is difficult to significantly increase students' English speaking proficiency. Specifically, it is challenging to motivate and monitor pupils to regularly practise speaking English. Several reasons have contributed to this issue, but insufficient student participation in and reflection on their speaking practice appears to be a frequent one [2].

Motivation and autonomy are influential factors impacting learners' English language proficiency. It has recently been argued that "the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are mutually supporting and fully integrated with each other" (pp.14) [3]. In other words, learner autonomy is now viewed as a deciding factor in promoting English ability. Similarly, motivation, which is generally accepted as a contributor to learners' success or failure in the learning process, plays a pivotal role in mastering the language [4]. Research on the subject of motivation in EFL has focused heavily on how it relates to success in second language acquisition (SLA) [5, 6]. Likewise, there have been increasing studies on examining relationship between autonomy and English competence [7]. Though for the majority of learners, autonomy intertwines their motivation and success with second language (L2)

learning, the relationship between motivation and learning autonomy has received little research interest [8, 9]. Particularly, despite a rather extensive body of work on motivation and autonomy in language learning accomplishment, the association between learners' autonomy, motivation, and English speaking competency has not yet been well investigated.

In light of these above-mentioned facts, this study attempts to fill the gap in exploring the relationship between autonomy, motivation, and learners' English speaking competence by seeking answers to two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Is there any correlation between the learners' autonomy and their English speaking proficiency?

RQ2: Is there any correlation between the learners' motivation and their English speaking proficiency?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Learner Autonomy

One of the most important factors affecting students' proficiency in the English language, especially English skills, is their learning autonomy. Holec [10] has made a significant contribution to the concept of learner autonomy by defining it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (pp. 3). This definition, according to Benson [11], remains the most notable and often quoted one. Following Holec [10], many other definitions of learner autonomy have been put forward. Learner autonomy, according to Dickinson [12], refers to situations in which learners independently determine all aspects of their learning and the consequences of those decisions. This means there is no involvement of a teacher or an institution in full autonomy. Sharing his view, Hedge [13] defines autonomy as the learner's capacity to assume responsibility for his or her own learning and freely plan, organise, and monitor the learning process. In this way, independent learners are driven to take responsibility for their own education since

they are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses [3, 11].

Increasing learner autonomy, according to Borg and Al-Busaidi [14], will result in a greater quality of language learning, prepare students for lifetime learning, and give a way for optimising classroom and extracurricular learning possibilities. Particularly if learners take the initiative in learning, make an attempt to learn, and have the ability to arrange their own learning, they can attain success in learning. Moreover, attribution theory is directly related to learning autonomy in the sense that it provides evidence to show that learners believe that they have control over their learning. By accepting new challenges, learners can increase their ability to perform learning tasks, so increasing their intelligence tend to be more successful than others [12]. Therefore, it can be inferred that learner autonomy is one of the variables that can be applied to an inevitably existing contributor to the level of English learners' proficiency.

## 2.2. Learner Motivation

Motivation is generally defined as “an inner drive, impulse, emotion or desire that moves one to a particular action” [15]. In the same view, Covington and Elliot [16] also note that motivation can be referred to as a mental process that propels one to act in a particular way and keeps him/her engaged in certain activities. Motivated learners are those who are striving toward a goal and are willing to put forth the effort to accomplish that goal. In terms of SLA, Dornyei [17] indicate that motivation refers to the efforts learners make to learn a foreign language. Similarly, Norris-Holt [18] defines motivation as the learner's attitude toward the aim of second language learning; thus, it is regarded as one of the factors affecting the rate and success of this process [19].

Motivation is commonly categorised into two main parts, namely extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is associated with an intrinsic desire to complete a task. Intrinsically motivated activities are defined by Deci [20] as those for which there is

no visible reward other than the action itself. According to a number of research, intrinsically driven learning is often more beneficial than extrinsically motivated learning [21]. If students have motivation in themselves, they will be more enthusiastic in learning, which is conducive for effortlessly achieving their goals. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is stimulated by external stimuli. In other words, extrinsically motivated individuals undertake an action not because they genuinely love it, but because a reward is readily available in their surroundings [22]. There might be short- and long-term extrinsic objectives, such as getting excellent grades or gifts from the instructor and parents, winning scholarships, and having better job opportunities. According to certain studies carried out in the 1980s, rewards can in turn, lead to an increase in intrinsic motivation among people who are already motivated for their own reasons [23].

## 2.3. Relationship Between Autonomy and Motivation

Many writers have concluded that it is the autonomy that leads to motivation. Motivation can be increased in learners who take responsibility for their own learning and better utilize strategies and greater effort to overcome failure. (Wang and Palincsar, 1989, cited in [12]). Deci and Ryan [24] argue that “intrinsic motivation will be operative when action is experienced as autonomous” (pp. 29). Their self-determination hypothesis emphasises three basic psychological requirements that must be addressed for an individual to feel genuinely motivated: autonomy, competence (the talents and skills that allow us to regulate our surroundings), and relatedness (relationships we develop through our interaction with others). This suggests that students with greater autonomy are more likely to feel intrinsic motivation in an environment that fosters the fulfilling of these demands than in one that ignores them [23]. In addition, Dickinson [12] highlights attribution theory, which suggests that learners' judgments of the reasons for their success or failure affect their future

performance. External or internal reasons may be recognised by the learner. External reasons are those beyond the control of the learner, such as chance, talent, and task complexity. However, effort is an internal factor that is under the control of the learner. This suggests that motivation is a consequence of accepting responsibility for learning outcomes.

#### 2.4. *Speaking Proficiency*

Nunan (1991, cited in Sidik [25]) believes that mastering the speaking skill is one of the most crucial components of learning a second or foreign language, and that success is assessed by the capacity to carry on a conversation in the target language. Speaking is defined by Kayi [26] as a process of building and sharing meaning through using verbal and non-verbal in different contexts. Speaking ability is an indicator of a successful language learning [27]. However, due to its spontaneity and the use of traditional teaching methods that prioritize memorization and students' passive position, speaking is thought to be the most difficult ability to perfect in a language [28]. On this account, improving L2 speaking proficiency should be paid special attention to, which can be achieved by enhancing its components assessed, such as language-knowledge aspects (vocabulary, grammar) and language-processing ones (speed in performing different tasks, speech sounds, word stress, and intonation), as De Jong et al., [29] state. Likewise, O'Sullivan [30] proposes criteria for assessing speaking comprising: vocabulary, grammar, accent, fluency, and comprehension.

#### 2.5. *Research on Relationship Between Autonomy, Motivation and English Speaking Proficiency*

A vast number of scholars and practitioners in the fields of English language teaching have investigated the topics of learner autonomy and motivation during the past few decades. The correlation between motivation, autonomy and English proficiency has been sufficiently explored in China with the participation of 458 non-English major students from one university

in Henan province [31], and 229 English-majored final-year students at a university in Vietnam [32]. The relationship between autonomy and English proficiency has been examined in different universities in Indonesia through Melvina and Julia's study [33] with 40 second-year undergraduate English majors and Myartawan et al.'s research [34] with 120 first-semester English-majored students.

Regarding the relationship between motivation and speaking proficiency, there have been a large number of studies conducted in Indonesia under the same topic. For instance, Khoiriyah [35] studied the correlation between motivation and speaking achievement revealed by 60 Non-EFL students of the University of Malang, Indonesia. Similarly, the correlation between the students' motivation and their speaking competence has been exploited in 11th graders of Senior High School 4 Kendari [36] and 30 communication and broadcasting Islam majors in Indonesia [37]. In terms of the relationship between autonomy and speaking proficiency, a search on literature shows that few studies have been implemented on that topic. For example, one study in Iran is conducted on the relationship between autonomy and speaking achievement with 50 participants in pre-intermediate and intermediate classes [38]. However, it can be noticed that these studies mainly focus on the relationship between autonomy, motivation with English proficiency. The correlation between learners' autonomy, motivation, and English speaking proficiency remains unexplored, especially in Vietnam, which is the gap that this study attempts to fill.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. *Research Design and Participants*

To answer two RQs, the study adopted a quantitative approach, widely recognised as systematic, controlled and objective [39] and useful for the description and/or explanation of numerical relationships [40] Particularly, the correlational relationship method was used to

collect data on two variables to examine a relationship between them [41]. This research methodology is in line with numerous previous studies conducted by Jianfeng et al., [31], Khoiriyah [35], Melvina & Julia [33], Phuong and Vo [32], and Syafrizal et al., [37]

The study was conducted in the Foreign Language Department at Vinh University, Vietnam. The main participants were 200 first-year English majors who have taken the General English module in the second semester in 2020. They were selected based on the convenience sampling approach, thanks to their availability, accessibility and willingness to participate in this research. Their ages range from 19 to 20, and their English proficiency is regarded as around B1 (according to CEFR).

### 3.2. Instruments

Data collection instruments were questionnaires and speaking scores. For the former, their main aim was to discover indicators showing students' level of autonomy and motivation. In the questionnaire, students' learning autonomy was investigated through 6 items, including making a study plan, studying hard in the course, having new ideas when learning, knowing learning style and using it effectively, being interested in learning, and looking for better methods. Motivation comprises two types, namely intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. The former was explored through 5 aspects: finding English lessons interesting, wanting to speak fluently, considering English important for their career, finishing English speaking tasks in the course, and being interested in watching and listening to English shows. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation was examined in 4 indicators: being encouraged to learn English by parents, being inspired to speak English by lecturers, being supported to overcome difficulties in speaking English by lecturers, and being influenced to improve my speaking skill by classmates. The researchers used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly disagree) to indicate the frequency on autonomy

and motivation questionnaires. To gain data on English speaking proficiency, students' scores in the final test results of the General English module were gathered. They were classified into eight groups on the 10-point scale, including A (from 8.5 and above), B+ (from 8.0 to 8.4), B (from 7.0 to 7.9), C+ (from 6.5 to 6.9), C (from 5.5 to 6.4), D+ (from 5.0 to 5.4), D (from 4.0 to 4.9) and F (under 4.0). The reason for choosing students' speaking scores in the final test was because it covered all aspects of speaking proficiency, thus serving as a reliable indicator of students' level of English speaking.

### 3.3. Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

Students were first briefed on the data collection process in their own language to ensure their full understanding. Then, they were asked to complete autonomy, intrinsic and extrinsic questionnaires in 15 minutes to mark the statements in each questionnaire according to the 5-point Likert scale. Next, students' English speaking scores were collected from their teacher, whose one of the researcher's colleagues was willing to share this information for the study. After collecting data, researchers analysed it using the SPSS program, then got the *r* coefficient (Pearson Correlation) which described the correlation between questionnaire results (X variable) and students' speaking scores (Y variable) as below:

Size of Correlation	Interpretation
0.00 – 0.20	The correlation between X variable and Y variable is very weak or there is no correlation between the variables.
0.20 – 0.40	The correlation between X variable and Y variable is weak.
0.40 – 0.70	The correlation between X variable and Y variable is enough.
0.70 – 0.90	The correlation between X variables and Y variable is strong.
0.90 – 1.00	The correlation between X variables and Y variable is very strong.

#### 4. Findings and Discussions

##### 4.1. RQ1: Is There any Correlation Between the Learners' Autonomy and Their English Speaking Proficiency?

The effect of autonomy on learners' English speaking proficiency is measured by calculating the correlations between their English speaking scores and the six items in the autonomy questionnaire (Table 1). Students' speaking test

results indicate that the highest number of students (34%) get a grade of C+ and the mean calculated is 6.28. This result is a bit lower than expected for the first-year English majors who are supposed to score B and above in the final-term speaking test, which is equivalent to reaching the B1+ level of English proficiency. This expectation is set by the teacher of the General English module and the head of the English department at Vinh University.

Table 1. Correlation of students' English speaking proficiency and various autonomy aspects

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. English speaking proficiency	6.28	0.56	1.0						
2. I can make a study plan to improve my English.	3.98	0.63	0.37**	1.0					
3. I study hard in my English courses.	3.34	0.76	0.75*	0.34**	1.0				
4. I often have new ideas when learning.	3.54	0.72	0.15*	0.26**	0.28**	1.0			
5. I know my learning style and use it effectively.	3.67	0.58	0.31**	0.21**	0.35**	0.26**	1.0		
6. I am interested in learning English speaking.	3.92	0.64	0.03	0.37**	0.39**	0.29**	0.36**	1.0	
7. I often look for better learning methods.	3.62	0.81	0.8*	0.12*	0.23**	0.34**	0.42**	0.37**	1.0

As shown in Table 1, learners' English speaking proficiency is positively correlated, with four out of six items in the section asking about their autonomy. The highest correlations are found between speaking proficiency and two aspects of learner autonomy, namely looking for better learning methods and studying hard in the English course ( $r = 0.8$  and  $r = 0.75$ , respectively). Two other autonomy aspects correlating with speaking proficiency are making a study plan to improve my English, and knowing my learning style and using it effectively, with  $r = 0.37$  for the former and  $r = 0.31$  for the latter. There is no correlation between learners' speaking proficiency and whether they have new ideas when learning or are interested in learning English. Overall, it can be deduced that there is a strong relationship between English speaking proficiency and learning autonomy. This

finding in the current study is consistent with that in Salehi et al.'s study [38], which specifically points out that learners with low speaking grades reported themselves as less autonomous than higher speaking proficiency learners. This means the higher level of autonomy learners possess, the higher their English speaking proficiency they achieve. Therefore, measures should be employed to improve learners' autonomy and English speaking proficiency.

##### 4.2. RQ2: Is There any Correlation Between the Learners' Motivation and Their English Speaking Proficiency?

Two types of motivation have been investigated in the current study, and both are strongly correlated with learners' speaking (Table 2, Table 3).

Table 2. Correlation of students' English speaking proficiency and their intrinsic motivation aspects

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. English speaking proficiency.	6.28	0.56	1.0					
2. I find English lessons interesting.	2.84	0.59	0.23**	1.0				
3. I like to speak English fluently.	3.05	0.72	0.87*	0.81*	1.0			
4. I considered English important for my career path.	4.72	0.63	0.95*	0.73*	0.48**	1.0		
5. I only try to finish English speaking tasks in the course.	3.17	0.74	0.01	0.37**	0.75*	0.43**	1.0	
6. I am interested in watching and listening to English shows.	2.91	0.68	0.72*	0.46**	0.81*	0.74*	0.39**	1.0

As shown in Table 2, learners' speaking proficiency is strongly correlated with four out of five items in the section asking about their intrinsic motivation. The highest correlations are found between learners' speaking proficiency and three aspects of intrinsic motivation. For example, they like to speak English fluently (Item 3), consider English necessary for their career (Item 4), and show

their interest in watching English shows (Item 6), with  $r = 0.87$ ,  $r = 0.95$ ,  $r = 0.72$ , respectively. Among these three reasons, career seems to be the most strongly influenced factor for learning English speaking, consistent with Doan's results (2011) that show the highest percentage of students (89.59%) consider getting a job in the future as their primary goal of speaking English.

Table 3. Correlation of students' English speaking proficiency and their extrinsic motivation aspects

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. English speaking proficiency	6.28	0.56	1.0				
2. I am encouraged to learn English, especially speaking skills by my parents.	3.74	0.69	0.92*	1.0			
3. I am inspired to speak English by lecturers.	3.12	0.77	0.84*	0.69*	1.0		
4. My lecturer helps me to overcome difficulties in speaking English.	3.35	0.72	0.39**	0.41**	0.29**	1.0	
5. I am influenced to improve my speaking skill by my classmates.	3.48	0.62	0.02*	0.34**	0.37**	0.43**	1.0

In terms of extrinsic motivation, Table 3 reveals that learners' speaking proficiency is closely linked to three out of four items in the section asking about their extrinsic motivation.

The highest correlations are found between learners' speaking proficiency and two following specific aspects of extrinsic motivation, such as being encouraged to learn

English by parents ( $r = 0.92$ ) and being inspired to speak English by lecturers ( $r = 0.84$ ). Hence, along with learners' desire to improve their English speaking, parents and teachers play a crucial role in assisting them in achieving that goal.

In brief, findings in the current study show a significant correlation between learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and speaking achievement, which is similar to those in studies by Anggraini et al., [36], Khoiriyah [35] and Syafrizal et al., [37]. Therefore, it can be inferred that motivation exerts a crucial impact on deciding English speaking proficiency level. In other words, the higher level of motivation learners have, the more proficient in speaking English they become.

## 5. Implications and Conclusions

The present study points out the strong relationship between learners' autonomy, motivation, and English speaking proficiency, which has potential implications for both English learners and teachers. In light of this research, learners can be aware of the importance of autonomy and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in enhancing their speaking proficiency. Likewise, teachers should enhance their role in enhancing students' motivation by developing teaching programmes with more communicative tasks, limiting demotivating factors such as boring speaking topics/activities, and incorporating more speaking practice. These motivational strategies and techniques for stimulating learners' speaking skills are suggested in Doan's study [42]. Also, another suggestion that should be taken into account is to train learners to be more autonomous and place autonomy as a goal that needs to be performed by students throughout the curriculum, as proposed by Salehi et al., [38]. Hopefully, such measures will be of practical use to improve learners' overall autonomy, motivation, and English speaking competence. Despite the fact that the current study has produced significant discoveries that assist address all research questions, there are

numerous limitations to consider. The most significant shortcoming of this research lies in its methodology, which employs questionnaires as the only data collection instrument. Accordingly, researchers would gain more valid data if follow-up interviews were carried out to offer further insights into participants' motivation, autonomy, and speaking proficiency. Another constraint of the study is that questionnaires primarily focus on English learning instead of specific features of speaking proficiency, resulting in less reliable and relevant findings. It is thus recommended to incorporate more statements related to speaking skills into the design of questionnaires. This study is also likely to pave the way for recommendations to conduct further studies on a similar topic, which can be experimental research on the effectiveness of motivation and autonomy on English speaking proficiency and action research on improving students' motivation and autonomy in learning English speaking.

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