



Original Article

The Students' Readiness for Learner Autonomy in English Language Learning

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Abstract: Learner autonomy is deemed as one of the long-term goals in English language teaching and learning in the 21st century; nevertheless, that students are ready for learner autonomy varies from one context to another. Furthermore, learner autonomy is variously perceived in different contexts. This research aims to explore non-English majors' readiness for learner autonomy concerning self-awareness, self-efficacy, and motivation in a college in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The quantitative approach was employed for data collection. A cohort of 134 students was involved in partaking in answering a closed-ended questionnaire. The collected data were statistically analyzed in terms of mean and standard deviation. The results unraveled that the participants were highly ready for learner autonomy. They were aware of learner autonomy and had high self-efficacy and motivation for their own English learning. The preliminary findings are expected to bring theoretical and practical contributions to students' readiness for learner autonomy in this research context and other similar ones.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, learner autonomy, readiness.

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy (LA) in education with a focus on English language teaching and learning has attracted the great attention of scholars and researchers, and it has emerged as one of the researched issues in the field of education [1-4]. Although teachers play a pivotal role in the creation and maintenance of

learner autonomy [3, 4], learners should be responsible for their own learning process [5], and their learner autonomy is essential for learning achievements [6]. Nonetheless, learner autonomy depends on learners' behaviors to determine whether one is an autonomous learner or not [7]. Autonomous learners are those who are conscious, democratic citizens and can think critically. In contrast, those who are not involved, reflect and use the target language as well as cannot determine their own goals are not autonomous learners [8].

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In addition, learner autonomy development is context-bound. Scholars [8-10] have indicated that Asian learners are able to become autonomous learners if they equipped themselves with sufficient knowledge and skills of learner autonomy. What is more, readiness for learner autonomy is not only self-awareness and beliefs [11] but also a high level of metacognitive awareness [12]. The term metacognitive knowledge can be classified as learners' psychology (hobbies, individual differences, etc.), language awareness, and the learning context (culture, political, social aspects, environmental, etc.) [12]. Hence, the basic potential of the readiness for learner autonomy is a certain level of awareness of learning. However, it is not easy for language learners to take the initiative in preparing for self-learning, accept the responsibility for learning and become autonomous [13].

In Vietnam, English as a foreign language is a compulsory subject taught from primary to higher education levels, and learner autonomy is an increasingly significant concept in education, particularly in English language education. Vietnamese students can become autonomous learners if they are provided with substantial resources and suitable facilities [14, 15]. Nonetheless, the issue of learner autonomy in English language teaching is not underscored [15-17]. It is observed that many learners are still passive in their dependent learning study style [18], and their English language proficiency is still poor [19]. Within the research context which is an international college, students have to learn all the subjects in English. Although their English language proficiency level is relatively high, they still face a number of problems in their English language learning. Although they can understand and develop their understanding of the concept of learner autonomy, they are unlikely to study further without their teachers. They have difficulties in realizing and creating their own learning process. Some of them display a certain reticence when they are required to show their understanding beyond the lesson. Some show their anxiety when

taking their own duty for learning. They do not know how to search for information in a meaningful and effective way. Moreover, they have limited time and ability to practice and choose resources for their own learning. Although learning materials are shared with students to practice their English, only some of them can gain benefits from such materials. As a result, they are not really proactive in learning. This study endeavors to unpack the EFL students' readiness for learner autonomy in their English language learning in the context of an international college in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

2. Literature Review

Learner autonomy is defined as "an ability to take charge of one's own learning" [20]. Benson [2] appreciated [20]'s definition of learner autonomy, which "has proved remarkably robust and remains the most widely cited definition in the field" (pp. 22). That is, students are expected to take more responsibility for all activities of their learning process (e.g., determining goals, collecting methods and techniques, choosing materials, and assessing the learning outcomes). Likewise, [21] describes learner autonomy as "a mode of learning; one in which the individual is responsible for all the decisions connected with her learning and undertakes the implementation of these decisions" (pp. 27). In another sense, some scholars have related learner autonomy to learner independence and decision-making capacity as [10] asserts that learner autonomy is "learners' ability and willingness to make choices independently" (pp. 427). This involves students' capacity to make appropriate choices on the basis of their background knowledge and skills. Within the scope of this study, learner autonomy is identified as learners' awareness of their learning needs and the ability to define their learning goals and plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning.

Regarding readiness for learner autonomy, [12] relates readiness for learner autonomy to metacognitive knowledge including knowledge

of learners' sense of self, knowledge of learning context, knowledge of subject content, and knowledge of the learning process. According to [22], learners need to increase their awareness of knowledge and skills in learning a language as they can monitor the learning process. Awareness is identified as the highest level of autonomy (e.g., awareness, involvement, intervention creation, and transcendence) [23]. Additionally, [11] claims that learners' beliefs play a fundamental role in promoting learner autonomy. Self-efficacy refers to one's belief in his/her capacity to achieve a target or deal with a task successfully [24]. Therefore, it can be concluded that self-efficacy may positively influence learner autonomy [11]. In a broader sense, [10] affirms that learners' readiness for learner autonomy can involve learners' psychology and metacognition. The former is about learners' attitudes and beliefs in learning, while the latter is about the knowledge and skills to act autonomously. Besides psychological and metacognitive factors, motivation is an indispensable factor in learners' readiness for learner autonomy [10]. In this study, learners' readiness for learner autonomy is referred to as learners' self-awareness, self-efficacy, and motivation.

Prior studies have shown that different aspects of learner autonomy in the context of English have been explored in different contexts. In global contexts, [25] carried out a study addressing teachers' and students' perceptions of learner autonomy in English language learning in the context of Nepal. A group of 80 master's students and 6 teachers partook in answering the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that both the teachers and the students held positive attitudes towards learner autonomy. The students had an effective practice of autonomous activities and recognized their roles in language learning. Bozkurt and Arslan (2018) [26] examined English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' perception and readiness for autonomy. The participants were 214 Syrian students in the 6th,

7th, and 8th grades who answered the questionnaires, and 8 teachers who took part in the semi-structured interviews. The results showed that students were aware of the importance of learner autonomy. Moreover, there was a statistically positive correlation between students' perception and readiness. In the context of Vietnam, [27] examined students' beliefs about and performance of learner autonomy in the courses of listening and speaking at a university in Ho Chi Minh City. It was found that students believed that the courses could enhance students' willingness and abilities to take responsibility for their own learning and establish a habit of self-directed learning. Tran and Duong (2018) [19] investigated the factors affecting Vietnamese EFL learners' support for or resistance to promoting learner autonomy by using a portfolio-based writing course. Thirty-five second-year English majors participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews and writing logs were used to collect data. The results of the study indicated that there were three main parts supporting and resisting learner autonomy development, such as personal, academic, and external factors in the portfolio-based writing course. Tran and Vo (2020) [17] conducted a qualitative study exploring students' perspectives on the factors boosting learner autonomy development. A group of 393 English-majored students from a Ho Chi Minh City-based higher education institution were conveniently sampled to answer open-ended questionnaires whose data were analyzed by the content analysis approach. The findings were that students' learner autonomy enhancement was positively affected by three major factors, viz., teacher-related factors, school-related factors, and parental factors. More specifically, teacher-related factors had a prominent role in boosting students' learner autonomy development, whereas school-related factors and parental factors were considered to be an influential role in shaping students' learner autonomy. To sum up, it is noticed that the aspect of learners' readiness for learner autonomy in English language teaching and

learning has not been much explored internationally and locally although aspects of learner autonomy have been intensively and extensively examined in various contexts. As such, this study aims to fulfill the aforementioned gap.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Setting and Participants

This quantitative study was carried out at an international college in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This institution offers many training programs taught in English. Before taking the specialized courses, students have to take English Foundation Programs (24 credits) and IELTS programs (18 credits) within the first academic year. Both courses are taught by Vietnamese teachers and foreign ones. In this study, the participants were freshmen who were taken the general courses, namely A1, A2, and B1. The course book used for the courses was Top Notch published by Longman Pearson.

The participants of this study consisted of 134 first-year non-English majors who were conveniently sampled. Of 134 participants, there were more females (55%) than males (45%). In terms of years of learning English, most of the participants (70%) have been learning English for almost 7 years. The remaining participants were those who have spent 7-10 years (16%) and over 10 years (14%) learning English.

3.2. Research Instrument

The closed-ended questionnaire, which was adapted from the questionnaires employed in the previous studies (e.g., [25, 27, 28]) was employed for data collection. It consists of two sections: the first section asks about participants' personal information; the second section seeks information about participants' readiness for learner autonomy which was divided into three subsections (self-awareness: 8 items; beliefs in self-efficacy: 8 items; motivation: 9 items). A five-point Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree,

2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree) was designed for 24 items. The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese to ensure that language barriers would not affect the participants' responses. The Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire was 0.96, i.e., the questionnaire was very reliable.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The questionnaire had been piloted to ensure the validity of the content before the official questionnaire was administered to students in person. It took students approximately 15 minutes to finish the questionnaire. All questionnaires were checked for the validity of the responses.

The garnered data were analyzed using SPSS version 22.0 in terms of descriptive statistics (Mean: M and Standard Deviation: SD). The interval mean score was understood as 1.00-1.80: Strongly disagree; 1.81-2.60: Disagree; 2.61-3.40: Neutral; 3.41-4.20: Agree; 4.21-5.00: Strongly agree. In order to validate the data analysis, the intra-rating approach was conducted to double-check the data analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

EFL students' readiness for learner autonomy

The results in Table 1 reveal that the total mean score of students' readiness for Learner autonomy is 4.15 (SD =0.73) out of five. Specifically, the mean scores of students' self-awareness of LA, self-efficacy, and motivation were 4.18, SD=0.71), self-efficacy (M =4.16, SD=0.81), and motivation (M= 4.12, SD=0.80).

Table 1. The students' readiness for learner autonomy

	Content	Mean	SD
1	Self-awareness	4.18	0.71
2	Self-efficacy	4.16	0.81
3	Motivation	4.12	0.80
	Average	4.15	0.73

All mean scores were higher than 4.0 which reflects “agree”. That is, EFL students were ready for Learner autonomy, and they were likely to be willing to develop learner autonomy in terms of their self-awareness, self-efficacy, and motivation.

EFL students’ self-awareness of learner autonomy

As seen in Table 2, participants were highly aware that they should “monitor [their] English learning process” (Item 8: $M = 4.37$; $SD = 0.94$), “set up [their] English learning goals” (Item 2: $M=4.26$, $SD=0.85$), and “seize

opportunities to practice English outside the classroom” (Item 7: $M=4.22$, $SD=0.98$). Furthermore, they agreed that they should “take charge of [their] own English learning” (Item 1: $M=4.18$, $SD=0.88$), “decide on [their] own English learning methods or techniques” (Item 4: $M=4.16$, $SD=0.91$), “choose my own materials for further English language practice” (Item 3: $M=4.15$, $SD=0.90$), “take risks that may happen in [their] English learning process” (Item 6: $M=4.07$, $SD=0.85$), and “evaluate [their] English learning performance” (Item 5: $M=4.01$, $SD=0.93$).

Table 2. The students’ self-awareness of learner autonomy

	<i>I am aware that I should, ...</i>	Mean	SD
1	Take charge of my own English learning	4.18	0.88
2	Set up my English learning goals	4.26	0.85
3	Choose my own materials for further English language practice	4.15	0.90
4	Decide on my own English learning methods or techniques	4.16	0.91
5	Evaluate my English learning performance	4.01	1.06
6	Take risks that may happen in my English learning process	4.07	1.03
7	Seize opportunities to practice English outside the classroom	4.22	0.98
8	Monitor my English learning process	4.37	0.94

EFL students’ self-efficacy of learner autonomy

Table 3 depicts that EFL students strongly believed that they were able to “set time for self-practicing English” (item 16: $M=4.38$, $SD=1.01$) and “look up the meaning of new words in dictionaries” (item 15: $M=4.28$, $SD=1.01$). They also agreed that they could plan (item 13: $M=4.16$, $SD=0.91$), set up goals

(item 10: $M=4.14$, $SD=0.95$), search (item 11: $M=4.12$, $SD=0.99$) for English learning. Additionally, they could “apply strategies of learning English” (item 12: $M=4.10$, $SD=0.96$), “evaluate [their] English learning progress” (item 14: $M=4.06$, $SD=1.00$), and “determine [their] own ways of practicing English” (item 9: $M=4.05$, $SD=1.01$) Table 4.

Table 3. The students’ self-efficacy of learner autonomy

	<i>I can ...</i>	Mean	SD
9	Determine my own ways of practicing English	4.05	1.01
10	Set up goals for my English learning	4.14	0.95
11	Search resources for English learning	4.12	0.99
12	Apply strategies of learning English	4.10	0.96
13	Plan my English learning	4.16	0.91
14	Evaluate my English learning progress	4.06	1.00
15	Look up the meaning of new words in dictionaries	4.28	1.01
16	Set time for self-practicing English	4.38	1.01

EFL students' motivation in learner autonomy

As regards Table 4, EFL students strongly reckoned that they stayed motivated to learn English because they “[found] it interesting to select methods/techniques for [their] English learning process” (item 21: $M=4.22$, $SD=0.92$). They agreed that they “[enjoyed] English tasks that [they could] practice by [themselves]” (item 20: $M=4.20$, $SD=0.99$), “[planned] to study abroad” (item 25: $M=4.18$, $SD=1.03$), and “[liked] to use every opportunity to take part in the activities that [they could] speak English” (item 23: $M=4.15$, $SD=0.97$).

Furthermore, participants were motivated to learn English because “[their] teachers [stimulated their] interest in learning English” (item 24: $M=4.13$, $SD=1.02$), and they enjoyed “practicing English in [their] free time” (item 22: $M=4.11$, $SD=1.03$) and “learning English” (item 17: $M=4.07$, $SD=1.03$), “[could] use English to communicate with foreigners” (item 18: $M=4.06$, $SD=1.02$), and “[could] choose [their] own materials for practicing English” (item 19: $M=3.96$, $SD=0.96$).

Table 4. The students' motivation in learner autonomy

	<i>I stay motivated to learn English because,...</i>	Mean	SD
17	I enjoy learning English	4.07	1.03
18	I can use English to communicate with foreigners	4.06	1.02
19	I can choose my own materials for practicing English	3.96	0.96
20	I enjoy English tasks that I can practice by myself	4.20	0.99
21	I find it interesting to select methods/techniques for my English learning process	4.22	0.92
22	I enjoy practicing English in my free time	4.11	1.03
23	I like to use every opportunity to take part in activities that I can speak English	4.15	0.97
24	My teachers stimulate my interest in learning English	4.13	1.02
25	I plan to study abroad	4.18	1.03

4.2. Discussion

The study has unraveled some significant findings. EFL students in this study believed that they were ready for learner autonomy in English language learning in terms of self-awareness, self-efficacy, and motivation. With respect to self-awareness of learner autonomy in English language learning, the participants were highly aware of the role of learner autonomy in English learning and autonomy-related tasks such as setting up English learning goals, actively practicing English outside the classroom, choosing their own materials for further English language practice, making a decision on their own learning methods, and evaluating their learning performance. This finding may be due to the fact that the concept

of learner autonomy has been introduced to students via different types of in and out-of-class learning activities. That may be how students became aware of the concept of for learner autonomy in English language learning. The finding is corroborated by [29]'s study, which indicated that EFL students were quite aware of learner autonomy in English language learning.

As for self-efficacy in learner autonomy, EFL students believed that they could be autonomous learners as they could set up English learning goals, plan their English learning, and evaluate their English learning process. This may result from the finding that they had a good awareness of for learner autonomy in English language learning.

Additionally, students in this study were pursuing their studies at an international college that offered different training programs in English, and they had to take 24 credits of English in their first academic year; hence, they had to spend much time self-practicing their English. Consequently, their learner autonomy in English language learning could be gradually enhanced. In a similar vein, [27] found that students had abilities to take responsibility for and be in charge of their own English language learning.

Regarding motivation for learner autonomy, students reckoned that they were motivated in English language learning. They were interested in selecting techniques for their English language learning and carrying out tasks they could practice independently. Their motivation resulted from their own objectives such as studying abroad, taking part in English activities, and interacting with foreigners. To obtain motivation, furthermore, students themselves not only got involved in the aforementioned activities but also stayed motivated to learn English because teachers stimulated their interest in learning English. It can be inferred that when the students were aware of their role as a decisive factor in for learner autonomy, they could be highly motivated and ready to make attempts in learning autonomously. This finding is supported by [2] who claimed that the students have good practice in autonomous learning activities if they realize their position in the learning process.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study indicated that the participants were ready for learner autonomy in English language learning. They believed that they were aware of the importance of learner autonomy, competent to conduct autonomy-related activities, and motivated to learn autonomously. Based on the findings, some pedagogical implications are drawn. Firstly, teachers should provide students with opportunities to promote learner autonomy such as encouraging students

to join off-campus activities, guiding students on how to learn autonomously (e.g., setting goals, self-assess their learning performance, creating a study plan, opting for appropriate learning strategies, or choosing learning materials), and maximize the application of technology in an EFL classroom. Teachers should monitor and check students' learning activities to help them on a regular basis. Secondly, it is advisable that students should actively take part in both in-class activities and out-of-class activities to equip themselves with sufficient knowledge and skills. Moreover, students should share their own experiences with their friends who are less autonomous. Finally, the school manager proposes action plans to increase teachers' and students' knowledge and skills to foster learner autonomy. The administrators also need to upgrade technological facilities that support the learning and teaching process.

Despite the contributions to the literature about learner autonomy, this study still has some shortcomings. Firstly, this study just employed the quantitative approach to collect data using the closed-ended questionnaire. Secondly, a small sample size from one single institution was recruited for data collection. Therefore, it is recommended that further research should use a mixed-methods research design and employ more research instruments (e.g., interviews or journals/diaries) for data collection. The sample size should be bigger, and research participants should be from different disciplines or institutions to compare and contrast findings.

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