

ONLINE AUTONOMOUS LEARNING BY UPPER-SECONDARY EFL STUDENTS: ONLINE RESOURCES AND PERCEIVED AFFORDANCES AND CHALLENGES

NGUYEN THI THUY HANG^{1,*}, TRUONG BACH LE²

¹*Le Quy Don High School for Gifted Students, Quang Tri Province*

¹*Post-graduate student, Hue University of Foreign languages and International studies*

²*Hue University of Foreign languages and International studies*

**Email: ntthang54@gmail.com*

Abstract: This study investigated autonomous English learning implemented by EFL students at an upper-secondary school concerning the utilization of online resources and the perceived affordances and challenges. To be specific, this study aimed to find out the frequency of upper-secondary EFL students using online resources for their language learning out of the classroom and the constraints that the students encountered when conducting their online autonomous learning. Quantitative research design was employed in the current study with the use of questionnaire. The participants of the study were 158 students at Le Quy Don High School for Gifted Students in Quang Tri Province, Vietnam. The findings revealed the prevalence of such online resources as online dictionaries, videos on YouTube, and social media. Conversely, radio, discussion forums, and emailing received the least preference. The most frequently-reported affordances related to stable Internet connection, whereas the most frequently-reported constraint was financial resources. From the findings, implications for teaching and learning with online resources and suggestions for further research were put forward.

Keywords: Autonomous language learning, online resources, affordances, challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy is widely regarded as a desired goal in education in general and language education in particular. Learner autonomy is also a necessity of lifelong learning when learners continue their learning process after completing schooling or finishing their courses in institutional settings. Autonomous language learning focuses on learners' independence to make decisions concerning all aspects of their learning (Holec, 1981). In this regard, the advancement of technology has been assumed and proved to foster learner autonomy with the provision of ample opportunities for exposure to authentic language input in the online settings (Richards, 2015).

In the Vietnamese context, learner autonomy is specified as one of the targeted competences in the circular No. 32/2018/TT-BGDĐT (Bộ Giáo dục và Đào tạo, 2018) about the new general education curriculum implemented nationwide from the academic year 2021-2022. According to this circular, EFL learners need to promote learning strategies, and enhance the capability of life-long learning, taking advantage of both formal and informal learning with the integration of information and communication technology. With these goals in mind, it is significant to first

understand the students' frequent use of available online resources for their autonomous EFL learning and their perceived challenges in this mode of learning. This is, in turn, expected to offer practical implications for bridging the gaps between the two dimensions of language education, inside and outside classroom (Richards, 2015) as well as for improving the autonomous language learning taking advantage of digital affordances offered by the endless development of information and communication technology.

On these grounds, the current study was set out to explore the range of EFL students' use of online resources as well as the affordances and challenges they might have in their autonomous learning.

Research questions

This study aimed to address the following two research questions. (1) What online resources do EFL students use for their autonomous language learning beyond the classroom? and (2) What affordances and challenges do EFL students have when conducting their online autonomous language learning beyond the classroom?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner autonomy in language learning

The introduction of the concept of learn autonomy into the field of language education is assumed to be conducted by Holec (1981) who defines learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3). This definition embraces radical implications for learners' responsibility for decisions on all aspects of the learning, namely defining the objectives and contents, selecting the methods, monitoring and evaluating the activities (Benson, 2007).

In attempts to define learner autonomy, many researchers emphasize the related constructs of ability, responsibility, willingness, and independence in decision making. Specifically, Little (1991) views learner autonomy as a "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (p. 4). At the same time, Wenden (1991) relates learner autonomy to responsibility for and willingness and confidence to take responsibility for language learning. Likewise, according to Dam (1995), Littlewood (1996), and recently echoed by Macaro (2008), learner autonomy is viewed as ability and willingness to make choices independently. The large number of conceptions of learner autonomy reflects the fact that this construct covers different aspects. In other words, learner autonomy has multi-dimensional nature. Moreover, Benson (2001) postulates that learner autonomy manifests itself differently for different individuals and in different contexts.

Since different approaches have been taken to the application of learner autonomy in language teaching and learning, learner autonomy in foreign language education has been perceived from different perspectives. According to Oxford (2003), learner autonomy can be placed into four perspectives, namely technical perspective, psychological perspective, political-critical perspective, and socio-cultural perspective, each with a distinct focus. In particular, the technical perspective focuses on the situational conditions under which learners may develop autonomy while they take charge of their own learning, for example self-access centers with authentic materials and personalized learning activities (Oxford, 2003). At the same time, psychological perspective focuses on learners' characteristics that make it possible for them to take control of their learning process, such as learners' abilities, motivations, attitudes, and learning strategies (Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014). The political-critical perspective focuses on learners' access, control, power, and ideology in their community (Oxford, 2003). The later-

added perspective of socio-cultural perspective focuses on social interactions as a part of language development, involving socially mediated learning.

Evidently, learner autonomy is a multidimensional construct (Benson, 2001). Researchers take different approaches and consider different factors when exploring learner autonomy in language education, which results in different models of learner autonomy.

Online language learning

Online language learning involves the learning of a second or foreign language through the use of digital learning platforms, tools, and applications which provide learning materials and potential online-based interactions with peers and/or instructors (Tzirides, 2022). Online language learning practices can be formal, structured or informal, unstructured, regarding how the digital language learning tools and platforms are offered and potentially used (Hockly, 2015). Structured learning practices pertain to practices often used in online language courses in educational settings such as schools and universities as part of the formal curriculum (Hockly, 2015) in which the learners are formally assessed for credits or qualifications. At the same time, unstructured practices refer to informal online learning situations with the support of available digital tools and platforms (Tzirides, 2022). In this type of practices, language content is related to real-life situations, and hence the learners can experience and even use it in real-life activities.

Unstructured online language learning activities possess the potential for offering digital affordances and can be used as out-of-class practices, and especially be an ideal approach to language learning since the learners are masters of their learning process (Tzirides, 2022). Kalantzis & Cope (2015) synthesize the seven digital affordances, all of which are echoed in Tzirides (2022). The seven digital affordances include ubiquitous learning, recursive feedback, multimodal meaning, active knowledge making, collaborative intelligence, metacognition, and differentiated learning (Tzirides, 2022).

Previous studies

Online resources have been reported to be adopted by language learners for their out-of-class language learning in research on the area of language learning beyond the classroom (Richards, 2015).

In Lai and Gu's (2011) study, quantitative and qualitative data collected from 279 participants reveal that language learners do use such available online resources as online dictionaries, social media, videos on YouTube, forums, and online news for their self-regulated language learning. A similar study by Trinder (2017) on 175 Australian university students reports that nearly three-quarters of the participants declare to adopt online resources to improve specific aspects of their English. Online resources in this study are documented as online news, television series, and videos.

A recent study by Yurieva et al. (2021) analyses the non-linguist students' experiences and perceptions of the English language involving online digital tools. Mixed methods approach is employed to collect data from 132 students at a Ukrainian university. The participants are asked to report their frequent use and their perceived helpfulness of 17 online resources. The results of the survey report students' regular engagement with English language involving online resources, of which the most frequently used digital tools are online dictionaries, YouTube videos, social media, and films and series. Besides, the findings show that vocabulary competence is reported to be best developed by the use of online resources, while writing skills are the least popular.

Taking into consideration the affordances and challenges of online autonomous language learning, Inayati et al. (2021) conduct a cross-sectional survey on 668 English language students of a renowned private university in Malang, Indonesia. The foci of the survey in the study are on the affordances and challenges during autonomous language learning. The findings report the affordances including a number of technical aspects, learning resources, and learning management, while the challenges consist of technical and learning management aspects.

In the Vietnamese context, there is a paucity of research on autonomous language learning outside the classroom using online resources. Studies on autonomous language learning in this context mainly focus on teachers' and students' perceptions on the learners' ability and responsibility for learning both inside and outside classroom (Nguyen, 2011).

The review of the related previous studies reveals that the aspects related to autonomous language learning using digital resources are not explicitly and systematically highlighted in the Vietnamese context. Accordingly, the purpose of this study are to investigate the EFL students' frequent use of online resources for their autonomous language learning and to identify the affordances and challenges that students have in such learning.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the quantitative approach, using questionnaire to gather the data to answer the research questions. The use of questionnaire is considered suitable as this study aims to gain information about students' activities, perceived affordances, and challenges in online autonomous language learning. Creswell (2014) suggests that survey design is best for collecting data about specific population's characteristics, opinions, and attitudes. Besides, questionnaire is assumed to help save time and effort for the researcher (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

The sample size of this study was determined with the help of the function of Sample Size Calculator on <https://www.surveymonkey.com>. With the population of 804 and the confidence level of 95%, the sample size is 158.

The 158 students were in grade 10th, 11th, and 12th at an upper secondary school in Vietnam. They have learned EFL as compulsory subject for eight years or more. They have three 45-minute periods of EFL each week. The in-class materials are the textbook complied according to the Vietnamese national curriculum of general secondary education, providing students with vocabulary, phonetics, grammar and the four skills.

Data collection instruments

To collect data for the current study, a 23-item questionnaire divided into three clusters was delivered to the participants in the face-to-face mode. The first cluster of the questionnaire included three items to gather the participants' background information of gender, grade, and EFL learning time. The second one included 15 items seeking to collect information related to online resources deployed for autonomous learning. The third cluster with 5 items was to investigate the affordances and challenges of online autonomous learning. The items in the second and the third cluster were respectively adapted from Yurieva et al. (2021) and Inayati et al. (2021) for these studies shared the research focus of online autonomous learning in EFL context with the current study. However, as the participants in the two previous studies were at university levels, necessary selections and modifications were made to the content of the questionnaire items on the basis of their relevance to upper-secondary EFL context in Vietnam. The items in these two clusters were designed in the form of 5-point Likert scale (from 1 –

never to 5 – always). A total of 158 questionnaires completed by the participants were collected for data analysis.

Data analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed by using a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0, focusing on two main clusters: online resources and affordances and challenges in online autonomous learning. The reliability of the questionnaire was ensured by reliability test for all 20 items. The Cronbach Alpha value of .859 indicates that the items had acceptable internal consistency. The validity of this research was ensured by the pilot study to a group of ten students since pilot tests aid initial detection of potential flaws in the instruments by recognizing possible issues and areas that may need adjustment (Gani et al., 2020).

4. FINDINGS

Online resources used for autonomous EFL learning outside the classroom

In the questionnaire, the student participants were asked to report their frequent use of the 15 online resources on a 5-point Likert scale of 1 - Never (N), 2 – Rarely (R), 3 – Sometimes (S), 4 – Often (O), and 5- Always (A). The results in terms of percentages, mean and standard deviations are demonstrated in Table 1 below. The results related to the individual mean scores of the investigated online resources from Table 1 indicate that the researched respondents made use of a wide range of resources on the Internet with a varying degree of frequency level. Among these online resources, the highest use was *Item 1. Online dictionaries* (**M = 3.96, SD = .996**), experiencing 76% of the respondents reporting their often and always deployment.

Table 1. *Online resources for autonomous EFL learning outside the classroom*

No	Items	N (%)	R (%)	S (%)	O (%)	A (%)	M	SD
1	Online dictionaries	3.2	5.7	15.2	43.7	32.3	3.96	.996
2	YouTube	3.8	13.9	42.4	27.2	12.7	3.31	.990
3	Social media	6.3	19.0	27.2	32.9	14.6	3.30	1.127
4	Text or voice messages	17.7	34.2	33.5	9.5	5.1	2.50	1.051
5	Watching films and series	7.0	22.2	28.5	31.6	10.8	3.17	1.107
6	News websites	22.2	34.2	30.4	10.1	3.2	2.38	1.038
7	English books online	24.7	38.0	23.4	11.4	2.5	2.29	1.042
8	Video chatting	20.9	42.4	23.4	10.1	3.2	2.32	1.017
9	Language learning sites	15.2	29.1	32.3	18.4	5.1	2.69	1.093
10	Blogs written in English	24.7	32.9	31.6	9.5	1.3	2.30	.987
11	Online magazines in English	26.6	44.3	22.2	5.1	1.9	2.11	.924
12	Podcasts in English	15.8	27.2	34.8	19.6	2.5	2.66	1.045
13	Emailing	39.2	35.4	18.4	5.7	1.3	1.94	.959
14	Radio broadcast in English	41.1	31.6	19.6	7.0	0.6	1.94	.973
15	Discussion forums	41.1	34.2	13.9	8.9	1.9	1.96	1.040
N = 158								

Moreover, an examination of the percentages and counts revealed that only three out of the moderately used (with the mean scores in the range of 2.50 to 3.49) online resources were reported to be often or always employed by a percentage of more than 35% respondents, including *Item 2. Social media* (**47.5%**), *Item 5. Watching films and series* (**42.4%**), and *Item 2.*

YouTube (39.9). On the contrary, the low mean frequency scores (from 1.00 to 2.49) were found with eight online resources, among which the three least used involved *Item 15. Discussion forums (M = 1.96, SD = 1.040)*, *Item 13. Emailing (M = 1.94, SD = 0.959)*, and *Item 14. Radio broadcast in English (M = 1.94, SD = .973)*. These low used online resources were respectively reported to be never or rarely employed by the majority of 75.3%, 74.6% and 72.7%, of the researched participants.

Affordances and challenges in online autonomous EFL learning outside the classroom

Based on Table 2, it can be seen that the surveyed respondents were able to make use of the affordances to foster their autonomous learning in online settings at high and medium levels of frequency. In particular, the affordance pertaining to *stable Internet connection (Item 17)* was reported to highly frequently support the participants' online learning process, yielding the mean score of **3.96**. The remaining four items fell into the medium range of frequency with the mean scores in the range of 2.50 to 3.49.

Table 2. *Affordances and challenges in online autonomous EFL learning*

No	Items	N (%)	R (%)	S (%)	O (%)	A (%)	M	SD
16	I have enough financial resources to do online English learning.	11.4	29.1	27.2	20.3	12.0	2.92	1.197
17	I have stable internet connection to do online English learning.	3.2	5.7	20.3	33.5	37.3	3.96	1.046
18	I have time for online English learning.	3.8	10.1	41.1	29.7	15.2	3.42	.992
19	I know where to ask for help if I have technical problems accessing online resources.	8.9	22.2	42.4	20.3	6.3	2.93	1.016
20	I know how to find online materials relevant to my targets.	7.0	12.7	37.3	34.8	8.2	3.25	1.014
N = 158								

Challenges of online autonomous English learning investigated in this study could be interpreted as the paucity of affordances, demonstrated by the percentages of low frequency. As seen in Table 2, the biggest challenge encountered by the participants involved *financial resources (Item 16)*, witnessing 40.5% surveyed respondents reporting the inadequacy in such supports. In other words, while some participants encountered difficulties related to the investigated aspects when learning independently on the Internet, many of them did exploit these advantages to afford their online autonomous language learning.

Discussion of the research findings

This research aimed to explore the EFL students' frequent use of online English language involving resources for their autonomous learning out of classroom and the perceived affordances and challenges.

The findings see the prevalent use of online dictionaries, social media, and videos on YouTube. This finding concurs with the consensus by a number of studies on YouTube being valuable resources for English language acquisition (Almurashi, 2016; Karunakar, 2019; Richards, 2015). These researchers postulate that YouTube's videos containing linguistic and cultural information

presented in authentic settings support learners' observing and immersing in English language natural and authentic use. The least used resources of emails, radio, and forums can be attributed to the lack of obligation to communicate in English in the EFL context of Vietnam, as well as the participants' unfamiliarity with the digital tools. Moreover, the findings of online dictionaries, social media, and videos on YouTube being the most favorable resources, and conversely, emailing, radio, and discussion forums being the least favored reflect the insights into students' reasons behind the choice of a particular online resource. Student participants demonstrated considerable awareness of the online resources' potential efficacy for their language improvement, pertaining to multimodality, authenticity, receptive nature, engaging and effortless learning with entertainment and information-oriented activities. This affirms the conclusions in related research by Dincer (2020), Trinder (2017), and Yurieva et al. (2021).

That stable Internet connection was reported as the most frequent affordance is different from Bonk and Lee's (2017) research result which indicates that Internet access still restricts online autonomous learning. However, the results of the current study are in line with conclusion made by Inayati et al. (2021), indicating that learners can enjoy reliable Internet connection. At the same time, the biggest constraint disclosed in this study relates to financial resources, which can be ascribed to high membership fees or fees for access to advanced versions of online resources (Bonk & Lee, 2017).

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was carried out with the aims to explore the upper-secondary EFL students' frequent use of online resources for their autonomous language learning and the affordances and challenges in such learning. Overall, online dictionaries, social media, and YouTube were employed with the highest level of frequency, whereas emails, radio, and forums gained the least preference. While reliable Internet access was assumed to be the biggest affordance, financial resources were regarded as the biggest constraint in the participants' online autonomous learning.

From the study findings, some practical implications can be put forward. First, the understanding of students' preferable online resources can assist EFL teachers in integrating authentic materials into in-class instructions. Second, the students' frequent use of online resources suggests that it might be constructive in developing EFL students' exposure to English language-rich environments as well as improving their language competences. Finally, the findings on affordances and challenges imply that EFL students can make use of available Internet access and collaborate when accessing advanced versions of resources.

The present study has some limitations. Firstly, the research was conducted through a questionnaire as the main instrument. Interviews or learning logs could have been deployed to triangulate the data. The limited number of the participants, 158, is the next limitation as it may not represent the whole population.

This study also opens new venues for future research on online autonomous language learning. Further investigations are needed into the strategies that the learners use in such learning. Additionally, further studies should be carried out employing qualitative approach to get in-depth information about online autonomous language learning, including strategies, resources, constraints, and perceived impacts.

REFERENCES

- Almurashi, W. A. (2016). The Effective Use of YouTube Videos for Teaching English Language in Classrooms as Supplementary Material at Taibah University in Alula. *International Journal of English Language and Linguistics Research*, 4(3), 32–47.
- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. London: Longman.
- Benson, P. (2007). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 40(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444806003958>
- Bộ Giáo dục và Đào tạo. (2018). *Chương trình giáo dục phổ thông—Chương trình môn Tiếng Anh (Ban hành kèm theo Thông tư số 32/2018/TT-BGDĐT ngày 26 tháng 12 năm 2018 của Bộ trưởng Bộ Giáo dục và Đào tạo)*.
- Bonk, C. J., & Lee, M. M. (2017). Motivations, Achievements, and Challenges of Self-Directed Informal Learners in Open Educational Environments and MOOCs. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 4(1), 36–57.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Dam, L. (1995). *Learner autonomy 3: From theory to classroom practice*. Dublin, Ireland: Authentik.
- Dincer, A. (2020). Understanding the Characteristics of English Language Learners' Out-of-Class Language Learning through Digital Practices. *IAFOR Journal of Education*, 8(2), 47–65. <https://doi.org/10.22492/ije.8.2.03>
- Gani, N. I. A., Rathakrishnan, M., & Krishnasamy, H. N. (2020). A pilot test for establishing validity and reliability of qualitative interview in the blended learning English proficiency course. *Journal of Critical Reviews*, 7(05), 140–143.
- Hockly, N. (2015). Developments in online language learning. *ELT Journal*, 69(3), 308–313.
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Oxford, England: Pergamon Press.
- Humphreys, G., & Wyatt, M. (2014). Helping Vietnamese university learners to become more autonomous. *ELT Journal*, 68(1), 52–63.
- Inayati, N., Karifianto, D. M., & Jarum. (2021). Student awareness, attitude, affordances, and challenges in online autonomous English language learning. *Bahasa Dan Seni: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, Dan Pengajarannya*, 49(1), 28–39.
- Kalantzis, M., & Cope, B. (2015). Learning and new media. In *The SAGE Handbook of learning* (D. Scott & E. Hargreaves (Eds.)), pp. 373–387. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Karunakar, M. T. (2019). Encouraging English language production using TED Talks at the tertiary level: A study in a technical college. *Teaching English with Technology*, 19(4), 57–68.
- Lai, C., & Gu, M. Y. (2011). Self-regulated out-of-class language learning with technology. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 24(4), 317–335.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner Autonomy: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin, Eire: Authentik.
- Littlewood, W. (1996). “Autonomy”: An anatomy and a framework. *System*, 24(4), Article 4.
- Macaro, E. (2008). The shifting dimensions of language learner autonomy. In *Learner and teacher autonomy: Concepts, realities, and responses* (In T. Lamb & H. Reinders (Eds.)), pp. 47–62). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Nguyen, T. V. (2011). Language learners' and teachers' perceptions relating to learner autonomy—Are they ready for autonomous language learning? *VNU Journal of Science, Foreign Languages*, 27, 41–52.

- Oxford, R. L. (2003). Toward a more systematic model of L2 learner autonomy. In *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives* (D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), pp. 75–91). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Richards, J. C. (2015). The Changing Face of Language Learning: Learning Beyond the Classroom. *RELC Journal*, 46(1), 5–22.
- Trinder, R. (2017). Informal and deliberate learning with new technologies. *ELT Journal*, 71(4), 401–412.
- Tzirides, A. O. (2022). Online Language Learning: Understanding and Supporting the Contemporary Digital Multilingual Learner. In *Research Anthology on Bilingual and Multilingual Education* (Information Resources Management Association (Eds.), pp. 790–810). Hershey, PA: IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-3690-5.ch039>
- Wenden, A. (1991). *Learner strategies for learner autonomy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Yurieva, O., Musiichuk, T., & Baisan, D. (2021). Informal English Learning with Online Digital Tools: Non-linguist Students. *Advanced Education*, 17, 90–102. <https://doi.org/10.20535/2410-8286.223896>