LEARNING AUTONOMY: A CASE STUDY AT THE FACULTY OF ENGLISH, HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY

Nguyen Thi Hong Minh, Le Phuong Thao, Le Thi Anh Tuyet, Le Thi Vy[*]

Abstract: *In Vietnam, learning activities are likely to be teacher-centered, in which teachers play the principal role in the teaching process. Project-based learning is an approach to enhance learner autonomy. Therefore, this paper reports the impact of project work in teaching English language skills to second-year students majoring in English at Hanoi Open University. Twenty-five second-year students who majored in English were randomly chosen to join the project for two academic semesters. Two instruments were employed to assess learner autonomy: a self-assessment questionnaire and group interviews. The study's findings indicated that project work made students more confident, responsible, motivated, and determined, making them more autonomous learners. The study meets the requirements of innovation of higher education policies to reform teaching methods.*

Keywords: *learner autonomy, project-based learning, English language class, motivation, English language classroom.*

I. Introduction

Learner autonomy is essential in language education as it is considered a goal of education. To accomplish this, firstly, autonomous students need to establish objectives, choose strategies that will assist them in achieving them, put those strategies into action, and keep track of their progress to achieve them. Secondly, the transaction from teacher-centered teaching to student-centered learning must be done. To achieve goals, project work can be an important tool. This subject has been understudied; particularly, these papers focus on project work as the central task and content for teaching and learning. Many researchers have been interested in the concept of learner autonomy in language learning over the past few decades (Balcikanli, 2010; Barillaro, 2011; Barnard, 2014; Benson, 2012); The preceding researchers investigated how technology-based learning, portfolios, student journals, and other learning strategies promoted learner autonomy. The results showed that learner autonomy was increased when the learning as mentioned above strategies were implemented. However, implementing it requires many restrictions because it is not

---

[*] Faculty of English - Hanoi Open University

an easy task. According to Lengkanawati (2016), to promote learner autonomy, teachers must be committed to making their duty a major factor in its success when creatively applying for project work in the teaching-learning process.

This study investigates how learner autonomy promotes the learning process, particularly through the implementation of project-based learning, motivated by the benefit of learner autonomy in the learning process and the success of previous research. Groups participated in a role-playing project, which consisted of three stages namely planning, implementation, and monitoring, lasting for sixteen weeks. This study demonstrates, at each stage, how the group of students promotes learner autonomy through mastery of the three criteria: self-instruction, self-direction, and self-access learning.

The paper reports the result of a case study using project work at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University, to stimulate and develop second-year students' learning autonomy. It recognizes the role of project work in training major English students.

II. Literature Review

Learner autonomy is a complex concept that several scholars have studied. The concept was born due to general educational and English language teaching changes. The changes are indicated in learning theories and teaching methods, which can be carried out by teachers, owners, and facilitators of knowledge (Nakata, 2011). Benson and Voller (1997) state that learning autonomy consists of learning skills such as independent working,

critical thinking, decision-making, and collaboration. According to Dickinson (1995), these skills can be achieved either naturally and unintentionally or through training. Benson (2007) cites that learner autonomy includes self-control and self-responsibility in learning activities independent of teachers or schools. Therefore, students can make decisions and choices relating to learning objectives, learning materials, and teaching methods. Communicative language teaching, where the learner is highly involved as an active learner, enables learners to construct their language and paves the way toward learner autonomy (Nunan, 2012).

2.1 The Definitions of Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is taking charge of one's learning (Holec, 2007). According to Stepura and Pravosudo (2016), Holec's definition includes taking responsibility for setting goals, choosing what to learn, choosing learning strategies, and evaluating one's learning. Equally important, learner autonomy is a skill that should be developed rather than regarded as innate (Little, 1991). Similarly, subsequent researchers have provided various definitions for the term. According to Macaro (2008), autonomy is the capacity to effectively employ cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Learner beliefs play a role in developing autonomy, according to Ellis (2008), who argues that teachers should investigate their students' perceptions of language learning to foster learner autonomy. Additionally, for autonomy to occur, students require a comfortable and tranquil setting that encourages motivation (Elashhab, 2020).

Learner autonomy is considered to enhance motivation, improve language learning efficiency, and prepare for life-long learning, but it is challenging to foster it in Vietnam due to the respect of collectivist cultural values (the respect of authority and acceptance of hierarchy) [Nguyen, T. C. L. (2009); Nguyen, N. T., Tangen, D., & Beutel, D. (2014)]

In Vietnam, the classroom culture is hierarchical according to the teacher-student relationship. They are recognized to be dependent on teachers; They are familiar with listening to lectures, taking notes, and reproducing the memorized knowledge for projects or tests. In the context of English teaching and learning in Vietnam, with students' passive learning style, the development of autonomous learning is challenging.

When mentioned about the conditions of English instruction in the nation mentioned above, the teacher-centered activity restricts students' ability to manage their education. It only results in the student's dependence on the teacher. During the learning process, the students lack problem-solving skills. According to Mullis (cited in Lengkanawati, 2016), students will not be able to attain higher-order thinking skills necessary for dealing with complex issues in everyday life. Teachers must reconsider this unexpected fact. They must implement a learning strategy that maximizes independent learning opportunities for students. As a result, they can enhance learner autonomy.

2.2 Project-based Learning

The application of project work has a long history. Beckett & Miller (2006)

point out that project-based learning mainly provides opportunities for language learners to receive comprehensive input and produce comprehensive output. In this context, learners are motivated to absorb language not only as an academic subject but also as an instrument for expression and comprehension in real contexts. Moreover, project work helps active roles for students; therefore, students can engage in real and exciting duties to achieve goals using collaborative work. As a result, they have opportunities to successfully improve their communicative language skills. Secondly, Stoller (1997) asserts that project work is a versatile vehicle for fully integrated language and content learning.

III. Research Method

This study is carried out as case study research. It employed the descriptive qualitative research design to reveal a comprehensive summary of the phenomenon in the real context. The purpose of the study was to indicate and gather evidence if project-based learning could boost students' learner autonomy in an English class by viewing the three criteria of learner autonomy mastered by participants, namely self-instruction, self-direction, and self-access learning. In other words, this study investigated every case when the participants completed each stage of project-based learning. It then found the criteria for learner autonomy that the participants were encouraged during the learning process.

3.1. Research site, participants, and research aims

This project was carried out at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University.

The participants are 25 students majoring in English, of which 10 are male. They are second-year students aged 19 and 20 in the academic year 2021-2022. They are proven to be at the same level of English proficiency according to their study record at the B1 level. For project work, they are divided into five groups of mixed genders. The study focuses on two purposes: (1) to enhance learners' autonomy; (2) to provide students with opportunities to experience project work. The article's report investigates the effectiveness of project work in teaching and learning language skills to second-year students. The question to study is "How does the integration of project work in English teaching modules affect learners' autonomy?"

3.2. Procedure of Collecting Data

This study employed three types of instruments: Students' journals such as writing articles and designing magazines, observation by the teacher, and structured interviews.

Journals were submitted by the end of the three stages of the project. The first journal about the project's planning was completed after the first stage. The first journal covered information about groups' members, the project topic, the team's schedule and the role of each team member, and the format of the work. Project requirements and assessment criteria were negotiated under teachers' supervision. Finally, the criteria for learner autonomy recommended by Benson (2012) were settled to assess reports. This phase lasted a week.

In the second stage, students implement the project by carrying out the project based on the schedule, accessing the material from various sources, and practicing in groups. Orientation and feedback sessions were held weekly to collect the report briefing from each group. This phase was about eleven weeks. At this stage, students work in a group of five to carry out their duties. They discussed the objectives and nature of the project work and settled the key features of the work. They had to decide how to conduct their peer feedback on content, organization, language, and resources. Each team was requested to give feedback on their peers' work every three weeks. Then the feedback will be exchanged for improvement.

Students have to feedback on their peers' work under four criteria. Then the feedback is exchanged for improvement.

Table1: The Peer-feedback criteria (Adapted from Stoller, 2019)

Criteria	Don't meet criteria	Approaching criteria	Meeting criteria	Exceeding criteria
Grading	poor	fair	good	excellent
Content	Select items are not relevant.	The content shows subject knowledge, but they are not important.	Selected items are important in discussing the activities assigned.	Selected items are important and help to make the content interesting. Choices help readers and listeners see thigs in a new way.

Criteria	Don't meet criteria	Approaching criteria	Meeting criteria	Exceeding criteria
Organization	Journal lacks logical order and organization.	Journal is somehow illogical and confusing.	Journal is rather logical, but there are not very effective.	Journal is logical and effective.
Language	The journal is inadequate with a lot of mistakes on grammar and spelling.	The journal is adequate.	The journal is good but there are some mistakes on grammar and spelling.	The journal is highly polished with no mistakes.
Resources	Too poor and irrelevant resources	Quite relevant resources	Relevant resources	

To assess their peers' works, students had to consider if their works meet the criteria in the checklist above. After that, comments or suggestions were provided for improvement.

In the last stage, about twelve weeks before the showcase, the journals were written and submitted for the teacher's feedback. Teachers also based on the four criteria in the checklist for assessment. Finally, the final products were performed for the whole class; teachers and peers evaluated the fine product based on the assessment criteria introduced in the first stage.

To observe and understand the natural environment, classroom observation was conducted twice a week during the teaching process to explore three phenomena, such as what the students do in the planning stage of the project, what they do in implementing the project, and what they do in reviewing and monitoring the project. The first observation was carried out during the planning stage. The second observation was done during the implementation stage. The third stage was led after reviewing and monitoring

stage. The final assessment focused on the student's fulfillment of the four criteria Benson (2012) recommended: self-instruction, self-direction, self-access learning, and personal instruction.

The structured interview consisting of a specific set of questions that achieved the same information from the participants was held in person three times during the project. The three interviews were conducted after the planning stage, the implementation stage, and the reviewing or monitoring stages in turn. The interview aimed to determine how the participants did the criteria above of learning autonomy. The records and notes were taken during the interviews, which acted as supportive information apart from the one achieved from the journal and observation.

IV. Findings and Discussion

To fulfill the task of the study, giving a panorama the learner autonomy was analysed under the three main headings: (1) Learner autonomy in the planning process; (2) Learner autonomy in the implementation process; (3) Learner autonomy in the monitoring process.

4.1 Learner autonomy in the planning process

From the data collected from three sources, journal, observation, and interview, it was clear that most learners completed their planning process with self-instruction, self-direction, and self-access learning tasks. Firstly, students were enthusiastic about randomizing team members, choosing topics, setting schedules, and assigning duties. 15 out of 25 students did the job very well without the controlling of teachers; however, 40% of the participants had to be closely instructed by teachers as their English was not good enough and they lacked the skill of learning independently, which was following the theory put forward by Lengkanawati (2016). Furthermore, the learners' fulfillment in self-instructions varies. One team fulfilled 100% of the requirements; two did 75%; two got 50% of the duties done.

Regarding self-direction in the planning process, it was recognised that 100% of participants were responsible and active in teamwork. They were willing to pave the way for others and got on well with corporate to archive the target. For self-access learning, students were unfamiliar with using self-access material at this stage. They depended a lot on teachers and partners. They needed time to fulfill the criteria of self-access learning.

4.2. Learner autonomy in the implementation process

To get the project done, at this stage, students had to implement the project based on the schedule.

About self-instructions, they completed their tasks successfully without the direct involvement of the teachers. They all met the deadlines of looking up documents, practising in teams, writing journals, sharing experiences, and practising English. These findings fit the proposals of cooperative work suggested by Ramirez (2014) that teamwork boosts learner autonomy by having more discussions, doing more research, and controlling their learning process better. From practice, learners make mistakes, and they can learn from these mistakes with the help of their partners. This can be seen in the statement of an interviewee, Hoa: "We have to corporate from the first stage to the last stage of the project. We must share ideas and resources, discuss, analyze, and evaluate with our peers in the target language. Everyone was involved to fulfill the workload." Another point of view stated by Van: "I am glad to involve in assessing my peers' work during the project and in return I get the assessment from my peers on my project. I could learn a lot from this task." The ideas from students indicated that the engagement of team members have more chances to learn from others, and they are more cooperative in learning and more confident in making decisions. In addition, for self-implementation, 95% of students investigated had desires to accomplish the goals of their project, so they carried out all activities required, took responsibility, and made all essential decisions. Students used a variety of material sources on the information highway and physical issues to meet the requirement of self-access learning. Learning autonomy has been

successfully boosted when learners are more active in their learning, responsible for their duties, and independently address their challenges.

In summary, it is found that most participants have engaged actively in the process of implementing the project, which enables them to be more autonomous learners as well as master their language skills.

4.3 Learner autonomy in the monitoring process

The monitoring process is the final stage in the project-based learning process, in which students perform the projects in written and spoken forms. At first, all teams performed their work for the whole class. Almost participants did the job confidently. They transferred the dialogue naturally with proper language usage and confidence. Thanks to the project assigned, students had more opportunities to make up their minds to choose their methods to achieve targets, which proved that project-based learning fosters learning autonomy. Students were actively engaged in the development of each activity or duty assigned.

V. Conclusion

Studying project-based learning to promote learner autonomy concludes that project-based learning can boost learner autonomy. In every project stage, all research participants complete the criteria of self-instruction, self-direction, and self-access learning.

To summarize, the study recognized five important findings:

Students have various levels of learning autonomy.

There is a close connection between learners' achievements and learning autonomy.

Learner autonomy takes time in a logical process.

No one can be 100% perfect.

Students get the most efficiency in learning autonomy in the implementation process.

Regarding autonomy in English as a foreign language class via project-based learning, not all students favour it as they are familiar with passive learning. To enhance learner autonomy, teachers should encourage students to do projects. They can gradually improve their self-instruction, self-direction, and self-access learning by implementing projects.

Nevertheless, project-based learning by doing projects is more likely to significantly impact increasing motivation. However, additional research is needed to back up the evidence that learner autonomy as a capacity can be improved. In order to boost learner autonomy, intensive training and opportunities for students' actions are necessary. The capacity to have control of learning may take a lot of time to develop. The skills and behaviors associated with learner autonomy will probably develop as the students complete more projects in their training program. As a result, it is suggested that project work be regularly incorporated into the training program to provide opportunities for exercises and encourage students to take control of their learning.

References:

[1]. Balcikanli, C. (2010). Learner Autonomy in Language Learning: Student Teachers' Beliefs. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(1), 90-103. Retrieved on March 12, 2015, from http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol35/iss1/8.

[2]. Bao, H. K. (2017). Promoting learner autonomy in the Vietnamese context: A study on teachers' roles beyond the classroom

[3]. Barillaro, F. (2011). *Teacher perspectives of learner autonomy in language learning* (Master's dissertation), TESOL Centre, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, England.

[4]. Barnard, R. (2014). Learner Autonomy: A Paper Presented at a Two-day Workshop at UPI Bandung, Indonesia

[5]. Beckett & Miller (2006). Project-Based Second and Foreign Language Education

[6]. Benson, P. (2007). Autonomy in Language Teaching and Learning. *Language Teaching*, 40(01),

[7]. Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Autonomy*. London: Routledge.

[8]. Benson, P. (2012). *Autonomy in Language Learning, Learning and Life. Hong Kong*: Institute of Education.

[9]. Borg, S. & Al Busaidi, S. (2012). *Learner Autonomy: English Language Teachers' Beliefs and Practices*. United Kingdom: British Council.

[10]. Dam, L. (2008). *In-service Teacher Education for Learner Autonomy*. IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG, 20-28.

[11]. Dickinson, L. (1995). *Autonomy and Motivation: A Literature Review*. System, 23, 165-174. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(95)00005-5

[12]. Elashhab, S. (2020). Motivational teaching strategies within Saudi University EFL classrooms: How to improve students' Achievement? *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 2(1), 133-150. DOI 10.36892/ijlls.v2i1.173

[13]. Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. W. (2009). *Educational Research, Competencies for Analysis and Applications*. United States: Pearson International.

[14]. Holec, H. (2007). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.

[15]. Nguyen, T. H. (2019). *Cơ chế tự chủ đối với trường đại học công lập và vấn đề đặt ra với mở chương trình đào tạo và mở mã ngành đào tạo*

[16]. Kamberi, L. (2013). Promoting learner autonomy in foreign language learning by using student journals. *Proceeding of The First International Interdisciplinary Conference* (pp. 408-412). Azores, Portugal.

[17]. Kelsi, Y. (2015). Effects of task-based Instruction on Reading Comprehension of Turkish EFL Learners. *International Journal of English Language Teaching*, 3(2), 23-37. Retrieved from www.eajournals.org.

[18]. Kim, H. J. (2014). The Use of Technology for learner Autonomy in Language Classroom. *ITBE Link- Fall 2014*, 42(3).

[19]. Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond Methods: Macro strategies for Language Teaching*. London: Yale University Press.

[20]. Lambert, V. A. & Lambert, C. E. (2012). Qualitative Descriptive Research: An Acceptable Design. *Pacific Rim International Journal of Nursing Research*, 16(4), 255-256.

[21]. Lengkanawati, N. S. (2016). Teachers' Beliefs about Learner Autonomy and its Implementation in Indonesian EFL Settings.

In Barnard, R and J. Li (eds), Language Learner Autonomy: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices in Asian Contexts. (pp. 134-149). Phnom Penh: CAMTESOL.

[22]. Macaron, E. (2008). The shifting Dimensions of Language Learner Autonomy. *In T. Lamb & H. Reinders (Eds.), Learner and teacher autonomy concepts, realities, and responses* (pp. 47-62). Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Company.

[23]. Nakata, Y. (2011). Teachers' Readiness for Promoting Learner Autonomy: A Study of Japanese EFL High School Teachers. *Journal of Teaching and Teacher Education*, 900-910.

[24]. Nguyen, N. T., Tangen, D., & Beutel, D. (2014). Exploring the Concept of Learner Autonomy in Cross-cultural Research. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 5(3), 202-216.

[25]. Nguyen, T. C. L. (2009). *Learner Autonomy and EFL Learning at the Tertiary Level in Vietnam.* (Doctor of Philosophy), Victoria University of Wellington.

[26]. Nunan, D. (2012). Nine steps to Learner Autonomy. Keynote Presentation at the Symposium of the International Association of Teachers of Swedish as a Foreign Language. Stockholm.

[27]. Ramirez, D. M. I. (2014). *Developing Learner Autonomy through Project Work in an English for Specific Purposes.* Class HOW, 21(2), 54- 73. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.19183/how.21.2.4

[28]. Stoller (2019). Project-based Learning in Second Language Acquisition.

[29]. Silverman, D. (2005). Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook (2nd Ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 7 No. 3, September 2017, pp. 47-55

[30]. Shahsavari, S. (2014). Efficiency, Feasibility, and Desirability of Learner Autonomy Based on Teachers' and Learners' Points of View. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4(2), 271.

Author's address: Faculty of English - Hanoi Open University
Email: TuyetLTA@hou.edu.vn