

BEYOND CLASSROOM BOUNDARIES: INVESTIGATING AUTONOMOUS LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTSNgo Nguyen Thien Duyen¹, Nguyen Ha Thao Mi^{2*}, Pham Huong Ngoc Uyen¹¹Ho Chi Minh University of Economics and Finance²University of Finance and Marketing

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 04/4/2024	The study explores the impact of changes in the learning environment on the autonomy of international students, challenging the traditional dichotomy between classroom-based and extramural learning. It aims to assess whether students maintain autonomous learning practices after studying abroad and their engagement in extramural activities during the transition from an English as a Second Language (ESL) to an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment. By using case study approach and in-depth interview, results show an increase in level of learner autonomy after ESL study, with sustained effects upon returning to the EFL setting. The study emphasizes the importance of supporting students' autonomy in lifelong learning and suggests that institutions can promote student success and satisfaction. However, limitations include the pilot nature of the research and the focus on overseas students.
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VƯỢT RA KHỎI RÀNG BUỘC CỦA LỚP HỌC: NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ SỰ HỌC NGÔN NGỮ TỰ CHỦ CỦA CÁC SINH VIÊN QUỐC TẾNgô Nguyễn Thiên Duyen¹, Nguyễn Hà Thảo Mi^{2*}, Phạm Hương Ngọc Uyên¹¹Trường Đại học Kinh tế Tài chính Tp. Hồ Chí Minh²Trường Đại học Tài chính Marketing

THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 04/4/2024	Nghiên cứu khám phá ảnh hưởng của các thay đổi trong môi trường học tập đối với sự tự học của sinh viên quốc tế, thách thức sự phân chia truyền thống giữa việc học trong lớp và học ngoài lớp. Mục tiêu nghiên cứu là đánh giá xem sinh viên có duy trì được việc thực hành học tự chủ sau khi du học và sự tham gia của họ trong các hoạt động ngoại khóa trong quá trình chuyển từ môi trường sử dụng tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ thứ hai (ESL) sang môi trường sử dụng tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ nước ngoài (EFL). Bằng cách sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu ứng dụng và phỏng vấn sâu, kết quả cho thấy mức độ tự chủ của người học tăng sau khi học ESL, với tác động có tính duy trì khi trở lại môi trường EFL. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh về tầm quan trọng của việc hỗ trợ sự tự chủ của sinh viên trong việc học suốt đời và đề xuất rằng các tổ chức có thể thúc đẩy sự thành công và sự hài lòng của sinh viên. Tuy nhiên, các hạn chế bao gồm tính thử nghiệm của nghiên cứu và sự tập trung vào sinh viên nước ngoài.
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1. Introduction

Autonomy in learning is "the product of interdependence rather than independence" [1]. Similarly, according to Benson [2], the social constructivism of active learning promotes autonomy. Autonomy does not imply that students operate independently. They learn by doing, socially constructing information as they go. Students improve their analytical, reflective, and synthesis skills via their interactions with others. This is the position held by Little [3], who emphasizes the need for "the internalization of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions". Unlike passively responding to stimuli, individuals who undergo internalization develop into autonomous learners [4]. Benson [5] emphasizes that learner autonomy is the capacity to behave ethically within a learning setting. If this conduct does not conform to an individual's typical behavior in real-life situations, it cannot be seen as indicative of average human behavior. The learner's degree of autonomy may be influenced by changes in their surroundings and social interactions.

Studying abroad presents a unique and invaluable opportunity for international students to immerse themselves in new cultures, societies, and environments, each offering distinctive affordances for learning. Recent research has delved into the effects of studying abroad on language acquisition outcomes, particularly focusing on the development of learner autonomy (LA). According to these studies, studying abroad in ESL (English as a Second Language) settings does help students' second language acquisition, but only to a limited extent. Experiences like navigating a new environment, managing finances, and choosing coursework can enhance self-reliance and decision-making skills [6]. Additionally, exposure to diverse learning styles and independent learning approaches practiced in many universities abroad can empower students to become more autonomous learners [6]. It is not always the case that chances to speak the target language outside of class are guaranteed while studying abroad in ESL situations, as Tanaka [7] noted in qualitative research with 29 Japanese language learners studying in New Zealand for 12 weeks. Students' second language (L2) improved in proportion to the amount of time they spend immersed in the target language throughout their study abroad experiences. Researchers Virkkula and Nikula [8] found that ELF study abroad significantly affected students' sense of self as English language learners. The case study research by Zhong [9] revealed that the educational environment the participant experienced in New Zealand encouraged a sense of interdependence and social interaction in his self-directed learning. At the conclusion of this research study, it was also determined that he exhibited improved ability in self-regulating his self-directed study. The results support the claim that learner autonomy is flexible and ever-changing. This indicates that, in addition to the learner's psychological factors, environmental factors such as guidance from the teacher and learning conditions also have a significant impact on the development of various aspects of learner autonomy. Research by Isabelli-García et al. [10] focused on the development of learner autonomy through studying abroad, examining the experiences of undergraduate language students for duration of one year or less. Their findings underscored the impact of factors such as anxiety, motivation, and attitudes towards learner identity on language acquisition. The study revealed that studying abroad can indeed enhance autonomy and language skills, thereby contributing to improved academic performance. In short, studying abroad offers language learners a valuable chance to enhance their language proficiency and get deeper insights into the language and culture of the host nation. According to Kashiwa and Benson [11], second language acquisition considers it a crucial component.

Previous research has generally looked at how students' perspectives alter or how their language and skill set advance, but not how much they take control of their learning. In addition, these studies were only conducted before or after the period of studying abroad. This research aims to fill this knowledge gap by investigating how international students' sense of autonomy evolves over their time in and after a foreign educational environment. There were two stages in the research. The first part of the study was conducted when the students lived in Australia at a time and the second stage was carried out when students came back to their home country.

Based on the results of the initial phase, the three researchers opted to proceed to the second phase, wherein two pivotal arguments were formulated, each offering a fundamental framework for contemplating autonomous learning and extramural language acquisition in contemporary contexts. The first contention posits that adult learners can attain proficient fluency in a foreign language even in the absence of formal classroom instruction. Conversely, the second argument asserts that language acquisition transcends the boundaries of traditional educational settings, occurring within the dynamic "language learning settings" unique to individual learners. The significance of these arguments lies in their potential to transcend the conventional dichotomy between classroom-based and extramural learning paradigms, which often dominates discussions on autonomous learning. It is crucial to recognize that these arguments have the capacity to expand the discourse beyond this binary perspective. By relinquishing the presumption that classroom instruction is indispensable for achieving advanced language proficiency, attention can be redirected towards understanding the multifaceted nature of autonomous language acquisition across diverse contexts, both within and beyond formal educational settings. However, to effectively navigate these nuanced contexts, it is imperative to develop a conceptual lexicon that extends beyond the limiting dichotomy of "in-class" and "out-of-class" learning. The term "environment" is poised to play a pivotal role in facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the myriad contexts in which language acquisition unfolds.

The primary objective of the present study is to address the following research questions:

- Do international students maintain their autonomous learning practices after studying abroad?
- In transitioning from an English as a Second Language (ESL) to an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment, do international students continue to engage in extramural learning activities in the absence of formal classroom instruction?

2. Methodology

The research was conducted in two stages, and five volunteers from Asia took part in each stage. The first part of the research was carried out in Australia to discover how changes in the learning environment affected learner autonomy for international students studying in Australia after a period of time. The second phase of the research was carried out after the students returned to their home countries to determine whether or not the autonomous learning behaviors of international students are maintained after they leave the ESL environment. Due to the long period of the study, a complete qualitative method with the application of a case study approach and a semi-structured interview are applied. This inquiry was conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of learner autonomy, rather than making generalizations to other populations and contexts. The study aimed to generate rich and detailed data to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon being investigated [12]. It is expected that this study will contribute to a thorough knowledge of the specific topic.

2.1. Participants

Table 1. Profile of participants

Pseudonym names	Nationality	Course studying in Australia	Time staying in Australia
Participant 1	Vietnamese	Master's degree in Applied Linguistics and TESOL	2 years
Participant 2	Vietnamese	Master's degree in Applied Linguistics and TESOL	2 years and a half
Participant 3	Vietnamese	Master's degree in Accounting	2 years
Participant 4	Chinese	Master's degree in Accounting	2 years
Participant 5	Chinese	Master degree in Chiro-practice	3 years

Table 1 provides a comprehensive profile of the participants, identifying them by their country and using pseudonyms in place of their real identities. It includes a description of the program that the participants have finished or are currently enrolled in, as well as the total number of years that they have spent living and studying in Australia.

All of the five participants share some similarities. Firstly, they all completed their Bachelor's degree and then came to Australia for their Master's Degree. In addition, the participants come from similar backgrounds of culture and education in China and Vietnam. Secondly, the participants live in the same dormitory on campus, which is easy for the three researchers to observe and conduct the case study in the first stage. Finally, after completing their Master's degree, the participants chose to come back to their home country.

2.2. Procedures and Data Analysis

The three researchers conducted in-depth interviews with the study's subjects in order to collect information and assess that information for the purpose of making the research technique more robust and comprehensive. According to Kvale and Brinkmann [13], interviews may be a productive way to get information from both the interviewee and the interviewer if they are interested in the same topic. In addition, the face-to-face interview is used to collect data for this research because it allows for a more in-depth exploration of thoughts and ideas from the participants than would be possible via a group interview and because it eliminates the influence of group dynamics and peer opinion [13]. Therefore, the interview was included in the scope of this report, it was transcribed in the main researcher's words, but the core ideas were kept intact. Because all the participants came back to their home country, the interviews were conducted online.

In addition to the plain language statement (PLS) that was delivered beforehand to participants to solicit their interest in the study and get their permission to take part in it, the three researchers provided participants with a verbal summary of the research topic and its important questions. Interviews are an excellent approach for capturing the complexity of an individual's experiences because of their versatility and adaptability. While the same basic interview standards were used, the structure was maintained fluidly to allow the talks to grow organically and widely and to allow the participants to influence the format and topic. All of the interviews were carried out in English, and the participants gave their consent to have their conversations recorded. Before conducting the interviews, we made sure to get participants' agreement to participate voluntarily. At the very least, one hour was spent with each of the interviewees.

3. Finding & Discussion

3.1. Summary of phase 1

As this study consists of two phases, this part is the summary of phase 1 about the changes in learner autonomy level because of studying abroad. The first phase was conducted after the participants had come to Australia for 1-3 months. The five participants showed changes in their learning beliefs as well as learning strategies and practices to adapt to the ESL environment. The participants consider their learning as an enjoyment and necessity instead of the need to get good grades and qualifications. In short, increased autonomy, which may be fostered by modifications like self-directed learning and self-management methods, is correlated with better academic outcomes, more learner satisfaction, and enhanced communicative abilities. These findings show that colleges and universities have the potential to adopt and apply more efficient teaching methods. Students' motivation and ability to take charge of their own learning might benefit from these methods.

3.2. Results and discussion of phase 2

In the follow-up phase of our study, participants returned to their home country after completing their Master's degree in Australia within 2-3 years. This phase sought to ascertain whether participants continued their autonomous learning habits and engaged in extramural language learning activities post-study abroad.

Regarding the first research question on learning habits, all participants indicated that they maintained some of the learning practices acquired during their time abroad. For instance, Participant 3 mentioned persisting with English searches and readings without translating to their

native language while Participant 4 continued activities like watching English movies and reading for her ACCA test:

'I get used to searching and reading in English, so I just keep on doing so. And I do not feel like translating everything into Chinese anymore. I also keep practicing listening to English short stories. It just becomes a part of my daily learning and I want to continue doing so.' (Participant 3)

'I think after a time in Australia, I found the right way to improve my English which I still need to learn and use for my job in China. Therefore, I just try to continue the activities such as watching movies in English, and reading books, especially for my ACCA test in English and I also try to keep in touch with my International friends so I still can communicate in English.' (Participant 4)

However, 3 out of 5 participants also shared that there are some difficulties for them to practice English in daily life as their learning ecology is EFL not ESL anymore.

'In Australia, I spoke English all day as there was no way for me to communicate with other people and friends. In China, there are not many chances for me to communicate in English every day, when I move to Hong Kong, more people speak English. I use English mostly with my clients and some colleagues. The opportunities are not as much as before. I also study medical terms and read medical research in English.' (Participant 5)

Besides, Participant 1 and 2 have different situations as they are now lecturers at the University teaching English. Therefore, their exposure to English as well as their practices are much more.

'I still keep my habits of learning and practicing just like before, I think, because I have taught English and I continue studying by myself every day with activities like watching English movies, listening to English podcasts, or reading in English.' (Participant 1)

Besides, the participants also share their opinions about their learning target.

'My aim is still to have a good level of English which is useful and necessary for my career. However, I am not under the pressure of having qualifications or passing exams like before. I just keep on studying with a relaxing mind and I enjoy chatting with my friends from Australia in English.' (Participant 2)

'I feel it has become a part of my life and just like my native language, I use it without thinking much and pressure.' (Participant 5)

As a result, the participants show that they still keep their learning habits which were founded when they studied abroad. The participants may show some constraints due to the environment in their home country that does not offer many opportunities for them to practice their language as much as the time they were in Australia. However, it can be seen that the participants try to create their learning environment by watching English movies or communicating with their friends from other countries in English. It is in line with the theory by Benson [5] that the learning environment is not limited to the classroom or specific settings like EFL or ESL but the learning environment can be coined by learners when they try to create and foster exposure to language. Moreover, according to the extramural activities that the participants shared, there is an absence of tests focusing on grammar and reading. The high frequency of social strategies is likely related to the need that the interviewees to speak English.

Addressing the second research question, the participants show a positive attitude toward learning as it becomes a part of their life or their daily activities rather than the need to achieve qualifications or pass exams.

'During my time in Australia, I joined the English mass at the church. After that, it somehow becomes my habit. I keep on going to English mass even in Vietnam and I read a short part of the Bible in English every day. I also keep on reading books in English.' (Participant 1)

'Before my studying abroad experience, I used to be stressed a lot with my English learning. I have to study for quite a long time and retake the IELTS test twice. I found it so difficult and like a barrier in my learning as I also struggled a lot with English when I studied accounting. However, I feel it like an effortless learning experience at the moment.' (Participant 4)

As the participants have learned English through experience and become part of their daily life; therefore, their motivation for learning becomes intrinsic motivation. The authors Gardner and Lambert [14], [15] proposed that a person's positive outlook on the L2 community and the desired outcomes (or orientations) from learning the language go hand in hand with keeping the learner motivated. In addition, getting away from a test-driven curriculum and being given greater leeway to pursue their interests in the classroom has been shown to improve students' long-term academic success.

Besides the out-of-class activities that participants keep on practicing, Participant 4 also shared about their finding resources for self-learning as well as their understanding of the culture.

'Nowadays, I feel more active and confident and I get access to multiple sources of knowledge in English; I can study on my own and use the resources very well. The technical terms in English or the case study in the ACCA test are not that struggling and difficult for me. Before, it was hard for me to understand these circumstances, but now I feel because my English level is better and also I understand how people in these English native countries speak and live. I can explain and solve these problems very well.' (Participant 4)

It is in line with the study by Little [1], [3], [16] that the participants' learner involvement, appropriate target language use, and learner reflection are the keys to the long-term development of learner autonomy. Similarly, other participants shared comparable sentiments regarding the integration of English into their daily lives and the shift towards intrinsic motivation. They emphasized the importance of personal interest and autonomy in sustaining their learning habits beyond formal education settings.

For me, English has become more than just a language learned in the classroom; it's now a part of my everyday life. I find myself naturally seeking out opportunities to use English, whether it's through reading articles online, watching English-language movies, or simply chatting with international friends. It's no longer about studying for exams or meeting course requirements; it's about my own personal interest and growth. (Participant 3)

After returning from studying abroad, I realized that my motivation for learning English had shifted. It's no longer about grades or certificates; it's about my own journey of self-improvement. I actively seek out resources and activities that allow me to engage with the language in meaningful ways, whether it's listening to podcasts, writing in English journals, or participating in online language exchange groups. (Participant 5)

Palfreyman [17] argues that a person's linguistic learning ecology is heavily influenced by how they change through time. The modifications to their home and school environments have created a unique language-learning ecosystem that has encouraged more independence in their language acquisition outside the classroom. To begin, participants gain autonomy over their education, something they lacked in their native nations owing to test-driven curricula. In addition, participants are given greater leeway in their learning, both in terms of deciding where to direct their attention and what skills to prioritize developing. Participants' motivation to learn outside of class increases as a result of their desire to adjust to their new surroundings and do better academically. The three key factors that promote learner autonomy are competence, motivation, and independence [18]. In addition, Murray [19] noted that students' levels of autonomy are the combined outcome of their thought processes and their interactions with others in the classroom. Students' perspectives on education, their approaches to community engagement, and their ideas for pedagogical innovation are all influenced by how their daily lives and classrooms have changed. As a result, they have greater opportunities for independent study thanks to these variables.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, changes in the learning environment from can have a significant impact on the development of autonomy in students. Both phases of the study demonstrate that there is an

increase in the level of learner autonomy after studying in the ESL setting. In addition, the effects of studying abroad on the participants do not fade away after they come back to their home country which is the EFL setting. In addition, it also shows that learner autonomy contributes greatly to the long-life learning process. When the participants have the right goals, strategies, and attitudes to their language learning, they can keep these autonomous behaviors out of the classroom setting. Therefore, it is important for institutions to take into account these differences and develop strategies that support the autonomy of all students, regardless of their country or culture of origin. By doing this, universities can help promote student success by allowing them to develop their own skills and knowledge while also enjoying a sense of satisfaction from their learning process. Moreover, institutions must recognize cultural variations to effectively support students' growth in independence and guarantee their success in higher education. Educators may provide a more nurturing learning environment for students of all ages and skill levels by expanding their knowledge of students' emotional experiences, such as autonomy. Universities may aid student achievement in this way by providing students with opportunities to study on their terms and in ways that bring them personal fulfillment.

Nonetheless, there are several caveats to the research that should be taken into account despite the above-mentioned strengths. For one, this was pilot research, so it is important to be wary about extrapolating the results to larger populations or other settings. In addition, the scope of the present research does not include seeing actual classes, but rather solely the overseas students. Hence, by integrating the perspectives of educators, more progress may be made. Furthermore, since this study only uncovered students' ideas, additional studies from the perspectives of instructors and university officials are required to fully comprehend learner autonomy implementation.

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