

# An investigation into learner autonomy of students of General English Program at International School, Vietnam National University, Hanoi

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**Abstract:** *This study aims at measuring the degree of autonomy of students in General English program at International School, VNU Hanoi. The data were collected by interviewing teachers and through survey questionnaires for students. The findings show that the degree of autonomy varies among the students. Most of them are aware of the importance of setting goals, self-evaluation and do self-study sometimes. They, however, fail to direct and monitor their learning process and work out their ways to achieve their goals due to lack of knowledge about learning strategies, self-monitoring, room for decision-making and there is plenty for teachers to do to help their students become more autonomous in their language learning.*

**Keywords:** *Learner autonomy, autonomous learning, setting goals, self-evaluation*

## 1. Introduction

English is a very important subject in the curriculum of students in International school. It is seen as a “key subject” since the students need to have a good command of this language in order to learn other subjects: reading books and materials, listening and understanding lectures, doing exam papers and writing assignments. Students have language classes every weekday and they almost learn only English for one to up to five levels to have good language competency for their study later. For most of them, however, their language proficiency is not at the desired level yet. Many reasons may be attributed to this result, among which lack of autonomy is thought to probably be the most serious and obvious one.

## 2. Research content

### 2.1. Methodology

This study aims at measuring the degree of autonomy of students in General English program at International school, VNU Hanoi by looking at several specific aspects like setting goals, using learning strategies, independent learning outside classroom, choosing materials for independent learning, evaluating, making decision relating to their learning, level of motivation and involvement in learning.

### 2.2. Findings and discussion

#### Phase 1: Interview with teachers

For the two questions, among ten teachers interviewed, two said that they are happy with their students since most of their students in general are

very enthusiastic and have positive attitude toward learning in class. They even had some new and good ideas for their teaching like grouping students for games/ competition for vocabulary revision thanks to their students. However, they also added that there were several students in their classes who are less active than others. These students seemed to be shy and were not confident in their answers, they tended to wait for the teachers to give out the key. Eight other teachers are not satisfied with the attitude of their students, saying that some of them are not actively involved enough in class activities and do not have an awareness of what they are expected to do.

#### Phase 2: Questionnaire for students

##### Setting goals

Setting goals or having a purpose in learning is the first thing that shows an autonomous learner. When being asked about setting goals for learning English, more than two thirds of the students (87.5%) said to some extent they have set some goals for their learning. However, about an eighth of the students (12.5%) said that they even have not thought about this.

Even for students who have set some goals for their English learning, the goal they set somehow belongs to the short-term objectives like to pass exams (57% of the students). Communicative competence, chosen by 76% of the students, seems to be the goal that set by almost all learners. To understand songs, movies and newspapers in English and to understand lectures of other subjects in English was the goal of 35% and 55% of the students respectively.

Among 21 students who added some goals to the list, 5 stated that their goal in learning English was to study abroad, 14 to find a good job in the future and 2 to work for foreign companies.

**Learning strategies**

In order to become autonomous in learning, learners must be aware of available strategies to choose ones that best suit their learning styles. The concept of learning strategy is still new to nearly a fifth of students. Two thirds of students have heard about it (know little) but not enough for them to use, let alone choosing the most suitable ones. Only 3% of the students know well about learning strategies. However, it is necessary to note that from “knowing” to “using”, especially effectively using, is a big gap. The result indicates that there is a lack of information and understanding of learning strategy in learners which may cause an unfavorable condition for autonomy.

Among fifty -two students who know about learning strategies, more than a half learnt about it from teachers. It can also be seen from the results that friends or peers can work as a source of information since more than a fifth of the students got some ideas of what learning strategies are thanks to their friends. The number of students who got some knowledge of learning strategy by reading books accounts for more than a fourth, equals to 27% of the total. This implies that some students are quite independent in their learning in the sense that they try to discover the ways to learn themselves and make use of materials they can access.

Students in the study were then asked about what strategies they used in getting their objectives and in their language learning process. The result is as below:

*Table 2.1: Strategies used by learners*

Strategies used by learners	Number of students	Percentage of students
A. Repetition (imitating others' speech)	19	29
B. resourcing (using dictionaries and other materials)	35	54
C. translation	19	29
D. note-taking	34	53
E. deduction (guess meaning based on the context)	22	34
F. direct attention ( pay attention to general aspects of tasks)	22	34
G. selective attention (pay attention to specific aspects of tasks)	20	31
H. self-monitoring (check your performance yourself)	19	29
I. self-evaluation	8	12
K. self-reinforcement (rewarding yourself for success)	7	10

L. teacher consulting (before and after class)	24	37
M. preparation (before class)	40	62

As can be seen in the result, most of the learners do some preparation before class (62%) and more than a half use note taking and resourcing as strategies in learning language and reaching the goals they set. The number of those who use self-reinforcement, self-evaluation and self-monitoring is quite modest which is 10%, 12% and 29% respectively. It seems that learners tend to use more cognitive strategies than metacognitive strategies. This in its turn indicates that metacognitive strategies are probably more difficult for learners to understand and use in their learning process and teachers failed to make teaching of strategies, if there is, explicitly and effectively enough to enhance learner autonomy.

**Independent learning outside classroom**

Independent learning in this context refers to learning outside classroom without the control or involvement of teachers or instructors. It therefore can somehow help reflect the attitude, independence and also the hard work of learners since this is not a compulsory task at all.

All students participated in the study do learn the language when not being asked by their teachers, which shows that they, to some extent and at different degrees, do have a sense of self-study and a quite responsible attitude toward their learning. More than a half of those students (62.5%) sometimes learn which is three times higher than the number often learning by themselves outside classroom (20.3%). Only five students (7.8%) stated that they always learn when their teachers do not ask them to do so. The number of students who rarely learn on their own (9.4%) is a little bit higher than that of those who always learn even when not being asked.

**Materials used for independent learning**

One characteristic of autonomous learners is taking chances to learn and make use use of the materials in hand since this is also an expression of taking charge of factors concerned their learning. 62% students use the internet as a source of materials for their self-study which shows that internet is becoming more and more popular among learners and is favored for its wide range of English teaching and learning websites and pages in English in general. Songs are also favorable materials for learning a language and being used by more than a half of the students for the purposes relating to learning. Grammar seems to play a quite important role in language learning in the learners' mind which is shown in the number of students using

grammar tests (40%) as materials for self-study. This can be explained by the focus on grammar as result of placing importance on accuracy which is a characteristic of traditional teaching approach in Vietnam rather than fluency which is a feature of CLT approach (Ellis, 1994)

**Self-evaluation**

Self-evaluation can only occur when the learners suppose that beside teachers, learners themselves can also conduct this process and find out the reasons for doing so. Once they can do this they would likely become autonomous in their learning.

Table 2.2: Below shows the opinion of students about who should be the evaluator of their learning process.

Who should evaluate your progress	Number of student choose	Percentage of student
A. teacher	8	12.5
B. peers (classmates)	0	0
C. you (myself)	4	6.2
D. teachers and you (myself)	6	9.4
E. teachers and peers (your classmates)	3	4.7
F. all: teachers, peers and you	43	67.2

**Decision making**

When being asked who choose how to do a task in class, more than a half of the students stated that they were given the room to decide whether they want to work individually or in pair/group; nearly another half have no right to do this since teachers make decision themselves and leave no room for learners to exercise their freedom of choice. This would suggest that teachers still paly the dominant role and seem to be the only decision-makers in class. It can be explained by the conformist teacher/students relationship and teacher-centered model in Vietnamese teaching practices which stem from Confucian tradition (Phuoc, 1975 as cited in Ellis, 1994).

The right to choose what to learn seems to be more encouraged than that of how to learn. This is clearly shown in the answer to question “Are you encouraged to choose outside curriculum sources?”. The results show that almost all students (87.5%) are encouraged to choose materials outside curriculum as supplementary sources; 11% of them are not encouraged but they still do it, which illustrates a higher degree of independence and responsibility in learning than other students. This number, however, is still modest.

**Motivation**

Almost all of the students learn English to get a good job (90%), a half of them to understand lectures in English, a fourth to get good marks or pass exams.

These number are much higher than the number of those who learn English because of feeling like the language itself (18%). It can also be seen from these figures that the type of motivation learners have in learning English is mainly extrinsic rather than intrinsic, which does not sound like a very good sign of high degree of autonomy as Scharle and Szabo (2000) suggest that intrinsic motivation seems to have more influential effects on autonomy as it increases the sense of responsibility in learners.

**Learner involvement in the learning process**

When being asked about how much the students get involved in the lessons/tasks/activities in their language learning, a third of them stated that they highly get involved and a half just have average or medium level of participation. There is still a number of those who do not involve or get very little participation in the class activities. This leaves much room for improvement in terms of classroom activities and more job to be done on the part of teachers to help students actively take part in their language learning, which is a crucial condition for autonomy.

**3. Conclusion**

The data gathered by means of teacher interview and questionnaire for students indicate that the tasks and activities used in the GE course do not really aim to help students promote autonomous learning and students are not able to direct and monitor their language learning process yet. The students to some extent have set goals and objectives for their language learning and for the course as well. They, however, fail to work out the way to get these goals and objectives which is shown in their inadequate knowledge about learning strategies. Most of them are not clearly aware of self-monitoring and self-evaluation, which are two factors that characterize an autonomous learner. The findings also show that the learners are not given enough room to make their own decisions and choices that relate to their learning.

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