

Challenges in promoting students' autonomy At ictu - thai nguyen university

Hoang Van Sau*

*The University of Information and Communication Technology
-Thai Nguyen University

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Abstract: Promoting learner autonomy – the ability of learners to navigate their own learning - has been regarded as the focus of education because it promises successful lifelong learning. However, students' level of autonomy, their difficulties when regulating their own learning, and solutions for those problems are the factors that educators usually believe are out of their control. In order to promote non-English major students' autonomy, the current research explores those often neglected concerns. The collected quantitative data from the survey answers of 127 non-English majors at a public university in Thai Nguyen City was analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis. The findings showed that the students are not very confident with their learner autonomy, and they have a lot of difficulties when conducting their learning on their own outside the classroom. The solutions to promote learner autonomy from their perspectives are improving their self-regulating skills, strengthening their interactions with teachers and friends, and receiving more support from society. These findings present some pedagogical implications to help students study more effectively outside the classroom.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, non-English major students, challenges, promoting, solution.

Introduction

There have been different solutions suggested to improve students' language competence, but promoting learner autonomy - 'the ability to take charge of one's learning (Holec, 1981)[1] - has more and more been considered one of the main ones because it lets 'individual flourish and enroots lifelong learning' (Winch, 2002)[2]. From a practical view, there is no formal training about learner autonomy in institutes. Teachers themselves can be confused in defining the notion of learner autonomy (Nguyen et al., 2014)[3]; students have been reported to have low and reactive language autonomy (Dang, 2012)[4], so how autonomy is promoted is really challenging. The situation is even harder for non-English major students, whose English training is considered peripheral in comparison to their main major. They seem to find learning at the tertiary institutions not effective. As a result, research about this group of students' level of learner autonomy, the difficulties they are facing, and how they think the problems can be solved is needed so that pedagogical implications for promoting learner autonomy for this particular group of students can be made.

Literature Review

Definition of Learner autonomy

For Henri Holec, who was considered the 'father'

of learner autonomy, self-management skills are crucial for an autonomous learner. He defined 'learner autonomy' as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning, including the ability to 'determine the learning objectives, define the contents and progressions, select appropriate methods and techniques to be used, monitor the procedure of learning and finally evaluate what has been acquired' (Holec, 1981: 3)[1]. In more recent research, self-management skills are defined as 1) understanding teaching objectives; 2) setting goals and making a plan for one's studies; 3) employing learning strategies effectively; 4) monitoring the effect of one's learning strategies; 5) monitoring and evaluating the English language's learning process and 6) transcending to new learning (Xu & Zhan, 2004)[4].

In this research, learner autonomy is defined as the combination of (1) the learner's capacity to regulate the learning process from making learning goals to transcending to the next learning activity, (2) their ability to seek help from teachers and friends, and (3) their confidence in controlling their learning and expectations for the roles of teachers, parents, and society in their self-learning.

Measuring learner autonomy

Many scales have been developed and validated

to measure students' learner autonomy. Learners are asked to evaluate their own learning performance during the learning process, and the items are usually on a Likert scale from levels 1 to 5. MILLA (Measuring Instrument for Language Learner Autonomy) is a scale with 87 items to measure learner autonomy from 4 dimensions: Technical, Psychological, Political-Philosophical, and Sociocultural, and two different sets of response choices: Do and Think items (Murase, 2015) [5]. The Self-Efficacy Questionnaire of Language Learning Strategies (SEQueLLS) blends the constructs of self-efficacy and learner autonomy with 37 closed items, divided into seven categories: identifying learning needs and goal-setting, selecting an appropriate approach, seeking social support, organizing the learning environment, monitoring the learning, evaluating the learning process and outcome; transferring acquired skills or information to other contexts correspondent with the processes of the self-regulated learning (Ruelens, 2019) [6]. Most recently, the questionnaire LAPQ - Learner Autonomy Perception Questionnaire, which consists of 87 self-reported items, was designed and validated to measure university students' autonomy (Nguyen & Habók, 2021)[7]. The questionnaire was based on the conceptualization of learner autonomy involving five factors - beliefs about teachers' roles, desire, motivation, freedom, and metacognition in language learning.

The current research modifies the above scales to measure students' abilities to regulate their own learning, their interactions with teachers and friends, their confidence, and expectations about others' roles in their own learning.

Promoting learner autonomy

There are six broad headings to classify practices associated with the development of autonomy: resource-based approaches, technology-based approaches, learner-based approaches, classroom-based approaches, and curriculum-based approaches (Benson, 2011)[8]. Autonomous strategy training has been emphasized to help less autonomous learners, and educators choose to intervene in the student's learning process to scaffold them. Educators also focus on raising learners' awareness about their learning process so that they gradually 'accept responsibilities for their learning and learn on their own effectively' (Little, 2007).

Autonomy is sometimes regarded as a Western concept, and the imposition of this value on Asian

learners contradicts their learning styles (Adamson & Sert, 2012). As a country in Southeast Asia, learner autonomy is also considered a difficult notion for Vietnamese students and requires the cooperation of all involved in the teaching and learning process to promote.

Research Questions

In order to explore non-English major students' autonomy, the research has three research questions:

1. What are students' levels of autonomy?
2. What are their difficulties with autonomy?
3. What are the possible solutions to promote autonomy from their perspectives?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study was conducted at The University of Information and Communication Technology – Thai Nguyen University (ICTU-TNU) with about 21,000 non-English major students. To graduate, students need to achieve the learning outcome of at least C level – equivalent to mark 5.5 of the curriculum. The non-English major students participate in English I, II, III and IV, which last 45 periods each as the required English training program, depending on the score they get when taking the placement test at the beginning of the first year. Lecturers of Foreign Languages Division conduct the training for non-English major students. The students are mainly from the North of Viet Nam, and they are well-behaved. The school's infrastructure is still limited; the classrooms are equipped with a blackboard, fixed rows of chairs and tables, a projector, and a microphone with air-conditioner. Internet coverage is fairly good, and teachers have to prepare their own laptops. To get a sample of at least 10% of the total number of students, the researchers randomly chose eight classes from the list of classes opened this school year. One hundred twenty-seven students in different years of different faculties participated in the study.

Design of the Study

The quantitative research design is chosen for this study because the researcher hopes to describe the current status of non-English major students' autonomy as well as their difficulties and suggested solutions.

The questionnaire employed in this research was modified from SEQueLLS (Ruelens, 2019)[6], MILLA (Murase, 2015)[5], and LAPQ - Learner Autonomy Perception Questionnaire (Nguyen & Habók, 2021)[7]. It includes four sections: Section

1 collected demographic information of participants, including gender, which year they are in, their department, and the time length of studying English; Section 2, with three questions, was used to measure students' autonomous learning capacity in terms of self-regulating skills (7 items), social interactions (4 items), belief about their learning (4 items). In this section, the participants were asked to choose one out of five closed-ended items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= disagree, 5= strongly disagree). Section 3 was designed to find difficulties students have to face when they regulate their own learning. Three checkbox questions in this part included different choices about the obstacles that students have with each aspect of learner autonomy. Open-ended questions were added after each to collect further information about their difficulties. Section 4 had one checkbox question, which let survey takers select multiple solutions from the list given for the difficulties they may have in the process of regulating their learning.

Data collection procedures analysis

The researchers explained the study to students gave the students the link to the survey on Google Form. The researchers ensured the students had an Internet connection to access the form. It took 20 minutes for the students to complete the questionnaire.

The data was screened first to find out the outliers that can influence the research result. Sixteen outliers were identified, so the final number of participants was 127. The data is then coded in SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies (F) and percentages (%), for the collected data on the students' learner autonomy, difficulties and solutions were subsequently calculated using SPSS after checking for reliability values. Next, the answers for opened answers were read through and then grouped into specific categories.

Findings

Demographic information

Out of 127 student participants, 30.6% were female, 69.4% were male. They come from 3 different faculties, and the majority are from Information Technology and Multi-media Communication. Most of them were second-year students (71.4%), 12.5% were first-year students, 13.5% were third-year students, and eight students were in their last year. 43,8% of them have studied English for 6-8 years, 40,8% of them spent 9-12 years learning English and the rest group (15,5%) had over 12 years of English learning.

Students' level of learner autonomy

The results show that students are not very confident with their self-regulating skills, with means from 2.9 to 3.2 and Std. from .8 to .9. They were more confident with selecting learner activities and evaluating their learning outcomes, and as a result, they also found transcending to new learning. They did averagely on selecting materials and initiating self-learning. Making learning plans and especially learning goals was the hardest for them.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics about students' self-regulating skills

| Self-regulating skills | Min | Max | Mean | SD |
|-------------------------------|-----|-----|------|----|
| Making learning goals | 1 | 5 | 2.9 | .8 |
| Making learning plans | 1 | 5 | 3.0 | .8 |
| Initiating self-learning | 1 | 5 | 3.1 | .8 |
| Selecting materials | 1 | 5 | 3.1 | .9 |
| Selecting learning activities | 1 | 5 | 3.2 | .8 |
| Evaluating learning outcomes | 1 | 5 | 3.2 | .9 |
| Transcending to new learning | 1 | 5 | 3.2 | .8 |

Students thought that they were averagely confident when interacting with friends (Means= 3.5 and 3.6), and they were more confident with friends than with teachers (Means=2.9 and 3.0). They tended to ask teachers and friends for help with the problems encountered when learning rather than asking for suggestions about what to learn.

Finally, the students were also not very confident about their ability to make decisions on their learning (Mean=3.4). They believe that society and schools have more influence on their selfregulating learning than parents.

Difficulties in learner autonomy

In terms of self-regulating skills, 68,1% reported that they did not have a chance to practice selfregulating skills in the right way, while 29% of them have not had an opportunity to learn these skills. These are the main reasons why the students were not very confident about their selfregulating skills when conducting self-learning. 3.0% of the students listed the reasons for students' laziness and lack of concentration as hindrances to their self-regulated learning. For example,

I am too lazy to study myself.

I cannot highly concentrate on their autonomous learning.

I cannot set my learning discipline.

The concerns that "I'm afraid of asking my teachers" and "I don't have a chance to talk about my autonomous learning with my teachers" mainly

resulted in challenges in interactions with teachers. The rates were 39.8% for these reasons. Regarding student-student interactions, 15.8% identified that their friends could not support them because they were also not good at English. 4.6% of them listed the reasons students cannot take advantage of the support from friends and did not know how to work more effectively with friends. For instance,

I could not find someone who had the same interest in learning English. I do not have a chance to use and practice English.

I am afraid that my friends gave me the wrong correction.

Finally, 64.5% of the students did not have confidence that they should be the person who needs to make their own decision about their learning outside of the classroom. 27.3% of survey takers had a very common problem of just waiting for their teachers' dictation even when self-studying, so they found it very hard to initiate their learning. 4.6% of them also experienced problems that they could not get the support from their family to manage the time to self-study effectively. 3.6% of the sample thought that they did not have the competence to learn English by themselves. They stated,

English is too hard to learn because of their linguistic and nonlinguistic knowledge. I cannot study English by myself.

In short, the facts that students do not have effective self-regulating skills, are afraid of asking teachers and are not able to take advantage of peer support or to make decisions about their learning are the main difficulties that non-English major students are facing during their learner autonomy process.

Solutions to promote learner autonomy

To promote self-regulating skills to learn more effectively, 76.6% of students believed that they should receive some autonomous learning skills, and another 55.3% wanted to participate in seminars or talk shows about self-regulating skills. 68.8% of them stated they needed to be able to find interests in one specific learning area. Then they could dedicate more time to studying. 68.4% stressed the importance of raising awareness about the necessity of having learner autonomy, the root of life-long learning.

To take advantage of teachers and peer support in self-study, 54.3% of them thought that students needed to know how to learn with their friends effectively. 49.3% believed teachers should accompany students in their autonomous learning activities. Furthermore,

35.9% of them shared the idea that teachers should give students more chances to discuss their autonomous learning in class with friends and teachers. 39.5% of them also expected to be involved in teachers' decisionmaking on classroom management in the classroom.

Discussion

The results indicated that the non-English majoring students who participated in the study were not very confident with learner autonomy. They have difficulties in self-regulating skills, particularly in making learning goals. Moreover, the support from teachers and peers was not effective. Compared to teachers' guidance, peers were chosen for more support.

In order to promote students' autonomous learning in English, some possible solutions are recommended for their challenges.

Firstly, in regard to solutions for self-regulating skills problems in learning English, there should be more emphasis on seeking autonomous learning skills, or students can actively take control of their learning (Benson, 2011)[8]. That explains why they themselves have to take responsibility for their English learning in and outside of the classroom. It is suggested to find their own interest in any specific areas such as vocabulary, grammar, every single skill, or even topics that they feel enjoyable in the belief that when they are motivated, they can build up their learning strategies easily.

Secondly, with reference to interactions, the student participants predominantly encountered difficulties in seeking support from the institution and teachers with their learning outside the classroom. They also did not have opportunities to discuss their autonomous language learning with their teachers. To get started, teachers in non-English major classes are encouraged to give more chances to the students to discuss their self-regulated learning. Teachers can ask students to work in groups and discuss how the students regulate their learning. This can form an enduring learning inspiration, which is fundamental for fostering learner autonomy (Muktawat, 2016).

The third possible solution to improve learning English can lie with their peers. Learning from peers might be a possible solution to promoting their autonomy. Compared to interaction with teachers, friends can be easier to ask and support each other. They can work together at all stages of self-learning, such as setting mutual learning goals, initiating

learning, practicing and supporting together, and giving feedback (Thornton, 2015).

Finally, as for promoting the confidence of students to make decisions about their own learning, opportunities should be given for students to raise their voices. The educators or university leaders need to be aware of the importance of learner autonomy and encourage students to make their own choice in different aspects of the learning process.

Conclusion

In spite of the possible contributions of the study to the field, some limitations can be found. Firstly, most students were second-year non-English major students, instead of the equal numbers of students from five years of studies and from various universities. Secondly, the findings would be more useful if more research instruments such as interviews with students and teachers or classrooms observation with opportunities for insightful accounts of levels of autonomous learning, difficulties, and solutions. Finally, other items in SEQuELLS (Ruelens, 2019) [6], MILLA (Murase, 2015)[5], and LAPQ (Nguyen & Habók, 2021) [7] scales have not been addressed in this study. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that

these aspects be explored in future research.

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Sử dụng đa phương tiện trong dạy học... (tiếp theo trang 26)

Ví dụ: Sau khi tìm hiểu xong bài “Rửa tay trước khi ăn” [5, 64 – 65], GV có thể tổ chức cho HS trò chơi “Em làm bác sĩ” thông qua việc nhập vai làm bác sĩ và bệnh nhân, HS có cơ hội phát triển các KN ngôn ngữ và mở rộng hiểu biết về giữ gìn vệ sinh, sức khỏe. Hay sau khi tìm hiểu xong bài “Đền giao thông” [5,78], GV tổ chức trò chơi “Nhận biết biển báo” HS nhận biết và hiểu nội dung biển báo, HS bình tĩnh, tự tin, nhanh nhẹn. Hoặc sau khi tìm hiểu bài “Loài chim của biển cả” [5, 104 – 105], ở phần liên hệ GV có thể cho HS chia sẻ “Cần làm gì để bảo vệ các loài chim?”. Điều đó có tác dụng giúp HS giải trí, thư giãn; tạo cơ hội rèn luyện KN sử dụng tiếng Việt cho HS, đồng thời khắc sâu kiến thức, rèn cho HS sự mạnh dạn, tự tin khi tham gia trò chơi cũng như tạo điều kiện để HS thể hiện bản thân mình.

3. Kết luận

Việc DHDH VBTT cho HS tiểu học nói chung và HS lớp 1 nói riêng có sự hỗ trợ của ĐPT ngày càng đóng vai trò quan trọng thúc đẩy đổi mới phương pháp dạy học, tạo môi trường học tập tương tác tích cực cho HS, tạo điều kiện thuận lợi giúp GV tổ chức các hoạt động dạy học. Do đó, sử dụng ĐPT trong dạy ĐH

VBTT là một việc làm rất cần thiết tạo nhiều cơ hội cho HS tiếp cận được kiến thức cũng như vận dụng được kiến thức ấy vào thực tiễn cuộc sống một cách dễ dàng nhất. Tuy nhiên, GV cần linh sử dụng phương pháp dạy học có hỗ trợ ĐPT kết hợp hiệu quả với các phương pháp dạy học truyền thống sẽ phát huy tính tích cực của HS và nâng cao chất lượng dạy học.

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