

FACTORS INFLUENCING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: NON-ENGLISH MAJORS' PERCEPTIONS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 09/11/2024</p> <p>Revised: 04/3/2025</p> <p>Published: 04/3/2025</p>	<p>In today's globalized world, learning has been considered a continuous process, and learner autonomy is one of its most essential keys. Numerous previous studies have examined the fact that independent language learners are more beneficial than passive learners. Subsequently, it is crucial to comprehend the various aspects relating to learner autonomy. This study aims to investigate university non-English majors' perceptions of factors that foster and hinder learner autonomy development. Data was collected from 300 English non-English majors at a private university in Ho Chi Minh City, using quantitative and qualitative methods. The findings indicated several factors that facilitate and impede the capacity of students to learn English autonomously. The study also revealed that motivation and time management skills significantly impact autonomy, while challenges include limited personal drive and inadequate resource support. Based on these findings, it is supposed that addressing these factors could foster a more autonomous learning environment, enhancing English proficiency.</p>
<p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>Learner autonomy</p> <p>Influential factors</p> <p>Perceptions</p> <p>Internal factors</p> <p>External factors</p>	

YẾU TỐ ẢNH HƯỞNG TÍNH TỰ CHỦ HỌC TẬP Ở BẬC ĐẠI HỌC: QUAN ĐIỂM CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
<p>Ngày nhận bài: 09/11/2024</p> <p>Ngày hoàn thiện: 04/3/2025</p> <p>Ngày đăng: 04/3/2025</p>	<p>Trong bối cảnh toàn cầu hóa, việc học được xem là một quá trình liên tục, và tự chủ học tập là một trong những nhân tố quan trọng nhất. Có nhiều nghiên cứu trước đây chỉ ra rằng những người học ngôn ngữ một cách độc lập sẽ có nhiều lợi ích so với những người học theo cách thụ động. Vì vậy, việc tìm hiểu các khía cạnh của tự chủ học tập là vô cùng cần thiết. Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu nhận thức của sinh viên không chuyên về các nhân tố thúc đẩy và kìm hãm sự phát triển của tính tự chủ học tập. Dữ liệu được thu thập từ 300 sinh viên không chuyên của một trường đại học tư thục tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh. Dữ liệu được phân tích dựa vào phương pháp định lượng và định tính. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra nhiều yếu tố tạo điều kiện cho sinh viên và cản trở họ trong việc tự học tiếng Anh. Nghiên cứu cũng nêu bật các yếu tố giúp sinh viên tăng cường năng lực tự chủ học tập như động lực và quản lý thời gian, trong khi các thách thức bao gồm động lực cá nhân còn hạn chế và thiếu nguồn lực hỗ trợ. Dựa trên những kết quả này, chúng tôi cho rằng việc giải quyết các yếu tố này có thể thúc đẩy một môi trường học tập tự chủ hơn, nâng cao trình độ tiếng Anh.</p>
<p>TỪ KHÓA</p> <p>Tự chủ học tập</p> <p>Yếu tố ảnh hưởng</p> <p>Nhận thức</p> <p>Yếu tố bên trong</p> <p>Yếu tố bên ngoài</p>	

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1. Introduction

In the era of the industrial revolution, English proficiency is not only an academic requirement but also a vital tool for career success, especially in the globalized and highly competitive economic environment driven by advancements in information technology and telecommunications [1]. It can be said that when English has become an essential tool in every aspect of life, English proficiency is an indispensable factor for the development of each individual. Since learning English has many advantages, teachers, and students are investigating and researching efficient teaching strategies to increase the efficacy of their English learning. Strikingly, the most important factor to improve English learning achievement is to foster learner autonomy. Little [2] distinguished between autonomy and self-directed learning, affirming that autonomy still requires teacher guidance, whereas Leslie [3] emphasized that students must be fully responsible for all decisions related to their learning. Holec [4] argued that autonomy is not simply independent learning but also self-management of the learning process with the support of a teacher. Cotterall [5] defined "control strategies" as those that learners can use to manage the learning process, such as goal setting and progress monitoring. In a broader sense, learner autonomy includes the ability to control the learning process and self-direct in setting goals, selecting materials, and assessing outcomes [6], [7].

There has been a high volume of learner autonomy research in both global and local contexts. Kemala [8] identified five main factors influencing learner autonomy, including motivation, social environment, task, teacher, and learning materials. The results showed that teachers need to support students in developing autonomy. Similarly, the results of [9] showed that large class sizes and teachers' directive habits can limit learner autonomy. The study also found a link between teacher and learner autonomy and emphasized that they must be considered holistically. Meanwhile, Wael et al. [10] investigated how English language education students self-managed the learning of academic speaking skills, highlighting the lack of details on independent learning techniques, suggesting that clearer guidance is needed in the application of strategies.

In the local context, several studies on learner autonomy have been carried out. Tran and Duong [11] explored English majors' perceptions of factors that supported and hindered the development of autonomy. Supporting factors included teacher autonomy orientation, learner skill development, and a positive learning environment while hindering factors consisted of ineffective learning activities and discomfort in the learning environment. Additionally, the findings of [12] pinpointed that students were aware of the value of autonomy in language learning, but their ability to act independently was only average. The study recommended integrating autonomy into English language teaching as an important part of the curriculum to enhance students' perceptions. Noticeably, Tran and Vuong [13] indicated that factors such as inadequate language knowledge and study skills are the main obstacles to students' autonomous learning ability.

Given the aforementioned rationale, this research aims to provide a better understanding of the factors that influence learner autonomy development in learning English. This knowledge is crucial for developing teaching methods and educational policies that optimize the learning experiences of non-English majors, thereby enhancing their autonomy in the EFL learning process. The research is conducted to answer the following question: What are factors influencing learner autonomy development perceived by non-English majors at a private university in Ho Chi Minh City?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research site and participants

The current research was taken at a private university with a total of 300 non-English majors from different faculties, including 34 students majoring in Finance (11.3%), 49 students majoring in Business Administration (16.3%), 43 students majoring in Economics (14.3%), 56 students

majoring in IT (18.7%), 43 students majoring in Logistics (14.3%), 35 students majoring in Accounting-Auditing (11.7%), and 40 students from the Faculty of Marketing (13.3%). There were 154 females (51.3%) and 146 males (48.7%), reflecting a relatively balanced gender distribution. Of the 300 participants, 15 students from different faculties were conveniently interviewed for in-depth information, i.e., the informants were selected based on their convenience and accessibility to the researchers. Table 1 illustrates the demographic information of the research participants.

Table 1. *The demographics of the respondents*

Content		N = 300	
		F	%
Gender	Male	146	48.7
	Female	154	51.3
Major	Finance	34	11.3
	Business Administration	49	16.4
	Economics	43	14.3
	IT	56	18.7
	Logistics	43	14.3
	Accounting - Auditing	35	11.7
	Marketing	40	13.3

Note: F = Frequency, % = Percentage

2.2. Research instruments

To conduct the research on non-English majors' perceptions of factors influencing learner autonomy at a private university, a closed-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used as data collection instruments. The questionnaire includes two different parts. The first part contains questions relating to students' demographic data. The second part includes questions concerning factors influencing learner autonomy at this university, including internal factors (11 items) and external factors (13 items). The questionnaire items were designed using a 5-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, and (5) Strongly Agree. Similarly, the interview questions primarily address two groups of factors. Based on the participants' responses, some further questions were raised to gather in-depth information.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire was piloted to reduce confusion or misunderstanding and ensure the appropriateness of the questionnaire items. After the university administrator's approval, one of the researchers contacted the teachers in charge of surveyed classes for permission. Initially, the purpose of the research was introduced clearly to the participants before they answered the questionnaire. The questionnaire was briefly designed using Google Forms, so each participant took approximately 10 minutes to complete it. Moreover, they received the necessary support to ensure they could complete the questionnaire easily and efficiently. The questionnaire focuses on factors that influence learner autonomy development perceived by non-English majors. At the same time, semi-structured interviews were also conducted to gain insights into factors affecting the development of learner autonomy in the learning process. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes for each participant.

Regarding data analysis, the data from the questionnaire was analyzed by means of the SPSS software. More specifically, descriptive statistics (i.e., Mean & Standard Deviation) was calculated to explore the level of students' agreement on the factors influencing the development of learner autonomy. The score intervals for the mean scores can be interpreted as 1.00 – 1.80: Strongly Disagree; 1.81 – 2.60: Disagree; 2.61 – 3.40: Neutral; 3.41 – 4.20: Agree; 4.21 – 5.00: Strongly Agree. Meanwhile, content analysis was then employed to analyze the qualitative data.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Internal factors

Table 2 illustrates how the participants held the perception of three internal factors: psychological issues, learning habits, and learning styles. Most students showed little agreement about taking notes to help them remember better ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.83$). Similarly, discussing English topics with others was not highly rated ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.78$). Although students were confident in their English learning competence ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.83$) and highly motivated to learn ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.85$), their daily study habits and adherence to the study schedule were not well maintained, with mean scores of 3.01 and 2.99 ($SD = 0.81$) respectively. Despite setting clear learning objectives ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.82$), techniques such as note-taking ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.83$) and discussion ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.78$) could have been less effective. On the contrary, students highly appreciated using diagrams, charts ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.50$), and listening to audio ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.50$), showing that these were the preferred learning methods.

Table 2. Agreement level of internal factors

Factor	Statement	N = 300		Level
		Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	
Psychological aspects	I am confident in my ability to learn English.	3.92	0.83	Agree
	I am very motivated to learn English.	4.09	0.85	Agree
	I have a positive attitude towards learning English.	2.95	0.84	Neutral
	I am familiarize with studying English every day.	3.01	0.81	Neutral
Learning habits	I follow a specific study schedule to learn English.	2.99	0.81	Neutral
	I set specific goals for what I want to achieve in my English learning.	4.12	0.82	Agree
	I like to use visual aids (e.g. charts, diagrams) when learning English.	4.47	0.50	Strongly Agree
	I find that listening to English audio helps me learn more effectively.	4.49	0.50	Strongly Agree
Learning styles	I like to learn English by doing practice exercises.	3.49	0.50	Agree
	I learn best when I can discuss English topics with others.	2.99	0.78	Neutral
	I like to take notes when learning English because it helps me remember better.	3.01	0.83	Neutral

The qualitative results were found to have a deep awareness of learner autonomy. The interviewees showed an understanding of learner autonomy and its aspects. It can be seen that students are not only capable of independent learning but also know how to control and guide themselves during the learning process.

“Autonomy means I will decide for myself, do everything without relying on others.” (S2)

“I clearly understand the goals, learning methods, and results to be achieved in learning.” (S6)

The students perceived learner autonomy as an important factor in achieving success in their studies and future careers. They believe that learner autonomy not only helps improve time management but also increases the efficiency of knowledge acquisition. That is, the students considered learner autonomy as a pathway to learning success. Furthermore, the students emphasized the role of making a clear and detailed study plan as it is a useful tool to ensure the completion of learning tasks.

“I often study by myself early in the morning because I feel my mind is clearer at this time, which helps me absorb knowledge quickly.” (S11)

“I often make a detailed study plan for each week, this helps me track my progress and avoid missing deadlines.” (S13)

In addition, learner autonomy also contributes to developing independent employability skills, skills necessary for both future study and work. Another student shared: "*I have a habit of self-evaluating my lessons after each class to see what I have mastered and what I need to add*" (S17), which shows that the ability to self-evaluate and adjust is also an important part of the self-study process. Through varied autonomous learning strategies, the students achieved their personal goals and motivated themselves when they encountered difficulties in learning.

3.1.2. External factors

Table 3 illustrates the external factors that focus on assessing the teacher, the task, and the environment. The data show the critical role of teachers in supporting students in learning English independently. Specifically, students appreciated that teachers encouraged them to take responsibility for their learning ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.86$) and provided helpful feedback ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.50$) and rich learning resources ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.50$), encouraged them to find their learning methods ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.50$) and increased their confidence in learning English independently ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.50$). However, when evaluating the learning tasks, only 31.7% of students agreed that the in-class assignments helped develop independent learning skills ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.79$). In comparison, 30% disagreed that the assignments encouraged active learning of English ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.82$). Although 51% of students felt that the assignments were designed to be completed independently ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.50$), more was needed to promote active learning. Regarding the learning environment, 48.7% of students felt that the school environment supported their English learning ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.50$), and 54.3% said there were enough resources for independent learning ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 0.50$). However, only 34.3% agreed that the social environment in the classroom encouraged independent learning ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.83$), indicating that interaction between students needed to be improved. Finally, only 37% of students felt that the classroom atmosphere allowed them to practice English independently ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.84$), indicating that a more open classroom environment was needed to practice the language confidently.

Qualitatively, the interviewees believed that studying in an environment with well-equipped facilities was very important. The university environment has a strong influence on learner autonomy. A learning environment that encourages initiative and provides many learning resources and support can help students develop better autonomy.

"Importantly, I want to study in an environment with full facilities where everyone can study comfortably." (S16)

In addition, students also emphasized the importance of organizing exciting learning activities, such as entertaining English competitions. This means that students need a comfortable and convenient learning space to concentrate and be more confident in self-study.

"My university regularly organizes useful English competitions so that students can both study and play, creating a sense of fun when studying." (S18)

Moreover, many students believed that flexible curricula allowed them to choose appropriate learning materials and methods. In other words, flexible curricula and teaching methods encourage learner autonomy and provide instructors who act as guides with opportunities to develop learner autonomy in their learning.

"The flexible curricula allow me to choose appropriate learning materials and methods." (S4)

However, some students found that some lecturers employed theory-based teaching methods, not providing opportunities for students to learn or ask questions independently, which could hinder their autonomy.

"Some lecturers are too strict with the assignment process. This hinders me from being creative and independent." (S6)

"The teacher heavily relies on the learning program that is too theory-focused. Therefore, it is quite hard for me to learn on my own." (S9)

Table 3. Agreement level of external factors

Factor	Criteria	N = 300		Level
		Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	
The teacher	My teacher encourages me to take responsibility for my own learning.	4.01	0.86	Agree
	My teacher gives me feedback that helps me learn English on my own.	4.50	0.50	Strongly Agree
	My teacher gives me resources that I can use to learn English on my own.	4.48	0.50	Strongly Agree
	My teacher encourages me to find my own way of learning English.	4.47	0.50	Strongly Agree
	My teacher's guidance helps me gain confidence in learning English on my own.	4.49	0.50	Strongly Agree
	The assignments given in my English class helps me develop my self-learning skills.	3.02	0.79	Neutral
The task	The assignments I do in class encourage me to be more proactive in learning English.	2.98	0.82	Neutral
	I find that my English tasks are designed to be completed independently.	4.51	0.50	Strongly Agree
	The activities in my English class helps me practice my lessons independently.	3.01	0.79	Neutral
	The learning environment at my university supports me in taking charge of my English learning.	4.49	0.50	Strongly Agree
The environment	I have access to enough resources to help me learn English on my own.	4.54	0.50	Strongly Agree
	The social environment in my English classes encourages independent learning.	2.99	0.83	Neutral
	The classroom atmosphere allows me to practice English independently.	3.04	0.84	Neutral

3.2. Discussion

The findings indicated that internal and external aspects significantly influenced learner autonomy among non-English majors at the research site. In terms of internal factors, the findings revealed that autonomous learners gained the confidence to learn English. Learner confidence plays a vital role in learner autonomy [14]. In other words, when learners are confident about learning and using a language, they tend to manage their learning process efficiently and demonstrate learner autonomy [15]. Moreover, learner autonomy was motivated by the students' aspirations for their future development, which is a drive of being innate. Among them, self-motivation was the most critical factor in fostering learner autonomy. As a result, it is similar to what numerous researchers explored. For example, as stated by [16], strong motivation could encourage students to be independent in setting goals and planning to achieve and to participate in learning activities more actively.

Regarding external factors, instructors have been the key to promoting learner autonomy. First and foremost, students felt encouraged and supported by their teachers, which helped them to be more confident in making decisions related to their studies and participate actively in their learning process. In a similar vein, Kemala [8] believed teachers acted as instructors, supervisors, and facilitators in autonomous language learning classes. Another inherent and tangible aspect was tasks and learning environment, which also had a profound impact on learner autonomy. While the tasks encouraged students to think independently, the environment promoted learning motivation and enhanced their autonomy. This is in line with the findings of [11] and [17]. They stated that a

dynamic and creative learning environment would encourage strong participation in learning activities, thus increasing learner autonomy.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

This study aims to investigate factors affecting the development of learner autonomy perceived by non-English majors at a private university in Ho Chi Minh City. The authors used qualitative and quantitative research methods, collecting from 300 students. The findings indicated various elements that promote learner autonomy among non-English majors. Several personal factors, including motivation, learning habits, and learning styles, impact the promotion of learner autonomy. On the other hand, outside factors like tasks, teachers, and environment also contribute to proactive English learning. Although many students expected to develop learner autonomy, they admitted that there were a lot of difficulties. One of the biggest obstacles is the need for more personal motivation and time management skills. Some students shared that they are easily distracted by external factors, leading to failure to complete work on time. In addition, there needs to be more study materials or clear guidance from lecturers in their independent learning process. Planning is the best way to make students more self-reliant. However, they still need help managing their pre-planned schedule. In addition, according to the participants, soft skills training programs, time management workshops, and supplementary online courses are resources that support them in developing self-reliance. Additionally, academic advising rooms should be improved to provide more places for students to seek advice. Besides the similarities with the quantitative results from the questionnaire, the qualitative results gained from the semi-structured interviews yield new external factors, e.g., flexible curricula and theory-based teaching methods, which influenced students' autonomous learning.

In terms of recommendations for further research, the total of participants is 300 students from a private university in Ho Chi Minh City; hence, it is necessary to enlarge the size of the research in future studies to include students at different levels in various types of schools in Vietnam, which can lead to generalization of roles of learning engagement in EFL classrooms. Additionally, further studies can gain insights into other factors that influence learner autonomy.

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