

Learner autonomy in English language learning: Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions and practices

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy has been regarded as an important value which is expected to be present in any English language students as it can have positive effects on their learning. In Vietnam, the notion of learner autonomy has attracted more attention, and various studies have been conducted on teacher beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy over the last decade. Nevertheless, not much evidence has been provided on how EFL students perceive and practise autonomous learning, especially at a time when there has been a shift towards student-centered instruction. To contribute to bridging this gap, this study is aimed to report on an investigation into Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions and practices of autonomous learning. Data were collected from 50 English-majored students at a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam by using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. It was found that the students had an agreement on the importance of learner autonomy in their language learning. However, their perceived level of abilities to act autonomously was just above average. This result was the same as that found on their frequency scale of reported practices of autonomous activities inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, it is suggested that, to better enhance learner autonomy in teaching and learning English in Vietnam, it should be integrated into English language instruction by making it an integral part of EFL curricula.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past, the English language teaching in Vietnam was considered as heavily teacher-centered where the teacher played an active role in the language learning of students. This was claimed to result in students' passiveness in learning and therefore act as a hindrance to their language acquisition. Furthermore, the dominance of traditional teaching approaches, such as audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods, in most Vietnamese contexts did not provide students with opportunities to enhance their communicative competence (Trinh, 2005). In particular, students studied English primarily by learning vocabulary by

heart, reading English texts, and memorizing grammatical or sentence structures. Also according to Trinh (2005), these ways of studying were aimed at preparing students for succeeding in their examinations but not for meeting their communicative needs. To address these problems, more innovative approaches, such as task-based language teaching, have been introduced to Vietnam, with the consideration of developing students' communicative competence and autonomy (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010). Accordingly, teachers have been encouraged to employ more student-centered teaching methods (Nguyen & Hall, 2016)

in which students are allowed to construct knowledge by themselves and take charge of their own learning. By doing this, teachers play less dominant roles both inside and outside the classroom. That is, in accordance with student-centered teaching, teachers are expected to be, for example, “the facilitator of learning, the nurturer of creative thinking” (Tran et al., 2014, p. 107), and no longer the provider of knowledge (Keiler, 2018). However, under the effects of traditional teaching practices, shifting the language instruction from teachers to students is by no means an easy task in reality. Besides, one of the changes in educational policy in Vietnam is that students have to be well equipped with skills necessary for the twenty-first century, with autonomous learning being one of them (Nguyen, 2016). However, learner autonomy has been taken for granted by and found lacking in many Vietnamese students, even those who study at the tertiary level.

Learner autonomy is not a new term in Vietnam as it is one of the significant goals set for students in any language curriculum, especially when most universities in the country employ the credit-based system that requires students to take more responsibilities for their own learning. It is claimed that, more often than not, autonomous students are likely to study languages better than those with a low level of autonomy. In other words, the ability to learn autonomously is viewed as an indispensable and important attribute of a successful language student. Although the concept of learner autonomy has attracted much interest from teachers, educators, and researchers in different contexts since the mid-1970s (Chan, 2015), it was not awarded enough attention of researchers in Vietnam until recently (Nguyen, 2016). Various efforts have been made to investigate teachers’ beliefs and practices pertaining to learner autonomy, but a small body of research has been conducted to provide valuable insights into how it is perceived and practised by Vietnamese EFL students. According to Cotterall (1995), elucidating students’ autonomous learning behaviors and beliefs is a prerequisite for any interventions which target at stimulating learner autonomy. To fill this gap, this study is intended to explore EFL students’ perceptions and practices of learner autonomy in a Vietnamese context.

Conceptions of learner autonomy

Learner autonomy in language learning is a multifaceted concept that has been defined in different ways. Holec (1981) who has been considered a prominent figure in the field of autonomy refers to it as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own directed learning’ (p. 3). Holec’s work on autonomy has laid the theoretical foundation for much later relevant research added to the literature, although the consensus on the definition of this term has not been so far reached (Benson & Voller, 1997;

Nguyen, 2011). Cotterall (1995) elucidates learner autonomy by looking at the degree to which learners are able to use a set of tactics for taking control over their own learning. The tactics are comprised of the ability to identify goals, select materials and tasks, plan practice opportunities, and monitor and self-evaluate learning progress. These variables of the tactics are also known as metacognitive factors that emphasize self-regulated learning skills (i.e., skills for planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning) (Trinh, 2005). Further explaining the definition, Cotterall assumes that students can have various levels of practices of these tactics partly due to their different perceptions about language learning. Noticeably, many researchers assert that autonomy involves some extent of freedom in learning. However, this freedom is believed to be of constraints, and it is not synonymous with autonomy (Benson, 2007). Little (1991) postulates that autonomy is not the same as self-instruction, which is described as situations in which learners work individually or with other students without the control of their teachers during the learning process. This is because there is no guarantee that students who undertake self-instruction can obtain a high level of autonomy. In his definition, autonomy is “a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” (p. 4). Lengkanawati (2017) perceives autonomous learning as learners’ capacity to control their own learning. That is, autonomous learners are able to make their own decisions in determining learning objectives, defining learning contents and progressions, choosing learning methods and techniques, monitoring acquisition procedures, and evaluating learning results.

Dimensions of learner autonomy

Also based on the definition proposed by Holec (1981), scholars in various contexts have put forward, albeit not in the same ways, the idea of categorizations of learner autonomy (Nguyen, 2011). In this respect, acknowledged as the first researcher, Benson (1997) suggests three dimensions of autonomy in language education, namely ‘technical’, ‘psychological’ and ‘political’. From the technical perspective, learning skills or strategies are essential for students to discover learning on their own, with learner training being a focal issue in language instruction. In regard to the psychological view, autonomy is seen as the capacity to take responsibility for one’s own learning. This point of view is in line with the aforementioned definition of Holec (1981). As for the political aspect, autonomy is emphasized as the ability to take control of the content and process of learning. Some years later, these dimensions of autonomy were developed by Oxford (2003) into a distinct model with four perspectives, including ‘technical’, ‘psychological’, ‘sociocultural’, and

‘political-critical’, each with a different focus. The technical perspective emphasizes the physical situation of learning where autonomy is enhanced by independent work, for example, in a self-access center. The psychological perspective is not just confined to learning responsibilities as, compared to that of Benson’s, it is extended with the focus on students’ emotional and mental characteristics. In the sociocultural perspective, attention is paid to mediated learning in which interaction is important to students’ learning processes. Regarding the political-critical perspective, autonomy is stressed as a medium to gain access to ‘cultural alternatives and

power structures’ and ‘to develop an articulate voice amid competing ideologies’ (p. 79). Trinh (2005) assumes that autonomous students are ones who possess the ability to take control of the affective (attitudes, willingness, readiness, and self-confidence), cognitive (ability or capacity), and social factors (social skills required for cooperating and interacting with others) in their learning.

In this study, learner autonomy is conceptualized from a combination of the technical, psychological, social, and political dimensions, each of them being briefly described in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Dimensions of Learner Autonomy (Benson, 1997; Oxford, 2003; Trinh, 2005)

Dimensions	Description
Technical	Focus on learning activities taking place outside formal educational contexts without the aid of teachers
Psychological	Emphasize the capacity for students to take responsibility for their own learning
Political	Highlight conditions in which students take control over the content and process of their learning
Social	Stress the roles of cooperation and social interaction in language learning

Related studies on learner autonomy

Although much research has been conducted to investigate teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy in various contexts, only scant attention was given to how students perceive and practise autonomous learning.

Overseas studies

Yildirim (2008) did a study on Turkish EFL students’ readiness for learner autonomy. Specifically, the study was intended to explore three distinct constructs of autonomous learning, namely the perceptions of teacher and learner responsibilities, the abilities for autonomous learning, and the practices of learner autonomy. To this end, 103 students of English at Anadolu University were selected to participate in this descriptive research. In relation to the research instrument, a questionnaire was used to gain quantitative data for the study. The results revealed that students had positive perceptions of shared responsibilities between teachers and students in most classroom activities. However, they thought that there were some cases (e.g., designing learning activities in class) when teachers had the greatest responsibility for their students’ learning, and there were some situations (e.g., choosing activities outside the classroom) in which students took the greatest responsibility for their own learning. It was also found that students perceived themselves as capable of learning autonomously, and they were ready to employ some out-of-class activities that could enhance their autonomy in the learning process.

Similarly, Razeq (2014) studied EFL students’ perceptions of their responsibilities and abilities related to learning autonomy. To be specific, the study was aimed to identify language students’

readiness for autonomous learning in terms of their educational responsibilities, abilities to learn autonomously, and actual performances of learner autonomy. Data were collected from 140 freshmen EFL students at Birzeit University in Palestine using a questionnaire and an interview. The results showed that students were affected by their past learning experiences in the sense that, from their perspective, teachers took responsibility for their learning results and acquisition of the target language. In addition, they assumed that they would be able to act autonomously if they were given exposures to learning activities that permitted autonomy. As regards the actual practices, the students reported that there were a variety of autonomous learning activities that they took part in both inside and outside the class to improve their English language proficiency.

Another research was conducted in Thai Lan by Scheb-Buener (2019), aiming at investigating EFL students’ perceptions of autonomous learning at a private university in Thai Lan. Unlike the aforementioned studies, this study focused on exploring the extent to which students could understand the concepts of learner autonomy. To obtain further insights into this issue, their teachers also participated in the study. As for the similarity compared to the studies mentioned earlier, students’ levels of learner autonomy were observed in this research. In response to the research aims, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a questionnaire for fifty-seven students and an interview for four teachers. When it comes to the results, the majority of student participants showed a limited understanding of the concepts of learner autonomy, although they viewed themselves as autonomous learners.

In the same year, Ramadhiyah and Lengkanawati (2019) carried out a study to explore voices about learner autonomy of an English teacher and thirty-six high school students involved in an EFL curriculum in Indonesia. This study also sought to identify how the teacher stimulated learner autonomy during the implementation of the curriculum. Three instruments, namely observations, an interview, and a questionnaire, were used to gain data for the study. The results revealed that the teacher had a basic understanding of learner autonomy consistent with the features specified in the technical dimension in which students were expected to do extra activities independently outside the classroom. Besides, it was inferred that the teacher showed some efforts to promote learner autonomy, even though this was implemented with a lack of authentic materials. Concerning the student participants, the study had a different result compared to that of Scheb-Buenner (2019)'s as the students did not consider themselves as autonomous learners. This was because they found it difficult to adapt to a learning environment where the learner-centered instruction became dominant.

Using an experimental design, Boonma and Swatevacharkul (2020) conducted a study first to investigate the effects of the autonomous learning process on undergraduate students' level of learner autonomy and second to examine how learner autonomy was revealed throughout this process. To collect data for the study, nineteen Thai students were asked to participate in a learning process where they were trained under four dimensions of learner autonomy (i.e., technical, psychological, political-critical, and sociocultural). The participants' written reflections on learning activities during that learning process and two questionnaires on learner autonomy were means of data collection. As shown in the results, the autonomous learning process had positive effects on the students' level of learner autonomy, with a large effect size. To provide more evidence on the students' improvement in this regard, learner autonomy was then analyzed using different themes related to their learning strategies, reflective behaviors, attitude towards learning, and identity construction.

Studies in Vietnam

In Le's (2018) research, the aim was to explore Vietnamese EFL students' voices, including both their perceptions and practices, on learner autonomy. Learner autonomy in this study was analysed based on a four-aspect framework: (1) the awareness of learning responsibilities, (2) the ability and willingness to create learning plans and identify objectives, (3) the selection of methods, strategies, and resources to perform learning activities with and without the assistance of teachers, and (4) the evaluation of learning processes and outcomes. To

collect data for the study, sixty English-majored students were selected to participate in a narrative interview on a voluntary basis. It was found that all the participants recognized the significant role of learner autonomy in higher education and supported the need for students to develop the ability to act autonomously. The results also showed that they demonstrated different levels of practices regarding autonomous learning.

More recent is the research done by Truong et al. (2019) in a Vietnamese context. With the participation of eighty EFL students at Hung Vuong University, the study investigated learner perceptions about autonomous learning across four dimensions: (1) the importance of learner autonomy, (2) the responsibilities of learner autonomy, (3) the abilities of learner autonomy and (4) the behaviors of learner autonomy. A mixed-methods approach, including a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, was used for data collection and analysis. The results revealed that the students emphasized the importance of learning autonomy in English language learning. Although they were aware of their autonomous responsibilities, such as determining learning objectives, selecting learning activities and strategies, and evaluating their learning progress, they reported that their autonomous abilities were limited to some extent. As regards the students' autonomous learning behaviors, they preferred peer interaction to student-teacher interaction inside the classroom, and there was a disparity in the selection of activities that they did outside the classroom.

Since learner autonomy is a multidimensional concept, the term itself cannot manifest a satisfactory meaning from just a single perspective. As seen from most of the above studies, the researchers divided learner autonomy into different aspects of focus, among which autonomous responsibilities, abilities, and behaviors were commonly investigated. The similar results found in these studies were that EFL students had positive perceptions towards autonomous learning, and they engaged in various activities, despite at different levels of engagement, with the intent to become autonomous learners. However, it was concluded in Scheb-Buenner's (2019) study that, notwithstanding their agreement on the importance of learner autonomy in language learning, the students' knowledge of the relevant concepts was limited. In Vietnam, only a few studies on university students' perceptions and practices of autonomous learning have been recorded in the literature until the present. Exploring learner autonomy from the teacher perspective, Nguyen's (2014) and Nguyen's (2011) studies arrived at a similar conclusion that most teacher participants did not believe that their students were capable enough to take charge of their learning (as cited in Nguyen, 2017). This result concurred with that of each of the works mentioned

earlier, showing an inconsistency in the perceptions about Vietnamese students' capacity to act anonymously. Therefore, there is a need to provide more evidence on what learner autonomy means to Vietnamese students in terms of importance and the extent to which they are able to act autonomously, and what autonomous learning activities they take part in whereby further understanding on Vietnamese students' capacity to take control of their learning could be drawn out. The present study attempted to investigate Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions towards the importance of learner autonomy in language learning, their perceived abilities to act autonomously, and their practices of in-class and out-of-class autonomous activities. To reach these research aims, the study was designed to address the following research questions.

1. How do Vietnamese EFL students perceive the importance of learner autonomy in English language learning?
2. What are the students' perceptions of their abilities regarding autonomous learning?
3. What are their practices of activities relating to autonomous learning?

METHODS

This descriptive study was of a mixed-methods research design. A questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were employed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data for the study. Knupfer and McLellan (2001) figure out that descriptive research can involve a collection of both qualitative and quantitative information to aid readers in understanding a situation more fully.

The questionnaire was comprised of three clusters: (1) the students' perceptions of the importance of learner autonomy, (2) their perceived abilities to be autonomous in their language learning, and (3) the autonomous activities that they did inside and outside the classroom. The items in the first cluster were presented according to a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., 1= 'strongly disagree', 2 = 'disagree', 3='neutral', 4='agree', and 5='strongly degree'). A similar pattern of 5-point Likert scale was repeated for the items in the second and the third clusters, ranging from 1='very bad' to 5='very good' and 1='never' to 5='always', respectively. Specifically, cluster 1 consisted of 12 items that were relied on Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) study. Clusters 2 and 3 comprised 18 and 25 items in turn, all of which were adapted from Spratt et al. (2015)'s questionnaire. To have a final version of the questionnaire, it was modified to some extent so that they could better suit the context under this research. Besides, there were two sections in the questionnaire. In the first section, the participants' demographic information, including their genders, ages, and English learning experience, was

collected. The second section consisted of 40 rating scale items used to obtain quantitative data for the study. To determine the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was calculated. The result showed that the reliability coefficient of this instrument was high ($\alpha=.89$). With respect to the statistical data analysis, responses gained from the questionnaire were subjected to the Software Package of Statistics for the Social Science (SPSS, version 20.0) to measure the participants' perceptions and practices of learner autonomy. Specifically, the Descriptive Statistics Test and the One Sample T-Test were calculated to observe the quantitative results of the study.

Regarding the interview, it was employed to enrich the results of the study. This instrument was developed by the researcher to elicit information on the students' perceptions and practices of learner autonomy. Six participants were randomly chosen in this phase of data collection. They were interviewed for more than 15 minutes on a one-on-one basis, and all the responses were recorded for later analysis. There were four prepared questions in the interview that centered on to which extent the students perceive the importance of learner autonomy in their language learning, how they assess their abilities to behave autonomously, and what autonomous activities they did inside and outside the classroom. During the interview process, in addition to the main questions, the interviewees were also asked some follow-up questions to gain deeper insights into the research issues. To make sure that all the interviewees could understand the researcher's questions and give relevant answers, all the interviews were conducted in the Vietnamese language. The interview data were then analysed according to specific themes related to the research questions to substantiate the statistical results.

Participants

The participants included 50 English-majored sophomores from a private university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21 years. They were selected to participate in this study using convenience sampling. Of these participants, the majority were female (N=35, 70%), and the number of male participants was 15 (N=15, 30%). Concerning their learning experience, they have been studying English for at least 10 years at the time of the study being conducted.

RESULTS

EFL students' perceptions of the importance of learner autonomy

To measure the participants' perceptions about the importance of learner autonomy in English language learning, data obtained from the first cluster of the questionnaire with 12 items were used. The Descriptive Statistics Test was run to check for the

mean score of how the participants perceived the importance of autonomous learning. The results of this test are displayed in Table 2 below. In addition, to provide more interpretation for the quantitative results, data from the interviews with six randomly

chosen participants were analysed and presented in connection with both their perceptions of importance in this regard and the aforementioned dimensions of learner autonomy (i.e., technical, psychological, political, and social).

Table 2

EFL Students' Perceptions about the Importance of Learner Autonomy

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Perception of importance	50	3.42	5.00	4.12	.36

As can be seen from Table 2, the participants' total mean score for their perceptions towards the importance of learner autonomy in English language learning was between the scales 4.0 and 4.5 (M=4.12, SD=.36) which denote the high and very high levels of perceptions, respectively. The One Sample T-Test was run to compare the mean score

and the test values 4.0 and 4.5. The results revealed that the general mean score was significantly different from 4.0 (t=2.36, p=.02) and 4.5 (t=-7.48, p=.00). This could be interpreted that the students perceived learner autonomy as "important" to their English language learning.

Table 3

EFL Students' Perceptions about the Importance of Specific Aspects of Learner Autonomy

Items	N	Mean	SD	D	N	A	SA
<i>Learner autonomy can help me...</i>					%		
1. identify my goals of learning English	50	4.34	0	2	0	60	38
4. choose learning strategies	50	3.96	0	6	18	50	26
5. modify learning strategies when necessary	50	3.88	2	8	12	56	22
6. monitor my learning progress	50	3.82	0	4	28	50	18
7. make plans for my learning activities	50	4.28	0	2	8	50	40
8. choose learning materials	50	4.22	2	0	6	58	34
12. improve my English proficiency	50	4.48	2	0	2	40	56

SD = Strongly disagree D = Disagree N = Neutral A = Agree SA = Strongly agree

Items that received high rates of agreement from the participants were presented in Table 3 above. To be specific, almost all the students (above 90%) reckoned that learner autonomy could help them identify their learning goals, choose learning materials, and improve their English proficiency. Meanwhile, more than a quarter of the participants had no ideas about whether learner autonomy could help them monitor their own learning progress. Only 2% of the participants did not think that autonomous learning could contribute to enhancing their English language competence.

To provide further information on how students perceive the importance of learner autonomy in their English language learning, as mentioned earlier in this study, the semi-structured interview was conducted with six randomly chosen participants. The results showed that the interviewees generally held positive perceptions towards the importance of autonomous learning, as shown in two of the participants' responses:

"I think that autonomous learning is important to any language learners, myself included, as it can help us take control of our learning activities and study English better." (Student 3)

"In my opinion, learner autonomy plays an important role in English-majored students' English learning. This is because it can help us study

English strategically and improve our English skills in the long term." (Student 5)

One of the participants claimed that the significance of autonomy should be associated with the necessity to learn autonomously and that it may contribute to students' success in language learning.

"Autonomy is important in English language learning, so it's necessary for students to know how to learn autonomously. Besides, I think that autonomous students may have a greater chance of success in learning the target language than those who are not autonomous." (Student 4)

To gain more insights into the students' perceptions of learner autonomy, data collected from the interview were also analyzed based on the four dimensions of learner autonomy. The results revealed that the highest level of importance went to the technical dimension. Nearly all the interviewees perceived that learner autonomy would help them learn independently and enable them to select appropriate learning activities and methods outside the classroom.

"Learner autonomy helps us be more aware of learning outside the classroom. We cannot develop our language proficiency if we just study with our teachers in class without much further practice. I think it's important for us to have a suitable plan to study more either at home or in the library." (Student 3)

The social and psychological dimensions equally ranked second in terms of importance. More than half of the interviewees assumed that learner autonomy would help them work together and learn from each other by doing autonomous learning activities. Besides, these participants accepted that the capacity to take responsibility for their learning, including monitoring and evaluating their progress, was a vital part of their learning.

“It’s important for us to be in charge of our learning, and keeping track of our learning progress is crucial. We should not always rely on our teachers’ feedback to help us know what we have done well and what we should improve.” (Student 4)

Last but not least, the interviewees’ perceptions on the political dimension were less strong as opposed to their viewpoints on the others. Half of the interviewees believed that autonomous learning would contribute to developing their capacity of determining the content and managing the process of their learning. However, they suggested that their teachers should offer them more conditions in which they could make decisions

about what and how to learn within their classroom contexts.

“I expect to have more opportunities to choose in-class learning activities and materials. This will motivate me to learn a lot, but in many cases, our teachers do everything in planning lessons and we just follow.” (Student 6)

EFL students’ perceptions of their abilities regarding autonomous learning

The degree to which the participants perceived themselves as autonomous learners was measured based on their responses to the 18 items in the second cluster of the questionnaire. The Descriptive Statistics Test was performed to identify the overall mean score of the participants’ perceptions about their abilities regarding autonomous learning. Table 4 shows the results of this test, and Table 5 depicts the students’ perceptions on their abilities. To obtain further information on the participants’ perceived abilities to learn autonomously, results from the interviews with six participants were also presented in this section.

Table 4
EFL Students’ Perceptions about Their Abilities regarding Autonomous Learning

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Perception of abilities	50	2.94	4.72	3.68	.45

According to Table 4, the mean score of the participants’ perceptions towards their abilities concerning learner autonomy was slightly lower than the scale 4.0 (M=3.68, SD=.45). To identify whether there was a difference between the mean score and the test value 4.0, the accepted mean for the high level of perceptions, the One Sample T-

Test was used. The result revealed that they differed significantly (t=-5.06, p=.00). It could be concluded that the students perceived themselves to be able to learn autonomously at the above average level, indicating that they were not very confident in their abilities in regard to autonomous learning.

Table 5
EFL Students’ Perceptions about Their Abilities regarding Specific Aspects of Autonomous Learning

Items	N	Mean					
			VB	B	O	G	VG
<i>If having the opportunity, how good do you think you would be at...</i>			%				
13. choosing learning activities in class	50	3.62	2	0	42	46	10
14. choosing learning activities outside class	50	3.44	4	4	46	36	10
15. choosing learning objectives in class	50	3.88	6	0	22	50	22
16. choosing learning objectives outside class	50	3.66	2	0	42	42	14
17. choosing learning materials in class	50	3.70	0	2	40	44	14
18. choosing learning materials outside class	50	3.68	0	6	40	34	20
19. deciding what should be learned next in your English lessons	50	3.64	0	8	34	44	14
20. deciding how long to spend on each activity	50	3.56	0	14	32	38	16
21. identifying your strengths in English	50	3.80	0	4	30	48	18
22. identifying your weaknesses in English	50	3.92	0	6	20	50	24
23. choosing learning strategies	50	3.88	0	0	34	44	22
24. modifying learning strategies when necessary	50	3.62	0	10	34	40	16
25. working alone	50	3.54	2	8	38	38	14
26. working with other students	50	3.68	0	8	30	48	14
27. making plans for your learning activities	50	3.80	0	2	34	46	18
28. monitoring your learning progress	50	3.82	0	6	28	44	22
29. evaluating your learning progress	50	3.68	2	2	36	46	14
30. studying outside class without your teachers	50	3.24	2	10	58	22	8

VB = Very bad B = Bad O = OK G = Good VG = Very good

A detailed look at Table 5 showed that more than half of the participants, ranging from 50% to nearly 75%, regarded themselves as capable of conducting most autonomous learning activities under survey, such as choosing learning activities in class, choosing learning objectives in and outside class, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, choosing learning strategies, modifying learning strategies when necessary, monitoring and evaluating their learning progress, and making plans for their learning activities, if they had a chance to do so. Only 30% of the participants assumed that they would be able to study outside the classroom without the aid of their teachers, with 10% perceiving that they would not handle this activity well. Noticeably, many students (from 40% to 58%) perceived that they would have the ability to do such activities as choosing learning activities in and outside class, choosing learning materials in and outside class, and studying outside class without their teachers, at the average level.

To have a better understanding of the students' perceptions about their autonomous abilities, interview responses from the six participants were analyzed. A general observation of the interview results indicated that the interviewees' perceived abilities to learn autonomously were not at the same level. Specifically, three out of the six participants claimed that if they had an opportunity to take control of their own learning, they could do this well. They explained that learner autonomy was something they were trying to do so that they could study English better without much dependence on their teachers. This is in contrast to the results from

the remaining three participants who showed a low level of confidence in learning autonomously.

"I believe in my ability to learn autonomously, so I hope that my teachers will give me more opportunities to do this and let me take more control of my own learning. At the moment, I am trying my best to practise doing as many autonomous activities as I can because I know that this is good for my learning." (Student 3)

"Although I know that learner autonomy is important, I do not think that I will do it well. I just follow whatever my teachers ask me to do, and I cannot decide a lot of things in my learning process. As a result, my ability to learn autonomously is limited. Therefore, if I had an opportunity to do autonomous activities, such as choosing learning strategies and evaluating my own learning progress, I am not confident that I would handle them well." (Student 6)

EFL students' practices of activities relating to autonomous learning

Data on the participants' practices of learner autonomy were obtained from the third cluster of the questionnaire including 25 items. The descriptive statistics of the results on the participants' responses to what activities they employed in and out of the classroom to practice learner autonomy are presented in Table 6 below. In addition, qualitative data collected from the interviews were analyzed with reference to the participants' practices of autonomous learning to scaffold the quantitative results.

Table 6

EFL Students' Practices of Activities relating to Autonomous Learning

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Practices of autonomous activities	50	2.27	4.14	3.28	.46

As shown in Table 6, the participants had a mean score of just above the scale 3.0 (M=3.28, SD=.46) for their practices of activities regarding autonomous learning. The difference between the mean score and the test value 3.0, the medium level of frequency, was checked using the One Sample T-

Test. It was manifested from the result that they were significantly different (t=4.22, p=.00). Therefore, it could be concluded that the students' overall level of practices of autonomous activities was just above average. In Table 7, the practices are elaborated in details.

Table 7

EFL Students' Practices of Specific Activities relating to Autonomous Learning outside Class

Items	N	Mean	N	S	So	U	A
			% %				
<i>After nearly two-year of studying English at university, how often did you do the following activities outside the class?</i>							
31. did assignments which were not compulsory	50	3.10	2	14	58	24	2
32. noted down new words and their meanings	50	3.74	0	6	28	52	14
33. read newspapers or magazines in English	50	3.30	0	16	50	22	12
36. listened to English songs	50	3.94	2	4	18	50	26
41. read grammar books on your own	50	3.14	6	12	50	26	6
45. did revision not required by your teachers	50	2.86	4	26	52	16	2

N = Never

S = Seldom

So = Sometimes

U = Usually

A = Always

Activities practised by at least 50% of the participants at a specific level of frequency were displayed in Table 7. It could be seen that the students (from 50% to 58%) sometimes did assignments that were not compulsory, read newspapers or magazines in English, read grammar

books on their own, and did revision that was not required by their teachers. Half of the students usually listened to English songs, with 52% noting down new words and their meanings at the same level of frequency.

Table 8

EFL Students' Practices of Specific Activities relating to Autonomous Learning inside Class

Items	N	Mean	%				
			N	S	So	U	A
<i>After nearly two-year of studying English at university, how often did you do the following activities inside the class?</i>							
48. asked your teachers questions when you didn't understand	50	3.14	4	18	46	26	8
49. noted down new information	50	3.94	0	2	26	48	24
50. made suggestions to your teachers	50	3.00	10	16	44	24	6
51. took opportunities to speak in English	50	3.48	0	12	42	32	14
52. discussed learning problems with your classmates	50	3.84	0	4	30	44	22

As indicated in Table 8, 46% of the participants sometimes asked their teachers questions when they did not understand lessons, and 4% of them never did this activity. Just under 45% made suggestions to their teachers and took opportunities to speak English in class at the average level of frequency. Nearly half of the students usually noted down new information when they were studying in class, 44% of them usually discussing learning problems with their classmates.

The quantitative results on students' practices of autonomous activities were supported by their responses in the interview. Two of the interviewees were fairly satisfied with their practice levels of activities concerning autonomous learning. They said that, apart from obligatory activities, they tried to spend time doing some unrequired ones which they thought were beneficial to their learning.

"In addition to activities required by my teachers, I tried to do some other activities, such as reading books and newspapers in English, watching English movies on the internet, and joining an English speaking club. I think that these activities were good for my learning." (Student 3)

On the contrary, one of the participants showed a high level of disappointment about the practices of activities both inside and outside the classroom.

"To be honest, I feel disappointed with my engagement in learning activities in and outside the class. I normally studied for my examination and spent most of my time doing revision of what was required by my teachers. I think that I need to do more activities, such as watching English films or listening to English songs. In class, I didn't take full advantage of the opportunities offered by my teachers to practise English. Therefore, I need to change to be better." (Student 2)

Half of the interviewees reported that they had an average level of practices relating to autonomous learning. They sometimes did activities that were not compulsory to improve their English. In class,

they preferred discussing learning issues with their friends to talking to their teachers.

"I think that I practised autonomous activities outside and inside the classroom at the average level. I mean that I sometimes did unrequired activities, such as talking to my friends in English outside the classroom, read English books and watching English films... In class, when I had any problems, I preferred to talk to my classmates." (Student 1)

DISCUSSION

As shown in the results of this study, the students perceived that autonomy was of importance in the process of learning the target language. This result is consistent with those of previous research (e.g., Le, 2018; Truong et al. 2019), which concluded that EFL students recognized learner autonomy as "important" to their English learning. Nevertheless, the dimensions of the notion had different levels of importance based on the qualitative results. It could be inferred that the students' perceptions of autonomous learning were driven mainly by the technical dimension, which focuses on activities taking place outside the classroom. To be specific, most of the interviewees were of the idea that, besides studying in class, learner autonomy would help them study better by doing out-of-class activities and having suitable learning methods. With respect to the social and psychological dimensions, more than half of the interviewees believed that they would have opportunities to work together and develop their capacity to cooperate with each other by doing autonomous activities, and learner autonomy would help them boost their ability to take responsibility for their learning, including monitoring and evaluating their progress. As regards the political dimension, only half of the interviewees stated that autonomous learning would contribute to promoting their capacity to take control over the content and process of their learning.

As to EFL students' perceptions of their abilities to learn autonomously, the result showed that they considered themselves to be at the above average level in this regard. This result is to some extent in line with those of Yildirim's (2008) and Razeq's (2014) studies. However, it is different from that of Truong et al. (2019)'s research, which revealed that EFL students perceived themselves to have limitations in their abilities to learn in autonomous ways. Also, Ramadhiyah and Lengkanawati (2019) found that the students in their study had an agreement on the important role of learner autonomy, but they regarded themselves as not autonomous learners.

When it comes to the students' practices of autonomous activities, it was found in this study that their overall practice level was just above average level. Given that all the participants were English-major students, such a level they attained for their practices of autonomous learning was not satisfactory, whereas it was concluded in Le's (2018) study that EFL students had different levels of practices of autonomous activities. By comparison, although the students perceived that learner autonomy was important to their language learning, their perceptions of abilities related to autonomous activities were not at an equal but a medium scale. This is also true of their practice level for autonomous learning, which means that a difference between their perceptions and practices of autonomous learning was observed in this study. This discrepancy is probably due to the impact of traditional teaching methods that they used to learn with. In most traditional classrooms, they were not granted the right to decide what to learn and how to do learning activities. They were also not allowed to choose learning materials as well as assessment forms. In other words, they were much reliant on their teachers in the process of their learning. Thus, more opportunities should be created for students to promote their ability to control their learning.

CONCLUSION

It is acknowledged that learner autonomy plays a pivotal role in English language learning as it is regarded as a necessary attribute of a successful learner. Therefore, a high level of learner autonomy is highly desirable for any students, particularly in the context of higher education. Nevertheless, the results of this study showed that the extent to which EFL students implemented autonomous learning was unsatisfactory, although they were aware of how important it was to conduct learner autonomy to enhance their language learning. It could also be inferred from the results of this study that many Vietnamese EFL students are more teacher-centered as they are much dependent on their teachers during the learning process, resulting in a lack of ability to learn autonomously. However, this does not mean

that students are not capable of learner autonomy. Drawing on the empirical evidence, it could be concluded that students can be more autonomous when they are exposed to a learning environment that requires them to do so, with appropriate support or intervention (Ming, 2009). In Vietnam, therefore, it is recommended that autonomous learning should be integrated into EFL curricula and students should have as many opportunities as possible to undertake independent learning. To take Boonma and Swatevacharkul (2020)'s study as an example, it was concluded that the autonomous learning process that was implemented in an EFL course could greatly promote students' learner autonomy. In addition, the students themselves should be aware of the significance of employing autonomous activities both inside and outside the classroom so that they can become more autonomous not only in their perceptions but also in their actual practices.

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