

## STUDENTS' AUTONOMY IN ENGLISH LEARNING AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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### SUMMARY

This paper presents a study on investigating the learner autonomy of the first-year non-English major students in English learning at Thai Nguyen University of Technology. The results report that student's autonomy in English learning is not quite positive. It is suggested that more attention should be paid to learner autonomy during learning and teaching process at the university. In addition, some implications to encourage learner autonomy are suggested.

**Key words:** *learner autonomy, learning strategies, language learning, autonomous learning*

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of learner autonomy first appeared in language teaching in 1981 with Holec. According to Holec, learner autonomy is 'the capacity to take charge of ones' own learning [1]. Based on Holec's definition, Leni Dam defines autonomy in terms of the learner's willingness and capacity to control one's own learning. She emphasizes that a person can be seen as an autonomous learner when he or she independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation [2].

In a more general way, Benson and Voller state that the term autonomy can be used in five ways including situations in which learners study entirely on their own; a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning; an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education; the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning; and the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning [3].

Learner autonomy has been interpreted in various ways and different terms have been frequently used to make reference to the autonomy of the language learner such as learner independence, self-learning, individualization, learning how to learn, self-

access learning, etc. In general, autonomous learners tend to exhibit goal directedness, manage their academic time, meaningfully direct their practice, use cognitive and metacognitive strategies appropriately, and possess self-efficacy for the task [4].

*Why is learner autonomy important?*

Ellis and Sinclair [5] state that for helping learners take on more responsibility for their own learning there are three reasons. First, learning can be more effective when they take control of their own learning. Second, learners who are responsible for their own learning can carry on learning outside the classroom. And finally, learners who know about learning can transfer learning strategies to other subjects.

Stating why learner autonomy is vital, Little mentions that if learners are reflectively engaged with their learning, it is likely to be more efficient and effective than otherwise. Moreover, if learners are proactively committed to their learning, the problem of motivation is by definition solved; learners who are autonomous "have developed the reflective and attitudinal resources to overcome temporary motivational setbacks" [6].

From the above ideas, it can be noted that learner autonomy takes a significant role in language learning. And in the process of language learning, teachers have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and in leading them a regular helping hand to stay afloat [7]. But teachers can only be

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successful in helping students to improve their learner autonomy when they are well aware of the students patterns in autonomous learning. Thus, this paper aims at finding the answers to the following question:

What is the general degree of the first-year non-English major students autonomy?

## THE STUDY

### *The subjects*

The participants in the study were 152 first-year students majoring in different specialties, including 11 female students and 141 male students. They have learnt English at school for six years and then at university for 8 weeks.

### *Instrument*

In the study, the researcher conducted the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) developed by Pintrich and DeGroot [8]. This 44-item instrument, 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true of me and 7 = very true of me) was changed into a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true of me and 5 = very true of me). In addition, there was a Vietnamese version of MSLQ to avoid possible misunderstanding.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for self-efficacy

	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.
Item 2	152	4	1	5	<b>3.70</b>	.982
Item 6	152	4	1	5	3.05	.909
Item 8	152	4	1	5	3.21	1.065
Item 9	152	4	1	5	<b>1.71</b>	1.059
Item 11	152	4	1	5	2.39	1.055
Item 13	152	4	1	5	2.86	1.136
Item 16	152	4	1	5	<b>1.76</b>	.975
Item 18	152	4	1	5	<b>1.85</b>	.954
Item 19	152	4	1	5	2.86	1.051

### *Data collection and analysis*

The MSLQ was administered with all the 152 participants. The questionnaires were returned within two days. The data of the study was analyzed using SPSS Version 15 through descriptive statistical procedures.

## RESULTS

The results collected from the questionnaires are reported and discussed in five categories Pintrich and DeGroot summarized: self-efficacy, intrinsic value, cognitive strategies, self-regulation and test anxiety.

### *Self-efficacy*

As shown in the table, the means ranged from a high of 3.59 to a low of 1.71. The highest mean was item 2 (*Compared with other students in this class I expect to do well*), whereas the lowest means fell into three items. They were item 9 (*Compared with other students in this class, I think I'm a good student*), item 16 (*My study skills are excellent compared with others in this class*), and item 18 (*Compared with other students in this class I think I know a great deal about the subject*).

### *Intrinsic value*

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for intrinsic value

	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.
Item 1	152	4	1	5	2.95	1.209
Item 4	152	4	1	5	3.76	1.144
Item 5	152	4	1	5	3.41	1.164
Item 7	152	4	1	5	<b>2.79</b>	.981
Item 10	152	4	4	1	2.97	1.162
Item 14	152	4	1	5	3.79	1.102
Item 15	152	4	1	5	<b>4.03</b>	.986
Item 17	152	4	1	5	3.07	1.189
Item 21	152	4	1	5	<b>4.11</b>	1.033

The intrinsic value expressed by the students is reported in table 2. It can be seen from the table that item 15 (*I think that what I am learning in this class is useful for me to know*) and item 21 (*Understanding this subject is important to me*) got the highest mean (M = 4.03, and M = 4.11, respectively). Item with the lowest mean was item 7 (M = 2.79).

### *Cognitive strategy*

It can be seen from Table 3 that item 44 (*When reading I try to connect the things I am reading about with what I already know*)

received the highest mean ( $M = 3.50$ ). Other high means of 3.42 and 3.47 belong to items 23 and 31. The item with the lowest mean was item 36 (*I use what I have to learned from old homework assignments and the textbook to do new assignments*) ( $M = 2.74$ ).

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics for cognitive strategy

	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.
Item 23	152	4	1	5	<b>3.42</b>	1.119
Item 24	152	4	1	5	2.95	1.051
Item 26	152	4	1	5	3.01	1.196
Item 28	152	4	1	5	2.77	1.070
Item 29	152	4	1	5	3.09	1.204
Item 30	152	4	1	5	3.38	1.218
Item 31	152	4	1	5	<b>3.47</b>	1.260
Item 34	152	4	1	5	2.89	1.099
Item 36	152	4	1	5	2.74	1.072
Item 39	152	4	1	5	3.03	1.035
Item 41	152	4	1	5	2.91	1.139
Item 42	151	4	1	5	2.66	1.145
Item 44	152	4	1	5	<b>3.50</b>	1.271

#### Self-regulation

It is expressed in table 4 that most of the items were below 3 points. The only item which got over 3 points was item 35 (*Before I begin studying I think about the things I will need to do to learn*). The lowest means were items 33 (*Even when study materials are dull and uninteresting, I keep working until I finish*) and 38 (*I find that when the teacher is talking I think of other things and don't really listen to what is being said*), which got the means of 2.40 and 2.14, respectively.

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics for self-regulation

	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.
Item25	152	4	1	5	2.47	1.053
Item27	152	4	1	5	2.64	1.284
Item32	152	4	1	5	2.79	1.194
Item33	152	4	1	5	2.40	1.147
Item35	152	4	1	5	3.14	1.196
Item37	152	4	1	5	2.82	1.313
Item38	151	4	1	5	2.14	1.092
Item40	152	4	1	5	2.95	1.132
Item43	152	4	1	5	2.86	1.213

#### Test anxiety

Table 5 expresses students' test anxiety. As it is shown on the table, items 12 (*I have uneasy, upset feeling when I take a test*), 20 (*I worry a great deal about tests*) and 22 (*When I take a test I think about how poorly I am doing*) got quite high means ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $M = 3.08$ ,  $M = 3.04$ , respectively).

**Table 5.** Descriptive statistics for test anxiety

	N	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean
Item 3	152	4	1	5	2.78	1.208
Item 12	152	4	1	5	3.11	1.064
Item 20	152	4	1	5	3.08	1.315
Item 22	152	4	1	5	3.04	1.183

## DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTED IMPLICATIONS

#### Students' Self-efficacy

From Table 1, it can be seen that most students expected to do well in class, however the mean was not very high. It reveals that the students do not hold a high confidence in learning English. This can be supported by the result of item 8 which says "I expect to do very well in this class". Moreover, most students do not think they know a great deal about their subject. More surprisingly, the range was from 1 to 5, which means that there are students who do not expect to learn well. This may be related to students' belief on learning English as Horwitz [9] argues that the concept of foreign language learning can be the source of negative outlook on language learning. This also explains why the students feel uncertain about their ability to "do excellent jobs on tasks and problems" assigned for the class and why they lack confidence in whether their skills are excellent or not.

Hence, it is advisable for teachers to improve students' self-efficacy. The more confident a student is in his or her capacity to learn a certain lesson, the greater the probability of success in accomplishing that goal. Apparently, high self-efficacy students are likely to perform better than low self-efficacy students. According to Schunk [10],

motivation is enhanced when students perceive they are making progress in learning. In turn, as students become more skilful, they maintain a sense of self-efficacy for performing well.

#### *Students' intrinsic value*

It is noticed from the result of students' intrinsic value that the students hold a right belief about the important role of English in their study but not at a high rate. Similarly, there are still many students who do not find what they are learning in class useful or important to them. It can be stated that many student are not full aware of the significant role of learning English or they find what is being taught uninteresting to them. They may not be willing to do extra homework or try challenging class activities. They will do what is asked to do with reluctance.

Noticeably, students' beliefs about intrinsic value need to be improved. Teachers should help students to change their misconceptions about intrinsic value, so that they will be able to hold realistic beliefs about language learning, which lead to active attitudes and participation in learning activities. Additionally, intrinsic value refers to the interest and enjoyment that students experience when engaging in an activity [11]. Thus, when students enjoy class tasks, they are intrinsically motivated to do well. It is recommended that teachers create classroom environments which provide students with opportunities to engage in interesting, personally relevant, challenging activities. Teachers can also increase the intrinsic value of their classes by creating an enriching environment and providing opportunities for students to explore their interests.

#### *Students' cognitive strategy and self-regulation*

It is realized that most students do not apply appropriate learning strategies. They may not know about learning strategies or may have difficulty in finding and selecting suitable strategies. Unexpectedly, such commonly used strategies as practising the important facts when studying for a tests or saying the words over and over to remember got poor

attention from the students. Moreover, many students are not active in their self-regulation. They are unwilling to do hard parts in their work or easy to give them up; they do not want to try to learn when they don't like the class.

Learning strategies take a significant role in language learning. They help learners in the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information; they make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations [12]. As it can be seen from the results, most students can use some learning strategies but they fail to make use of many others. They find it difficult in getting main ideas or inferring; they are not well aware of the vital role of practice in language learning. Furthermore, in terms of self-regulation, the students appear not to be so active in controlling themselves in such activities as doing extra homework or facing hard work.

Thus, to encourage students' autonomy, teachers, as facilitators, are suggested to provide students with information about learning strategies, introducing different strategies to them, helping them in choosing appropriate ones through the process of teaching. Yaping [13] suggests giving students a chance to apply the new learning strategies and ask them to evaluate the effectiveness of strategy use. It is also important that a key factor leading to success is for learners to discover for themselves the methods and techniques by which they learn best [14].

#### *Students' test anxiety*

The results on test anxiety revealed that the students are rather anxious when doing tests. They really need support from their teacher since Anxiety seriously affects not only on learners' language performance but also on their further learning process. It is noticed that students need help from their teacher in lowering their test anxiety. This can be solved by giving them guidance and encouragement during their learning process.

#### CONCLUSION

In the paper, the first-year student's autonomy in English learning at Thai Nguyen University

of Technology has been explored. The results show that the students' autonomy is not so positive. Most of students expect to do well in study but they lack confidence and are not active in learning the language. Moreover, they are somewhat unrealistic about their learning. They have difficulty in using effective learning strategies and in self-regulation controlling. Additionally, they experience quite high degree of test anxiety. In order to improve student's autonomy some suggestions have been reported.

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#### TÓM TẮT

#### TÍNH TỰ CHỦ CỦA SINH VIÊN TRONG VIỆC HỌC TIẾNG ANH TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC KỸ THUẬT CÔNG NGHIỆP

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Bài báo trình bày nghiên cứu về khảo sát tính tự chủ của sinh viên năm thứ nhất không chuyên ngữ trong việc học tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Kỹ thuật Công nghiệp. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy tính tự chủ trong việc học tiếng Anh của sinh viên còn hạn chế. Nghiên cứu đưa ra gợi ý cần chú trọng đến tính tự chủ của người học trong quá trình dạy và học tiếng Anh tại trường. Bên cạnh đó, tác giả đưa ra một số giải pháp nhằm khuyến khích tính tự chủ của người học.

**Từ khóa:** *tính tự chủ của người học, chiến lược học, học ngôn ngữ, tự chủ trong học tập*

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