

EFFECT OF LEARNER AUTONOMY ON ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OF NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS

Ho Si Thang Kiet

The University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies; kiet.ho@ufl.udn.vn

Abstract - Learner autonomy (LA) has been considered to be one of the important goals in education. This article investigates the effect of LA on English proficiency (EP) of non-English major students. 635 Vietnamese students from five member universities of the University of Danang completed the questionnaire on LA. The collected data was compared with the scores of their English language course. The results show that there are overall positive and significant correlations between LA and their EP. However, while there are significant correlations between LA and EP among high proficiency learners, such correlations do not exist among low proficiency learners. The results also indicate that LA can predict students' EP. The study suggests that students should be aware of the importance of LA and empowered to take charge of their own learning process to enhance their language proficiency. Also, LA may be used by university administrators to predict learners' academic potential.

Key words - learner autonomy; English proficiency; correlations; predict, learning process.

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, language teaching and learning has shifted its focus from teaching methods to learners as individuals in the teaching and learning process, which was reflected in the development of language teaching methods, learning styles and learner strategies (Hall, 2011). The shift from the teaching process to the learning process with a focus on learners has shaped the concept of learner autonomy, an important feature of language learners who have effective learning strategies (Valadi & Rashidi, 2014). In the globalized world, learner autonomy has become even more important as it has been considered to be one of the important educational goals (Benson and Huang, 2008). Enhancing learner autonomy is therefore a valuable and ideal goal for every educational institution because education is a means to achieve the ultimate goal, not the end means (Valadi & Rashidi, 2014).

Given the importance of learner autonomy in language education, this article investigates the effect of learner autonomy on English proficiency of non-English major students. The article also examines whether learner autonomy can predict their English proficiency.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Concept of learner autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy is not a new element in the history of education. Learner autonomy (hereinafter referred to as LA), especially in the field of foreign language learning, was clearly articulated in Holec's 1979 report for the Council of Europe (Holec, 1981). LA has been defined in different terms in relation to language learning. Various terms are used to refer to LA such as 'self-instruction', 'self-assessment', 'self-education', 'out-of-class learning' or 'distance learning' (Benson, 2001, p.48), but in fact they are not synonymous with the term LA. The above terms mainly describe different ways and

levels of self-study, while the term LA refers to the ability and attitude in learning (Dafei, 2007). Although the terms 'independent learning' and 'self-directed learning' refer to self-study, they are often used as equivalents for LA.

There is a variety of definitions about LA. LA is defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3). This means that learners have "a power or capacity to do something and not a type of conduct, behaviour" (Holec, 1981, p.3) which helps them "to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (Benson, 2001, p.3). Benson and Huang (2008) state that LA is transferred from situations in which learning proceeds independently from teachers and teaching materials (Dickinson, 1987) to the learner's capacity to take charge of one's learning (Holec, 1981). However, Benson (2001) claims that Holec's (1981) definition of LA is not complete as it does not mention the learner's self-management. According to Benson (2001), LA is a multi-dimensional construct that consists of three levels of control over learning: control over learning management, control over cognitive processes and control over learning content. These three levels are inter-dependent because LA implies that the first two levels will cover the decisions relating to learning content (Benson, 2001, p.50). Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012) also claim that LA is the learner's ability to closely manage their own learning process in the classroom or outside and LA in language learning refers to the learner's close management of their language learning goals and methods. In addition, LA is also a social construct which is defined as "the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible, and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as interpersonal empowerment and social transformation" (Jiménez Raya, Lam and Viera, 2007, p.1). Nguyen (2010) has an operational definition of LA which consists of two basic threads of self-initiation and self-regulation. Self-initiation refers to learners' volition and willingness to learn without being forced by other people, while self-regulation involves the metacognitive skills of planning, monitoring, and evaluating (Nguyen, 2010, p.50-51). Nguyen's (2010) operational definition of LA describes the aspects of LA the most specifically; therefore, the present study adopts the concept of LA as a combination of self-initiation and self-regulation.

2.2. Importance of learner autonomy in education

Learner autonomy plays an important role in the learning process. Dafei (2007) claims that LA is one target of learning and one of the most important issues that determines whether a learner can achieve their potential or not.

Little (2007) mentions three reasons accounting for the

importance of LA. Firstly, LA deals with learner's motivation as an autonomous learner is truly motivated to meet his/her learning needs. Secondly, a motivated learner will be likely to study more efficiently and succeed more easily depending on the level of his/her LA. Thirdly, because it is impossible to develop all necessary skills for learners in the language classroom, those who have a higher degree of LA will have more opportunities to develop their communication skills than the others. With these reasons, LA is closely related to effective learning and learners with a higher degree of LA are more likely to succeed than those with a lower degree of LA or without LA (Myartawan, Latief & Suharmanto, 2013).

2.3. *Learner autonomy in Asia*

LA was previously considered to be more appropriate in the Western educational environment than in the Asian one (Lamb, 2004). This assumption comes from the fact that Asian learners are often seen as being more passive and dependent on the teacher and therefore they have limited LA. According to Sakai, Chu, Takagi and Lee (2008), the students from Japan, Taiwan and South Korea wanted their teachers to take more control of the classroom with materials, learning methods, pace of lessons, assignments and assessments. However, these authors claim that this concern has prevented the learners from developing their LA. It is necessary that students be encouraged to take more charge of their learning process in order to enhance their LA. Some researchers claim that some teachers have succeeded in developing LA on Asian learners (Morimoto, 2006; Waikui, 2006).

Compared with learners in other Asian countries, LA of Vietnamese EFL learners is generally still limited due to the fact that the learning environment tends to emphasize the teacher's role in providing knowledge and the learner-centred approach is still peripheral and underdeveloped. However, some researchers express their concern about developing LA for Vietnamese students. For example, Trinh (2005) investigates the development of LA through curriculum adaptation and innovation with task-based learning. Dang (2010) analyzes the situation of teaching English in Vietnam and finds that the co-ordination of the attributes from learning resources, learners, teaching and learning practices plays an important role in developing learners' LA.

In short, LA can be feasible in Asian EFL context as long as EFL teaching and learning practices are geared towards the learner-centred approach in which learners are able to take charge of their own learning process and develop their LA.

2.4. *Relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency in Asia*

Previous studies on English language teaching and learning in Asian countries have shown that there is a close relationship between LA and learners' English Proficiency (hereinafter referred to as EP). Dafei (2007) investigated 129 non-English major students at a university of teacher education in China and found that their EP was positively and significantly correlated to their LA. Sakai & Takagi's (2009) study with 721 students from 16 universities in Japan shows

that there was a significant difference on LA between three groups of students including independent users, independent learners and dependent learners. Myartawan *et al.* (2013) investigated 120 students of English at a state university in Bali and found that the students' LA and EP were closely related. Two other studies with Iranian students also show their speaking and reading skills in English were positively correlated with their LA (Valadi & Rashidi, 2014; Zafarian & Nemati, 2016). Nguyen's (2010) study on LA in English language learning at two universities in Vietnam showed that LA was feasible in Vietnamese EFL context and most aspects of LA were positively and significantly correlated to the learners' EP; however, the learners still need more training on metacognitive skills of planning, monitoring and evaluation in order to develop LA and achieve a higher level of EP.

3. Research method

The study applies the quantitative approach to investigate the effect of LA on EP of non-English major students. The non-English major students were chosen for this study because there has been no research on correlations between learner autonomy and English proficiency of non-English major students in Vietnam. The research sample consists of 635 Vietnamese students from five member universities of the University of Danang including University of Economics, University of Technology, University of Education, University of Technical Education, and College of Information Technology. The majority of participants are at the pre-intermediate English level. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) *What is the effect of learner autonomy on English proficiency of non-English major students?*
- (2) *Is it possible to predict students' English proficiency based on their learner autonomy?*

The study employed the questionnaire on LA (Appendix) as the research instrument, which is based on Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Nguyen (2010). The questionnaire consists of two aspects of LA including students' self-initiation, which includes their in-class and out-of-class activities, and students' self-regulation, which involves their learning strategies of planning, monitoring and evaluation. The questionnaire consists of 25 questions designed on a 5-point Likert scale. The students completed the Vietnamese version of the questionnaire so that they can understand all the questions thoroughly. In order to ensure all the participants' questions in the questionnaire are reliable, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to measure the internal reliability of the questionnaire. The result shows that the Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaire is .747, which is an acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha from 0.70 and above (DeVellis, 2003).

In order to calculate the correlations between LA and EP, the scores of the questionnaire on LA are compared with the students' scores of English language course which reflect the students' overall EP. The students' English scores are classified into four levels of English proficiency as given in Table 1. The four levels of EP include Excellent (8.9%), Good (53.4%), Average (32.3%), and Pass (5.4%). The students of Excellent and Good EP belong to high

proficiency learners and those of Average and Pass EP belong to low proficiency learners.

Table 1. The students' levels of English proficiency

Level of EP	Grading in number	Grading in letter	Number of students	Percentage
Excellent	8.5 - 10	A	57	8.9
Good	7.0 - 8.4	B	339	53.4
Average	5.5 - 6.9	C	205	32.3
Pass	4.0 - 5.4	D	34	5.4
Total			635	100.0

4. Results

To examine whether there is any effect of LA on the learners' EP, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation is performed. The Pearson correlation coefficient, also referred to as the Pearson's r , is a measure of the linear correlation between two variables. It has a value between +1 and -1, where 1 is total positive linear correlation, 0 is no linear correlation, and -1 is total negative linear correlation. The results of the correlations between LA and EP are given in Table 2.

As can be seen in Table 2, there are positive and significant correlations at the 0.01 level ($p < .01$) between EP and the students' self-initiation and self-regulation with $r = .271$ and $r = .257$ respectively. The correlation of self-initiation with EP is higher than self-regulation and the correlations between self-initiation and self-regulation are also statistically significant with $r = .191$, $p < .01$.

Table 2. Correlations between LA and EP

			EP	Self-initiation	Self-regulation
EP		Pearson	1	.271**	.257**
		Sig(2-tailed)		.000	.000
		N	635	635	635
LA	Self-initiation	Pearson	.271**	1	.191**
		Sig(2-tailed)	.000		.000
		N	635	635	635
	Self-regulation	Pearson	.257**	.191**	1
		Sig(2-tailed)	.000	.000	
		N	635	635	635

Notes: ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed); EP = English proficiency; LA = Learner autonomy

Table 3. Correlations between LA and Excellent EP

			Excellent EP	Self-initiation	Self-regulation
Excellent EP		Pearson	1	.358**	.332**
		Sig(2-tailed)		.000	.000
		N	57	57	57
LA	Self-initiation	Pearson	.358**	1	.221**
		Sig(2-tailed)	.000		.000
		N	57	57	57
	Self-regulation	Pearson	.332**	.221**	1
		Sig(2-tailed)	.000	.000	
		N	57	57	57

Notes: ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed); EP = English proficiency; LA = Learner autonomy

In order to see whether there are any differences between LA and the students' four levels of EP (Excellent, Good, Average and Pass), the Pearson Product Moment Correlation is also performed with each level of EP. The results are given in Table 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Table 4. Correlations between LA and Good EP

			Good EP	Self-initiation	Self-regulation
Good EP		Pearson	1	.289**	.277**
		Sig(2-tailed)		.000	.000
		N	339	339	339
LA	Self-initiation	Pearson	.289**	1	.172**
		Sig(2-tailed)	.000		.000
		N	339	339	339
	Self-regulation	Pearson	.277**	.172**	1
		Sig(2-tailed)	.000	.000	
		N	339	339	339

Notes: ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed); EP = English proficiency; LA = Learner autonomy

Table 5. Correlations between LA and Average EP

			Average EP	Self-initiation	Self-regulation
Average EP		Pearson	1	.099	.071
		Sig(2-tailed)		.160	.313
		N	205	205	205
LA	Self-initiation	Pearson	.099	1	.063
		Sig(2-tailed)	.160		.354
		N	205	205	205
	Self-regulation	Pearson	.071	.063	1
		Sig(2-tailed)	.313	.354	
		N	205	205	205

Notes: EP = English proficiency; LA = Learner autonomy

Table 6. Correlations between LA and Pass EP

			Pass EP	Self-initiation	Self-regulation
Pass EP		Pearson	1	.043	.037
		Sig(2-tailed)		.809	.834
		N	34	34	34
LA	Self-initiation	Pearson	.043	1	.031
		Sig(2-tailed)	.809		.768
		N	34	34	34
	Self-regulation	Pearson	.037	.031	1
		Sig(2-tailed)	.834	.768	
		N	34	34	34

Notes: EP = English proficiency; LA = Learner autonomy

As can be seen in Table 3 and 4, there are positive and significant correlations at the 0.01 level ($p < .01$) between LA and EP of high proficiency learners. Specifically, the correlations between EP and self-initiation and self-regulation of the students of Excellent EP are $r = .358$ and $r = .332$ respectively and those for the students of Good EP are $r = .289$ and $r = .277$ respectively. The correlations between self-initiation and self-regulation of the high proficiency learners are also statistically significant with $r = .221$ and $r = .172$ respectively. By contrast, as shown in Table 5 and 6, there are no significant correlations ($p > .01$) between LA and EP of low proficiency learners including students of Average EP and Pass EP.

Furthermore, in order to see whether LA can predict learners' EP, linear regression is performed. Linear Regression is a statistical model used to predict the value of a dependent variable (EP) or a result variable based on the values of at least one independent variable (LA) or the causal variable. Since the regression model analyzes the dependence of a variable on a single variable, this is a

simple linear regression. The results in Table 7 show that the LA coefficient has statistical significance at the 0.05 level ($t = 37.056$, $p < .05$). Therefore, it can be concluded that LA can significantly predict students' EP.

Table 7. Linear Regression between LA and EP

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (constant)	.224	.170		1.315	.021
LA	.924	.025	.827	37.056	.000*

Note: * $p < .05$; LA = Learner autonomy; EP: English proficiency; B= Beta.

5. Discussions

The results of this study show that there are positive and significant correlations between LA and learners' EP as a whole. These results echo those of previous studies (Dafei, 2007; Myartawan et al., 2013; Nguyen, 2010; Sakai & Takagi, 2009; Valadi & Rashidi, 2014; Zafarian & Nemati, 2016), which offer evidence of the overall correlations between LA and EP of Asian EFL learners.

However, the present study has investigated in depth the correlations between two aspects of LA including self-initiation and self-regulation and each level of EP including Excellent, Good, Average and Pass. The results show that there are significant correlations between LA and EP of high proficiency learners (learners of Excellent and Good EP), while no such correlations exist among low proficiency learners (learners of Average and Pass EP). The results also show that the correlations between learners' self-regulation and the levels of EP are always lower than those of their self-initiation. These results imply that high-proficiency learners are highly autonomous learners who are more responsible for their own learning and have better self-management of their learning inside and outside the classroom; therefore, they can adopt more effective learning strategies of planning, monitoring and evaluation to achieve a high level of EP. By contrast, low-proficiency learners are less autonomous learners as they lack self-management and self-regulated learning; therefore, they are more likely to achieve a lower level of EP.

The present study also indicates that LA can significantly predict learners' EP, which reflects some previous studies showing the correlations between LA and learners' language skills (Masita, 2016; Safari & Tabatabaei, 2016; Zafarian and Nemati, 2016). However, the previous studies only indicate the correlations between LA with one individual language skill such as reading, speaking, writing or listening skill, but not with learners' overall EP as the present study did.

6. Conclusions

In today's globalized world, LA has become one of the important goals in education in general and in English language learning in particular. This study confirms previous studies that Asian EFL learners do have LA, that is, LA is feasible in Asian EFL learning context. The study shows that while there are positive and significant correlations between aspects of LA and EP of high

proficiency learners, such correlations do not exist among low proficiency learners. In addition, the study also indicates that LA can predict learners' overall EP. This means that if learners have a high degree of LA, it is very likely that they will achieve a better level of EP. This shows that LA has a great decision on learners' academic achievement.

The results of the study prove to reflect the current EFL learning situation of non-English major students at member universities of the University of Danang. In the author's teaching experience, low-proficiency learners of non-English majors are still dependent a great deal on the teacher's provision of knowledge and consequently their low degree of LA results in a low level of EP. These results suggest some implications for English language teaching and learning. Firstly, it is crucial that EFL learners be informed and aware of the importance of LA to facilitate their language learning process as LA has a positive and significant effect on their EP. The more autonomous a learner is, the higher level of EP he/she can achieve. Secondly, English language teachers should engage EFL learners in a more active learning environment, inside and outside the classroom, where learners can maximize their LA. This means that EFL learners should be empowered to take more charge of their own learning process and develop the ability to control their own learning in order to achieve the ultimate goal of their English learning. Thirdly, as high proficiency learners tend to be more autonomous than low proficiency learners, English language teachers should provide the latter with appropriate scaffolding based on their level of EP so that they can gradually develop LA to improve their level of EP accordingly. Fourthly, as the correlations between learners' self-regulation and EP tends to be lower than those of their self-initiation, it is necessary that EFL learners be equipped with more effective strategies of planning, monitoring, and evaluation in English language learning in order to achieve a higher degree of LA. Last, but not least, as LA can predict learners' overall EP, curriculum designers should develop a strong focus on LA in curriculum innovation and LA may be used by university administrators as one of the important variables to predict learners' academic potential.

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