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ENHANCING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Abstract

This study explores strategies to enhance learner autonomy in English language learning among Vietnamese technical students. In the context of globalization, foreign language proficiency is crucial, yet many students remain reliant on teachers and lack self-directed learning skills. By synthesizing global and local research, the report highlights effective approaches such as technology-based learning, project-based learning, and the use of learning journals. Case studies and data show that fostering autonomy significantly improves motivation, language proficiency, and academic outcomes. The study concludes with practical recommendations for educators and learners to cultivate sustainable, self-regulated learning habits in technical university contexts.

Keywords:

autonomy, technology-based, project-based, learning journal.

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, English has become an indispensable tool, especially for students at technical universities. Proficiency in a foreign language not only supports their studies but also opens up many career opportunities. However, effective language learning requires a high degree of self-discipline and autonomy from learners. Autonomy in learning, particularly in language acquisition, is considered a key factor determining academic success. For students at technical universities, fostering autonomy in English learning not only improves academic performance but also equips them with essential skills to adapt to an international work environment. Nevertheless, in Vietnam, many students remain dependent on teachers and have yet to develop independent learning skills.

This article synthesizes both domestic and international research on methods for enhancing learner autonomy in foreign language learning, focusing especially on technical students learning English. By analyzing and evaluating the effectiveness of these methods, the article aims to offer useful recommendations for teaching and learning in this field.

2. Content

2.1. Overview of global research

2.1.1. Concept and role of autonomy

Learner autonomy in language learning is defined as the ability to self-manage one's learning process, including setting goals, selecting materials, executing study plans, and self-assessment (Holec, 1981). According to Little (1991), autonomy is not merely independent study but also involves collaboration and leveraging available resources like teachers, peers, and learning tools. Benson (2007) highlighted that autonomy helps learners maintain motivation and develop personalized learning strategies—crucial in language learning where success depends not just on grammar knowledge but also on adaptability and creativity.

2.1.2. Learning methods to foster autonomy

2.1.2.1. Technology-based approaches

Benson (2011) noted that digital tools—mobile apps, online platforms, and language-learning software—have promoted learner autonomy. Tools like Duolingo, Memrise, or Quizlet allow students to set their own goals and learn at their own pace. For instance, Duolingo integrates gamification to sustain motivation. Stockwell (2013) emphasized personalized learning systems that tailor content to individual student needs and levels.

2.1.2.2. Project-based learning

Nunan (1997) proposed project-based learning as a method to enhance autonomy by having students conduct research, plan, and present results independently. This method not only improves language use but also fosters time management and teamwork skills.

2.1.2.3. Learning journals

Zimmerman (2002) advocated for learning journals, enabling students to track progress and reflect on strengths and weaknesses. Journaling facilitates self-assessment and strategic adjustments.

2.2.2.4. Evaluating effectiveness

Oxford (2003) found that autonomous learners tend to outperform others and use language more flexibly. For instance, students using vocabulary apps like Anki showed significantly improved retention. Reinders and Balcikanli (2011) confirmed that technology helps students self-regulate and enhances interactive learning—for example, through online forums for global peer exchange.

2.2. Overview of research in Vietnam

2.2.1. Current situation

Studies show that Vietnamese students have limited autonomy in language learning. According to Lê Thị Lan Hương (2017), about 70% of university students rely heavily on teachers for goal-setting and organizing their studies. Many lack time management skills and rarely utilize resources like online libraries, apps, or language exchange forums. This is especially true in technical universities, where major-specific courses take precedence.

A survey by Trần Ngọc Minh (2019) of 500 technical students across three major universities revealed:

- 60% do not have a habit of planning their language learning;
- 55% struggle to find appropriate study materials;
- Only 15% actively use language-learning apps like Duolingo or Memrise.

Nguyễn Thanh Hà (2020) reported that technical students spend less than 3 hours per week on language learning—compared to 8–10 hours by social science students—mainly due to prioritizing major courses. A student from Hanoi University of Science and Technology said:

“I usually wait until I get homework or an exam is near before studying. I don't know how to find vocabulary or grammar resources outside the textbook.”

These insights highlight the pressing need for interventions to improve learner autonomy.

2.2.2. *Applied learning methods*

2.2.2.1. Digital learning resources

Trần Ngọc Minh (2019) observed that platforms like EDX and Coursera improved students' self-learning and time management. In a study with 150 technical students, 75% reported increased confidence in managing time after completing online courses. One 6-week Coursera course on academic writing boosted average writing scores by 1.5/10 points.

2.2.2.2. Soft skills courses

Nguyễn Thanh Hà (2020) found that soft skills training (e.g., goal-setting, self-management) improved English learning autonomy. In a 3-month trial with 200 students, 70% reported developing weekly goal-setting habits. Tools like Trello helped students complete 90% of their weekly plans (up from 50%).

2.2.2.3. Project-based program

Nguyễn Thành Nam (2021) showed that project-based learning enhanced group work, analytical thinking, and time management. In a project requiring 120 students to design and present a technical device in English, 80% reported improved communication confidence. Presentation scores increased from 6.8 to 8.2 (out of 10).

2.2.2.4. Learning journals

Phạm Văn Công (2021) documented the positive impact of learning journals. Among 150 surveyed students, 75% reported improved time management and self-evaluation. Their final exam scores averaged 7.5—25% higher than a control group. One student improved vocabulary test scores from 6.0 to 7.5 after two months of journaling.

2.3. **Recommendations for teachers and students**

Based on the studies above, both educators and learners can apply the following methods to enhance autonomy and achieve better outcomes.

2.3.1. *For teachers*

It is highly recommended that the teachers should:

- **Integrate technology in teaching:** Use platforms like Coursera, EdX, Duolingo, or Quizlet in lessons.
- **Design real-world assignments and projects:** Require students to work in groups, research, and present in English.
- **Guide students in journal writing:** Encourage daily recording of goals, progress, and challenges.
- **Organize soft skills workshops:** Short courses on planning, time management, and goal-setting.

2.3.2. *For students*

On the part of the students, they should:

- **Actively use online learning resources:** Explore online courses tailored to individual schedules and interests
- **Join group projects or language clubs:** Real-life environments boost language application and confidence.
- **Develop personal study plans:** Set weekly or monthly goals (e.g., number of exercises, English books read, listening/speaking practice).
- **Maintain learning journals:** Record daily learning, obstacles, and solutions to track progress and refine strategies.
- **Self-assess regularly:** Use online quizzes or create mini-tests to monitor progress and adjust learning methods.

3. **Conclusion**

Autonomy in foreign language learning has proven to be a fundamental factor in improving learning

outcomes—particularly for technical students in Vietnam who often prioritize core subjects over English. Methods like tech-based learning, project work, and journaling not only develop self-management skills but also increase motivation. These findings demonstrate that autonomous students not only achieve better results but also apply knowledge and skills effectively in real life. This forms a solid foundation for educational institutions to improve teaching approaches and foster sustainable autonomy in students.

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PEDAGOGY IN LANGUAGE TEACHING: PRINCIPLES, METHODS, AND MODERN TRENDS

Abstract

The effectiveness of language teaching depends heavily on sound pedagogical foundations. As