Impact of Time in College on Learner Autonomy: A Comparative Study on English-Major Students with Different Academic Years

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Learner autonomy (LA) is proven to have a significant impact on English learning and teaching. However, almost no research has examined the impact of students' time at university on their LA. Therefore, this study focuses on clarifying the impact of students' time at university on their LA by comparing students' awareness of LA in different academic years. This research stems from the hypothesis that the more students are at university, the more their LA will increase. Designed as a comparative study, the study used a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to collect data from three groups of English majors studying in different academic years, then compared the hypothesis to check whether or not the students' awareness of LA is affected by their time in college. The results show that the hypothesis was partly correct because the juniors and seniors had higher LA than the sophomores. However, the juniors even had higher LA than the seniors. In other words, students' time at university changes their perception of LA. The cause of the difference in LA, besides time at university, was also the difference between high school and higher education, individual differences, or subject matters. Some suggestions profoundly given to help increase LA as well as the quality of teaching are mentioned. The big difference between teaching and learning in high school and university needs to be shortened so that students' transition from high school to university could be smoother. Also, due to the difference between the two levels of study, first-year students need much more attention to avoid being shocked when they change their learning environment.

Keywords: time in college, learner autonomy, a comparative study, English-major students, academic years

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning English has been receiving significant attention from all stakeholders in Vietnam. Many state policies have been proposed to enhance the quality

of English teaching and learning in this country (Thao & Mai, 2020). Undoubtedly, the two most important factors determining the success or failure of education are the teachers and the learners. In particular, learners are the ones who directly decide whether they achieve high results or not in their own learning. Therefore, research on how to help learners learn well has been done a lot in recent years.

One of the noticeable topics related to learners is learner autonomy (LA). According to many researchers, learner independence dramatically affects how well learners can learn foreign languages, especially English (e.g., Holec, 1981; Cotterall, 1995; Trinh, 2005; Benson, 2001; Leenknecht et al., 2021; Little, 1991; Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen, 2016; Thai, 2015; Ngoc & Ishawita, 2012; Ghobain, 2020). LA is proven to help learners increase language knowledge and skills, develop critical thinking, and help them learn effectively. In addition, the factors affecting LA are also studied in many contexts, including Vietnam (e.g., Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen, 2016; Thai, 2015; Ngoc & Ishawita, 2012). However, most of the above studies have overlooked a crucial factor that directly affects one's LA: the time one spends studying at university. In Vietnam, no one can deny that general education and higher education take place completely differently; specifically, in public education, learners are guided in everything and have almost no or very little autonomy in their learning. However, learners will participate in most activities related to their studies at the college/university level, from scheduling to choosing subjects to study. According to the research team's hypothesis, that difference will affect learners' LA, but previous studies have not questioned this. Based on the above assumption, the research team conducted this study at a university in Southwest Vietnam to test whether or not there is a difference between English-major students studying in different academic years, including sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The difference between this study and previous studies in this field will clarify LA and the factors affecting students' LA from an entirely new perspective.

Literature Review

Learner Autonomy and its Dimensions

Learning autonomy has been defined differently by different researchers. Autonomy originated from a word in Greek, auto-nomos. In this case, "auto" means "self" and "nomos" means "rule or law". Auto-nomos is defined as where one gives oneself his/her own law. Originally, auto-nomos is used in politics (Boud, 1981). Later, this concept prevailed in fields such as philosophy, medicine, and psychology to indicate a capacity to justify reasons for doing something (Dearden, 1972). In terms of education, this capacity refers to school autonomy, teacher autonomy, and LA (Dang, 2012). However, this present research centers on LA.

To be able to understand how LA affects learners in particular and the quality of education in general, the definition of LA needs to be clarified. In fact, there have been many previous studies defining LA. LA in language learning first appeared in the survey by Holec (1981), defined as an ability to take charge of one's own learning. Later, this definition was innovated by several scholars. Cotterall (1995) elucidated LA through the lens that considers the degree of learners' capacity to use a set of tactics for controlling their own learning. These tactics include identifying goals, selecting materials and tasks,

planning practice opportunities, and monitoring and self-evaluating learning progress. Those variables are considered the elements of metacognition emphasizing self-regulation in learning progress (Trinh, 2005). Benson (2001) defined LA as the ability of the learners to manage their learning. More specifically, Leenknecht et al. (2021) postulated that LA refers to the capacity to function autonomously in self-directed and self-regulated learning processes. Differently, Little (1991) benefits in his research that LA is not the same as self-instruction, which is considered the situation in which the teacher does not take control of the students' work, whether individually or with other peers during their learning process. The reason is that it is not guaranteed that the students who undertake the self-instruction can achieve a high level of LA. Considering those, Little (1991) defined LA as a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. The controversy over the definition of LA will continue with the emergence of new researchers. However, in this study, LA is defined as the ability of learners to decide for themselves, what they will do in learning a foreign language, from choosing learning materials, how to learn, how to participate in activities in and outside of class, and so on.

Several scholars reflected perspectives on the categorizations of LA in various contexts but in different ways (Nguyen, 2011). In this respect, Benson (1997) is acknowledged as one of the first researchers who suggested three dimensions of autonomy, namely the "technical," "psychological," and "political" dimension. According to the technical perspective, learning skills or strategies are crucial for students to discover learning by themselves, and learner training is a core issue in language instruction. From the psychological perspective, LA is the capacity to take charge of one's own learning. Regarding the political perspective, autonomy focuses on the ability to take control over the learning content and learning process.

Gradually, those three dimensions have been developed by several researchers. Oxford (2003) expanded them into four perspectives, including technical, psychological, sociocultural, and political-critical. Regarding technical, autonomy emphasizes the physical situations in which autonomy is improved by independent work in a self-access center, for example. The psychological perspectives did not fence in learning responsibility, but it extended with the focus on students' emotions and mental characteristics. Regarding sociocultural perspectives, mediation in learning is emphasized. The interaction in mediated learning is crucial for the students in their own learning process. Regarding the political-critical perspective, attention is paid to a medium to gain access to "cultural alternatives and power structures" and "development of an articulate voice amid competing ideologies." Trinh (2005) assumed that autonomous learners possess the ability to take control of the affective, cognitive, social, and meta-cognitive factors. In regard to the affective one, the students should have positive attitudes, willingness, readiness, and self-confidence. For cognitive, he stated that the students should have ability or capacity. With respect to social factors, the students should have the social skills required for cooperation and interaction with others. Concerning meta-cognitive, the students should be aware of planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning process. In this research, LA is

conceptualized from a combination of technical, psychological, social, and political dimensions. Each of them is briefly described in the table below.

Table 1
Dimensions of learner autonomy

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

Related Studies

LA is far from a new subject, which has been received concern in discussion from research since the 1980s (Little, 1999). Although this concept has yet to be thoroughly researched (Nguyen, 2016), the development of research and education in Vietnam does not stand out from this trend. Several studies on LA have been conducted in various educational contexts, especially in higher education.

Nguyen (2016) researched the teachers' belief and their practice on LA in the Vietnam context. All of the participants were lecturers at six public universities around Vietnam. The data from the questionnaire and interview indicated that the teacher acknowledged the value of learning autonomy in language learning and their vital role in enhancing LA. In comparison, their perception of the concept was still driven by social and psychological perspectives. Those emphasized developing how-to-learn skills, self-monitoring and evaluating learning, and learning through cooperative group work. Moreover, the participants stated a lack of trust in the students' ability to take ownership of their learning. They stated that they were considered the decision-maker in selecting and designing classroom activities, and the students were not sufficiently confident in deciding on their own learning process.

Thai (2015) conducted a study to justify the disjunction between students' preference and the learning selections which is available to them. He identified the impact of assessment and its role on LA in teaching English and American literature. Unlike Nguyen (2016) collecting data from the teachers, he collected data from 241 English-major students through a survey. The result indicated that most of the students at the tertiary level lacked readiness for LA. Furthermore, the assessment methods requiring learn-by-heart knowledge negatively influenced LA practice. Besides, it was perhaps not Vietnamese students who lacked LA, but other external factors impacting their ability to learn autonomous demonstration in a classroom setting, which was in relation to the cultural learning values.

Due to the importance of the involvement of both the teacher and the students in doing research, Ngoc and Ishawita (2012) conducted a comparative study with the attendance of 37 Vietnamese teachers of English and 88 pre-intermediate students at two universities. This study explored the students' beliefs, attitudes, and actions toward LA practice but incorporated teachers' views. The data were collected from the responses to a questionnaire. The key finding revealed that much like the ideas of guided autonomy

(Humphreys & Wyatt, 2013). Particularly, teachers in the study expressed that it was crucial to facilitate LA and train learners to take control over their own learning rather than leave it up to the learners entirely. On the contrary, the common opinion was that the students expected the teachers to be knowledgeable guides in learning English. Most students stated that teachers are essential in assisting students in developing LA and responsibilities (Ngoc & Ishawita, 2012). The authors also emphasized that the findings were somewhat contradictory. Learners' replies appeared to strongly support LA practices while also stating that in order to be able to take control over their learning, students needed input from the teacher, such as orientation, guidance, and instruction, to attain the goal of autonomous learning practices. This finding was consistent with the previous research findings, indicating that Vietnamese students would like to engage in autonomous learning practices but prefer to receive advice and orientation from teachers on how to do so efficiently. The authors implied that a lack of confidence hampers autonomous learning since participants were susceptible to original ideologies of LA and learner-centeredness.

As mentioned, although research on LA has been done quite a lot in the world and the context of Vietnam, there seems to be no research focused on exploiting the impact of external factors on one's LA. Therefore, future studies need to clarify the impact of those factors on LA. From there, this field of study will be unpacked more clearly, helping to propose implications for the development of students' LA. With a clear awareness of the importance of studying the above problem, the research team focused on understanding and explaining the impact of students' time in college on their LA. As a consequence, this study addressed the question: "Is there any significant difference in LA of English-major students made during their time at university?"

METHOD

Design

This study combined qualitative and quantitative methods with a questionnaire and seven semi-structured interviews to collect data from English-major students. Specifically, a questionnaire consisting of 18 closed-ended questions on a 5-point Likert scale focused on measuring students' perceptions of their LA was used. Quantitative data obtained from a large number of participants provided an overview of the students' perceptions of their LA. At the same time, with these data, the research team could use them to compare to find out the similarities and differences in the perception of the students with different backgrounds to answer the research question. Next, the qualitative data from the interviews would go into detail to explain, supplement and clarify the quantitative results that had been analyzed previously. With this design, the data would have depth and breadth to help the research generalize and detail the research results. This made research highly valuable in the field.

Participants

All participants are English majors studying at a higher education institution in Southwest Vietnam. Specifically, there are a total of 199 students. Among them, 75 students are sophomores, 74 are juniors, and the rest are 50 seniors. With the aim of the study to examine how studying in a university environment affects students' LA, all

students need to have a certain experience in this environment. Therefore, first-year students were not selected to participate in this study.

After the above 199 students completed the survey, the research team analyzed quantitative data to select interviewees according to the following criteria. First, two students represented each course in participating in the interviews. Secondly, in each course, it was necessary to select a student with the smallest mean score corresponding to the person with the lowest level of LA and the person with the highest level of LA with the highest mean score. As so, a total of six students participated in the interview. These six students were called by aliases to avoid revealing their personal information. The information of the interviewees was manifested below.

Table 2
Interviewees

Names	Academic year	Mean scores
Olivia	Sophomore	2.00
Emma	Sophomore	4.90
Liam	Junior	2.15
Ava	Junior	5.00
Noah	Senior	2.60
Lucas	Senior	5.00

Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaire

The first data collection instrument used in this study was a questionnaire with 18 closed-ended questions. This tool was developed by the authors through references from previous studies on LA (e.g., Holec, 1981; Cotterall, 1995; Trinh, 2005; Benson, 2001; Leenknecht et al., 2021; Little, 1991; Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen, 2016; Thai, 2015; Ngoc & Ishawita, 2012). To avoid respondents not understanding the meaning of the questions, the authors used both English and Vietnamese, the native language of the respondents. In addition, the following steps have been taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. For validity, the team contacted researchers specializing in LA to ask for opinions on the topic. The purpose of listening to these researchers is to add and remove items to make the questionnaire more valid. For reliability, the authors conducted a pilot study with the participation of 30 students majoring in the same program. The data obtained from the pilot study were analyzed by a Scale test to find Cronbach's alpha. With the obtained results, the research team is completely confident about the reliability of the questionnaire. Therefore, the questionnaire was then used in the formal study.

Semi-structured Interviews

The second data collection tool was semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected participants. While questionnaires helped the research team collect data with a large sample, semi-structured interviews helped collect detailed data to explain the research issues. Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the questionnaire data were analyzed. Therefore, the research team did not ask the main question related to the

students' perception of their LA only. Still, they also elicited some additional questions to gauge insight answers. Similar to testing the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, the research team conducted a pilot study to ensure the above two aspects of the interview part. Specifically, the research did it with three English majors to test whether or not the interview questions were easy to understand. If the interview question were too complex, leading to ambiguity, the research team would adjust according to the pilot interviewees' suggestions. Besides, some sub-questions were added to the protocol to find more significant data. The questions are open-ended, without putting pressure on the interviewees or directing them to answer according to the interviewers' intentions. Besides, before meeting and interviewing interviewees, the research team assumed the answers that interviewees could give to draw a branching mind map. From there, the research team partly built scenarios about the interview to operate them as effectively as possible. However, sometimes the interviewees' answers could be unrelated to the research topic, so the interviewers' experience was said to be an essential quality. The current research team was utterly confident because they had many years of doing research with the use of semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the research team discussed and agreed that when interviewees' answers are unrelated to the topic, interviewers would help them come back to the main issue skillfully without making them lose their interest in speaking. Each interview lasted from 90 to 120 minutes, and the communication was entirely in Vietnamese to help interviewers and interviewees become more confident in their talks.

Data Analysis

This study had two main types of data: quantitative from questionnaires and qualitative from semi-structured interviews. The data analysis also followed the order of data collection. In other words, quantitative data were analyzed before qualitative ones were processed. For quantitative data analysis, the research team used SPSS. Specifically, the research team used One-Way ANOVA to compare and find differences in the perception of LA of three student groups, including sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The difference was considered significant when the p-value was less than 0.05.

After analyzing the quantitative data, the research team collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews, as mentioned above. Qualitative data were analyzed using the content analysis method. In other words, similar ideas related to a specific content would be grouped together for analysis. The analysis steps were as follows. First, the research team reread the transcripts of the interviews to familiarize themselves with the data and, simultaneously, get the gist of each interviewee. Then, the team members worked independently to analyze the data. Each team member would analyze all transcripts before the next meeting took place. After a month of independent analysis, the team regrouped and read the analyses. In this meeting, each member would compare the analysis of other members with their own to find similarities and differences. Similarities would be retained for this paper. For the points of analysis that were not similar, the team would conduct a discussion with the participation of an analyst with many years of experience in qualitative research. After discussing with the experts, the team considered, adjusted, and contacted the participants again to clarify the issue.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 3 displays the test results on the questionnaire to see whether there is any significant difference among the three groups of students related to their learner autonomy.

Table 3
The comparison among the students with different academic years

		N	Mean	SD	SE	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max	F	p
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound				
I can identify my strengths in learning English.	Sophomore	75	3.53	.66	.08	3.38	3.69	2.00	5	3.45	.03
	Junior	74	3.86	.88	.10	3.66	4.07	1.00	5		
	Senior	50	3.76	.80	.11	3.53	3.99	2.00	5		
	Total	199	3.71	.79	.06	3.60	3.82	1.00	5		
I can identify my weak points in learning English.	Sophomore	75	3.88	.72	.08	3.72	4.04	2.00	5	.97	.38
	Junior	74	4.05	.89	.10	3.85	4.26	1.00	5		
	Senior	50	3.94	.65	.09	3.75	4.13	2.00	5		
	Total	199	3.96	.77	.06	3.85	4.07	1.00	5		
I can decide what to study next in my English course.	Sophomore	75	3.47	.72	.08	3.30	3.63	2.00	5	4.11	.02
	Junior	74	3.82	.85	.10	3.63	4.02	2.00	5		
	Senior	50	3.78	.89	.13	3.53	4.03	2.00	5		
	Total	199	3.68	.83	.06	3.56	3.79	2.00	5		
I can make my own study schedule.	Sophomore	75	3.48	.78	.09	3.30	3.66	2.00	5	2.11	.12
	Junior	74	3.72	.91	.11	3.50	3.93	1.00	5		
	Senior	50	3.78	1.00	.14	3.50	4.06	1.00	5		
	Total	199	3.64	.89	.06	3.52	3.77	1.00	5		
I can define my own learning goals.	Sophomore	75	3.59	.68	.08	3.43	3.74	2.00	5	2.59	.08
	Junior	74	3.89	.89	.10	3.69	4.10	2.00	5		
	Senior	50	3.68	.96	.14	3.41	3.95	1.00	5		
	Total	199	3.72	.84	.06	3.61	3.84	1.00	5		
I can suggest learning activities in my class.	Sophomore	75	3.11	.80	.09	2.92	3.29	1.00	5	7.57	.00
	Junior	74	3.62	.96	.11	3.40	3.84	1.00	5		
	Senior	50	3.56	.81	.12	3.33	3.79	1.00	5		
	Total	199	3.41	.89	.06	3.29	3.54	1.00	5		
I can solve the problems that occur during my study.	Sophomore	75	3.23	.83	.10	3.04	3.42	1.00	5	3.61	.03
	Junior	74	3.61	.90	.11	3.40	3.82	1.00	5		
	Senior	50	3.46	.89	.13	3.21	3.71	1.00	5		
	Total	199	3.43	.88	.06	3.30	3.55	1.00	5		
I was able to complete the task on my own without detailed instructions from the instructor.	Sophomore	75	2.76	.79	.09	2.58	2.94	1.00	5	6.75	.00
	Junior	74	3.26	1.14	.13	2.99	3.52	1.00	5		
	Senior	50	3.32	.98	.14	3.04	3.60	1.00	5		
	Total	199	3.09	1.00	.07	2.95	3.23	1.00	5		
I can prevent adverse effects on my English learning by myself.	Sophomore	75	3.17	.81	.09	2.99	3.36	2.00	5	1.87	.16
	Junior	74	3.47	1.05	.12	3.23	3.72	1.00	5		
	Senior	50	3.24	1.10	.16	2.93	3.55	1.00	5		
	Total	199	3.30	.98	.07	3.16	3.44	1.00	5		
I can evaluate what I have learned.	Sophomore	75	3.41	.77	.09	3.24	3.59	2.00	5	2.25	.11
	Junior	74	3.72	.99	.12	3.49	3.94	1.00	5		
	Senior	50	3.60	.86	.12	3.36	3.84	1.00	5		

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	Total	199	3.57	.88	.06	3.45	3.70	1.00	5		
I can study on my own without a teacher.	Sophomore	75	2.84	.95	.11	2.62	3.06	1.00	5		
	Junior	74	3.15	1.19	.14	2.87	3.42	1.00	5	3.64	.03
	Senior	50	3.34	.98	.14	3.06	3.62	1.00	5		
	Total	199	3.08	1.07	.08	2.93	3.23	1.00	5		
I like to study on my own outside of the classroom.	Sophomore	75	3.47	.83	.10	3.28	3.66	2.00	5		
	Junior	74	3.91	1.00	.12	3.67	4.14	1.00	5	5.54	.01
	Senior	50	3.50	.74	.10	3.29	3.71	2.00	5		
	Total	199	3.64	.89	.06	3.51	3.76	1.00	5		
I prefer to find resources other than those provided by the instructor.	Sophomore	75	3.59	.86	.10	3.39	3.78	2.00	5		
	Junior	74	3.81	.89	.10	3.61	4.02	1.00	5	1.42	.25
	Senior	50	3.62	.83	.12	3.38	3.86	1.00	5		
	Total	199	3.68	.86	.06	3.56	3.80	1.00	5		
I want to have choices in my learning style.	Sophomore	75	3.87	.78	.09	3.69	4.05	2.00	5		
	Junior	74	4.08	.75	.09	3.91	4.26	1.00	5	2.24	.11
	Senior	50	3.82	.75	.11	3.61	4.03	2.00	5		
	Total	199	3.93	.77	.05	3.83	4.04	1.00	5		
I want to be involved in deciding my learning activities in class.	Sophomore	75	3.59	.76	.09	3.41	3.76	2.00	5		
	Junior	74	3.85	.75	.09	3.68	4.03	2.00	5	2.16	.12
	Senior	50	3.74	.85	.12	3.50	3.98	2.00	5		
	Total	199	3.72	.78	.06	3.61	3.83	2.00	5		
I would like to be involved in deciding my study topics in class.	Sophomore	75	3.60	.81	.09	3.41	3.79	2.00	5		
	Junior	74	3.91	.81	.10	3.72	4.09	2.00	5	2.71	.07
	Senior	50	3.78	.79	.11	3.56	4.00	2.00	5		
	Total	199	3.76	.81	.06	3.65	3.87	2.00	5		
I would like to be involved in deciding my academic goals in class.	Sophomore	75	3.59	.86	.10	3.39	3.78	1.00	5		
	Junior	74	3.82	.94	.11	3.61	4.04	1.00	5	1.31	.27
	Senior	50	3.70	.89	.13	3.45	3.95	2.00	5		
	Total	199	3.70	.90	.06	3.58	3.83	1.00	5		
I want to be given exercises that I can choose to do.	Sophomore	75	3.60	.77	.09	3.42	3.78	2.00	5		
	Junior	74	4.03	.83	.10	3.84	4.22	1.00	5	5.35	.01
	Senior	50	3.86	.81	.11	3.63	4.09	2.00	5		
	Total	199	3.82	.82	.06	3.71	3.94	1.00	5		
Learner Autonomy	Sophomore	75	3.48	.58	.07	3.35	3.61	2.00	4.90		
	Junior	74	3.80	.66	.08	3.64	3.95	2.15	5.00	5.14	.01
	Senior	50	3.66	.56	.08	3.50	3.82	2.60	5.00		
	Total	199	3.64	.62	.04	3.56	3.73	2.00	5.00		

Based on the results in Table 3, there was a significant difference among the students (p=.01). Particularly, the sophomores perceived themselves to have the lowest level of LA (M=3.48), followed by the seniors (M=3.66) and the juniors (M=3.80). The results confirm that time spent studying at university had an impact on the students' LA. Compared to sophomores, juniors and seniors had a higher level of LA. This result is relatively similar to what the team hypothesized. However, the research team could not conclude that the longer the students spent studying at university, the higher level of LA they would achieve because the level of LA of juniors (M=3.80) was higher than that of seniors (M=3.66).

Of the 18 items in the questionnaire, approximately half of the items had significant differences in the self-perceived level of LA of the three-course students (p<.05). Firstly, there was a difference in recognizing their own strengths when learning English

(M=3.53; M=3.86; M=3.76; p=.03 <.05). It can be seen that sophomores did not understand their strengths when learning English, like what juniors and seniors could do. This was also relatively understandable when sophomores were still needing to be more experienced to define their strengths, while juniors and seniors had a longer time understanding what they could do well.

Although there were differences in the evaluation of their own strengths, it was interesting to indicate no significant difference between the students' perceptions of their weaknesses (p=.38). Similar to self-perceived strengths, the order of mean scores would be the highest for juniors (M=4.05), followed by seniors (M=3.94) and sophomores (M=3.88). In the interview, students also clarified this issue. Specifically, Olivia and Lucas said,

> "Although I have not had enough time to realize my greatest strength when learning English, I am quite weak in listening and speaking skills because, in high school, these two skills were not much focused …" (Olivia)

> "Right from my freshman year of college, I knew very well what my weaknesses were. To be honest, the lack of listening and speaking practice in high school made it quite difficult for me to study in college. Therefore, I know very well that I am not good at these two skills when learning English…" (Lucas)

The fact that Vietnamese students are not confident in their listening and speaking skills is no longer a new topic in related research in this context. According to Thao and Mai (2022), the reform but not uniformity among educational levels has caused some critical problems—for example, students' English listening and speaking skills. Although there have been many reforms in communication-oriented teaching to help high school students become better at listening and speaking English, learning assessment is still heavy on reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary (Hoa & Mai, 2016). Therefore, to ensure that high school students have enough or high scores to graduate and enter university, English high school teachers continue to focus on teaching reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary (Pham & Bui, 2019). As a result, students' listening and speaking skills when entering university are often weaker than other skills. Therefore, while sophomores might not have appreciated their strengths properly after only a year in college, they, as well as juniors and seniors, could easily recognize their weaknesses, namely their English listening and speaking skills.

The second significant difference between groups of students was their ability to decide what to study next (p=.02 <.05). Specifically, sophomores received the lowest mean score (M=3.53), followed by seniors (M=3.76) and juniors (M=3.82). As can be seen, juniors and seniors were likely to know what they should learn next better than sophomores because they somewhat understood their strengths and weaknesses. Meanwhile, despite knowing their weaknesses, sophomores still needed to understand their strengths fully. Therefore, they were not confident in choosing what to study next. During the interviews, Emma and Ava confirmed the above point as follows,

> "Determining what to learn next required me to think a lot about my strengths and weaknesses. Although I know myself quite well, choosing which subject to study next is really not easy…" (Emma)

> "Nowadays, I find it easier to choose which subjects to study and when. This was quite easy because I understood what I needed and wanted next. Compared to my first year at university, I can now make decisions much easier…" (Ava)

In Ava's share, there is a very remarkable point that is comparing herself now and when Ava's first year at university. Specifically, at present, Ava's LA had increased a lot compared to the time when she first started studying at university. Therefore, it is safe to say that the ability to decide what to study next, an aspect of LA, was significantly influenced by the time students spent studying at university.

The next difference related to the way students want to learn presented in two items, including "I can suggest learning activities in my class" and "I want to be given exercises that I can choose to do" (p) <.05). Specifically, juniors and seniors found themselves able to recommend classroom learning activities better than what sophomores could do. The difference between high school and college learning can be a significant factor in the likelihood of giving suggestions about learning activities in the classroom. To give sound recommendations, students need to know how to study at the university level. With sophomores, they have not had enough time to understand this. Therefore, suggesting personal opinions for teachers' design of learning activities seems a bit ambitious. Unlike sophomores, juniors and seniors have had specific experiences during their time at university. Since then, they have more confidence in themselves and can assess which activities are appropriate for their learning. In the interview, Liam said,

> "When I was in high school, it was often considered disrespectful to the teacher to comment on how to teach. Therefore, I never dared to comment because that was not good at all. I am used to that. So when I went to university, I had no intention of commenting on their teaching for the reason I just mentioned…" (Liam)

Vietnamese students are taught to respect adults and not disobey them, especially their teachers (Nguyen, 2007; Tran et al., 2022). In the case of young people who defy adults and point out the mistakes of adults, it is often considered disrespectful. Therefore, Vietnamese high school students tend to be passive learners, making little comments about their teachers' teaching methods (Tran, 2013). Gradually this becomes their habit and is difficult to correct if the environment does not change. Therefore, sophomores were people still strongly influenced by their time at high school, so they still kept that habit.

Lucas further elaborated on the ability to suggest class activities as follows,

> "After working with many teachers, I know many different teaching and learning methods. Many methods are great, but some do not seem to work for me. Therefore, I will give feedback directly to the teacher on an activity I feel is not

good. Fortunately, in the university environment, most of the teachers are very open-minded…" (Lucas)

Unlike Liam's excerpt, having more time to study at university has gradually given Lucas, in particular, and learners, in general, more confidence. They get used to an environment where learners have the right to share their views and opinions, even if it is about the teacher's way of teaching (Do Ba et al., 2017). Besides, university teachers are also more open-minded, according to Lucas. In Vietnam, lecturers need to have at least a master's degree, most of which are masters who have studied abroad. As a result, they may have absorbed more open cultures from the West. Therefore, they also have somewhat different views from teachers at the high school level (Nguyen et al., 2018). With more time working with such instructors, juniors and seniors might also gradually become more comfortable in the way they could share their opinions.

Regarding problem-solving skills, sophomores also showed less confidence in themselves than juniors and seniors perceived them to be (p=.03 <.05). Specifically, the highest mean score was for juniors (M=3.61), followed by seniors (M=3.46) and sophomores (M=3.23). In addition to less time and experience at the university level, most sophomores were also younger than juniors and seniors. Those things did not give sophomores enough confidence to solve their problems during the learning process. Emma explained,

> "I do not have much experience, so I am not very confident in my problem-solving skills. Once I got a mis-graded score from a teacher, but I did not dare say it out loud for fear of making her angry. But in the end, my friend advised me to tell the teacher so she could double-check. Through that time, I became much braver…" (Emma)

Different from Emma, Ava insisted that studying at university for a long time would help students' problem-solving skills better. Specifically, Ava said,

> "Different from studying in high school when everything would be taken care of by a teacher, university students have to have a sense of self-care. That helps students become more independent…" (Ava)

The university environment is very suitable for students to become more independent as it requires students to personalize everything to find a way of life that works for them (Holdsworth, 2009; Cobban, 2022). Therefore, the longer students stay in the university environment, the more independent they become and know how to solve their own problems. Thus, the difference between the students was understandable.

The following two items with significant differences included "I can complete the task on my own without detailed instructions from the instructor" and "I can study on my own without a teacher" (p<.05). Both items mean that students can learn on their own without too much support from their teacher. The order, by mean scores, would be seniors, juniors, and sophomores for the last. This shows that seniors were most confident in their ability to learn without the help of a teacher. Noah and Lucas explained,

"The final year subjects include dissertations or mini theses, which require students to study independently rather than go to class to meet their teacher. Therefore, I need to learn a lot on my own. However, I do not feel too serious about self-study because the nature of these subjects is like that. On the contrary, I am quite satisfied with my graduation thesis…" (Lucas)

"The final year at university does not require me to go to class too often. I just need to focus on finishing my thesis. Although I have the support of my supervisor, most of it is self-study and self-exploration…" (Noah)

Differently, sophomores still needed the help of teachers in their studies. Emma said,

"I think right now I am not really confident to be able to study on my own without the guidance of my teacher. The subjects are very different from what was learned in high school. Therefore, the lack of instructor support would leave me at a loss for what to do. However, I think it is possible to self-study at the university level because I heard many seniors said that there would be subjects requiring students to study on their own…" (Emma)

Self-study without teacher intervention will be related to the nature of the subject. There are many specialized subjects, and students will find it difficult to self-study and self-understand. Therefore, for complex subjects, students need to have the support of teachers, and these subjects are usually placed in the second and third years of university. After completing these subjects, students will have time to do research in the final year. With the knowledge of previous years, students find themselves a favorite topic for further study by writing a thesis or mini thesis. With theses and mini ones, students mostly self-study under the support of their supervisor (Bayona-Oré, 2021). However, the nature of the research is to be done by students. Therefore, the ability to self-study without the support of the teacher would thrive most in seniors.

Students also showed differences in LA concerning their preference for self-study outside the classroom (p=.01<.05). Interestingly, juniors had the highest mean score (M=3.91). Otherwise, sophomores (M=3.47) and seniors (M=3.50) had almost equal mean scores. In the interview, Ava explained the reason juniors might prefer to study outside the classroom as follows,

"I prefer to study outside the classroom. In addition to going to class at regular times, I want to spend time for myself to learn and discover new things. Besides, I feel that self-study outside is more effective than learning in class. Although teachers teach very well, I think it is difficult for them to teach in-depth things about the subject with little time in class. Therefore, it is necessary to self-study what I think needs to be better understood…" (Emma)

Class time in Vietnam often lasts from 45 to 50 minutes. Therefore, it is almost impossible for the lecturer to convey everything to the students about the subject, especially academic knowledge (Hiep, 2007; Tran & Tanemaru, 2020). Hence, students need to self-study outside to acquire deep knowledge about subjects they are challenging to study.

Olivia explained why sophomores still thought classroom learning was somewhat more effective as follows,

> "I want to learn more in class with the support of the lecturer. I feel like I am still weak in many things. Therefore, with the instructor's support, I think I will progress faster…" (Olivia)

The role of the teacher is always vital in the development of knowledge and skills of students (Peredrienko et al., 2020), especially for those who are not good enough and need support from their teachers. Therefore, for sophomores, confidence in their knowledge and skills was not high, so they still needed the help of instructors.

The interesting result was that seniors felt more interested in learning in class than studying outside of class on their own. Lucas explained,

> "Honestly, during my thesis work, I felt quite lonely when I did not have much time to see my friends. While I understand that I need to focus on completing my thesis, I also realize that nearing graduation will mean parting with friends and teachers. Therefore, I feel a bit short of breath when I think about it…" (Lucas)

In addition to the literary elements, participating in university studies also helps students build various relationships, such as friendships, student-teacher relationships, and so on (Abel & Deitz, 2014). Therefore, the farewell after graduation would somewhat affect the psychology of seniors. Specifically, they would like to go to class more to spend time with friends and teachers.

In summary, the data obtained from the interviews are similar and complementary to the results of the quantitative data. Most of the results show that after getting used to studying at university, the students were more confident in their LA. Second- and third-year students were less affected by the difference between high school and college. This made them more self-conscious about self-study than first-year students, who were still unfamiliar to the changes related to their learning environments. In addition, the elements of the arrangement of modules in the curriculum also contributed to the difference between groups of students. Besides, psychological factors and relationships built at different times significantly affected the students' self-perceived LA. Research findings are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4
Research findings

Aspects of learner autonomy	Whether time at university affects students' learner autonomy		Order of mean scores
	Yes	No	
Self-identifying strengths	X		Ju>Se>So
Self-identifying weaknesses		X	
Self-deciding what to study next	X		Ju>Se>So
Self-scheduling own study		X	
Self-defining learning goals		X	
Suggesting learning activities	X		Ju=Se>So
Solving problems	X		Ju>Se>So
Completing tasks without detailed instructions from the instructor	X		Ju=Se>So
Self-preventing adverse effects in learning process		X	
Self-evaluating what learned		X	
Self-studying without a teacher	X		Se>Ju>So
Self-studying outside of the classroom	X		Ju>Se=So
Prefering to find resources other than those provided by the instructor		X	
Making choices in learning style		X	
Deciding what learning activities taught		X	
Deciding topics in class		X	
Deciding academic goals		X	
Choosing given exercises	X		Ju>Se>So
So=Sophomore; Ju=Junior; Se=Senior			

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to examine the impact of the time English-major students at university had on their LA. Designed as a comparative study, data obtained from three groups of students, including 75 sophomores, 74 juniors, and 50 seniors, on LA were compared, and conclusions were drawn about the impact of time at university on LA. The data collection instruments included an 18-item questionnaire and six semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected interviewees. Research results partly supported the hypothesis that time studying at university has a considerable impact on LA. In other words, the three groups of students had different perceptions of LA. The results mostly showed that sophomores did not have as much LA as juniors and seniors. In addition to the main reason that the time studying at university affected their LA, the study also showed the influence of the way of learning at high school, too different from the practice of learning at university. Additionally, factors such as subject matters, teachers' teaching styles, and individual differences caused the differences in the students' LA.

Based on the findings, the massive difference between high school and university education has greatly affected students' LA. It takes a long time for learners to change and adapt to the university environment. This may affect learning outcomes as well as the quality of education in Vietnam. Therefore, education reform is necessary,

significantly shortening the difference between general and higher education. The fact that learners can develop LA right at the high school level will help them get used to teaching and learning at university faster. Besides, research also shows that in the first year at university, students need a lot of support from teachers. Therefore, support measures during these years need to be put in place to help students not get lost in their studies. Moreover, students can completely self-study subjects that are not too complicated and academic; most of the time in class should be spent on intricate knowledge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has partly answered the research question about the impact of time studying at university on students' self-perceived LA. However, the research results are somewhat not convincing with three groups of students at different academic years. Therefore, in order to clarify the research problem, a longitudinal study for a single group of students is worth-doing. With the results collected once a year for that group of students, the study will show the change in the students' self-perceived LA from year to year. That will be a more convincing basis for affirming how studying in a university environment will affect LA over time. At the same time, research on factors affecting LA will also bring significant results. These studies on the factors affecting LA will help higher education institutions devise effective measures to develop students' LA, an essential part of creating success in their studies. When these studies are done, they enrich the literature on this field, building a more prominent data source that helps clarify the research topic.

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