

TESOL-MAJOR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES ON GROUP AUTONOMY AT DONG THAP UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

For decades, researchers around the world have expressed concern about group autonomy outside the classroom. However, this topic has received little attention in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. To address this gap, a study was conducted with 107 first-year TESOL-major students in the Foreign Languages Faculty at Dong Thap University. They were invited to complete a set of questionnaires to explore their perceptions and practices regarding group autonomy behind class. The findings revealed that the majority of students understood the importance and role of group autonomy in their learning process. However, the results also indicated that just half of them could learn autonomously without teacher requirements, and group work frequency was quite low. This study provides valuable insights into the literature on autonomous learning in the local context.

Keywords: *Group autonomy, perception, practice, TESOL-major students.*

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NHẬN THỨC VÀ VIỆC THỰC HIỆN TỰ HỌC NHÓM CỦA SINH VIÊN SƯ PHẠM TIẾNG ANH, TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC ĐỒNG THÁP

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Tóm tắt

Tự học nhóm ngoài giờ học trên lớp đang được các nhà khoa học trên thế giới quan tâm. Tuy nhiên, vấn đề này vẫn còn ít được nghiên cứu ở Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long, Việt Nam. Do đó, nghiên cứu này được thực hiện với 107 sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành Sư phạm tiếng Anh để tìm hiểu nhận thức và việc thực hiện tự học nhóm của các em bên ngoài lớp học thông qua việc trả lời phiếu khảo sát. Kết quả cho thấy đa số sinh viên có nhận thức tích cực về tầm quan trọng cũng như vai trò của tự học nhóm trong quá trình học đại học. Tuy nhiên, khi hỏi về thực tế việc tự học nhóm, kết quả cho thấy phần lớn các em học nhóm để giải quyết các bài tập giảng viên giao. Chỉ gần phân nửa là tự học nhóm không phải để làm các nhiệm vụ giảng viên yêu cầu. Bên cạnh đó, việc học nhóm của các em cũng không diễn ra đều đặn. Nghiên cứu này góp phần vào cơ sở lý luận của lĩnh vực tự chủ học tập của sinh viên, và đặc biệt mang tính ngữ cảnh địa phương.

Từ khóa: Nhận thức, sinh viên Sư phạm tiếng Anh, thực hành, tự học nhóm.

1. Introduction

The concept of learner autonomy (LA) has remained a popular topic in language learning, with researchers examining this field in various global locales. These scholars have explored definitions, dimensions of LA, as well as EFL teachers' and students' perceptions and practices regarding LA (e.g., Holec, 1981; Chan et al., 2002; Benson, 2006; Borg, 2006; Balcikanli, 2010; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a; Joshi, 2011; Dang, 2012; Le, 2013; Talley, 2014; Keuk & Heng, 2016; Haji-Othman & Wood, 2016; Tapinta, 2016; Alhaysony, 2016; Nguyen, 2016; Dogan & Mirici, 2017; Le, 2019; Tuan, 2021; Al-husban & Tawalbeh, 2023). In the past five years, some studies have focused on project work, collaboration, and cooperation via task-based learning and teacher supervision to enhance LA skills in classroom language learning (e.g., Lynch & Orr, 2016; Nguyen, 2017; Feick, 2018; Lin, 2019; Yasmin & Naseem, 2019; Chowdhury, 2021; Dang & Nguyen, 2023). However, there has been limited exploration of teamwork without teacher management for developing EFL students' LA abilities outside the classroom, particularly at Dong Thap University, a rural region in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam. Therefore, this research aims to investigate first-year English language Teacher Education program students' perceptions of the significance and role of group work in the LA process and their extracurricular teamwork practices. The findings of this study will contribute to the literature review of this field.

2. Literature review

2.1. Concept of group autonomy

In the realm of independent learning, the term "autonomy" often refers to a learner's ability to take charge of their own education (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981). Recently, scholars have proposed a socially-situated interpretation of autonomy, suggesting that learning is a collaborative process that involves working with instructors and peers to achieve common goals. This perspective acknowledges the interdependence of learners, who are held accountable for their contributions within the social context while also collaborating with others in the group to make decisions. Little (2000, 2007) has argued that learners' ability to participate in social interactions is crucial to their development of autonomy. Additionally, according to Oxford (2003), learner autonomy includes a sociocultural component that emphasizes

social interaction in shaping both language growth and cognition for the learners. However, there is a lack of early research on how learners interact and collaborate. This study seeks to explore how collaboration can promote interdependence among learners in group autonomy.

2.2. The importance of collaboration in group autonomy

According to Chowdhury (2021), collaboration is a learner-centered approach and enhances students' LA ability in the English Language Teaching context. In recent decades, early studies have indicated the effectiveness of the collaborative learning approach with learners' accomplishment, attempt, endurance, and ambition (e.g., Slavin, 1980; Webb & Palinscar, 1996; Barron, 2000; Johnson et al., 2007). In addition, collaboration develops students' learning in depth and involves them in social communication with high quality (Visschers-Pleijers et al., 2006). Moreover, Linton et al. (2014) showed that learners who worked in groups could obtain more achievement than ones studying independently. Furthermore, Scager et al. (2016) found that autonomy was an element of devotion to the validity of teamwork. Their findings demonstrate that autonomy can boost the success of group work, only when students have their highly optimistic interconnection. More importantly, Feri and Erlinda (2014) posited that collaboration in learning a language is one of the best modes to construct learners' LA to grow their language perception. In the same vein, Lynch and Orr (2016) emphasized the relationship and importance between group work and autonomous learning. Their research results proved that teamwork could help learners promote their LA ability. Furthermore, Palfreyman (2018) claims that LA has been associated with teamwork. Finally, Yasmin and Naseem (2019, p. 2) think that "learning through collaboration promotes active learning, student empowerment, and cognitive enhancement as students collaboratively construct knowledge". In short, collaborative learning in teamwork plays a vital role in developing students' LA abilities in learning a language outside of the classroom.

2.3. The role of collaboration in group autonomy

According to Goodsell et al. (1992), collaboration in learning involves working in teams of two or more, with the goal of understanding course materials and generating solutions or products. Ibrahimi and Essaaidi (2012, cited in Chowdhury, 2021, p. 92) have

identified six key elements of collaborative learning, namely “active approach focused on the student, construction of knowledge by the student, sharing discoveries and negotiation, teamwork, collective task, and achieving a common goal”. Collaboration also promotes responsibility, motivation, confidence, language skills, and positive connections among students, as noted by Yasmin and Naseem (2019). Additionally, Chowdhury (2021) highlights the importance of student-to-student interaction in group work, where students can work together without the need for teacher supervision.

3. Research method

Research questions

The current study was conducted to seek the answers to the following research questions:

1. What are TESOL-major students’ perceptions regarding group autonomy at Dong Thap University?
2. What are TESOL-major students’ practices regarding group autonomy at Dong Thap University?

Participants

The study’s participants are 107 TESOL-major freshmen from the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Dong Thap University in Vietnam (2023-2024 academic year). Due to the limited time, the researchers

have focused on TESOL first-year informants at the first stage. Based on the results of this current study, the authors will explore others in various majors in the next stages. All of them took part in this research voluntarily and answered items in the survey related to both their perceptions and practices on teamwork as a way of LA outside the classroom. It is noticed that none of them had ever attended any training programs on autonomous learning before.

Data collection and analysis

A set of questionnaires with 21 items was designed according to the framework in the literature review. It included 11 items in the perception session and 11 items in practice. Data for the study was collected through a Google Form survey instrument and analyzed using a statistical package for the social sciences to code and give statistics. The Cronbach’s Alpha value of the questionnaire on TESOL students’ perceptions of group autonomy was 0.819 of all the items ranged from 0.773 to 0.861. This means that all the items’ reliability was qualified to be used in the research. This analysis indicated the means and standard deviations.

4. Findings and discussion

Students’ perception regarding group work of learner autonomy

Table 1. Students’ perception regarding group work of learner autonomy

Items	Mean	SD	N	Cronbach’s Alpha (N=11)
1. Group autonomy is important for students in learning TESOL major.	3.99	0.771	107	0.799
2. Group autonomy is one of the learning ways, and TESOL-major students needn’t work in groups outside the classroom.	3.22	0.945	107	0.848
3. Group autonomy is only necessary when teachers ask us to work in groups.	2.37	0.967	107	0.845
4. Group autonomy is useful for learning at university, not for our work in the future.	1.98	0.981	107	0.861
5. Group autonomy helps us develop our motivation during the process of acquiring new knowledge.	4.02	0.801	107	0.796
6. Group autonomy helps group members develop their self-consciousness and autonomy in a learning process.	4.07	0.887	107	0.777
7. Group autonomy helps increase the interaction between students and lecturers.	4.10	0.835	107	0.778
8. Group autonomy helps increase the communicative skills among group members.	4.17	0.895	107	0.787
9. Group autonomy helps us practice critical thinking skills.	3.99	0.863	107	0.777
10. Group autonomy helps us improve our group management and organization ability.	4.07	0.821	107	0.775
11. Group autonomy helps us learn from each other and save time to explore knowledge as well as summarize previous lessons.	3.96	0.857	107	0.773

The results in Table 1 showed that Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.819. This meant that the items of the questionnaire were reliable to be used in this current research. More specifically, item 8 got the highest mean score with 4.17, and the lowest one was item 4 with 1.98. The mean score of item 3 was 2.37. The mean scores of others were from 3.22 to 4.10. These findings indicated that students had a positive perception of the crucial meaning and the roles of team autonomy outside the classroom, especially in improving their communicative skills when they learned in groups. They appreciated the benefits of autonomous learning in groups outside the classroom highly. Besides, a number of participants did disagree with items 3 and 4. It meant they thought that group autonomy should often be fulfilled, not only when lecturers asked them to learn. The mean score of item 4 was the lowest, which showed that they emphasized the importance of lifelong learning of group autonomy.

Students practices regarding group work of learner autonomy

Table 2. Places for group autonomy

Places (students can choose more than one place they often learn in groups autonomously)	Percentage
Online (Google Meets, Zoom, Teams, Facebook Group, etc.)	49.53
In café	38.31
In the reading room	33.64
In the self-study room	23.36
In the library	23.36
In campus	29.9
In the park	8.41
At one of the group members' house	2.8

When asked about places they often studied in groups out of classes, nearly half of them chose virtual platforms. The next sites they liked were the café, the reading room, the campus, the library, and the self-study room, with 38.31%, 29.9%, 33.64%, 23.36%, and 23.36% respectively. Only 8.41% of students responded that they learned in groups in the park, and 2.8% wanted to study at one of the team members' houses. From the findings in Table 2, it can be seen that they tend to learn autonomously via online sites.

Perhaps those online tools are suitable and convenient for all members of a group. Additionally, they liked to study at the café and in the reading room rather than in the library, the self-study room, or on the university campus. Especially, since they seem not to learn in the park or at home.

Table 3. How often students spent time on group autonomy

Frequency	Percentage
When assignments are given	42.1
Every week	29.0
Every day	17.8
When tests or exams are coming	10.3
Sometimes	0.8

Table 3 shows the rate of frequency students learned in groups autonomously. It can be seen that 42.1% of them conducted group autonomy when they were given assignments by their teachers. Furthermore, only 29% of them studied in teams every week; 17.8% learned together every day. 10.3% of them gathered to work in groups when they were going to take tests or exams. Only 0.8% sometimes learned in groups. This indicated that they had not developed their LA ability because they still depended on teachers' given tasks. They did not study autonomously in groups outside the classroom without the teachers' requirements. The number of students who practiced group autonomy every day or every week was low, which obtained only one-fifth or one-third of the total.

Table 4. Time for each group's autonomy

Time	Percentage
From 1 to 2 hours	64.8
More than 2 hours	31.5
Less than 1 hour	3.7

In terms of time for each group autonomy in Table 4, 64.8% of participants spent from one to 2 hours on team study. Next, 31.5% of them responded that it took them more than two hours each time they learned together. Finally, 3.7% answered that they consumed less than one hour for each group's autonomy. The results showed that they spent much time working in groups.

Table 5. Contents of group autonomy

Contents (students can choose more than one choice)	Percentage
Homework, assignments, and tasks were given by the lecturer of each subject	82.6
Practicing language skills autonomously (e.g. reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills)	61.5
Finding out more knowledge on our pedagogical subjects	56.9
Exploring knowledge based on the outline of each subject	55.0
Summary of previous lectures via mindmap, summary, etc	54.1
Finding out more knowledge on our major subjects	52.3
Finding out more information/knowledge of general subjects	39.4

In Table 5, 82.6% of students answered that they did homework, assignments, and tasks given by teachers outside of the classroom together. Next, 61.5% practiced their language skills, namely reading, speaking, listening, and writing with each other. Then, 56.9% worked in groups to search for more learning materials about their pedagogical subjects. Additionally, 55.0% found knowledge from the outline of each subject given by teachers. Moreover, 54.1% learned in groups to summarize their early lessons to help them memorize them better. In addition, 52.3% studied in teams to seek more materials for their other major subjects (not pedagogical ones). Finally, 39.4% found more information on their general subjects in groups outside of the classes. The findings indicated that most of the students conducted LA in groups when teachers asked them to do homework, assignments, or tasks. Just half of the students investigated knowledge to improve their learning. This was similar to the frequency of time they spent on group autonomy in Table 3 as above.

5. Conclusion and implications

This study delved into the perceptions and practices of TESOL-major students when it comes to group autonomy as a means to improve their LA abilities. The findings revealed that the majority of participants recognized the importance of group autonomy in their major, but still relied on their instructors' guidelines when working in groups outside the classroom. This suggests that they have yet to achieve true autonomy in their learning. Furthermore, only half of the participants proactively sought out additional knowledge to enhance their learning without being prompted by their teachers. In addition, lecturers should train them in some modes

of autonomous learning so that they can practice LA by themselves.

It is important to note that this study was limited in scope, as it only focused on TESOL-major students and did not include other majors within the Foreign Languages Faculty. Additionally, the researchers solely utilized a questionnaire to gather data on participants' perceptions and practices of group autonomy.

Future research in this area will involve conducting qualitative studies and subsequently comparing the results with the quantitative data to determine any similarities or differences between the two methods. Overall, this study contributes valuable insights to the existing literature on group autonomy in language acquisition.

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