VIETNAM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

**UNIVERSITY OF LANGUAGES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

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**PHẠM ĐỨC THUẬN**

**PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS THROUGH PROJECT WORK IN A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY**

(Tăng cường tính tự chủ cho sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh thông qua dự án tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam)

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**CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

## 1.1 Research aim and questions

The ultimate aim of the study is to explore how the implementation of projects enhances the students’ autonomy in four aspects: technical, psychological, political, and socio-cultural.

To achieve the aim and the objectives, this study attempts to answer the following overarching research question and sub-research questions. The overarching research question is: *How does the project work promote learner autonomy for the non-English majors in the university?* The sub-questions are:

1. *Technically, how do the projects enhance the students’ access to learning resources and their use of learning skills/strategies?*
2. *Psychologically, how do the projects promote the students’ attitudes towards learning English and motivation in learning English?*
3. *Political-critically, how do the projects stimulate the students’ choices of learning contents and choices of learning methods?*
4. *Socio-culturally, how does the project work foster the students’ interaction and collaboration?*

## 1.2. Scope of the study

This action research was grounded in the wish of improving English language teaching and learning for teachers and students in higher education. And starting with the argument that autonomy plays an essential role in English language education due to its benefits to learners, the study employed project work as an intervention to enhance autonomy for 34 non-English majors in a university in the north of Vietnam.

## 1.3. Contributions of the study

The significance of this study is twofold. First, from the theoretical perspective, the study results proved that the enhancement of learner autonomy was evident among the non-English majors through the project work. Second, from the practical perspective, to enhance learner autonomy for the students in the research institution, project work was proved to be an effective approach.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is indisputably a multi-layered concept that is possible to see from different perspectives. This resulted in countless attempts to theorize it. The definitions proposed by Holec (1981), Little (1991), Dam (1995), Benson and Voller (1997), Benson (1997), Litllewood (1999), Scharle and Szabo (2000), Benson (2001), and Oxford (2003) gain more attention in the literature. And it is found that there are two ways the scholars employ to conceptualize learner autonomy. Some scholars hypothesize autonomy in definitions including Holec (1981), Little (1991), Dam (1995), Scharle and Szabo (2000), and Benson (2001). The others describe learner autonomy in frameworks including Benson and Voller (1997), Benson (1997), Littlewood (1999), and Oxford (2003).

Although the scholars approach learner autonomy differently, four aspects have been identified in the proposed configurations of learner autonomy which are the technical, the psychological, the political-critical, and the socio-cultural.

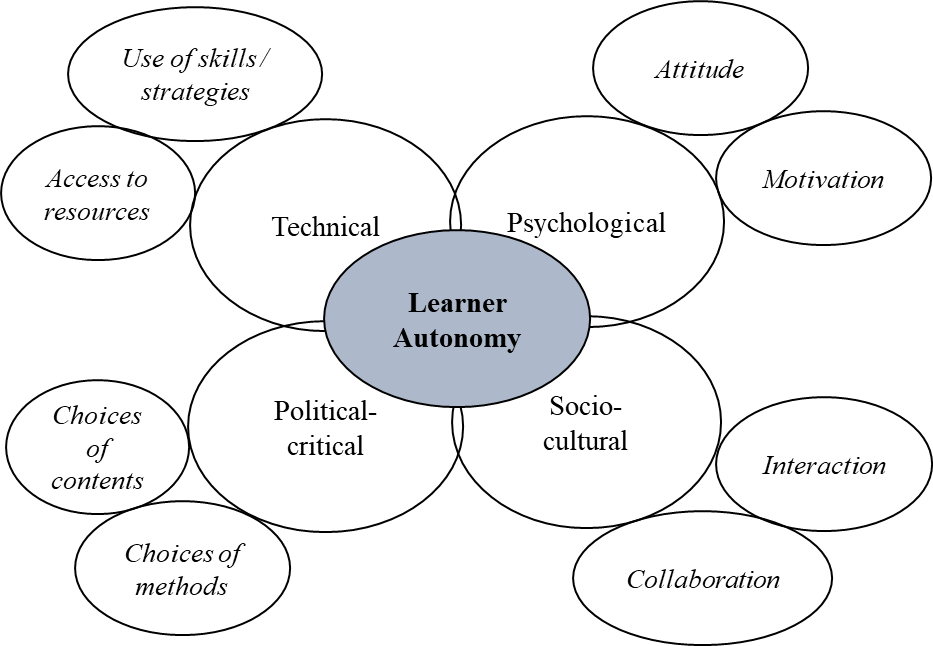


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework of Learner Autonomy

In this study, learner autonomy is conceptualized as a multi-layered construct comprising four aspects: the technical, the psychological, the political-critical, and the socio-cultural. Correspondingly, technical autonomy is related to learners’ access to learning resources and their use of the learning skills; psychological autonomy features attitude and motivation; political-critical autonomy highlights learner’s choices of learning contents and methods; and socio-cultural autonomy features interaction and collaboration.

### 2.2. Project Work

Many proponents of project work such as Fried-Booth (2002), Haines (1989), Sheppard and Stoller (1995), Stoller (2002), and Alan and Stoller (2005) who took different approaches agree on six features of project work as summarized by Stoller (2002). First, project work prioritizes the content rather than the language. Thus, it can be considered as a mirror of the real world, which includes topics of interest to students. Second, students will do the main tasks in a project, and teachers will give guidance and support where necessary. Third, during the process, students can work individually or cooperatively in small groups, or as a whole class to share resources, ideas, and expertise to complete the project. Fourth, students integrate diverse skills through conducting tasks. Fifth, project work is usually designed with end products as the outcome, for example, an oral presentation, a poster session, a bulletin-board display, a report, or a stage performance. Project work not only develops students’ language accuracy through the process stage, but also language fluency through the product stage. Finally, project work is potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging. It usually results in building student confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy as well as improving students’ language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities.

To serve the research purpose of this study, project work is conceptualized as an integrated mode of teaching and learning into the ongoing syllabus in which teachers and learners collaborate with each other in building projects, realizing project activities, presenting project final outcomes, and evaluating projects.

Based on the model proposed by Stoller (2002), the researcher put the ten steps into a four-phase model which serves as the working model of project work in this study. This aims to help the researcher picture the whole process of doing a project in a simpler way. The phases are preparation, realization, presentation, and evaluation. Table 4 below describes the detailed activities of the phases.

*Table 1: Four Phases of The Working Model of Project Work*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Phases** | | **Activities** |
| 1 | Preparation | * Teacher prepares topics/themes from the existing syllabus, introduces about project work to be integrated in the learning, suggests the project final outcomes * Students establish groups for themselves. * Students and teacher:   1. agree on themes for projects,   2. determine the project final outcomes,   3. detail the activities,   4. consider responsibilities,   5. agree on the deadlines for projects,   6. agree on the timing for gathering, compiling information, and presenting the final products. |
| 2 | Realization | * Students search and gather information. * Teacher assists students in arranging and categorizing the gathered information and materials. * Students compile, analyze, organize information, and discuss the value of the gathered data, keeping some and discarding others. * Teacher helps students to revise and edit the products. |
| 3 | Presentation | * Teacher prepares the language demands for students in preparing the final products * Students present the final products |
| 4 | Evaluation | * Students reflect on the projects by answering the Post-Project Work Questionnaire |

### 2.3. Previous Studies Using Project Work to Promote Learner Autonomy

In order to inform the epistemological and ontological aspects of the study, in this section the previous studies using project work to promote learner autonomy in English language learning were reviewed. It is found that project work is employed for learner autonomy development in different contexts which can be for future teacher university students (Villa and Armstrong, 2004), or ESP university students (Ramires, 2014), or school students (Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin, 2017), or university English-majored students (Chong, 2003; and Nguyen Van Loi, 2017).

Two significant differences are also found in the studies. The first difference was the configuration of learner autonomy. It is noticed that the studies just focused on separate elements of learner autonomy such as awareness and readiness, willingness and motivation, cognitive and metacognitive abilities, self-confidence, self-regulated learning behaviors, self-determination and decisions about learning, attitude towards self-responsibility, and attitude towards social interaction, learner choice, supporting environment, and self-assessment. The second difference was with the research participants and research context. The studies mentioned were not conducted with non-English majors in the context of Vietnamese tertiary level. Among the studies above, three were conducted in foreign contexts. The fourth study was carried out with English majors.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research Approach: Action Research

To serve the purposes and answer the research questions above, an action research design is believed to be appropriate for this study. Hence, in the next sections, the discussions go on by presenting the definitions of action research, the advantage and caveats of action research, rationale for using action research, and the working action research model.

This study employed the action research model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) which involves four broad phases (plan, act, observe, and reflect) in a cycle of research.

The reasons for this selection include: (1) this model features core phases of an action research; (2) the model consists of 4 simple and easy-to-apply phases; (3) it is the is most popularly recognized by the researcher-practitioners, and (4) the model features a continuing, or iterative, spiral of cycles which recur until the action researcher has achieved a satisfactory outcome and feels it is time to stop.

The four phases of the working action research model are shown in table 6 below.

Table 2: The Working Model of Action Research

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Phases* | | *Activities* |
| 1 | Plan | Identifying the students’ autonomy in four aspects before projects |
| 2 | Act | Implementing project work into the syllabus |
| 3 | Observe | Administering the data collection tools  Collecting the data |
| 4 | Reflect | Analyzing the collected data  Presenting the results  Discussing the results |

### 3.2. Research Context and Participants

The university, where the study was conducted, is a provincial university located in the north of Vietnam. The research university is province-funded with missions to train workforce for the sake of the socially and economically development needs of the province, the surrounded areas, and the whole country.

The participants of this action research are 34 students in a GE2 class at the university They are first year students majoring in Kindergarten Teacher Education and Primary Teacher Education. Among them, there are 27 female and 7 male students, and 9 majored in Kindergarten Teacher Education, 25 – in Primary Teacher Education. They all have passed GE1 in the previous terms.

### 3.3. Data Collection Methods and Data Analysis

To serve the purpose of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in this study, different data collection methods were employed. These are two questionnaires (Pre-project work Questionnaire and Post Project Work Questionnaire), interviews, and teacher’s diary.

In this study, procedures for analyzing data proposed by Ezzy (2002) was employed. The scholar describes content analysis in a simpler process of four steps: (1) defining the units of analysis (e.g.: words, sentences) and categories to be used for analysis; (2) reviewing the texts in order to code them and place them into categories; and then (3) counting and logging the occurrences of words, codes and categories. From here statistical analysis and quantitative methods are applied, leading to (4) an interpretation of the results.

### 3.4. Identifying Problems

Functioning as the starting point of research process, this sub-section will look at the teaching context and identify the problems emerged from it. Learner autonomy is put in direct connection with the found problems. The investigation looks at four perspectives of learner autonomy: technological, psychological, political-critical, and socio-cultural. The data resource was examined to diagnose the problems with students’ autonomy was from the results of the Pre-project work questionnaire.

The Pre-Project Work Questionnaire (Appendix B) with 12 items was conducted in the fourth week. Before the delivery of the questionnaire, the informed consent was sent to the students. The questionnaire aimed to explore the level of learner autonomy in four perspectives of learner autonomy: technical, psychological, political-critical and socio-cultural.

The survey results showed the students’ autonomy seems to vary in all four perspectives. With the technical aspect, students appeared not to have exploited the learning resources surrounding, and they seemed to employ a narrow range of learning skills in their learning. As for the psychological aspect, the students seemed to have a neutral attitude towards learning English (neither favorable nor unfavorable), and their motivation in learning seemed to be a little low. In terms of political-critical aspect, the students shared that there were not many choices for learning contents and learning methods in learning. And for the socio-cultural perspective, the students appeared to have limited interaction and collaboration in learning.

### 3.5. Implementation of Project Work

This chapter describes the implementation of projects which serves as “act” phase of the working action research model. In the previous section, the learner autonomy status of the students is determined. And in this section project work is chosen as an intervention to improve the students’ autonomy. More specifically, the application of project work is described in four phases: preparation, realization, presentation, and evaluation.

As the result of these activities, there were totally 8 projects established. It can be seen that 8 different projects were established totally, in which 4 projects were about describing places (Project 1 - Introduction about Bai Dinh pagoda; Project 3 - Introduction about five craft villages in Ninh Binh; Project 4- Introduction about a local bakery; and Project 7 – Introduction about a clothes store); other 3 projects were related to the topic of practical English (Project 2- Dubbing the short fairy tale cartoon Cinderella; Project 6- Dubbing a short part of the horror movie – Annabelle; Project 8- Ordering a meal in a restaurant; and the remaining project was about describing people (Project 5- Talking about the friendship of close friends). The final outcomes of the projects also varied: most of the projects involved making video clips (Projects 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8); the other two were an oral presentation (Projects 1) and a brochure (Project 3). In terms of the number of members in the projects, three projects have 6 students in their groups (Projects 1, 2, and 3); three projects have 3 members: Project 5, 6, and 8; Project 7 has 2 members.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1. Technical Aspect

The technical aspect of learner autonomy has two categories to be examined in this study: (1) access to learning resources and (2) use of learning strategies. There are three sub-categories in the first category: exploitation of learning environment; use of additional materials; and employment of learning tools / aids. And as for the second category there are also three subcategories: cognitive, metacognitive, and social/affective. The presentation of the results and discussions along in this section aims to answer the first sub-research question: ‘*Technically, how do the projects enhance students’ access to learning resources and students’ use of learning skills/strategies?*’

The findings generally proposed that greater autonomy in the technical aspect seemed to be attributed to the implementation of projects. The learners appeared to manifest positive changes in their access to learning recourses and use of learning strategies during projects.

#### **4.1.1 Access to Learning Resources**

Three subcategories presented in this section include (1) exploitation of learning environment; (2) use of additional materials; and (3) employment of learning tools / aids. And the findings revealed that the students appeared to exploit their learning environment more during project work. The students’ learning space seemed to have gone beyond the ‘home study’ and have reached further to ‘library’, ‘online’ and ‘places where they carried out the project activities.’ At the same time, a wider range of learning materials among the students were also identified. The students used more online resources, library books, and dictionaries. Besides, more learning tools were employed to serve the learning purposes. And smartphones and laptops were two common instruments along with Google Translate application.

Based on the data presentation above, it can be drawn that the implementation of project work somewhat stimulated the students’ access to learning resources in comparison with before-project-work period. This can be seen by the fact that the students became more active in learning. Out of the class time, they seemed to study at home more often. Their learning space appeared to be enlarged: they also came to other places to take up their learning activities. At the same time, they seemed to make more use of their learning tools available around them such as computers, laptops, or smartphones.

The results presented above seem to reflect a shared opinion in the literature that access to learning resources contribute to the development of learner autonomy (Reinders & White, 2011; Benson, 2013; Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014; and Augustina, 2017). Both Benson (2013) and Augustina (2017) share the points that learning resources play important roles in the development of learner autonomy. And it is indicated that the more learners access learning resources, the more autonomous they become. Meanwhile, Reinders and White (2011) and Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, (2014) stress the potential of the use of technological resources to the enhancement of learner autonomy. The researchers elaborate that online recourses and technological tools are contributors of stimulation of learner autonomy. And learning environment where learners can socialize with each other and interact and collaborate on learning activities was also supposed to support autonomy (Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014). It is identified in this study that through project work the students were exposed to opportunities to make the most of the learning resources. And by approaching more learning resources, the students’ autonomy was recognizably facilitated.

#### **4.1.2 Use of Learning Skills/Strategies**

The second category in the technical aspect of autonomy focused on in this study is the use of learning skills/strategies covering three sub-categories: cognitive, metacognitive, and social/affective. The results showed that during projects the students employed a variety of learning strategies presented in Table 31. Along with different cognitive strategies, the students were identified to apply various metacognitive and social/affective strategies into their learning activities.

The results from three sub-categories (cognitive, metacognitive, and social/affective) show that there is an increase in using learning skills/strategies among students during project work. The students appeared to employ more skills/strategies to interact with the material to be learned, to manipulate the materials effectively to server the learning purpose, or to apply techniques to a particular learning task. They also seemed to use more strategies to plan and regulate their learning. At the same time, they appeared to apply more strategies to seek assistance in learning and control their anxieties.

The findings revealed above resonated with a range of studies on the links of learner autonomy and learning strategies (Wenden, 1991; Cotterall, 1995; Oxford, 1999; Figura & Jarvis, 2007; Ceylan, 2015; and Wang, 2015). These studies share an important point of views that the manifestation of learning strategies during the learning process represents the extent of how autonomous the learners are. In a more detailed interpretation, Cotterall (1995) specifies that the demonstration of more learning strategies employment among learners is indicative of a fully realized autonomy. Similarly, according to Ceylan (2015), the more strategies the students apply, the higher their autonomy is developed. The results seemed to be different from Nguyen Van Loi (2017) in which it is identified that cognitive and metacognitive abilities are the most lacking. However, the enhancement of the technical autonomy seemed to be echoed by Villa and Armstrong (2004). According to Villa and Armstrong (2004), the features of the technical aspect is evident in their study as follows: the learners take control of their own learning; they learn how to learn and can thus apply the knowledge acquired in this experience to life-long learning; they decide jointly what they want to learn, set their own goals and plan actions to reach those goals, and they evaluate the process and the results of the experience in order to learn from it.

### 4.2. Psychological Aspect

The second sub-research question in this study focuses on the second aspect of learner autonomy – the psychological aspect which covers attitude and motivation. The question is “*Psychologically, how do the projects promote students’ attitude towards learning English and motivation in learning English?*” Therefore, attitudes and motivation are two main sub-categories in the data analysis process. To answer this sub research question, the data was collected from the Post-Project Work Questionnaire (5 Linkert-scaled question items 5, 6, 7, and 8). Besides, to validate the results, the data from the interview and the teacher’s diary was also gathered and analyzed. This triangulation helped to shed more light on the enhancement of learner autonomy in terms of the psychological aspect. The results showed that with the implementation of projects, the students seemed to display highly positive attitudes towards learning English, and they appeared to be motivated to learn and engaged in the learning activities with the satisfaction and inherent pleasure of the projects with strong desire to achieve the commonly shared goals with others.

#### **4.2.1 Attitudes**

The results showed significant difference in the students’ attitude before project work.. It presents the changes in the students’ attitudes towards learning English before and during projects. Before projects were implemented, only 17,6% of the students claimed that learning English is interesting. And the remaining percentage was “As normal as other subjects”. Meanwhile, during projects almost all the students exhibited highly positive attitudes towards learning English.

From the presentation above it seemed that the implementation of projects helped the students feel like learning the subject and activated the love for the subject that they used to have. In learning, they appeared to find joy, comfort and effectiveness, and forget about the difficulty.

The findings showed that psychologically, the application of projects seemed to enhance the students’ attitudes towards learning English. The students exhibited highly positive feelings in learning English during projects. The results appeared to reflect the link between attitudes and autonomy which is recognized by many authors (Knapper & Croppley, 1991; Wenden, 1991; Dickinson, 1995; Benson, 1997; Scharle & Szabo, 2000; Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011; Zarei & Elakaei, 2012).

#### **4.2.2 Motivation**

Motivation is the second category in the psychological aspect of learner autonomy. Discussed about in the literature review, motivation consists of three components: (1) desire to achieve a goal, (2) effort extended in this direction, and (3) satisfaction with the task (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). Question items 6, 7 and 8 in the Post-Project Work Questionnaire serve the purpose of collecting data for this category. Overall, the results indicate that when used as an integrated tool in the process syllabus, project work seemed to enhance the students’ motivation in learning.

The result shows descriptive statistics of students’ motivational elements during project work analyzed by SPSS. It can be easily noticed that the mean of all three question items is high which stays above 4. More specifically, the mean for question 6 “When doing projects, I desired to achieve the set learning goals” is 4,41; the mean for question 7 “Participating in the projects, I made lots of effort in learning English” is 4,47; and the mean for question item 8 “(I am satisfied with my learning activities in the projects”.

Drawn on the presentation and interpretation of the results, it can be seen that through the implementation of projects students’ motivation seemed to be enhanced in terms of desire to achieve learning goals, efforts, and satisfaction with the tasks. More specifically, the students appeared to be ambitious with the targets they set. They wished to complete the tasks with a better result. They made lots of efforts in that direction at the same time. And when they finished the projects, they seemed to be happy and proud with the jobs done. All of these can be identified that the project work application affected the psychological aspect of students’ autonomy in both attitude and motivation in a highly positive way. The students seemed to have a better attitude towards learning English, and they appeared to be more motivated in learning the subject throughout the project application.

The results appeared to support the arguments in the literature that learner autonomy and motivation are in close connections (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dam, 1995, Dickinson, 1995; Little, 1995, Ushioda, 1996; Benson, 2007). The scholars agree on the association between autonomy and motivation. The findings also confirmed what was claimed in previous studies (Villa & Armstrong, 2004; Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin, 2017 Nguyen Van Loi, 2017) that the students became motivated in learning the subject while doing projects.

**4.3. Political-critical Aspect**

The third aspect of learner autonomy investigated in this study is the political-critical. In the conceptual framework, this perspective of autonomy is configured with choices of learning contents and choices of learning methods. And the third sub-research question serves the purpose of collecting data for this aspect. The question is “Political-critically, how do the projects stimulate students’ choices of learning contents and choices of learning methods?”. In this section, the results from the collected data are presented and discussed in two subcategories of learning contents and learning methods. The data was gathered from the responses of the question items 9 and 10 in the Post-Project Work Questionnaire. Question 9 is for choices of learning contents and question 10 is for choices of methods. The results indicated that with the implementation of projects, the students enjoyed a larger range of choices of learning contents and learning methods.

#### **4.3.1 Choices of Learning Contents**

The results showed that lots of respondents confirmed the variety of options for learning contents during projects. The data “many learning contents” coded 3a12 were found to occur 22 times in the data. And in terms of the quality of choices for learning contents, there were more ranges of data which include “suitable”, “diverse”, “interesting”, and “fresh”. The most frequent code is “interesting” with 18 occurrences, and the least often is “fresh” with 5 occurrences.

The changes in the students’ choices of the learning contents can be seen in the first phase of doing projects when the students were given choices of the topics, the outcomes, and the suggested projects. Appendix F presents the choices for these categories. For the topics, there were four choices: describing people, describing an event, describing a place, and practical English. And for each topic, there are also several possible projects recommended for the students. For example, for the topic of describing people, the students can consider projects about a famous person, a group of close friends, family, or class. For the outcomes of projects, the students can choose any from the lists including videos, oral presentations, brochures, posters, talk shows, game shows, or plays. It can be seen that the variety of choices available for the students brought about the diversity of projects. As a result, there were 8 different projects.

Obviously, in its nature, projects supply more choices of the learning contents and learning activities for learners. And this is in accordance with what Hutchinson (1991) describes about project work stating that the choices of learning contents and activities in projects are not limited and provides learners with adaptation and creativity. The findings also prove Thomas’s (2000) argument that projects embrace learners’ choices rather than traditional instruction where only teachers decide the learning contents and methods.

#### **4.3.1 Choices of Learning Methods**

In terms of quality of choices of learning methods, the table presents three most often occurred descriptions (words or phrases) by the respondents. These are “fresh” with 9 occurrences, “interesting” with 7 occurrences, and “effective” with 17 occurrences. Similar to the students’ views on quality of learning contents during projects, it can be noticed that the students also found positive qualities of choices in learning methods when the students carried out their projects.

Based on the presentation of the findings along with the interpretation, it can be concluded that the integration of projects into the process syllabus brought about more choices for students in both the learning contents and the learning methods. At the same times, the students seemed to believe that the choices possessed good qualities making them enjoyed the learning.

The findings from the political-critical aspect of autonomy supports arguments in the literature that when given choices learners become more independent (Cotterall, 1995), more responsible (Assor et al., 2002), and more engaged (Ramires, 2014; and Parker, et al., 2017) in learning. The results were also echoed by Chong (2003) and Villa & Armstrong (2004). Chong (2003) concluded that CALL projects provided learners more choices in learning, and Villa & Armstrong (2004) stated that the students became more responsible when they made various decisions jointly.

### . Socio-cultural Aspect

In this section, the presentation and interpretation of the results serves to answer the fourth sub-research question of the study. The question is “*Socio-culturally, how does the project work foster students’ interaction and collaboration*?”. To get the answer for the question, question items 11 and 12 in the Post-Project Work Questionnaire were designed to collect data. The results showed that doing projects appeared to stimulate the students’ interaction and collaboration in their learning activities.

#### **4.4.1 Interaction**

As presented, the coded data for students’ interaction is put into four sub-categories: frequency (how often?), type (with whom?), place (where?), and purpose (for what?). There are six codes in those subcategories. First, many respondents stated they “often” interacted with people while doing their projects. The code “often” was counted 26 times of occurrences. And the interaction was always conducted with the group members (34 occurrences), and with the teacher as well (17 occurrences). The interaction is acknowledged by the students to take place online (34 occurrences) and in class (32 occurrences). And lastly, in terms of the reason of interacting, lots of students responded that they interacted with people in order to seek for assistance in solving their problems (22 occurrences). More evidence of the frequent interaction can be found in the following responses.

The data from the diary also revealed an increase in interaction during the projects. Table 45 below summarizes the interactions in the learning process during projects from the Appendix P. The table presents that the numbers of interactions before projects were less than that of during-project period. The interactions in the first week were mostly conventional teacher-student question and answer in class, and there were almost no out-of-class interactions between the students and the teacher. The period from week 7 to 11 witnessed a significant increase in both forms of interactions and frequency of interactions. For the forms of interactions, it was noted that in student-teacher contacts for support or consultation out-of-class rose sharply during the phase of doing projects. The discussions in class also built up which could be student-student discussions or teacher-student consultations. The findings also pointed out that the students were active in contacting their teacher on their problems they encountered while they were conducting the project activities. It was noted that the students contacted the teacher in various times: at noon or in the afternoon or in the evening or even at midnight.

#### **4.4.2 Collaboration**

Along with interaction, collaboration is the second category in the socio-cultural aspect that is conceptualized in the theoretical framework of learning autonomy. To measure the enhancement of students’ collaboration in learning English through the integration of project work, question item 12 in the Post-Project Work Questionnaire was designed to collect the data. The question is “While doing projects, how did you collaborate with people?”. The result is presented that Three codes in the first sub-categories are “building projects” with 34 occurrences, “presentation” with 34 occurrences, and “doing project tasks” with 28 occurrences. It can be seen that the number of occurrences for these three codes are really high. It means that the students all collaborated mostly with each other in the first phase and the last phase of project work which are “building projects” and “presentation”. And “doing project tasks” is related to phase two of project work – realizing project tasks. The number of occurrences for this code is also rather high – 28. This appeared that the students collaborated a lot during their projects.

In the second sub-category, there are the two codes “collaboration with teammates” with 34 occurrences and “collaboration with teacher” with 13 occurrences. The results indicate that the students predominantly collaborated with their friends rather than with their teacher.

In summary, with the implementation of project work, the socio-cultural perspective of learner autonomy comprising of interaction and collaboration among students seemed to develop. The development was evident in all of the subcategories. In terms of interaction, the students interacted with people in higher frequency and in a larger environment. As for collaboration, the collaboration was observed in more learning activities.

The findings seemed to be consistent with the arguments in the literature proposed by many scholars that the socio-cultural perspective is an important element in autonomy configuration which highlights interaction and collaboration in the learning process (Oxford, 2003). Through interaction and collaboration with other peers, learners can learn effectively (Little, 2007). The demonstration of more interaction and collaboration among the students during projects in this study also seems to prove the proposal by Palfreyman (2003) that collaboration and interactions are central to a successful capacity for autonomy. Besides, autonomy is identified in interdependence rather than entire independence (Little, 1996). And this can be seen in the collaborative participation in the project activities manifested among the students.

# CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

## 5.1. Overview of the Study

The study reported in this thesis investigated the enhancement of learner autonomy through the implementation of the project work in the process syllabus throughout one semester with a class of 34 first year non-English majors in a university in the north of Vietnam.

The study was motivated by commonly shared arguments in the literature that learner autonomy is beneficial to learners in their learning. Autonomous learners are believed to possess good qualities such as engagement, positive attitude, high motivation, independence, self-regulation, collaboration and interaction. These qualities are targeted in the curriculum of the research university. At the same time, it was found in the literature that project work is believed to develop learner autonomy. Besides that, there seemed to be little literature on using project work to promote the aspects of learner autonomy. There was no study among the found ones which used project work as an intervention to promote the components of autonomy in four aspects for non-English majors in the tertiary Vietnamese context. Hence, the study was expected to be an empirical research in the area.

In this study, learner autonomy is conceptualized as a multiple-faced concept consisting of four aspects: technical, psychological, political-critical, and socio-cultural. Two components: access to learning resources and use of learning skills/strategies represent the technical aspect. Attitudes towards learning English and motivation represent the psychological aspect. Choices of learning contents and choices of learning methods represent the political-critical aspect. And interaction and collaboration represent the socio-cultural aspect. This configuration serves as the theoretical framework of learner autonomy employed in this study.

At the same time, project work is theorized as an integrated mode of teaching and learning into the existing syllabus with four phases preparation, realization, presentation, and evaluation. In the preparation phase, it involves the teacher’s preparing topics/themes from the existing syllabus, introducing about project work to be integrated in the learning, suggesting the project final outcomes. It is also related to the students’ grouping, and teacher-student collaborative activities in agreeing on themes for projects, determining the project final outcomes, detailing the activities, considering responsibilities, agreeing on the deadlines for projects, and agreeing on the timing for gathering, compiling information, and presenting the final products. in the realization phase, the students search and gather information; the teacher assists the students in arranging and categorizing the gathered information and materials; the students compile, analyze, organize information, and discuss the value of the gathered data, keeping some and discarding others; and the teacher helps the students to revise and edit the products. In the presentation phase, the teacher prepares the language demands for students in preparing the final products; and the students present the final products the students present their final. In the last phase, the students evaluate their project work by answering the Post Project Work Questionnaire.

As an English teacher, I have been always concerned with how to stimulate the effectiveness of learning and teaching within and out of my classroom. I conducted this study with an ultimate aim to examine how project work enhances the learners’ autonomy. Therefore, the overarching research question was “How does the project work promote learner autonomy for the non-English majors in the university?”. This main research question is divided into four sub-research questions: (1) Technically, how do the projects enhance students’ access to learning resources and students’ use of learning skills/strategies?; (2) Psychologically, how do the projects promote students’ attitude towards learning English and motivation in learning English?; (3) Political-critically, how do the projects stimulate students’ choices of learning contents and choices of learning methods?; (4) Socio-culturally, how does the project work foster students’ interaction and collaboration?.

To answer the above established research questions, a four phases action research model by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) was selected as the research approach for the study with one cycle. The four phases included plan, act, observe, and reflect. The plan phase involves the identification of learner autonomy status among the students before the application of projects. The second phase – act, features the implantation of projects into the syllabus as the intervention. The observe phase consists of administration of the data collection tools and collection of the data. The reflect phase includes analysis of the collected data, presenting the results, and discussions of the results.

To collect data for the study, the tools were employed: questionnaires, interviews, and the teacher’s diary. Two questionnaires were administered at two different periods of the projects. The Pre-Project Work Questionnaire was delivered to the students before the implementation of the projects. And the Post-Project Work Questionnaire was conducted right after the presentation of projects. The contrasting and comparing of the two questionnaires’ results helped to reflect on the changes and development of the components of learner autonomy. The interviews with the students were conducted after they presented the final products of their projects. And the diary was written from the beginning of the semester to the end of project work. The data collected from the interviews and the diary were used as additional resources of data to be triangulated and analyzed with the data of the questionnaires. The analysis of the collected data was based on the four steps content analysis which are: (1) defining the units of analysis (e.g., words, sentences) and categories to be used for analysis; (2) reviewing the texts in order to code them and place them into categories; and then (3) counting and logging the occurrences of words, codes and categories; (4) an interpretation of the results.

The implementation of the project work in four phases resulted in thirty-four students carrying out eight projects with different topics and outcomes. There were six projects for making video clips, one project for creating a brochure, and one project for oral presentation. The projects were in three topics: describing places, describing people, and practical English.

The overall results for the main research question showed that the enhancement of learner autonomy is evident in all four aspects: technical, psychological, political-critical, and socio-cultural. In terms of the technical aspect, the students accessed more learning resources than they did before projects, and they employed more learning skills/strategies. In the psychological aspect, during project work, the students had a much more positive attitude toward learning English, and the students were highly motivated. As for the political-critical aspect, the students had more choices of both learning contents and learning methods. And with the socio-cultural aspect, the students interacted more often with their friends and their teacher not just in but also out of the classroom, and they collaborated in more learning activities. The findings in this study seemed to support the arguments by many scholars that project work develops autonomy for learners in their learning. Thomas (2000), Stoller (2002) and Allan and Stoller (2005) share the point that project work results in building up learner autonomy. The findings in this study also made contribution to the previous studies (Chong, 2003; Villa and Armstrong, 2004; Ramires, 2014; Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin, 2017; and Nguyen Van Loi, 2017) that the implementation of projects into the learning process enhanced the students’ autonomy.

Obviously, the presentation of the findings and the discussions above showed that the implementation of projects brought the students “a new learning environment” (Reinders & White, 2011). This new learning space was filled with more learning opportunities. They had more choices for what they were going to learn, and they were able to decide themselves how to carry out their learning activities. It could be seen that this new learning situation exercised the students’ freedom in learning which used to be rare in the traditional education practice. This argument was supported by Littlejohn (1985), and in accordance with Benson’s (2012) suggestion on creating learning situations for learners to take some control of their learning.

It was also found that the new learning environment in doing projects featured the impact of technology. Throughout the application of the project work, all forms of technology in its current availability (websites, mobile apps, online resources, social networks, smartphones, computers) were identified to be present in the students’ learning activities. Technology also provided opportunities for interaction, and support for learning outside formal contexts. This was proved by the students’ use of popular mobile applications such as Facebook messenger, Zalo, or Google E-mails in interacting and communicating with the teacher and the group members. The interpretation seemed to be supported by Reinders & White (2011) that technology offers increased affordances for autonomous learning. At the same time, the findings related to the prominence of mobile technologies were consistent with the assumption by Stockwell & Reinders (2019) that learners would be motivated to use their mobile devices to carry out the app-based learning activities. It was found that majority of the video making projects the students employed the applications in their smartphones. Although the focus of this study was not on the connection of technology and motivation, it was recognized that technology positively affected the aspects of the students’ learning and the development of learner autonomy.

The study demonstrated that the application of projects into the learning process yielded tangle results, and that the project work is worth being used not only to promote the aspects of learner autonomy but also to change and transform the students into the new learners exhibiting good qualities. Along the noticeable the positive changes in motivation and interaction in learning, it was found that there was increased strategy use and enhanced psychology. This study supports Wenden (1991) and White (2008) who strongly believe in the interconnectedness of learning strategies and learner autonomy that when learners master learning strategies, their aspects of autonomy will be enhanced. The findings in the students show that the students demonstrated lots of learning strategies ranging from cognitive strategies to metacognitive strategies and socio/affective strategies.

To conclude, the project work application in this study represents an important means of promoting learner autonomy. The study demonstrated the ongoing relevance of learner autonomy research, and strengthened the tenuous link between theory, research, and practice in the field of learner autonomy.

## 5.2. Implications

The study employed the project work as an intervention tool to promote learner autonomy, hence, the implications and recommendations are presented in two main areas: researching learning autonomy and implementing project work.

Learner autonomy is recognized as a multiple-perspective concept. Therefore, in terms of researching learner autonomy, first, it is suggested that defining autonomy and pinning it down into smaller components is necessary. This helps to establish a theoretical framework throughout the study. And by doing so the assessment of learner autonomy can be easier. Second, using multiple data sets and employing different data collection tools in a study is essential. This is because students’ autonomous learning behaviors can be shaped and demonstrated in different learning situations and environments. Therefore, the mixed methods design and the employment of data collection and analysis in this study should be a useful reference for other studies.

The results in this study proves that projects can make students be more motivated in learning, have a better attitude towards the learning, use more skills to do the learning tasks, and take advantage of the learning resources, and interact more and collaborate in more learning activities. Therefore, project work can possibly be a fruitful approach in not just learning English as a foreign language but also in other subjects. And application of project word can be feasible not just in the context of the research institution of this study but also in other EFL contexts.

The enhancement of learner autonomy identified above among the students gave more evidence for the effectiveness of project work implementation in this study. Based on this, there are some implications for applying projects into the learning process. First, the purpose of using projects should be taken into consideration before the implementation. In this study, projects were employed to stimulate learner autonomy. However, with different purposes in other studies, the focus in projects can be changed. Next, it is recommended to choose an appropriate model of projects to serve the established purpose. Finally, the application of projects in this study stressed the teacher’s supporting roles during the whole process. Hence, it is suggested that teachers should specify clearly the all the activities and the responsibilities of both teacher and students in those activities. By doing so, teachers can give better assistance to their students.

During project work, it is noticed that majority of the students uses online resources, mobile phones, and mobile applications for video recording or for looking for meanings of new words. This implies the indispensable role of technology in the students’ learning. Therefore, for application of more compilated projects which involve using more advanced technology, there are three recommendations. First, teachers should seek experienced peers for better support. Second, there should be training of technological skills for students. And last, but best, teachers should familiarize themselves with technological tools in various contexts in which learners can be expected to use.

## 5.3. Suggestions for Further Research

Learner autonomy is identified as a multi-faced concept. There are still many missing components in the conceptual framework of learner autonomy in this study: awareness, willingness, confidence, control, responsibility, engagement, etc. There should be more research on how project work promotes these ignored autonomy components.

This study focused on investigating the enhancement of eight components of learner autonomy through the implementation of projects which were access to learning resources, use of learning skills/strategies, attitudes towards learning English, motivation in learning English, choices of learning contents, choices of learning methods, interaction and collaboration. However, the interrelationship of the components was not examined closely. How the components connect to each other and how they affect each other in the process of applying projects should also be investigated.

The subjects of this study were non-English majors. A different research project would be applied to participants from other backgrounds would be interesting. Such focus would help further identify the effectiveness of the project work in developing learner autonomy.

**THESIS-RELATED PUBLICATIONS**

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