Fostering Learner Autonomy in Vietnamese Higher Education: What Factors to Be Considered?

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy is widely recognized as a significant goal for tertiary education in enabling learners to become lifelong learners. To achieve this goal, it is crucial to identify what factors support or impede learner autonomy. This study, therefore, aims to explore influencing factors by collecting data from 420 English majors at a university in the south of Vietnam, using questionnaire surveys and focus group interviews. Its results show that motivation and teachers' teaching styles and requirements are the two most influential factors, representing internal and external elements, respectively. Internal factors are found to be more influential than external ones, with eight out of nine identified as very influential (i.e., motivation, learning attitudes, knowledge of the subjects, language proficiency, learning styles, learning goals, preferences for self-study, learning methods/techniques). Family expectation emerged as a new external element contributing to learner autonomy. Discussion about the influence level and suggestions for facilitating learner autonomy are presented.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy (LA) has long been of great interest to language educators and has become increasingly significant as the focus of education has shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered education (Ciekanski, 2007; Little, 2007). It has also been suggested that LA facilitates target language performance with a great level of confidence (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). A great deal of effort has been made to measure LA (Halabi, 2018; Hermagustiana & Anggriyani, 2020) and to identify factors affecting LA (Arfae, 2017; Benson, 2013; Chen, Warden, & Chang, 2005; Dang, 2012; Micallef, 2016; Nakata, 2011; L. Nguyen, 2012; Yasmin, Naseem, & Abas, 2020). The existing body of literature also suggests that the practice of autonomous learning and factors affecting LA change according to the specific cultural and educational context (Yildirim, 2008).

In the context of Vietnam, LA needs promotion, especially in higher education (Dang, 2010), and in order to foster LA, it is essential to identify factors that impact its development. Although there have been a number of investigations into factors, both internal and external,

that may support or hamper the development of LA in the Vietnamese tertiary education context. They have either been conducted more than a decade ago (e.g., Dang, 2010; Nguyen, 2012) or employed quantitative-based approaches employing only closed-ended questionnaires (Nguyen et al., 2022).

As such, findings about the influential factors and their levels of influence on learners' LA are unlikely to be up-to-date or explored in any depth. Those factors considered as impeding LA a decade ago (e.g., education policies, testing, and assessment system, school rules and conventions, teachers' teaching styles, and availability of learning materials, to name just a few) might no longer be an issue after substantial changes in educational policy in the last decade. In particular, in 2013, Vietnam passed Resolution 29, one of the country's most fundamental and comprehensive education reforms, that put the development of Vietnam's education system at the top of socioeconomic development plans (Le, Han, Khaing, & Farrar, 2022). One of the most prominent reforms in Resolution 29 is the transformation of the testing and assessment system applied since 2015. Specifically, the university entrance exams were merged with the High School National Graduation Examinations.

According to the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, the implementation of Resolution 29 is an effort to relieve pressure on students and allow teachers to focus more on skills and application rather than being restricted to teaching for testing. Given such a drastic change to the Vietnamese educational context over the last decade, there is a need to re-examine factors that might support or impede the development of LA among Vietnamese learners in higher education. To guide this study and address the identified gaps in the literature, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What factors influence the development of learner autonomy among Vietnamese university students?
2. To what extent do these factors influence the development of learner autonomy?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Conceptualization of Learner Autonomy

Despite numerous attempts to define LA (Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981; Littlewood, 1999), a universally established definition remains elusive, with the concept still thought of as being 'fuzzy' (Dam, 2000) or 'abstract' (Smith, 2007). There are variations of the definitions of LA in the literature; however, the concept seems to be widely considered as a 'multidimensional' construct. From a *technical* perspective, LA is described as consisting of two sub-dimensions, behavioural and situational (Benson, 2013). The behavioral sub-dimension, which is based on Holec's (1981, p. 3) definition as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning,' is elaborated further as the act of learning a language on one's own without the aid of a teacher. The situational sub-dimension refers to 'the situations in which learners are obliged to take charge of their own learning' (Benson, 2013, p. 19), which could include learners' physical settings or their circumstances.

From the *psychological* perspective, LA is seen as the learners' capacity to take responsibility for their own learning (Benson, 2013; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). This capacity involves personal attributes such as motivational (learners' desire or willingness to learn), metacognitive (learners' use of metacognitive strategies), and affective (learners' anxiety and self-esteem) sub-dimensions. As Benson (2013) further clarified, this capacity is not innate but fundamentally acquired through a purposeful learning process.

LA, viewed from the *political-critical* angle, is concerned with learners' ideology surrounding the power of group autonomy over individual autonomy (e.g., the teacher's role as authority) and their freedom in the classroom (e.g., learners' freedom to choose what to learn and with the consent of teachers) (Benson, 2013). Learners' ideologies may influence the individual's attitudes to their own learning (Murase, 2015). Finally, from the *socio-cultural* perspective, LA is understood as learners' abilities in terms of social interactions with peers and teachers (Oxford, 2003). Though often regarded as independent learning, LA does not necessarily mean complete independence from peers and teachers but interdependence instead (Little, 1990). Moreover, LA is concerned with cultural aspects which are often assumed to be compatible with Western culture.

Despite LA being defined differently depending on various perspectives, it is suggested that research into the topic should cover as many angles as possible (Oxford, 2003) since they are not opposite but, in fact, complement each other (Halabi, 2018). Therefore, for the present study, in order to explore the factors that affect English major students' development of LA, the concept of LA is incorporated from all four dimensions discussed above (technical, psychological, political-critical, and socio-cultural). By integrating these perspectives, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how external and internal factors interact to influence English major students' development of LA. This holistic approach ensures that all potential influences-environmental, psychological, socio-political, or cultural-are taken into account, offering a nuanced view of the factors affecting LA.

2.2 The Importance of Developing Learner Autonomy

It has been widely acknowledged that LA improves the quality of language learning, prepares individuals for life-long learning, and allows learners to make the best use of learning opportunities in and out of the classroom (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Although LA refers more to learners' personal attributes (Benson, 2013), the learning process, which reflects the factors that need to be in place for these attributes to develop, plays an important role. According to Esch and John (2003), the process of learning takes place over four stages. The first involves learners' ability and willingness to learn. The second stage is that there must be something new for learners to learn and experience. The third requires learners to analyze and synthesize information. The final stage is when learners apply what has been learned to other situations. The suggestion that learners must be willing and able to learn matches the main characteristics of LA in Holec's (1981) definition: learners' self-initiation and self-regulation. To conclude, fostering LA not only enhances language proficiency but also equips learners with essential skills for independent and lifelong learning, ensuring their adaptability in diverse contexts.

2.3 Factors Affecting Learner Autonomy

A literature review has shown that numerous factors might influence LA, which can be classified into two categories: external and internal. This categorization is justified by the nature of the influences on LA. Internal factors stem from within the learner and directly affect their capacity to take responsibility for their learning. External factors, on the other hand, originate from the surrounding environment. The first external factor identified in many studies is policies on language education (Arfae, 2017; Benson, 2000; Le, 2013; Yasmin et

al., 2020). If ELT (English language teaching) in a particular setting is test-oriented, textbook-based, or teacher-centered, LA will most likely be negatively affected.

LA might be also hampered by institutional rules or regulations, curriculums, examinations, school conventions, and classroom practice (Benson, 2000; Jing, 2006; Micallef, 2016; Nakata, 2011). Interview data from teacher participants in Nakata's (2011) study show that institutions are not adequately flexible, and this limits the ability of teachers to allow students to set their own goals. The data also indicate that exam pressure leads to exam-oriented teaching and learning, which impedes the development of LA. In the same vein, Chen et al. (2005) highlight high pressure in the learning environment at the tertiary level in the specific context of Hong Kong, claiming that a huge workload will limit the development of LA. This factor, according to C. T. Nguyen (2012), seems to stem from the Confucian cultural heritage, which has been criticized for its teacher-centered teaching model. Accordingly, culture can be seen as more or less a direct factor influencing learners' learning styles closely associated with LA. Apart from the cultural factor, in another study in a similar educational context – EFL learning at a Chinese university – Jing (2006) identified societal expectations as a constraining factor, arguing that learners tend to accommodate societal expectations and 'take on roles as short-term passive receivers of knowledge and pragmatic opportunists for short-cut learning methods.'

Another external factor found to potentially impact LA is teaching in general (Benson, 2000; Dang, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2022). Benson (2000) elaborated that this is about teaching styles and how related resources, accessibility of learning aids, and activities are utilized. Teachers should play a facilitating role that enables learners to manage their own learning (William, 2003). L. T. C. Nguyen (2012) has also stated that LA is significantly dependent on teachers' willingness to enhance autonomous learning while teaching. It has been sometimes observed that teachers are reluctant to support LA or even hold back controlling behavior as teachers as they see it as a challenge to their authority (Hermagustiana & Anggriyani, 2020; Wood & Millichamp, 2000). Peer achievement has also been found to be a potential contributing factor to LA (Dang, 2012; T. A. Nguyen et al., 2022), albeit not significant. Competitiveness with peers in learning is often discussed as an incentive to foster LA.

Apart from external factors, some internal factors have been confirmed to be contributing to LA development. Learners' motivation is widely discussed as the first and most important contributing factor in many studies (Dang, 2012; Le, 2013; T. A. Nguyen et al., 2022; Yasmin et al., 2020). Sources of motivation might come from personal interest in the subject or a desire for an outstanding profile for professional development. Motivation might also stem from learners' awareness of the importance of the English language (Yasmin et al., 2020). Other factors that might boost or impede LA are personal preferences and learning attitudes (Dang, 2012; T. A. Nguyen et al., 2022). Students with a strong preference for self-study tend to take a more proactive role in deciding what to learn and how to learn it. Similarly, the more positive learners' attitudes are, the more engaged they are in their learning. In addition, learning goals, both short-term and long-term, have been found to be a contributing factor to learners' LA (Jing, 2006). Learners with clear learning objectives tend to choose appropriate learning activities and materials proactively to obtain their goals.

In contrast, results from N. T. Nguyen's (2012) study of Asian students suggest that lacking sufficient knowledge and language proficiency impose potential constraints on the process of developing LA. Learners' skills in using technology have also been identified as

a determinant that could either boost or impede learners' LA (Dang, 2012). Though Dang (2012) identifies technology skills as a determining factor in an online learning context, the present study assumes that proficient use of technology would support learners in their search for learning materials, which in turn facilitates and supports their autonomous learning.

The factors discussed above are believed to contribute meaningfully towards fostering LA in different educational contexts. However, the factors and their levels of influence on learners' LA change according to specific cultural and educational contexts (Yildirim, 2008). As mentioned earlier, studies on this issue investigating EFL learners in the Vietnamese educational context (e.g., Dang, 2010; N. T. Nguyen, 2012) had been conducted before Resolution 29, which is believed to have brought about comprehensive educational change, after being passed in 2015, and T. A. Nguyen et al.'s (2022) study is the most up-to-date on this issue. Yet, given the fact that a close-ended questionnaire is the only instrument used in T. A. Nguyen et al.'s study, we endeavored to re-examine factors, as perceived by language learners in higher education, that impact their LA and, more importantly, dig deep into why they are determining factors.

Given the discussion above, the conceptual framework of this study focuses on the exploration of internal factors (e.g., language proficiency, subject knowledge, motivation, technological skills, learning attitudes, preference for self-study, learning styles, learning methods, and learning goals) and external factors (e.g., teachers' teaching styles and requirements, peers, classroom rules and conventions, availability of learning materials, accessibility of learning aids, curriculum, testing and assessment systems, school regulations, education policies, work/society requirements, and Vietnamese culture). Additionally, the study seeks to identify other potential internal and external factors unique to the evolving context of Vietnamese higher education and to provide deeper insights into their influence on learner autonomy.

3. METHOD

To investigate the factors that affect learners' LA, we employed a mixed-methods design with a questionnaire survey and focus-group interviews. The questionnaire was self-developed based on the factors identified in previous studies (e.g., Dang, 2012; Le, 2013; T. A. Nguyen et al., 2022; T. C. Nguyen, 2012). The purpose of building this questionnaire was to gather learners' views on factors and their levels of impact on learners' LA. The main part of the questionnaire consists of 20 items (9 items on internal factors and 11 items on external ones), using six-level Likert scales running from 0 (not at all influential) to 5 (extremely influential). The draft questionnaire was reviewed by two lecturers. It was then designed in Google Forms and piloted on 220 students. All the items were found to be reliable and valid.

The final version of the questionnaire was then distributed to students of all four years in an English faculty program at a university in the south of Vietnam (the target population was 536 students). To collect the data, we visited each class during the break, explaining the purpose of the study and the questionnaire to the students and asking them to complete the questionnaire on a voluntary basis. All the students present in the classes agreed to participate in the study and completed the questionnaire in about 10 minutes on average. The total number of valid questionnaires completed was 420, accounting for 78.36% of the target population.

After the data were collected, the responses from Google Forms were extracted in an Excel file, which was then cleaned and imported into the IBM SPSS Statistics 26 Program for analysis. Mean scores were calculated to identify the factors and their levels of influence on learners' LA. Mean scores will be interpreted based on the interpretation of the mean range in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Interpretation of mean range

Scale	Mean Range	Verbal Interpretation
0	0 - 0.83	Not at all influential
1	0.84 - 1.66	Slightly influential
2	1.67 - 2.50	Somewhat influential
3	2.51 - 3.33	Moderately influential
4	3.34 - 4.17	Highly influential
5	4.18 - 5.0	Extremely influential

To ensure the reliability of the Likert-scale items in the questionnaire, we checked the Cronbach's alpha coefficients (α) for the two subscales (i.e., internal and external factors). The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Reliability statistics of the two subscales

Subscale	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Internal factors (IF)	.884	9
External factors (EF)	.909	11

As can be seen from Table 2, the Cronbach's alphas for both subscales (internal factors and external factors) are very high (.884 and .909, respectively), much higher than the required threshold of .700. The questionnaire can thus be considered reliable. The last question in the survey asked participants whether they would agree to participate in a focus group interview. Due to the scope of the study, we decided to select three student participants from each year among those volunteers. The selection was based on the student's GPA in the previous semester; to be specific, we selected one who had a high GPA, one with an average GPA, and one with a low GPA from each year. Four focus group interviews were then conducted with 12 students across four years, as presented in Table 3, with each focus group interview time ranging from 30 to 45 minutes.

Table 3
Participants of the focus group interviews

Focus Groups	Number of Students	Student Participants
Year 1	3	Students 1A, 1B, 1C
Year 2	3	Students 2A, 2B, 2C
Year 3	3	Students 3A, 3B, 3C
Year 4	3	Students 4A, 4B, 4C
Total	12	

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to gain a deeper understanding of the internal and external factors that influence the students' LA (see Appendix B for the interview protocol). All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. After that, both of the researchers read through the transcripts to identify the main themes that emerged from the students' responses. The interview data were mainly used to crosscheck with the questionnaire data and give the researchers an insight into the students' perceptions.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Internal Factors

Table 4 shows the mean scores of each item in the internal factors (IF) subscale across the four years, with the highest mean scores highlighted in bold.

Table 4
Mean scores of the internal factors

	Year 1 (N = 125)		Year 2 (N = 105)		Year 3 (N = 120)		Year 4 (N = 70)		Total (N = 420)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
IF1. Language proficiency	3.18	1.088	3.57	1.142	3.63	1.276	**3.77**	0.981	3.51	1.159
IF2. Knowledge of the subjects	3.29	1.007	3.72	0.985	3.70	1.127	**3.81**	0.873	3.60	1.035
IF3. Motivation	3.72	1.242	4.07	1.129	4.06	1.197	**4.23**	0.951	**3.99**	1.167
IF4. Skills in using technology	3.23	1.192	3.28	1.236	3.18	1.432	**3.29**	1.264	3.24	1.283
IF5. Learning attitudes	3.65	1.226	**4.15**	1.090	3.75	1.147	4.03	0.932	**3.87**	1.140
IF6. Preferences for self-study	3.34	1.270	3.60	1.198	3.21	1.315	**3.69**	1.303	3.42	1.280
IF7. Learning style	3.27	1.279	**3.82**	1.207	3.33	1.386	3.79	1.089	3.51	1.284
IF8. Learning methods/ techniques	3.23	1.226	3.58	1.246	3.29	1.387	**3.61**	1.171	3.40	1.277
IF9. Learning goals	3.31	1.399	3.73	1.120	3.24	1.426	**3.86**	1.120	3.49	1.319

As can be seen from Table 4, *Motivation* (M=3.99) and *Learning attitudes* (M=3.87) emerge as the two most prominent internal factors affecting learners' LA across the four years. All other factors are also identified as highly influential, except for *Skills in using technology* (M=3.24), which was rated as a determinant with a moderate level of influence. When asked whether *Skill in using technology* has some impact on the LA level, one student shared: '*When you are good at using technology to search for information, you can easily find what you need, and that boosts your confidence and independence in learning.*' It is interesting to see that Year 4 students tended to view most of these internal factors as being more influential than the other groups of students, except for *Learning attitudes* and *Learning styles*, which received higher ratings from Year 2 students.

From the focus group interviews, students from Years 1, 2, and 3 share the idea that *Motivation* is a very important factor in determining their LA level. One stated that '*Motivation has a significant impact. When I'm highly motivated and interested in something, I take the initiative to dive deeper.'* [Student 2B] Two Year 4 students, however, pointed out that

motivation derived from having an interest in the subject is important, but being able to apply their knowledge and forming the habit of self-study are more important:

Motivation derived from having an interest in the subject does not have much influence on my learning autonomy level. If the subject is initially interesting but I cannot see how I can apply the knowledge I learnt in that subject, I will not be able to sustain my learner autonomy level. [Student 4A]

Being merely interested in the subject is not sufficient. It won't last long. You should make self-study a habit to increase your learning autonomy level. [Student 4B]

Although their choice of *learning styles*, *learning methods/techniques*, and *learning goals* suggest they greatly value freedom in promoting autonomous learning, they shared in their interviews that their expectations of having teachers monitor their work and set requirements acted as a momentum to trigger their learning. One remarked:

At this level we are expected to set our own learning goals and choose appropriate learning methods to achieve the goals. This will support our autonomous learning; however, the momentum for learning will reduce gradually if teachers do not check, monitor, or set some requirements of the course. [Student 3A]

As can be seen in Table 4, *language proficiency* and *knowledge of the subjects* are also found from the questionnaire survey to be highly influential in the development of LA. This is validated in the interviews with more than half of the student participants, who shared that '*Those (friends) who are good at language proficiency or have a considerable knowledge of the subjects tend to be more proactive in their learning*' [Student 1A] or '*when I'm good at a subject and having the admiration of friends I strive to learn autonomously to maintain the outstanding position in class.*' [Student 3C]

To determine whether there are any significant differences across the years, Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Tests were run for each of the nine internal factors across Years. Results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

Test statistics for the internal factors

Test Statistics[a,b]				
	Kruskal-Wallis H	**df**	**Asymp. Sig.**	**Effect Size (E^2)**
IF1. Language proficiency	19.306	3	.000	0.046
IF2. Knowledge of the subjects	22.193	3	.000	0.053
IF3. Motivation	10.979	3	.012	0.026
IF4. Skills in using technology	.194	3	.979	0.000
IF5. Learning attitudes	14.824	3	.002	0.035
IF6. Preferences for self-study	9.884	3	.020	0.024
IF7. Learning style	17.412	3	.001	0.042
IF8. Learning methods/ techniques	7.351	3	.062	0.018
IF9. Learning goals	13.521	3	.004	0.032

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Year

As shown in Table 5, there are significant differences (p < 0.05) in students' perception of the influence of internal factors on their LA across Years for all the factors except *Skills in using technology* and *Learning methods/ techniques.* However, these effect sizes are considered small according to (Cohen, 1992).

4.2 External Factors

A slightly different pattern can be found for the external factors, with the mean scores ranging from 2.92 to 3.87 (see Table 6). Four out of 11 factors were found to be not very influential, which may indicate that from the students' viewpoint, the external factors are not as influential as the internal ones.

Table 6
Mean scores of the external factors

	Year 1 (N = 125)		Year 2 (N = 105)		Year 3 (N = 120)		Year 4 (N = 70)		Total (N = 420)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
EF1. Teachers' teaching styles and requirements	3.64	1.160	3.95	1.180	3.91	1.195	**4.10**	0.903	**3.87**	1.145
EF2. Peers	3.62	1.230	**3.67**	1.230	3.62	1.342	3.53	1.126	**3.61**	1.243
EF3. Classroom rules and conventions	**3.26**	1.206	3.14	1.289	3.09	1.270	3.07	1.255	3.15	1.251
EF4. Availability of learning materials	3.45	1.208	3.63	1.250	3.26	1.247	**3.79**	0.991	**3.50**	1.208
EF5. Accessibility of learning aids	3.53	1.255	3.68	1.189	3.58	1.358	**3.83**	1.154	**3.63**	1.253
EF6. Curriculum/schemes of work	3.33	1.134	3.50	1.110	3.32	1.296	**3.64**	1.036	3.42	1.165
EF7. Testing and assessment systems	3.47	1.215	3.81	1.110	3.48	1.341	**3.96**	1.122	**3.64**	1.225
EF8. School rules and conventions	**3.22**	1.255	2.95	1.450	2.72	1.513	2.74	1.471	2.93	1.428
EF9. Education policies	**3.30**	1.233	3.01	1.390	2.78	1.562	2.90	1.436	3.01	1.416
EF10. Work/society requirements	3.41	1.271	3.70	1.255	3.23	1.364	**3.74**	1.138	3.49	1.286
EF11. Vietnamese culture	**3.10**	1.549	3.01	1.458	2.66	1.678	2.93	1.535	2.92	1.568

Table 6 shows that the external factors considered by the students as having the most influence on their LA are *teachers' teaching styles and requirements* and *testing and assessment systems*. Factors also identified as influencing, but only moderately, include *Vietnamese culture, School rules and conventions*, *Education policy,* and *Classroom rules and conventions.*

The findings from Table 6 align with the insights shared by students in the focus group interviews, where the influence of teachers on LA was prominently highlighted. It is interesting that two of the interviewees pointed out two opposite impacts teachers have – one positive and one negative: '*If the teacher has an interesting teaching method, I will feel*

interested in the lesson and will be more proactive in learning' [Student 2A] and *'My teachers can have a great impact on me, but in a negative way. If I don't like a teacher, I will lose my interest in that subject, even stop learning it altogether'* [Student 1B]. From the students' perspectives, the testing and assessment system in Vietnam is still exam-oriented, which has a negative impact on learners' LA, creating passive students. One shared, '*we only learn what has been taught… if not taught, it is not necessary to know'* [Student 4C].

Family expectation emerged as a factor that somewhat shapes learners' LA, as shared in the interviews. Although all student participants agreed that at this level they are expected to be self-regulated in their learning, four of them admitted that their family expectation creates considerable momentum to push them forward to achieve good grades. They stated that '*My family has a high expectation of me, so I strive to learn to obtain good results'* [Student 2B], or '*I'm expected to be a good role model for my younger siblings'* [Student 1A], or '*Around me, my relatives are successful and earn a lot of money. They check in on me, so I feel the need to take the initiative in learning to do better.*' [Student 4B]

Table 7 summarizes the results of Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Tests across Years on each of the external factors.

Table 7
Test Statistics for the external factors

Test Statistics[a,b]				
	Kruskal-Wallis H	**df**	**Asymp. Sig.**	**Effect Size (E^2)**
EF1. Teachers' teaching styles and requirements	10.298	3	.016	0.025
EF2. Peers	1.338	3	.720	0.003
EF3. Classroom rules and conventions	1.845	3	.605	0.004
EF4. Availability of learning materials	10.908	3	.012	0.026
EF5. Accessibility of learning aids	2.962	3	.397	0.007
EF6. Curriculum/schemes of work	4.661	3	.198	0.011
EF7. Testing and assessment systems	11.120	3	.011	0.027
EF8. School rules and conventions	7.876	3	.049	0.019
EF9. Education policies	7.309	3	.063	0.017
EF10. Work/society requirements	10.570	3	.014	0.025
EF11. Vietnamese culture	4.724	3	.193	0.011

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Year

As shown in Table 7, there are not many significant differences in students' perceptions of the influence of external factors on their LA across Years. The only factors that have significant differences (p < 0.05) across Years are *Teachers' teaching styles and*

requirements, *Availability of learning materials*, *Testing, and assessment systems*, *School rules and conventions*, and *Work/society requirements*, and these effect sizes are considered small according to Cohen (1992).

5. DISCUSSION

Both qualitative and quantitative data show remarkable consistency concerning which internal and external factors influence learners' LA. The results highlight *motivation* as the most influential factor (M=3.99), which broadly supports the work of other studies in the Vietnamese educational context (e.g., Dang, 2010; Nguyen, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2022), in other Asian educational contexts such as China (Jing, 2006), Saudi Arabia (Halabi, 2018), and Pakistan (Yasmin et al., 2020), and in Western educational contexts such as Canada (Arfae, 2017). This result is predictable yet meaningful. It suggests that in whatever educational context, Western or Asian, and through whatever changes in educational policy, *motivation* remains the most influential factor concerning learners' LA. That means that educational reforms aiming at fostering learners' LA need to take into consideration measures to generate or boost their motivation. Raising learners' awareness of the importance of their English specialization and obtaining an outstanding professional development profile seems to be a simple but effective solution for cultivating their motivation. Granting learners autonomous decision-making in learning activities, learning methods/techniques, and learning preferences could also enhance motivation and engagement, thereby fostering autonomy.

The study findings show that all internal factors are highly influential to the development of learners' LA, except for *skills in using technology*, which have a moderate impact. This result aligns with existing studies on different educational contexts, including Vietnamese (e.g., Dang, 2010; Nguyen, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2022). Though not significantly contributing to learners' LA as much as other internal factors, *Skills in using technology* is identified as a factor in offline learning as well. This is understandable since computer competence enables learners to build bridges to knowledge in the outside world, providing them the freedom to approach learning materials to enable them to achieve their own goals. Learning is not confined to what is taught in the classroom but is extended to the broader world, enabling learners to independently seek out resources that align with their interests and needs.

It is evident from the study findings that external factors are not as influential as internal ones, with four out of 11 factors identified as not very influential. This finding also explains why the definition of LA is mainly from the psychological perspective, emphasizing personal attributes or the 'self' factor. However, while evaluating personal attributes as highly beneficial to LA, the learners in the present study assert teachers' roles and the requirements they set as having a pivotal influence on fostering students' LA. This may sound contradictory as, on the one hand, they express how they expect the freedom to choose learning styles and learning methods/techniques and how they expect teachers' roles to shift from controller to facilitator while, on the other hand, they hope their teachers will monitor their students' work and set concrete requirements as an incentive for their learning. However, it is reasonable, as able to 'take charge of one's own learning' (Holec, 1981, p.3) does not necessarily mean that learners are completely independent from teachers (Little, 1990). Teachers' presence as facilitators or counselors is broadly meaningful in fostering and maintaining learners' levels of autonomy, and this partly

explains why *Teachers' teaching styles and requirements* were rated as the most influential external factor. Innovative teaching methods and classroom activities that teachers employ might contribute enormously to learners' LA. Moreover, it is hard to foster learners' autonomous learning if the teachers who are in direct contact with them are not fully aware of the importance of LA and do not encourage innovative ideas in their teaching practice.

Testing and assessment systems were also found to be greatly influential in mediating language learners' LA in the present study, which corroborates the findings of a great deal of previous work (e.g., Dang, 2010; N. T. Nguyen, 2012; T. A. Nguyen et al., 2022). What comes as a surprise is that after a great deal of effort to alleviate the burden of exams, as claimed by the MOET (Ministry of Education and Training) in Vietnam, in the learners' views, examinations still pose significant challenges to students in their efforts to promote autonomous learning. It seems that drastic changes at the macro level do not considerably change learners' views and experiences of examination pressure. Educational reforms to foster autonomous learning in order to educate learners toward lifelong learning might also need to employ a bottom-up approach; that is, end-of-semester exams should not focus solely on what has been taught but include room for learners' demonstrations of creativity and application of what has been learnt. Certainly, that could not be done without the involvement of teachers, who contribute to constructing students' social and intellectual experiences through instruction, pedagogical activities, motivation, encouragement, and support in class (Farmer, Lines, & Hamm, 2011). If teachers appreciate and reward students' innovative ideas or inspire them to learn by self-exploring, learners will be encouraged to take initiative in their learning.

The study findings reflect those of Dang (2010) and T. A. Nguyen et al. (2022), who also found that *Peers*, another external factor, was a determinant in learners' autonomous learning. This factor impacts learners' LA in two aspects. Firstly, interaction and support from peers would serve as catalysts for nurturing LA since autonomy is not exclusively individualistic but can be enhanced collectively through negotiation and collaboration. Secondly, peers' achievements can have both a positive and negative impact on learners' autonomous learning. For some, the achievements of peers would stimulate them to be more proactive in their learning to achieve par with their peers, while for others, those achievements would discourage them from learning if, however hard they try, they could not catch up with their peers. Accordingly, actions taken might start with facilitating peer interaction and support to boost learners' LA.

Although *classroom rules and conventions*, *school rules and conventions*, and *policy in language education* were reported as constraints on LA in Benson's (2012) model, and confirmed in many other studies as strong determinants (Arfae, 2017; Micallef, 2016; N. T. Nguyen, 2012; Yasmin et al., 2020), the student participants in this study identified their LA as not highly dependent on the washback effects of those factors. Several elements could explain this positive finding. First and foremost, Resolution 29 on educational reforms, which claims to change the education system towards openness and flexibility, might have begun to take effect, enabling Vietnamese learners to develop their potential, their creativity, and their capacity for self-learning. Second, the mushroom growth of international schools and universities with liberal Western rules might somehow impact the implementation by teachers and educators of schools and classroom rules and the conventions of public universities. The learners thus seemed to experience fewer constraints imposed on them by school and classroom rules.

Family expectation has emerged as a new external factor that has not been reported in previous studies. Though its level of impact might not be as significant as that of the other factors, its presence cannot be doubted. Regarding education, aside from the external factors pertaining to the educational environment and society, family plays a vital role, especially in Asian countries, contributing to learners' development of LA in both positive and negative ways through encouragement and pressure. This factor came into view from the focus group interviews, and future studies might need to be conducted to quantitatively evaluate its level of impact.

The findings highlight the importance of cultural context in shaping learners' LA. In the Vietnamese context, family expectations and cultural norms play a significant role in shaping how learners approach their education. While motivation remains a key driver of LA, the influence of family, societal pressures, and the traditional focus on exam-based assessments show that cultural factors cannot be overlooked. The shift toward more flexible educational models, alongside the growing influence of international educational systems, may gradually reduce the constraints imposed by traditional classroom rules and social expectations, fostering a more autonomous learning environment. This evolving cultural landscape is likely to have a lasting impact on the development of LA in the future.

Building on the insights from the discussion, some practical implications of these findings for educators, policymakers, and learners themselves are suggested. Firstly, educators should recognize the crucial role of motivation in enhancing LA and consider strategies that can cultivate it in students. This includes helping students understand the importance of their academic and professional goals, as well as providing opportunities for them to make autonomous decisions about their learning methods and preferences. Teachers also need to be aware of their role as facilitators, guiding students in ways that promote independence while maintaining support. Furthermore, educational reforms at the policy level should not only focus on reducing the burden of exams but also introduce assessment systems that encourage creativity and application of knowledge, helping students to demonstrate their autonomy. Additionally, fostering peer collaboration and positive interaction can further strengthen autonomy, as students benefit from both individual growth and collective learning experiences. Lastly, it is crucial for policymakers to consider the role of cultural contexts, such as family expectations and societal pressures, in shaping students' motivation and autonomy, ensuring that reforms align with the cultural values and practices of the region.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study explored factors that impact learners' LA through questionnaire surveys and focus group interviews. *Motivation* and *teachers' teaching styles and requirements* have been found to be the most influential internal and external factors in learners' LA. Overall, internal factors are more influential than external ones, with eight out of nine identified as very influential (i.e., *motivation, learning attitudes, knowledge of the subjects, language proficiency, learning styles, learning goals, preferences for self-study, Learning methods/techniques*). Concerning external factors identified in the study, apart from *teachers' teaching styles and requirements,* other greatly influencing factors include *testing and assessment systems, peers, accessibility of learning aids, availability of learning materials, curriculum/schemes of work,* and *work/society requirements.* The emergence of *family expectation* as an external factor impacting learners' LA is a valuable contribution of

this study to the theoretical background relevant to LA in the literature. This work contributes to the existing knowledge of LA by updating the factors and their levels of influence and by suggesting *family expectation* as an additional element.

Taken together, these results suggest that to foster LA, one needs to take into consideration solutions to generate learners' motivation, which might stem from the interest in and awareness of the importance of the subjects. It can also stem from the awareness of obtaining an outstanding profile for professional development. This study strengthens the idea that teachers have a critical role to play in fostering learners' LA. Instead of occupying the central position of the classroom all the time, it is advisable for teachers to leave that position for learners, providing them the support they need and opportunities to develop their self-regulation. Insights gained from this study may be of assistance to policymakers in their adjustment of education policy, to language educators in their choice of teaching styles and strategies, to university administrators in their implementation of school and classroom rules, and to language learners in their learning process to develop towards lifelong learners.

One limitation of the study is cultural factors specific to the Vietnamese context may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational settings. Furthermore, the study focuses primarily on students' perspectives, and the views of teachers and policymakers were not included. To gain a holistic understanding of the factors affecting LA, future studies could also include perspectives from teachers and policymakers.

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APPENDIX A

LANGUAGE LEARNER AUTONOMY SURVEY

Personal information:

1. Gender: □ Male   □ Female
2. Year: □ 1   □ 2   □ 3   □ 4
3. Are you working part-time?   □ Yes □ No
4. Course grades in the previous semester:

   Course 1: ……….. Course 2: ………..   Course 3: ………….   Course 4: ………..

   To what extent do you think the following factors influence your level of learner autonomy?

Internal factors:

		Not at all influential **0**	Slightly influential **1**	Somewhat influential **2**	Moderately influential **3**	Very influential **4**	Extremely influential **5**
1	Language proficiency						
2	Knowledge of the subjects						
3	Motivation						
4	Skills in using technology						
5	Learning attitudes						
6	Preferences for self-study						
7	Learning style						
8	Learning methods/techniques						
9	Learning goals						

External factors:

		Not at all influential **0**	Slightly influential **1**	Somewhat influential **2**	Moderately influential **3**	Very influential **4**	Extremely influential **5**
1	Teachers' teaching styles and requirements						
2	Peers						
3	Classroom rules and conventions						
4	Availability of learning materials						

5	Accessibility of learning aids						
6	Curriculum/schemes of work						
7	Testing and assessment systems						
8	School rules and conventions						
9	Education policies						
10	Work/society requirements						
11	Vietnamese culture						

Appendix B: Interview questions

1. What factors influence your own learner autonomy? (motivation, interest in learning, availability of learning materials, access to learning aids, etc.)
2. What factors will promote your learner autonomy in the university environment you are currently studying in?
3. What factors will limit your learner autonomy in the university environment you are currently studying in?
4. Do you think that learner autonomy is a result of your own habits and routines?
5. Do you think that your interest in the major you have chosen influences your learner autonomy?
6. Do you think that your skills in using technology for learning English affect your learner autonomy? If so, how does it influence it?
7. Do you think that your language proficiency impacts your learner autonomy?
8. Do you think that external factors can influence your learner autonomy?
9. Does your family influence your learner autonomy? If so, how?
10. Do you think that your teachers have an impact on your learner autonomy? If so, how?
11. Do you think that the teaching methods of your teachers influence your learner autonomy? If so, how?
11. Which activities in the classroom will promote or develop your learner autonomy?
12. Do you think that your classmates influence your learner autonomy? If so, how?
13. Does the assessment system affect your learner autonomy? If so, how?
14. Do the demands of your job or society count as factors influencing your learner autonomy? If so, how?
15. Does educational policy affect your learner autonomy? If so, how?
16. Is Vietnamese culture a factor that influences your learner autonomy? If so, how?
17. How would you rate your learner autonomy on a scale from 1 to 10?