



Strategies Used in Learner Autonomy Development in English as a Foreign Language Learning among 9th Grade Students

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Abstract— Recently, teaching and learning languages has largely and directly focused on students' ability to study independently. Therefore, it is necessary for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to develop learner autonomy (LA) in learning. Conducting studies to explore the ability to study autonomously among secondary students is necessary. This study, hence, aimed to explore the 9th grade students' perceptions of their strategies in LA development in learning EFL at a state-owned secondary school (SOSS) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The study involved 152 ninth graders. Both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained through the use of two instruments, namely the questionnaire and interviews. For analyzing the collected data, descriptive statistics and content analysis were employed. The findings of the study revealed that to develop LA, most students used strategies related to identifying learning needs and trying to achieve learning goals, and over half of them used such strategies as setting learning goals and making plans, applying learning strategies, and evaluating the learning process and outcomes. The study also made some recommendations for both teachers and students, as well as their families, with the aim of enhancing students' LA in learning EFL. This study is expected to shed light on methods for language teaching and autonomy-based learning orientation.

Keywords— LA development, EFL, secondary school students, strategies, Vietnamese context

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid global growth of international trade and cooperation has sharply increased the demand for learning foreign languages, including EFL (Teng, 2019). This contributed to the significant increase in the teaching and learning of foreign languages since linguistic skills are highly critical for employment and careers. Therefore, students have to develop learner autonomy (LA) and become autonomous learners in language learning. An autonomous learner is a person who has full capacity and is willing to take charge of their own learning (Gathercole, 1990). They adopt the attitude of an independent learning process in which they are able to choose their own goals, materials, resources, methods, and tasks to achieve their targeted language. They can also determine the objectives by defining the contents and progressions, selecting

methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedures of acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired (Holec, 1981).

However, in most cases, English is taught using the traditional method. The teacher is the center of the classroom, and students become less active but more dependent on the teachers' guidance (Begum & Chowdhury, 2016). They become inactive as they cannot know what they should do in order to improve their language acquisition. In other words, they do not know thoroughly what strategies are used for LA development. Furthermore, although many studies have been conducted to discover strategies used by students in LA development, very few have been conducted to discover what strategies are used by secondary school students in both international and Vietnamese contexts. Therefore, this study aims to

explore the students' perceptions of strategies used in LA development for learning EFL at a secondary school. The study attempted to address the following research question:

To what extent are strategies used for LA development in learning EFL among 9th grade students?

II. A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been a variety of definitions of LA development over the past thirty years. Holec (1981) defined LA development as determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedures of acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired. Benson (2001) also stated there are three main components of LA development: students' ability to take charge of their learning, students' desire to be in control, and a learning environment that supports learner control. According to Rivers and Golonka (2009), LA development consists of the attitude of managing learning independently and actively. Students bend over backwards to set up their own learning program, which includes goals, curriculum, pedagogical methods, and content. Hence, LA development can be identified as self-management with the ability to make decisions, which must be acquired by students. In addition, Little, Dam, and Lengenhausen (2017) defined LA development as the ability to identify and direct one's own learning toward one's own needs.

LA development involves students using a number of learning strategies that they are capable of applying flexibly in different contexts (Cook, 2008). Specifically, students should know their purpose of learning, have insight into what they want in order to be able to decide learning objectives, identify strengths and weaknesses, find support from teachers and peers, and collaborate with others based on their own needs to achieve language acquisition. It is fundamental for autonomous students to identify goals, formulate their own objectives, and change goals to suit their own learning interests and needs. In addition, goals turn out to be a direction to address their needs, as what they want to achieve is in relation to specific goals (Benson, 2011). When students are able to set goals for the learning process, they demonstrate a positive attitude when deciding on learning materials and other resources (Blidi, 2017). Carrying out appropriate learning strategies in relation to specific goals is another aspect that an autonomous student should do to develop learner autonomy. Griffiths (2008). What is more, making and implementing learning strategies for LA development should come to an end with the evaluation of the learning process and the outcomes. Moore (2015) states that an autonomous learner is responsible for the conception of how to evaluate their learning, from which

they acknowledge all the strong and weak aspects of self-learning. Moreover, achievement of goals can enhance students' motivation, which can support LA development (Benson, 2011). Once they achieve set goals, they feel enthusiastic and confident, and they become more motivated as they experience their own value. This contributes to supporting LA's development. Considering all of the above strategies, to develop learner autonomy, a student is encouraged to be responsible for identifying his own learning needs, set learning goals to address those needs, identify resources and materials, apply appropriate learning strategies, and evaluate the learning process and outcomes to achieve learning goals.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research site and participants

The research was conducted at a state-owned secondary school (SOSS) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The school was founded in 2018, and it is training 6th grade to 9th grade students. The total number of students at the school is about 2,150, and the total number of English teachers is 10. Each teacher is in charge of 5–6 classes. Despite the limited facilities and its rural location, the school always puts students at the center of education in a dynamic environment. The sample for this study consisted of 152 ninth grade students from four classes at SOSS. All the students are mature enough to understand and take charge of answering the questionnaire because they are going to complete their secondary level. 81 of them (53.3%) are male, and 71 of them (46.7%) are female. Their ages range from 14 (75%) to 15 (25%). 33 of them (21.7%) have learned English for 3–5 years; 55 of them (36.2%) have spent 6–8 years learning English; and 64 of them (42.1%) have learned English for 9–11 years. All of them spend 3 hours per week studying English at school.

3.2. Research instrument

The current study employed two research instruments, including a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire has two main parts: Part A, with five items, is about participant demographic information. Students were required to give their personal information, including their gender, age, grade, number of years in learning EFL up to now, and number of hours spent learning English in classrooms per week. Part B includes 38 items that delve deeper into students' perceptions of their strategies for LA development in learning EFL. This part uses a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true for me), 2 (seldom true for me), 3 (sometimes true for me), 4 (often true for me), and 5 (always true for me). Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire was .908, so the reliability of the questionnaire is high. Finally, the interview responses used

as qualitative data revealed students' deeper understanding of strategies in LA.

3.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

Students were not involved in the study. It is necessary to ensure that students understand all questions and feel comfortable answering them. As a result, changes were made to make it more appropriate for and consistent with research criteria, as well as easier to understand for students. Second, 152 students participated in the survey and 10 students volunteered to join the semi-structured interview. It took the students around 15 minutes to complete the final version of the questionnaire and 10 minutes to answer the final interview questions. For questionnaire data analysis, "descriptive statistics" with the calculation of mean scores and standard deviation through the use of SPSS Statistics version 20.0 were employed. The mean scores for the students' level (extent) of using strategies for LA development were interpreted as follows: M = 1.00–1.80 (very low); M = 1.81–2.60 (low); M = 2.61–3.40 (moderate); M = 3.41–4.20 (high); M = 4.21–5.00 (very high). For interview data analysis, "content analysis" was employed. The students' responses were coded as S1, S2, S3, etc. to S10, and the interview questions were coded into IQ1, IQ2, IQ3, IQ12, etc.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

In this section, both qualitative and quantitative data collected to address the research question are presented. Quantitative data are presented first and are followed by qualitative data to obtain triangulation. It can be seen in Table 1 below that all six categories of strategies were employed by the students to develop their learner autonomy. However, among six categories, five of them were used at a moderate level, and one of them was used at a low level, with a range of mean scores from 2.49 to 3.34. More specifically, "identifying learning needs" and "achieving learning goals" were reported to be used by the majority of secondary students because these strategies came out with the highest mean score with M = 3.34 and 3.05 and SD = .662 and .635, respectively. The other 3 categories of strategies obtained a lower level of use, including "setting learning goals and making plans to address needs," "applying appropriate learning strategies," and "evaluating learning process and outcome," M = 2.8, 2.72, and 2.65, and SD = .684, .594, and .565 respectively. The only category of strategies that they seldom apply is "identifying resources (human and material) for help". It can be said that the students rarely used this category of strategies (M = 2.49 and SD = .648).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of 6 strategies used for LA development

No.	Strategies	N = 152		
		Mean	St. D	Level (extent)
1	Identifying your own learning needs	3.34	.662	Moderate
2	Setting learning goals and making plans to address those needs	2.80	.684	Moderate
3	Identifying resources (human and materials) for help	2.49	.648	Low
4	Applying appropriate learning strategies	2.72	.594	Moderate
5	Evaluating the learning process and outcomes	2.65	.565	Moderate
6	Achieving learning goals	3.05	.635	Moderate
	Total	2.84	.429	Moderate

For more details, in term of the category of "Identifying learning needs", the two strategies including "Learning 4 English skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) to become good at communication" and "increasing grammar and vocabulary knowledge every day" were used at a high level with M = 3.56, SD = .882 and M = 3.60, .965 respectively. The other three strategies were used at a moderate level; i.e., students sometimes identified what needed doing inside and outside the classroom to enhance English knowledge, figured out what skill needed learning and practicing in each activity, and identified what

points of grammar and vocabulary needed to be learned and practiced in each activity and unit with M = 3.25, SD = .766 with M = 3.21, SD = .858 and 3.10 and St. D = .836 respectively. In addition, qualitative data from the interviews revealed students' similar opinions as follows: "I determine to study 4 skills: speaking, listening, writing, reading and enhance grammar, pronunciation and vocabularies in order to make language acquisition." (S1); "I have to improve 4 skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking) as well as vocabularies so that I could use English in daily life efficiently." (S7) and "In class, I am

excited about grammar lessons, I listen to my teacher's explanation of grammar carefully and take notes of grammar points, then at home, I try to do all homework from my teacher and learn by heart all vocabularies in textbook" (S9).

Regarding the category of **"Setting learning goals and making plans to address needs"**, all 5 strategies of this category were used at a moderate level, there is one strategy of "setting up learning goals for semester for gaining high study results" was employed the most in their learning with $M = 3.09$, $SD = .986$, followed by other three strategies with lower mean scores which were used at the same moderate level: "arranging and balancing time to study inside and outside classes", "Setting up objectives for each class session for learning English pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and skills", and "designing clear study plans for learning each English skill" with $M = 2.82$, $SD = .950$, $M = 2.97$, $SD = .942$ and $M = 2.82$, $SD = .950$ respectively. Only one strategy was used at the low level: "setting up time to learn and practice English pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary with the lowest $M = 2.39$, $SD = .991$. This means students rarely set up time for learning and practicing English pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. The above quantitative data is also supported by the qualitative data from the interviews as expressed by several students as follows: *"In each semester, I have to learn at least 300 new words, make clear of all grammar points in textbook, and I sometimes check whether I achieve my learning goal or not" (S1) and "To me, each semester, I have to know what to learn, how many lessons do I have from my textbook. Then I list down topics, vocabularies and grammar points at the end of each semester" (S6).*

Concerning the category of **"Identifying resources (human and materials) for help"**, among 7 strategies, 4 strategies were reported to be used at a low level; i.e., "going to the school library to read other English books besides the textbook" with $M = 2.11$, $SD = .987$, "buying grammar and vocabulary books from bookstores for self-learning" with $M = 2.35$, $SD = .800$, and "asking teachers to help me when having problems in learning English through emails, Zalo or Google meetings outside the class" with $M = 2.35$, $SD = .998$. Obviously, the strategy of "making friends with foreigners to practice English speaking skills" is the least used strategy among those 4 mentioned ones. Qualitative data from interviews supported the quantitative data as follows: *"I rarely contact my English teacher as it is not my habit and she may be busy with her family" (S2) and "I don't contact anyone outside class. I study English by myself" (S4).* However, 3 out of 7 strategies were used at a moderate level such as: "asking friends to help when having problems with English learning inside and outside the class", "using internet and computers

to study and improve English", and "autonomously searching and preparing learning materials before and after class sessions for better class participation and understandings" with $M = 3.01$, $SD = .917$, $M = 2.89$, $SD = .855$ and $M = 2.82$, $SD = .870$, respectively. Qualitative data also support quantitative data: *"I send message via Zalo to my friend to ask about homework and how to do homework" (S2), "I study with my classmate twice a week to do homework, review lessons. Normally on Thursday and Friday, 1 hour each time" (S3) and "I listen to some English YouTube channels to practice listening, vocabularies and speaking." (S3)*

When it comes to category of **"Applying appropriate learning strategies"**, data indicated that students used all strategies at a moderate level except "participating in activities where I can work with other students in the English lesson" which was used at a low level with $M = 2.55$, $SD = .996$. Students in the interview shared the same opinion: *"In classes, I try to listen to teacher's lesson. In my opinion, grammar is very important but I don't enjoy working in group with others in classroom" (S5).* On the contrary, students tried to remember expressions used by teachers or friends that they found new and interesting, and they sometimes watched English video or movies to improve English skills are the items with highest mean score with $M = 2.91$, $SD = .945$ and $M = 2.86$, $SD = .952$ respectively. These are followed by "trying to use English dictionary to learn more new words", "listening to English dialogs on YouTube and repeat them many times to learn speaking skills", "doing assignments which are not compulsory to improve grammar and vocabulary knowledge", "actively doing the assignments independently inside and outside the class", and "looking for opportunities to use English as much as possible" with $M = 2.78$, $SD = .976$, $M = 2.72$, $SD = .748$, $M = 2.70$, $SD = .941$, $M = 2.68$, $SD = .946$, $M = 2.61$, $SD = .870$ respectively. Regarding the qualitative data collected from interviews, most of them coincided with quantitative data. For example, several students expressed, *"In class, I follow my teacher's instruction. At home, I use app Mochi Mochi to improve vocabularies and study at an English center" (S2), "In class, I pay attention to grammar lessons, I listen to my teacher's explanation of grammar carefully and take notes of grammar points" (S6) and "In my opinion, grammar is very important. I spend at least 1 hour to do grammar exercises at home every day. I buy grammar books and practice grammar." (S5)*

For the category of **"Evaluating the learning process and outcomes"**, 3 out of 7 strategies were reported to be employed at a moderate level. Above all, in order to evaluate learning process and outcomes, over half of the students admitted that they all noted their strengths and

weaknesses in learning English and improve them with $M = 2.91$, $SD = .992$, followed by “thinking about which resources work best for English skills, grammar and vocabulary (e.g., YouTube, newspapers, grammar books, vocabulary books)”, and “analyzing the reasons to make mistakes and correct them to improve English learning” with $M = 2.89$, $SD = .711$, $M = 2.70$, $SD = .914$, respectively. In terms of qualitative data, several students reported their opinions as follows: *“I use YouTube channel: Tex-ed (I listen to many topics about science), or watch cartoon movies (Madagascar, etc.)” (S1)* and *“I listen to some English YouTube channels to practice listening, vocabularies and speaking. Moreover, I buy some vocabulary and grammar books to enhance my vocabularies and grammars” (S3)*. The rest four strategies were seldom used by the students, such as: “knowing which strategies work and do not work in my English learning” with $M = 2.60$, $SD = .978$, “having ways of assessing how much has been learned and understood” with $M = 2.43$, $SD = .981$, “asking the teachers and peers to give feedback on learning” with $M = 2.55$, $SD = .920$ and “checking the tasks planned in advance in English learning outside the classroom” with $M = 2.51$, $SD = .846$. The students’ opinions during the interviews revealed the same information as follows: *“I rarely contact my friend after class unless I have a final exam and need to review lesson, so I ask her for help upon some difficult grammar such as tenses” (S7)*.

Last but not least, with respect to the category of **“Achieving learning goals”**, the findings of the study revealed that to achieve learning goals the students applied all 6 strategies at a moderate level. For more details, they “sticked to their goals even some in-class and out-of-class tasks are difficult” with $M = 2.88$, $SD = .923$, “carefully considered whether my learning goals are realistic and doable” with $M = 2.93$, $SD = .851$), and enjoyed being challenged to achieve learning goals with $M = 2.93$, $SD = .672$. More interestingly, the rest 3 strategies below have higher mean scores. They are “going back to their goals and see if they had achieved their learning goals”, “tending to be motivated when meeting deadlines for any goals”, and “being aware that if they were more autonomous in learning, they would receive better grades in English subject” with mean scores ranging from 3.13, 3.22 & 3.22 and $SD = .933$, $.837$, $.805$ respectively. Regarding the data collected from the interviews, several students reported that: *“in each semester, I have to learn at least 300 new words, make clear of all grammar points in textbook, and I sometimes check whether I achieve my learning goal or not” (S1)* and *“I feel more discipline if I reach my learning goals.” (S6)*

4.2. Discussion

Regarding the strategies used for LA development in learning EFL by the 9th grade students at SOSS, the findings of the study revealed that most of the students seemed to acknowledge the many strategies applied for LA development in their EFL learning, although these strategies were used at a moderate level. These findings are consistent with the theoretical foundation related to strategies in LA development that was written by Benson (2011) and Nguyen Thi Cam Le (2008), which revealed that being able to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning appeared to be the recipe for a successful autonomous learner.

For more details, in terms of identifying one’s own learning needs, it was explored that the students often figured out their own learning needs in their process of learning autonomy. The findings confirmed the results discovered by Little, Dam, and Lengenhausen (2017) that LA development is the ability to identify and direct one’s own learning toward one’s own needs. It is also in line with Joshi’s study (2011). One of the possible explanations for this result is that 9th graders might have to prepare for the graduation exam. The importance of this exam may make them better aware of their duties and needs for self-study.

With respect to setting learning goals and making plans to address those needs, it was moderately used by students. The findings are compatible with Yan (2007). It was concluded that students knew how to set goals for each semester to achieve high study results. They were also aware of balancing time to study both inside and outside of class. This might explain why students in grade 9 are mature enough to handle their own learning. However, they rarely set aside time to practice English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. It was probably that the lack of support from teachers or any external source might make them ignore the importance of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary in learning EFL.

Regarding identifying resources for help, the findings indicated that students used these strategies at a low to moderate level. It can be seen that students rarely have contact with teachers outside of classrooms or go to the library to search for further learning resources. It is likely that teachers are so busy with their own lives after classes that the library lacks essential facilities, which may demotivate students in their LA development. Nevertheless, they have more contact with friends after classes to ask for learning support. This means they may have a stronger bond with peers outside of class, or the availability of the internet can make them more autonomous and active in self-learning. Hence, they can autonomously search for and prepare for new classes at home. The findings shared some similar results with those of Duong Minh Tuan’s study (2012), which stated that students were very good at both

working with friends and without teacher aid outside classrooms.

In terms of applying appropriate learning strategies, students reported that they just employed these strategies at a moderate level. However, this proved that they all had awareness and knew how to apply strategies to their LA development. The finding is in line with the study by Nguyen Thuy Ngoc Han (2021). With the innovation of information technology, students can take advantage of many English channels on the Internet to learn by themselves. However, they may need more training to use appropriate strategies for gaining the best results in LA development.

For the category of evaluating the learning process and outcomes, it seems that students did not evaluate their learning process and outcomes, nor could they apply these strategies well or frequently. The result is consistent with that of the study conducted by Daflizar, Sulistiyob, and Kamil (2022). Students need to identify their strengths and weaknesses or figure out what resources work best for their EFL learning. They should be active learners both inside and outside of class. They also need more training in strategies to help them know how to assess learning results. Teachers should give initial guidance on what categories to use to evaluate learning outcomes and follow up with students during the learning process. Hence, they will be able to evaluate which strategies work or do not work in order to improve English learning.

Last but not least, among the six categories of strategies, "achieving learning goals" appeared to be the most used category. The finding is consistent with that of a study by Nguyen Thi Bich Phuong and Duong My Tham (2022). Students had reflections on their own learning processes and admitted that achieving learning goals can motivate them and enhance both their LA and their learning outcomes. However, they should practice these strategies more frequently. Teachers should encourage and remind students of their learning goals to see whether they achieve them or not. This helps them discover what they should do and what strategies should be applied to meet their goals and needs. In turn, they will be more motivated to improve their L.A.

V. CONCLUSION

The current study reveals the six categories of strategies that 9th grade students used in their LA development in EFL learning in SOSS in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Although these strategies were employed at a moderate level, it is evident that among the six categories, "identifying one's own learning needs" and "achieving learning goals" were used by the majority of the students,

while "setting learning goals and making plans to address those needs", "identifying resources for help", "applying appropriate learning strategies," and "evaluating the learning process and outcomes" were less frequently employed.

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are made for both EFL teachers and secondary students. For teachers, it is recommended that they play an important role in shaping students' LA development. At the beginning of each semester, teachers should have a discussion with students about figuring out their learning needs and how and what to do to improve their English skills as well as their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. In addition, teachers should encourage students to set aside permanent time for learning English every single day, so that their learning process can continuously bring out the best results. Teachers should introduce to students the strategies and resources to be used based on the students' abilities. For example, teachers can offer students English apps, YouTube channels, English-speaking groups, or any extra books of grammar or vocabulary to do at home. Lastly, teachers should give feedback at the end of each course so that students can see whether they apply appropriate strategies or not and how much they can learn, understand, and improve their LA. For secondary EFL students, they should spend more time learning EFL outside classrooms; being disciplined in their learning is also a must. To succeed in learning English, they have to apply more strategies and stick to their learning goals as much as possible.

The study was conducted at SOSS in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, with the participation of 152 ninth graders. Hence, the study's scope is likely to be limited. Further studies in the future should emphasize the importance of LA development so that results can be extrapolated to other similar EFL settings. A larger sample from a wider range of academic levels and research sites should be made available.

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