

# IMPACTS OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENT ON STUDENTS' APPROACHES TO ENGLISH LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

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Thu Huong Do<sup>1</sup> - Saeed Paivandi<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** Given the importance of English learning in globalization and modernization, the study aimed to examine the relationship between the learning environment and students' approaches to English learning in tertiary education in Vietnam. A survey with a 52-item questionnaire measuring the students' approaches to English learning as a non-major subject and their perceptions of the learning context was distributed to 720 students at four universities. The data was analyzed using cross-tabulation and regression analyses. Firstly, the results showed a close relationship between the students' approaches to English learning and their perceptions of the learning environment. The positive perceptions were associated with the deep and strategic approaches, whereas the negative perceptions were related to the surface approach. Secondly, the workload was the most significant positive predictor of the strategic approach but the strongest negative predictor of the surface approach. Meanwhile, the development of generic skills became the most significant positive predictor of the deep approach. These findings should be helpful for English lecturers and administrators to enhance English teaching and learning practice in higher education in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** English learning, approaches to learning, learning environment perceptions

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<sup>1</sup>LISEC laboratory, the University of Lorraine, Nancy, France, Email: thu-huong.do@univ-lorraine.fr

<sup>2</sup>LISEC laboratory, the University of Lorraine, Nancy, France, Email: saeed.paivandi@univ-lorraine.fr

## 1. Introduction

English has been the preferred foreign language in Vietnam since the Open Door policy in the 1990s for economic recovery after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Up to now, many policies on learning and teaching English have been adopted to increase the English language proficiency of the Vietnamese, which enhances their capacity of international competition in the context of integration and globalization. Because of the importance and necessity of English, this language is also a compulsory subject in a majority of schools and universities (Hoang, 2008b; Le, 2007). Consequently, English education in Vietnam has received a great deal of attention from researchers, and many studies have been conducted to investigate the factors affecting the English learning of Vietnamese students to improve their outcomes in English learning. According to phenomenographic research, the quality of the learning outcome is closely related to approaches to learning (Marton and Booth, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2004). Furthermore, the student's approaches to learning are strongly affected by the educational environments in which they are embedded (Entwistle & Tait, 1990; Fransson, 1977; Laurillard, 1978; Marton & Saljo, 1976; Paivandi, 2015; Ramsden, 1979; Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981). To be more specific, the students may adopt different approaches to learning in different backgrounds, living conditions, learning environment, and different cultures. Therefore, students' approaches to learning in the learning context of Vietnam would not be the same as those in other countries. However, little is known about the students' approaches to English learning in Vietnam from their perspectives and experiences of learning. Moreover, there is little information relating to the students' perceptions of the learning environment as well as its impacts on their ways of learning this subject in university according to this direction. Therefore, an investigation of the students' approaches to English learning and the factors affecting them becomes

essential to bridge these gaps and contribute to the improvement of the English learning quality at universities in Vietnam.

The present study investigates the students' approaches to English learning as a non-major subject and the influences of the learning environment on them in higher education in Vietnam. The students studied English as the compulsory subject in universities and their English proficiency would be evaluated with an end-of-course test as the requirement for university graduation (HaUI, 2012). Moreover, English competence can be an advantage for graduates to find better job opportunities (Bang, 2016; Trinh, 2005). Therefore, English learning and the results of this subject were so important to the students' university learning and their future professions. The study focuses on identifying the ways the students approached their English learning and their perceptions of the learning environment, whereby the relationship between the contextual factors and their approaches to learning is revealed. The findings of the study offer insights into the students' English learning in different situations, which helps educators and administrators make appropriate policies and plans to enhance the students' English outcomes.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Approaches to learning**

Up to now, a large range of research has been conducted in an attempt to explain the reasons why students have different outcomes in their studying. One of the most influential studies in student learning is Marton's research in 1974 (Marton & Saljo, 1997). The researcher argued that if students produced different outcomes in their learning, the ways they handled the learning tasks, which resulted in those outcomes, should not be the same. Thus, he believed that the disparities in the student's learning achievements can be explained by examining their process of learning resulting in these outcomes. He and his colleagues in Gothenburg carried out an experiment using

phenomenographic methods to find out the different levels in the process of learning in an attempt to explain about the students' success or failure in their studying. According to the student's intention, the author indicated two groups of students with two qualitatively different levels of processing, namely surface, and deep approaches. For those students in the first case, because of their intention on reproducing, they only tried to look for and memorize the signs of the text - the facts and numbers displayed in the text. In another group, however, students intended to understand the text, so they made efforts to find out the main idea of the article, considered whether the text was logical or not with their own evaluation as well as referred to the content of the article with their own experiences in the real world. As a result, the students learning for understanding achieved higher-quality outcomes whereas those learning for reproducing had poorer outcomes.

Using the same categories of outcome in Marton's experiment, Svensson (1976) independently conducted a study with the different procedure. Instead of focusing on students' process of learning, he performed an analysis of outcomes using "knowledge – skill framework" (Svensson, 1977, p.238) to classify students' ways of understanding leading to these outcomes. Accordingly, the author found that four outcomes reflected four "qualitatively different ways of organizing the content of the text", in other words, "different skills which lead to different understandings" (Svensson, 1997, p.65), which were divided into two distinct cognitive approaches: atomistic and holistic. After conducting the experiment in which the ways students solved a particular learning task (reading an article) were identified, Marton (1974) continued investigating students' approaches to learning in their normal studying at university. The results from the interviews showed that approaches to learning students adopted in everyday studying were similar to those in the experiment. In everyday studies, under the pressure of exams, some students tried to memorize as much knowledge as they could, which was seen as

adopting the surface approach. Nonetheless, other students adopting the deep approach intended to understand the knowledge, so they preferred “learning something about reality” (Marton, 1974, p.48). The results of the study also indicated that the deep approach was related closely to good outcomes of the first-year students in social sciences courses; however, there was still lack of evidence to fully draw conclusion on the association between students’ examination results and their approaches to learning. Laurillard (1979) conducted a study on how students tackled the problem – solving tasks, and the same results were obtained. The author found that students in reading and other particular tasks followed the approaches to problem-solving in terms of deep and surface approaches.

Also, in the research at Lancaster, Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) found the differences in the ways students worked out learning tasks in terms of deep and surface approaches to learning in everyday studying. Besides, a third category of approaches to learning – strategic approach was added when the authors investigated the effects of academic departments on students’ approaches to learning. According to the study, because of the influences of assessment demands, some students needed to adopt a learning way by which those requirements are satisfied with the highest results. Having positive attitudes toward studying, students using the strategic approach paid much attention to assessment requirements and focused on the pertinent conditions and materials for studying to fulfill those demands. They also managed their time effectively. All their attempts were to maximize their grades.

At the same time, at Newcastle University in Australia, Biggs (1987) shared the same interest in investigating how students go about learning. In his study, the 3P model of student learning concerning the relationship among personal and situational factors, the process of learning, and the outcomes (called presage, process, and product, respectively) was proposed as the framework for the research. This

process indicated students' motives and strategies for learning, which were combined together to yield different approaches to learning. The author first labeled these approaches with the Utilizing, Internalizing, and Achieving Dimensions, which then were changed to Surface, Deep, and Achieving, which were utilized broadly in the literature on student learning (Biggs, 1986).

### ***2.2. Students' perceptions of the learning environment***

Students' approaches to learning relate to intentional activities, and the students adopt different approaches to learning in response to the requirements of learning context in which they are embedded (Ramsden, 2004). Therefore, students' approaches to learning are strongly influenced by how they perceive the learning environment (Laurillard, 1979; Marton & Saljo, 1976; Paivandi, 2012; Ramsden, 1979). State differently, the effects of the learning environment on the students' ways of learning can be determined through the relationship between the students' approaches to learning and their perceptions of the learning context (Ramsden, 1997). Marton and Saljo (1976) carried out a study that referred to the relationship between students' conception of the task and their approaches to learning. It was concluded that the requirement of the learning task influenced the students' approaches to learning. More specifically, "students did adapt their way of learning to their conception of what was required of them" (Marton & Saljo, 1976, p.115). Therefore, it seems worthwhile to draw attention to the students' perceptions of academic tasks, which are not the same in individuals, in studying student learning. Similarly, the study of Laurillard (1979) indicated that the students' approaches to learning in the normal studies were context – dependent. The author believed that if the ways students coped with the problem derived from what they intended to, those approaches would not be stable because the students should have different intentions in different learning situations. The students' perceptions of the learning environment emerged clearly from Ramsden's study at

Lancaster University (Ramsden, 1979) by both the semi-structured interview and the questionnaire survey. The study indicated that the students' approaches to learning were affected by their perceptions of the educational environments in which they studied.

### ***2.3. Perspectives of learning***

In France, the student's approaches to learning and the factors affecting them also have received increasing attention from researchers and educators. Paivandi (2011) carried out an investigation in which the student's learning perspectives were found to understand the student's learning in the French context. The concept of perspectives is used to reflect the meaning students give to learning and the ways they mobilize learning activities in the process of learning in universities. To be more specific, the students' attitudes to learning can determine the amount of effort they put into learning. According to his study, the researcher classified four students' perspectives of learning. Firstly, the students with a comprehensive perspective focused on the meaning in their learning activities. They also explore the knowledge outside of the course and connect the knowledge with their previous learning and experience. The second perspective was performance which referred to the students optimizing their learning for good results and success. They paid much attention to the teacher's instructions for their good performance. Next, minimalist perspective related to the students who learned for validation only. Their learning focused on memorization, and they tackled the learning tasks in a very superficial way. Lastly, the study presented the non-involvement perspective relating to the students who could not keep up with their studies and lost their motivation. It might be due to their wrong choices at the beginning of university and the mismatching between what they thought about the courses and the reality of it. The research also pointed out the relationship between the student's perspectives of learning and their perceptions of the learning context they were embedded in.

Particularly, the students with “enthusiastic perceptions” often developed the performance and comprehensive perspectives. In contrast, the students perceiving the learning environment negatively tended to adopt the minimalist and non-involvement perspectives.

In conclusion, students’ approaches to learning have been investigated considerably by a large number of researchers in an attempt to understand the distinction in the ways students cope with their work of learning. In terms of definition, approaches to learning refer to the relation between the students and their learning tasks, in which the ways the students tackle the tasks are dependent on their intentions. Concerning the classification, three categories are distinguished in terms of deep, surface, and strategic (or achieving) approaches. Deep approach refers to the level of processing in which students’ intention is toward understanding while those who adopt surface approach only intend to reproduce the knowledge. In the learning context with the pressure of assessment, students may adopt the strategic approach in an attempt to achieve the highest results.

The previous studies (Entwistle & Tait, 1990; Fransson, 1977; Laurillard, 1978; Marton & Saljo, 1976; Paivandi, 2015; Ramsden, 1979; Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981) also indicated the influences of the learning environment on the students’ approaches to learning through their perceptions as a mediator. The students’ perceptions of the learning context derive from their experiences of teaching methods, course design, workload, and assessment procedures. Given the differences in their perceptions of the educational context, the students can adopt different approaches to learning. Accordingly, one same student may approach his or her learning differently in different circumstances. Having positive perceptions of the learning context, the students tend to deploy the deeper approaches to learn for understanding. In contrast, the students are more likely to resort to a reproducing approach when they perceive the learning environment negatively. As such, the relationship between the student’s approaches



to learning and their perceptions of the learning context can be utilized to explain the disparities in their learning outcomes. It is noted that although the studies on the students' approaches to learning from their perspectives have been conducted and developed in western countries, there is little research on the students' ways of learning in Vietnam by examining their own experiences of learning in general and of English learning in particular. Also, little is known about the students' perceptions of the learning environment which may affect their ways of learning English. Therefore, the present study is carried out to fill these gaps by investigating the students' approaches to English learning at universities in Vietnam and the influences of the learning context on the ways they learn this subject, which is mediated by their perceptions.

### 3. Research questions

The current study explores the impacts of the learning environment on students' approaches to English learning as a non-major subject at the tertiary level in Vietnam. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- *What are students' approaches to English learning as a non-major subject in universities?*
- *What are students' perceptions of the learning environment?*
- *How do students' perceptions of the learning environment have influence on their approaches to English learning?*

### 4. Methodology

#### 4.1. Research approach and design

The study used a quantitative approach to interpret and determine the students' approaches to English learning and their perceptions of learning context, whereby the impacts of the learning environment on their ways of learning English were evaluated. The quantitative

method was helpful to examine trends of variables and relationships between them (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Thus, this method could assist the author to obtain the tendency of the students' approaches to English learning and of their perceptions of the learning environment, whereby the association between them could be shown.

#### **4.2. Participants**

There were 752 students (males and females) participating in this study. They were from the first to fourth year at four universities in Vietnam. These are public universities in which the students' majors are information and technology, accounting, law, and art. They were studying English or had taken the course of English as a non-major subject in the university. The participants were selected based on their willingness to get involved in the study and the approval of the institutional leaders of these four universities.

#### **4.3. Instruments**

The tool for data gathering was a questionnaire (in Vietnamese) with 55 items developed on the basis of the Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST) (Noel Entwistle, Velda McCune, and Hilary Tait, 2013) and the Course Perceptions Questionnaire (Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981). Using questionnaires is advantageous because it not only helps the researcher save time but it also can collect a large amount of data with relatively low expense (Dörnyei & Dewaele, 2022). The questionnaire is composed of two sections, and it was designed on a Likert – scale of 1 – 5 (1= Never true or only rarely true of me, 2= Sometimes true of me, 3= True about me about half the time, 4= Frequently true of me, 5= Always true or almost always true of me). Section 1 referred to the approaches to English learning, and section 2 related to the perceptions of the learning environment. The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese, the native language of the participants, to minimize the language barriers.

#### **4.4. Data collection procedure**

At the end of the first term of the academic year 2018-2019, the survey was carried out at four universities in Vietnam. Having permission to access a database of students, the researcher came to classes and invited students to participate in the study. The questionnaire was distributed, and the research details were explained to the students by the researcher. The importance of the respondents' answers for the study's success was also emphasized.

#### **4.5. Data analysis**

The data were firstly preprocessed to remove the invalid data and to normalize the answers of the inverse questions. Then, questionnaire responses were projected to SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics and statistical analyses, including reliability tests and multiple linear regression analyses, were performed to identify trends and correlations in data relating the students' approaches to English learning and their perceptions of learning environment, whereby the impacts of learning context on the students' approaches to English learning were considered.

### **5. Findings**

#### **5.1. The students' approaches to English learning**

Table 1 presents the percentage of students adopting approaches to English learning in four universities in Vietnam. The reliability test showed that Cronbach's alpha values of all approaches were high ( $\alpha > 0.7$ ). It revealed that items in each component of approaches to English learning had relatively high internal consistency, which made the components robust and reliable (Kline, 1994). As seen from the table, there was a tendency towards the surface approach that the students used to study English in universities. Specifically, nearly half of the students (46%) adopted the surface approach to learning English, while less than a fifth (18%) deployed the deep approach.

Furthermore, the number of students adopting the strategic approach was less than those adopting the surface approach with 36%. Therefore, it can be referred that the students tended to prefer adopting the surface approach rather than the deep and strategic approaches when learning English at universities.

**Table 1:**The number and percentage of students in each approach

Student approaches	Student number	Percentage	Reliability
Surface	330	46	0.73
Deep	128	18	0.85
Strategic	262	36	0.80
<b>Total</b>	720	100	

### ***5.2. The student's perceptions of the learning environment***

Table 2 presents the percentage of the student's perceptions of the learning environment. It can be seen from the table that there was a tendency to a positive attitude in the ways the students perceived the learning environment. Particularly, the number of students having positive perceptions was larger than those perceiving the learning context negatively with 57 percent. To make it more explicit, the components of the learning context were examined to see the differences in the ways the students perceived them (see table 2).

**Table 2:**Percentage of the student's perceptions of learning environment

Perceptions	Number of students	Percentage
Negative	201	28
Positive	128	72
<b>Total</b>	720	100

**Table 3:**The student's perceptions of each element of the learning environment

Components	Negative	Positive	Reliability
Good Teaching	32%	68%	0.78
Clear Goals and standards	20%	80%	0.88
Generic skills	28%	72%	0.75
Appropriate assessment	52%	48%	0.59
Appropriate workload	53%	47%	0.62
Cooperating with other students	38%	62%	0.65
Openness to students	19%	81%	0.70
Material access	30%	70%	0.85
Vocational relevance	25%	75%	0.80

Table 3 illustrates the percentage of how the students perceived the components of the learning context. The result showed that most components had high reliability as their Cronbach's Alphas were above 0.70. For other components whose value of Cronbach's Alphas was lower than 0.70, their levels of reliability were acceptable. That means items in the nine components had internal consistency. It is clear from the table that the students had positive perceptions of seven of the nine components of the learning environment, including Good teaching, Clear goals and standards, Generic skills, Cooperating with other students, Openness to students, Material assess, and Vocational relevance. There were two components of Appropriate assessment and Appropriate workload receiving negative perceptions from the students with the higher percentage (57% and 60%, respectively). Based on these results, variations in the student's approaches to English learning across their perceptions of the learning context were investigated to find out the impacts of the learning environment on their approaches to English learning.

### ***5.3. Variations in the student's approaches to English learning across their perceptions of the learning environment***

Table 4 presents the differences in the student's approaches to English learning according to different perceptions of the learning environment. It can be referred to from the table that there were variations in the student's approaches to English learning when they perceived the learning environment differently. To be more specific, when the learning environment was perceived negatively, the percentage of the students adopting the surface approach was the highest, with 70%. It showed that the surface approach was the most frequently adopted by students with negative perceptions of the learning context. However, there was a reduction in the students' choices of surface approach to learning to 36%, and the percentage of adopting deep and strategic approaches increased to 21% and 43%, respectively, when the learning environment was perceived positively. In particular, the number of students adopting this strategy accounted for the highest proportion. This indicated that the strategic approach was the most deployed by the students with the positive perceptions of the learning environment.

It can be referred from the obtained results that there was a close relation between the student's approaches to English learning and their perceptions of the learning environment. Stated differently, the student's perceptions of the learning environment had a significant influence on the ways they approached English. The negative perceptions drove them to learn English in a superficial way while the positive perceptions encouraged them to adopt better approaches to learning. Indeed, the context of learning was perceived to provide good teaching, clear goals and standards, appropriate assessment and workload, and vocational relevance, which encouraged the students to learn English for understanding. In contrast, the students were pushed into superficial learning due to their negative perceptions of the learning context, which combined the low quality of teaching, excessive workloads,

inappropriate forms of assessment, and lack of clarity in the purposes of the study. As such, the student's perceptions were considered as the mediator between the learning context and their approaches to English learning, and they had direct effects on the ways the students studied English.

The above obtained results in the sections were consistent with previous studies on the impacts of learning context on the student's approaches to learning (Marton & Saljo, 1976; Ramsden, 1979). For example, Marton and Saljo (1976) noted that the students tended to adopt the surface approach when the questions contained the demand of reproducing the knowledge. The present study shared the common finding from the data results, which revealed the tendency of the surface adoption in the student's English learning when the assessment was perceived to push them in memorizing and reproducing the knowledge. In addition, the study was consistent with the research by Ramsden (1979), who found that the student's approaches to learning were affected by their perceptions of the educational environment including the assessment, the workload, the teaching, and course design. Specifically, the deep approach was associated with the appropriate assessment and workload, good teaching, freedom in learning, and clear goals and structures. In contrast, the surface approach was related to the inappropriate assessment and workload, the low quality of teaching, and the lack of structures and clarity in the goals of the study. Also, Paivandi (2012) believed that the students' perspectives were developed based on their interaction with the learning environment. Similar to these research findings, the analysis results in the present study indicated a close relation between the student's approach to English learning and their perceptions of the learning environment in a range of aspects. Nevertheless, the cross-tables did not reveal clearly which aspects of the learning environment more strongly influenced the development of the approaches to English learning. Therefore, the relationship between the academic environment and the students' approaches to

English learning is elaborated in the next section in an effort to have a clearer grasp of the students' approaches to English learning in Vietnamese universities.

**Table 4:** The relation between the student's perceptions of learning environment and their approaches to English learning

		Student's approaches			Total
		Surface	Deep	Surface	
Perception	Negative	141	21	39	201
		70%	10%	20%	100%
	Positive	189	107	223	519
		36%	21%	43%	100%
<b>Total</b>		330	128	262	720
		46%	18%	36%	100%

#### ***5.4. Elaboration of the impacts of learning environment on approaches to English learning***

This section presents the further relationship between the students' perceptions of the environment aspects and their approaches to English learning using a multiple regression analysis. While the students' perceptions of learning context had influences on their approaches to English learning, there were differences in this regard. Therefore, the impacts of individual aspects of the learning environment on the development of the approaches to English learning (surface, deep, and strategic) were measured and compared, whereby the strongly influential aspects as the significant predictors of the approaches to learning were determined. The results are shown in the sub – sections below.

Table 5 illustrates the results of the multiple regression analysis, using the students' perceptions of the academic environment as predictors of their approaches to English learning. There are five of nine aspects of the learning context (clear goals, generic skills,



assessment, workload, and cooperating) which were perceived by the students as having significant impacts on the development of the ways they studied English in universities ( $p < 0.05$ ). The other aspects of learning context which inconsiderably influenced the approaches to learning ( $p > 0.05$ ) are not presented in the table.

**Table 5:** Results of multiple regression analyses with aspects of learning environment as predictors of approaches to English learning

		Approaches					
		Surface approach		Deep approach		Strategic approach	
		SC	p-val	SC	p-val	SC	p-val
Aspects of learning environment	Clear goals	-0.119	0.002	-	-	0.091	0.025
	Generic skills	-0.171	0.000	0.129	0.002	-	-
	Assessment	-	-	0.106	0.006	-	-
	Workload	-0.212	0.000	0.098	0.008	0.142	0.000
	Cooperating	-0.152	0.000	-	-	0.109	0.006
Index of determination (R2)		0.52		0.49		0.43	
Note. SC = Standardized coefficients.							

Firstly, the table shows that four of the nine aspects of the university learning environment (namely, the clear goals and standards, the generic skills, the workload, and the cooperating with other students) were significant negative predictors of the surface approach to English learning, in which the workload was the strongest predictor (SC = - 0.212,  $p < 0.001$ ). This aspect describes the amount of curricular material and the requirements of the syllabus and assessment which the students have to fulfill in the process of studying English. When the students perceived the workload as excessive, they were more likely to learn English subjects with stress and anxiety. What the materials in the curriculum and the assessment required was too difficult and heavy for them to satisfy and they were overloaded, which pushed them into learning with an incomplete understanding of the subject matter.

This finding was consistent with a wide range of previous studies which indicated the relationship between the heavy workload and the reproducing approach to learning (Entwistle & Tait, 1990; Kember

&Leung, 1998; Crawford et al., 1998; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991a, 1991b; Lizzio et al., 2002). The study of Entwistle and Tait (1990) indicated the significant relation between the studying with reproducing orientation and the demanding workload. Similarly, Kember and Leung (1998) indicated that the relationship between the high workload and the surface approach was the two directional influences. That is, when the workload was perceived as heavy, the students had a tendency to learn by reproducing. Also, the learners adopting the surface approach were more likely to have negative perceptions of the workload. Additionally, Trigwell and Prosser (1991a, 1991b) pointed out the association between the perceived heavy workload and the surface approach adoption of nursing students. Furthermore, Crawford et al. (1998) found that the deep approach to learning was associated with the good teaching, clear goals, and independence scales, while the surface approach was related to the inappropriate assessment and workload scales. Moreover, the present study was consistent with what Lizzo et al. (2002) found. Through the path and regression analyses, their research also pointed out that the surface approach was associated with a heavy workload and inappropriate assessment. As such, the present study aligned with the previous research in terms of the influence of the workload on the ways the students approached their English learning. Specifically, it appeared to be that the aspect of the academic environment that would most strongly influence the students towards the surface approach was the heavy workload involving the overwhelming amount of course material.

Secondly, there were three of the nine aspects of the academic environment (namely, the clear goals and standards, the workload, and the cooperating with other students) being significant positive predictors of the strategic approach. Similar to the surface approach, the workload was the most significant predictor of the strategic approach, but it was a positive association ( $SC = 0.142$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Noteworthy that this aspect was also a significant positive predictor of the deep approach ( $SC = 0.098$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ). As such, that the students

perceived the amount of material in the syllabus and the requirements of learning tasks as appropriate the most strongly contributed to the strategic approach, then to the deep approach with a slightly less relation. Otherwise, the surface approach would be adopted.

This finding is consistent with the previous finding that the surface approach was predicted by the high workload. It seemed to be that when the workload was perceived positively, the students were able to completely absorb all the amounts of material in the university curriculum and satisfy the requirements of the syllabus. In other words, the students could keep pace with the lesson, which helped them avoid the feeling of pressure and kept them engaged in learning. Also, the students had enough time to organize information systematically and make clear learning plans so as to have a grasp of the learning tasks. Therefore, they were more likely to study English for understanding and for high achievements. This finding aligned with the research by Chambers (1992) who indicated that the appropriate workload encouraged the students to be more involved in the learning. It can be referred to that the students with intrinsic motivation intended to learn by seeking meaning and they did not seem to perceive the workload as heavy (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Kember & Leung, 1998). Conversely, those having extrinsic motivation might take reproductive approaches due to their negative perceptions of the syllabuses (Crawford et al., 1998; Entwistle & Tait, 1990; Kember & Leung, 1998; Lizzio et al., 2002; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991a, 1991b).

Lastly, three of the nine aspects of the university learning environment (namely, the generic skills, the appropriate assessment, and the workload) were significant positive predictors of the deep approach. The strongest predictor of the deep approach, "generic skills" ( $SC = 0.129$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), reflected the development of the students' abilities after studying English in universities. That is, the students were able to improve their English speaking skills and skill of working in groups after taking English courses. Probably, the students

must have arrived at a certain understanding of this language so that they were able to speak it fluently and accurately in the right context. They also might have the need for discussion and academic exchange with classmates to deepen their understanding of English. When the students were allowed to do the classroom activities in group work regularly, they would have more chances to experience different roles in the group, such as a leader, a note taker, or a timer. In addition, they were able to develop other skills in group work relating to presenting their own ideas, sharing, and respecting other people's opinions. All these activities could help the students enhance their understanding of the lessons in English classes. As a result, the students would most likely develop a deep approach when they felt that the English learning environment enabled them to improve their language skills and develop their ability to work as a team member.

Several previous studies indicated the similar relation between the deep approach and the general skills which were developed through the process of learning. Lizzio et al. (2002) pointed out that the students' approaches to learning affected academic outcomes referring to academic achievement, course satisfaction, and generic skills. In those associations, the deep approach was clearly related to the development of the generic skills. This finding also aligned with the research of Goh (2005), Rahman and Mokhtar (2012), and Ryan et al. (2004), who found that the deep approach to learning was positively associated with the generic skills. It can be seen that higher education in Vietnam in recent years has experienced positive changes in teaching and learning activities in which there is a shift from teacher – centered approaches to student – centered ones (Binh, 2013; Harman & Ngoc, 2010; Mai & Hall, 2017). Accordingly, the students are encouraged to show their own opinions and develop critical thinking, problem – solving skills, or creativity. The assessment has also changed towards this trend (Tran, 2019). As such, the students can develop deeper approaches to learning in the learning environment which allows them to improve the generic skills. Also, the students need to study for understanding so as to satisfy the assessment

demands which heighten the development of higher – order learning skills.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study examined the influences of the learning environment on the students' approaches to English learning as a non-major subject at the tertiary level in Vietnam. The results revealed that the learning environment had a considerable impact on the students' approaches to English learning, which were mediated by their perceptions. The students perceiving the learning context negatively tended to adopt the surface approach to learning whereas those who had positive perceptions preferred to develop the deep and strategic approaches. Furthermore, the learning environment which most strongly influences the students towards deeper processing is characterized by the appropriate workload (strategic approach) and the development of the generic skills (the deep approach). Meanwhile, the excessive workload most strongly contributes to the surface approach.

The present study exposed some limitations. The data revealed that there were the students deploying the deep and strategic approaches although they did not have positive perceptions of the learning context. Besides, some of them still adopted the surface approach in spite of their positive perceptions of the learning environment. The implication is that there are other factors that are able to weaken or strengthen the positive influences of the learning environment and the negative ones on their approaches to English learning to help or hinder their English learning in better ways. Therefore, future research is needed to clarify the impacts of other individual and contextual factors, such as their previous knowledge, fields of study, and university... on the relationship between the students' approaches to English learning and their perceptions of learning context in an effort to have a clearer grasp of how the students develop their ways of learning English in universities in Vietnam.

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