

VIETNAMESE TERTIARY STUDENTS' AUTONOMY IN LEARNING ENGLISH LISTENING SKILLS

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Abstract: Autonomy is deemed a crucial component of the learning process since it contributes substantially to learners' academic achievement and equips them with lifelong learning skills. This paper aims to investigate tertiary students' autonomy in learning English listening skills (ELS) through a mixed method using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. After selecting participants with the random sampling method, the study surveyed 150 sophomores and 10 EFL teachers at a public university in Hanoi. 10 students and 5 teachers were then randomly selected to take part in 10-minute semi-structured interviews. The results indicated that students were not willing to learn English listening skills autonomously and they needed more guidance from teachers to develop their autonomous listening ability. The data also revealed that one of the most common factors hindering learner autonomy was their lack of motivation. Based on the findings and discussion, the study provided some recommendations to improve students' autonomy in learning English listening skills.

Keywords: English listening skills; autonomy; tertiary students; factors influencing autonomy

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1. Introduction

It is currently of the utmost importance to master English since this language occupies a dominant role in international communication. Vietnamese students are well aware of this fact, as many of them are not only attending regular English classes but also rushing to enroll in additional after-school programs in the hope of being proficient in the language. However, it is concerning that these students tend to rely on rote memorization rather than actively seeking out new knowledge and improving their communication skills (Nguyen, 2010). In fact, they still focus on acquiring a strong grasp of grammar and vocabulary of the target language to pass exams and they do not have a clear perception of how to find their own ways and strategies to enhance their skills, especially listening ones. Since Vietnamese tertiary students seem to have difficulties in developing their listening comprehension skills (Vu & Shah, 2016), some researchers propose that teachers should give more power to students in their learning process as they study better when having a say in what and how to learn (Nguyen, 2019). Moreover, Cross (2014) highlighted that although students' exposure to listening sources during class time is crucial for improving their listening comprehension, it alone is insufficient. Therefore, considering the potential benefits for language learning and listening comprehension (Chamorro, 2015), it is anticipated that learner autonomy is an indispensable element in the process of acquiring the English language (Vu & Shah, 2016). Even though the notion of language learner autonomy has been of interest to numerous researchers and teachers and got increasing attention since the mid-1970s (Chan, 2015), it has not been researched thoroughly in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2016). In light of this, the present study aimed to investigate whether students allocate time to enhance their listening skills independently at home and explore the factors influencing their autonomy in learning English listening skills.

2. Literature review

Autonomy

As defined by Reeve et al. (2008) and Benson (2011), autonomy is the ability to make choices and be in charge of one's own learning. In the same vein, Littlewood (1996) explained the concept of autonomy as learners' capability and willingness to make decisions independently both inside and outside the classroom. It means they are supposed to determine learning objectives, monitor progress and evaluate their learning; yet still need the support from teachers as a motivator and a guide.

Teacher's role in learner autonomy is a critical aspect that requires collaborative efforts between teachers and students to cultivate an environment conducive to independent language learning (Chamorro, 2015). As highlighted by Du (2013, p. 2), teachers bear a dual responsibility in fostering learner autonomy. Their role goes beyond merely delivering content; it encompasses guiding and supporting students in developing the necessary skills and strategies to become autonomous learners. Abd Rahman, Mynas, Hashim, and Ab. Rahman (2022) further emphasized the significant impact of teachers in shaping learner autonomy.

To effectively promote learner autonomy, teachers must provide consistent assistance and guidance, helping students understand the concept and process of autonomous learning. They should establish clear expectations and provide learners with the necessary tools and resources to actively engage in self-directed learning. Moreover, teachers should help students recognize their own agency in the learning process, encouraging them to take ownership of their educational journey.

Furthermore, Vu and Shah (2016) stressed the importance of teachers having a comprehensive understanding of their roles in supporting learner autonomy. This entails being knowledgeable about effective instructional strategies, facilitating learner reflection and goal-setting, and providing constructive feedback. Teachers should

create a supportive learning environment that encourages learners to take risks, explore new ideas, and develop metacognitive skills.

In summary, teachers play a crucial role in nurturing learner autonomy. By guiding and empowering students, providing necessary support and resources, and fostering a culture of independent learning, teachers contribute significantly to the development of learners' autonomy. It is through the collaborative efforts of both teachers and students that a truly autonomous language learning environment can be created.

Teaching and learning of listening skills

Listening, as defined by Underwood (1989, p. 1) is 'the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear'. As listening is an interactive process (Brown, 2001), the ability to decode the message, apply a variety of strategies and interactive processes to make meaning, and the ability to respond to what is said in different contexts are all necessary for listening well. In order to do that, learners are required to have active involvement, effort and practice through self-study (Shen, Guizhou, Wichura, Kiattichai, 2007). These requirements should be supported by teachers through guidelines for autonomous learning.

Autonomy in learning English listening skills

Learning to listen in a second language essentially still takes place in a classroom environment. Teachers typically manipulate and control the text as they see fit to enable learners to listen a number of times, complete the given comprehension task(s), and produce the necessary response. (Cross, 2014, p. 8)

Teachers also have to search for ways and strategies to scaffold their students' listening process. O'Malley et al. (1985), Chamot (2005) and Vandergrift and Goh (2012) conducted research on learner autonomy and learning strategies and concluded that students' independent learning ability to develop their listening skills involved their actions in the following areas:

- Setting the goals for improving their listening skills (on the whole) and particular sub-skills (components of listening skills);
- Recognizing their difficulties in listening;
- Planning their pre-, while- and post-listening practice;
- Pursuing listening comprehension strategies which suit them most;
- While practicing listening, establishing clear objectives for each particular listening activity without their teacher intervention;
- Assessing their own listening skills development.

Factors influencing learner autonomy

A wide range of key studies has been undertaken to seek the factors affecting learners' autonomy in learning English. First of all, in Kemala's research (2016), autonomous learners were influenced by positive exposures including five factors: motivation, social environment, task, teacher, and material. In particular, these exposures could be affected by their motivation such as future career; social aspects like their parents, brother, siblings and friends which helped enhance their knowledge, vocabulary and ability in English; challenging tasks which stimulated or even sometimes compelled independent learners to be responsible for their tasks; great teachers who could build comfortable environments and various materials which could arouse their students' enthusiasm. In line with Kemala (2016), Balapumi and Aitken (2012) suggested that there were two major factors that could have a considerable influence on learner autonomy, which were internal and external elements. They further explained that internal factors were metacognition knowledge and motivational belief, while external ones included lectures and instructions.

3. Methodology

Research questions

- *What are teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy in learning English listening skills?*

- *What are students' perceptions of learner autonomy in learning English listening skills?*

Settings and participants

The research was carried out at School of Languages and Tourism, Hanoi University of Industry (HaUI)- a public university in Vietnam involving the voluntary participation of 150 sophomores and 10 EFL teachers who are currently working at this university. The teacher participants are from 28 to 40 years old with M. A. degrees in TESOL and all have been teaching at the tertiary level from 6 to 15 years. At the time that the research was carried out, these teachers taught English in the second term of the academic year. The program of university provides 10-week English courses following a textbook named Skillful Listening and Speaking. Besides, teachers also design handouts which provide students with the topical vocabulary of each unit and needed structures. A 100-minute lesson will take place twice a week. The English courses are deployed in classrooms that are fully equipped with teaching-learning equipment such as projectors, screens, speakers, etc.,.

Design of the study

The researchers used a mixed method with two versions of questionnaires, followed by 10-minute semi-structured interviews for this study. Questionnaire was applied as it is “a useful instrument for gathering factual information, data on attitudes and preferences, beliefs and predictions, opinions, behavior and experiences-both in past and present time” (Cohen et al., 2011). Besides, interview is adopted as it is a useful data-collection tool to generate in-depth information (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012).

A study needs to be piloted to “ensure the high quality in terms of reliability and validity of the outcomes in the specific context” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 75). Being aware of the significance of the piloting phase, the research was piloted to check whether the questionnaires as

well as the interview questions had any problems and gain experience in carrying out in-depth semi-structured interviews. To make sure the content and linguistic purposes of the questionnaire were appropriate, valid and understandable, the questionnaire and interview questions were trialed with 10 English teachers and students. The items in the questionnaire and interviews were then reviewed by two researchers to determine their clarity and appropriateness. After receiving many helpful comments from colleagues, students, and the researchers, the authors edited interview questions and finalized the details in the questionnaire.

Data collection and analysis

Data for the study were collected through questionnaires and interviews. To be more specific, two sets of questionnaires adapted from Vu and Shah (2016) were used. The questionnaire for teachers included two parts. While the first part emphasized on teachers' background, the second part focused on how much time teachers spent teaching listening skills, the challenges they faced, and their opinions on their students' autonomy and ways to improve it. Similarly, there are two parts in the students' questionnaire. The first section concentrated on demonstrating students' understanding of the importance of ELS and their autonomy in learning ELS. In the second section, their study habits and suggestions for improving the outcomes of self-studying ELS were to be ascertained.

In order to further explore the students' autonomy in learning ELS, interviews were then conducted with teachers and students respectively. 10 randomly selected students and 5 teachers participated in 10-minute semi-structured interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded, which produced objective data and helped researchers review, replay and transcribe to yield a record of interaction (Bailey, 2006). During the research, the respondents were given pseudonyms to ensure their privacy. Students invited to participate in the study will be coded in the order of Student No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.

Evidence from all the recordings were carefully noted and categorized into different categories. Any examples belonging to new groups would be taken into account. Meanwhile, findings from the questionnaires were compared and contrasted with the findings from the interviews.

4. Results and discussion

Findings from teachers' data

To begin with, the participants' experience of teaching English listening skills will be presented and discussed. When it comes to the amount of time, about 40% of the teachers reported that they spent over 3 hours per week teaching listening for a class. Interestingly enough, the number of surveyed respondents allocated 1-2 hours or 2-3 hours to teach listening skills was equal (28%). When interviewed, these teachers shared that the amount of time used to teach listening skills was sufficient and this amount of time spent was the same for the other 3 English skills. Fortunately, it could be seen that listening wasn't neglected (Figure 1).

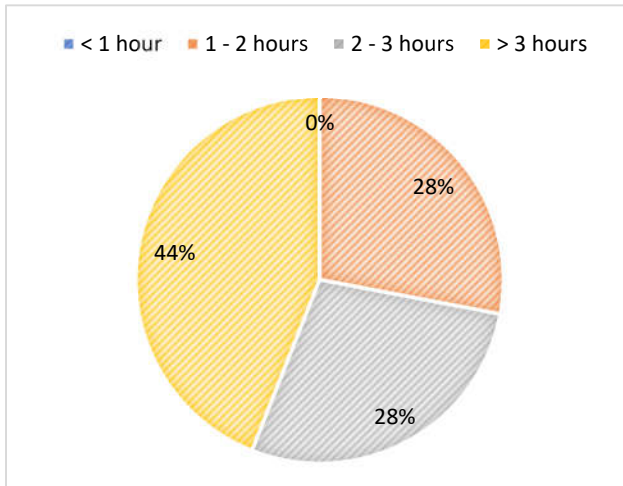


Figure 1: The amount of time spent on teaching listening skills for a class within a week

It is undeniable that teachers encounter a number of problems in teaching listening skills. Results show that there are considerable

differences in the responses of the participants about the difficulties which they encounter while teaching listening comprehension.

The greatest difficulties were the students' limited vocabulary and inability to concentrate. This makes teachers spend more time preparing the listening materials carefully because they must understand students' level very well and choose appropriate ones. With regard to students' inability to concentrate, the teachers interviewed shared that they had to replay the audio multiple times if their students didn't pay attention to the listening recording, which was really time-consuming. Nevertheless, it is surprising that none of the teachers selected lack of equipment as a problem. It means that the classroom was well equipped and available to teach listening skills. This finding contradicts what other researchers found, for example Alrawashdeh and Al-zayed (2017) and Thanajaro (2000) when their results indicated that the classrooms or laboratories in schools were not designed specially to teach listening skills. Only one teacher reported that he/ she lacked teaching methodologies. In other words, the majority of the respondents stated that there was no need to update the teaching methods as they believed in their experiences. Likewise, in Aryana and Apsari's study (2018), the subject also shared that he found it hard to select a suitable method or strategy to teach listening (Figure 2).

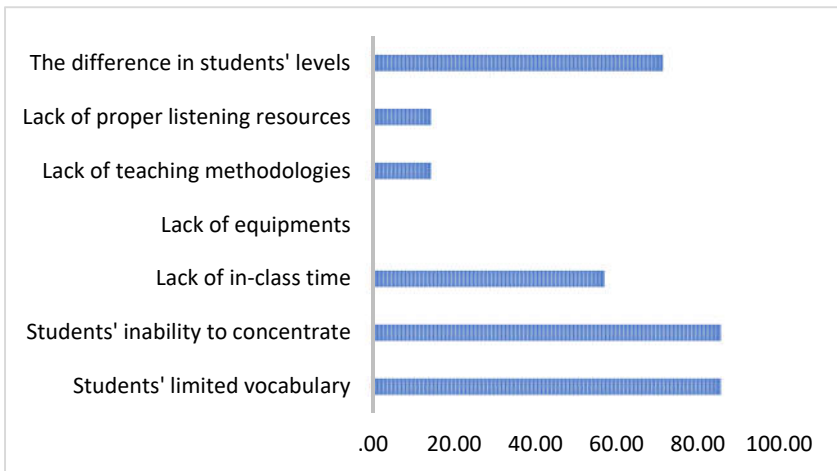


Figure 2: The difficulties in teaching listening skills

Results retrieved from the questionnaire show that roughly 60% of the teachers complained that their students' autonomous ability was bad. Over 40% of the teachers held a neutral opinion about their students' autonomy in learning English listening skills. It seems that the teachers did not appreciate their students' ability to learn English listening skills by themselves. This result well supports Chan (2003) and Vu and Shah's findings (2016) as in their studies, most of the teachers shared that their students' autonomous ability was bad (Figure 3).

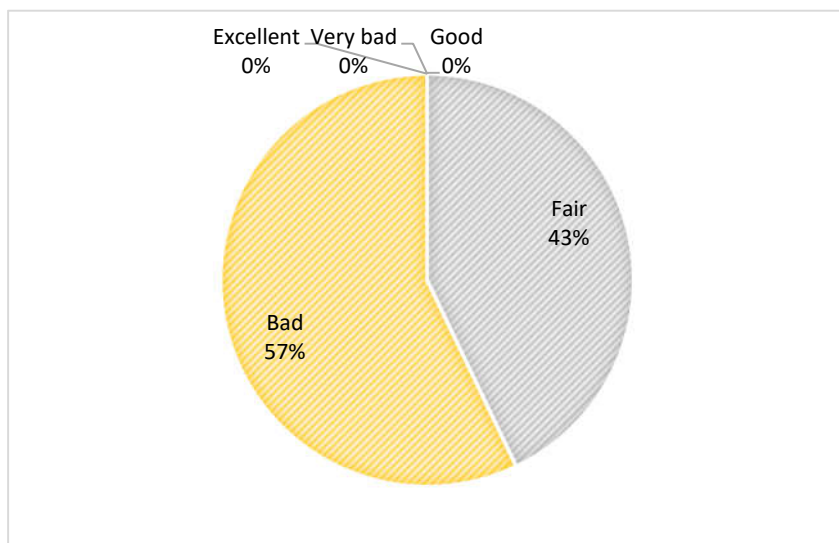


Figure 3: Students' ability to be autonomous in learning listening skills

When questioned about the reasons why they think their students' autonomous ability to learn English listening skills is not sufficient, nearly 60% of the teachers stated that it was because students were unaware of the importance of learning English listening skills autonomously and were not motivated to study. In contrast, in Vu and Shah's study (2016), only 30% of the teachers agreed that students had poor awareness of the importance of learning English listening skill on their own. More than half of the teachers disagreed that their

students were bad at learning independently because teaching methodology was not suitable with students' level. In other words, they believed their teaching methodology was not a factor impacting their students' autonomy ability (Figure 4).

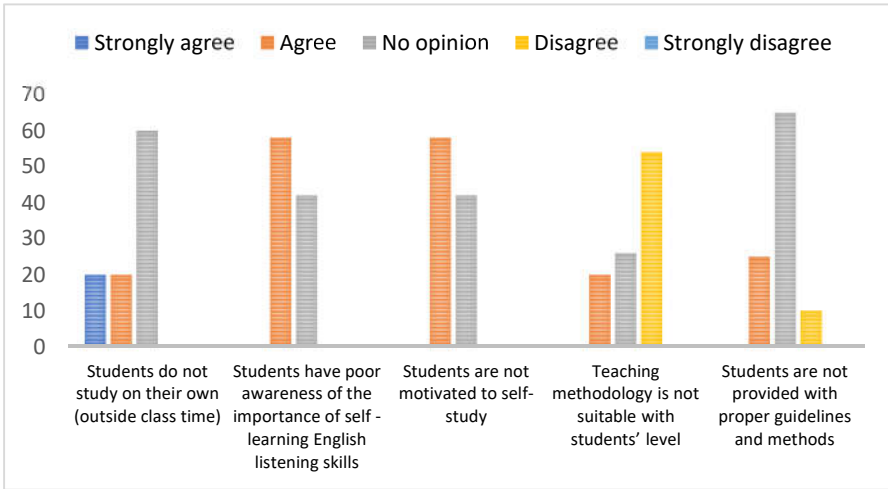


Figure 4. The reasons why the teachers think their students are not autonomous in learning English listening skills.

The survey also asked the teachers about suggestions on how to improve students' self-study ability of English listening skills. All the teachers agreed that assigning weekly homework (for example portfolios, reports) and giving students more exercises or assessment were the most effective ways to enhance the situation. The teachers further explained in the interview that since their students were not autonomous enough, they had to be provided with exercises with deadlines set. It is clear from the findings that extra exercises and homework play an important role in students' learning process. The least suggested way was designing suitable assessment methods, with only 40% of the respondents. This is contrary to Vu and Shah's study (2016), in which all of the teachers rated design suitable assessment methods as the most efficient way (Figure 5).

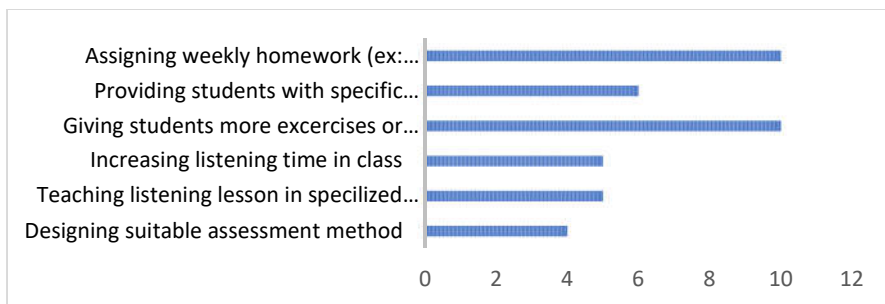


Figure 5: Suggestions on how to improve students' self-study ability of English listening skills

Findings with students

The research also focuses on discovering students' views on learner autonomy in learning English listening skills by using a separate questionnaire and open-ended interview questions.

The role of listening skills in learning English

First of all, students were asked to rate the role of listening skills in English language learning. The findings showed that about 80% of students considered it very important, while the rest thought that it was an important skill. Based on the results above, it can be concluded that all the students were well aware of the great importance of listening skills. Nevertheless, the ability to learn this skill independently and effectively is not simple.

The data collected on the question concerning the extent to which listening is difficult to learn indicated that about 70% of the students viewed it as "very difficult" and "difficult" and only 8% of participants thought it was normal. None of the students stated it was easy to learn this skill.

The student respondents were also surveyed about the reasons why they think English listening skill is difficult to learn. The findings pointed out that the two most selected difficulties which hindered learners' listening comprehension were lack of vocabulary and the

speed of speakers in audio with the responses from 77% and 68% of students, respectively. These results were similar to those revealed by Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) and Vu and Shah's study (2016).

Lastly, the finding of the general situation of learner's autonomous listening ability was reported in Figure 6. When asked about the importance of learning English listening skills independently, 80% of students shared that it was very important and 19% thought that it was important. Surprisingly, there was only one student who disagreed and claimed that it was not important to study English listening skills by themselves. It can be seen that most of the respondents are well aware of the importance of learning English listening skills independently. This contrasts with what their teachers thought when they claimed that their students had poor awareness of the importance of self-learning English listening skill (Figure 6).

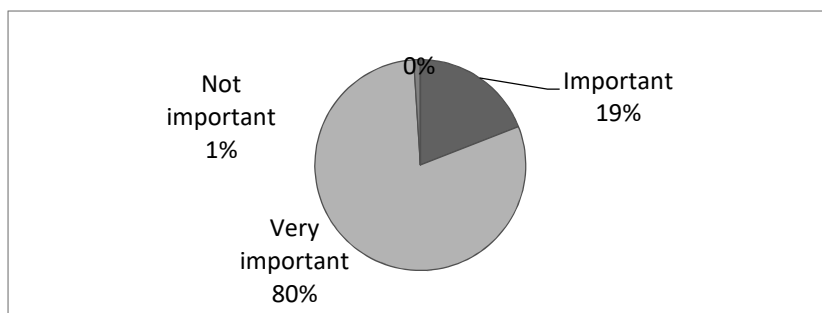


Figure 6: The importance of learning English listening skills independently

Students' engagement in self-studying ELS

Students involved in the research were asked about the time when they learn autonomously to measure their engagement in learning ELS autonomously. According to the data gathered from the survey, the majority of respondents (58.2%) self-study "when there is a test/exam," followed by 53.9% of them who learn when having motivation, 38.3% when "teachers ask them to learn," and 35.5% if they "have free time." (Figure 7).

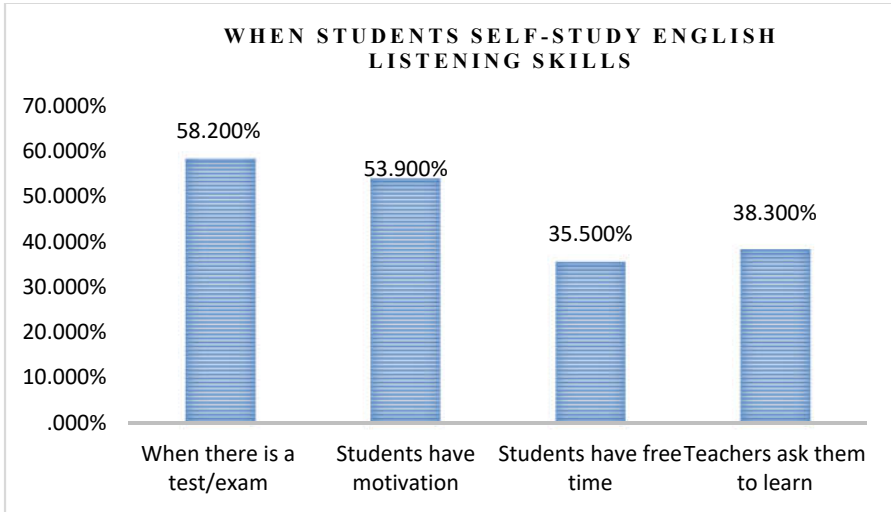


Figure 7: The time when students self-study English listening skills

As for the students’ opinions on the frequency of their self-study’s listening skills. The result collected from the questionnaire shows 57.4% of the students ‘sometimes’ self-study followed by 18% who ‘rarely’ self-study, and 5.8% of them are not involved in self-studying ELS. (Figure8)

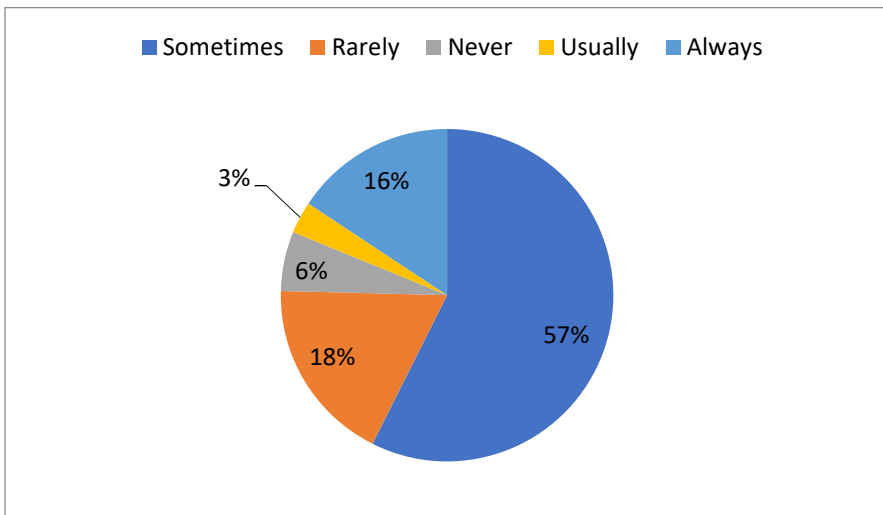


Figure 8: The frequency of self-studying English listening skills

From the findings, it is clearly shown that 65.2% of the respondents spend “less than 1 hour”, followed by 27% who spend about “1 to 2 hours”. The rest of participants stated that they did not allocate any time for self-studying ELS. When being asked about the reasons, students 1 stated that “*I do not have time, and I have other homework to finish*”. Moreover, when being interviewed, the majority of students admitted that they did not know how to set up their specific learning goals despite being taught at the beginning of the first year. In fact, a wide array of them lacked their own daily or weekly learning plans. There are some students who created their study plans but failed to make them effective since they could not manage their time for these plans or were drawn to other unplanned activities or excessive amounts of homework or lacked sufficient efforts and strong will. They admitted that they swiftly felt bored and frustrated when learning alone. Additionally, as the Internet is their primary learning tool, students were easily distracted by social media instead of paying attention to their learning practice.

Moreover, this could be explained by the fact that students may still be in the training process to become more independent in their learning (Kemala, 2016; Abd Rahman, Md Yunus, Md Yunus, & Ab. Rahman, 2022). Specifically, students might not fully grasp what it means to be autonomous, and they may lack the necessary skills to decide what to learn, the teaching strategy to be employed in class, and the appropriate materials to be used in lessons. Another reason for this result would be the notion of students' capacity which relates to their ability, willingness, and opportunity in learner autonomy and this ability needs to be developed gradually through practice (Pham, 2022).

Factors affecting students' autonomy in learning ELS

As regards to the factors which hinder students from autonomous learning effectively, ‘lack of motivation’ accounted for 80.9%

respondents. ‘Lack of study method’ is the second factor that has an impact on students’ self-study ELS (79.1%). The third factor, ‘Lack of vocabulary’, is considered an obstacle to 50.4% of students when self-studying ELS. This highlights the importance of vocabulary in learning ELS and indicates that before students can study ELS autonomously, they need to master the vocabulary. Finally, it appears that ‘lack of equipment’ is not a problem as only 19.7% of student’s informants find it challenging to study independently due to this (Figure 9).

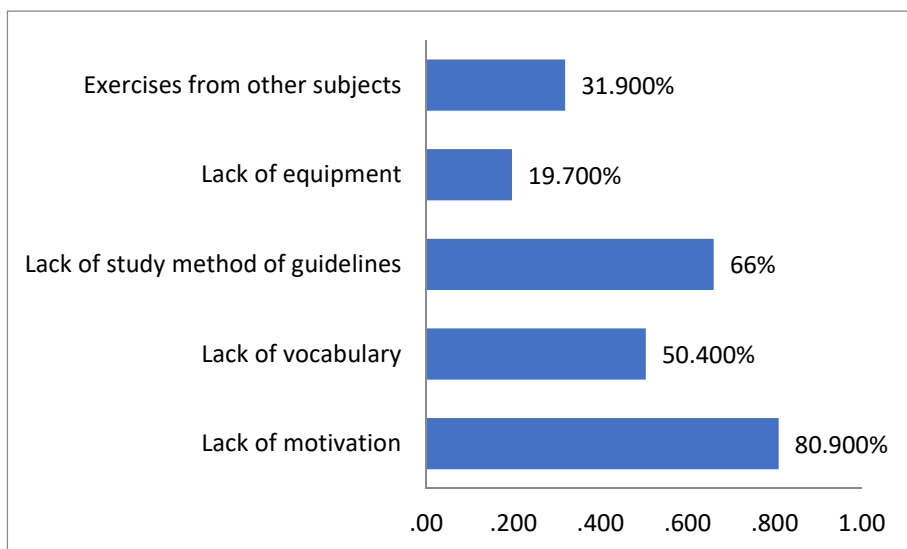


Figure 9: Factors affecting students’ autonomy in learning ELS

Another significant finding of this study is that there is a discrepancy between teachers’ and students’ viewpoints about the factors that contribute to students’ lack of autonomy in learning ELS. The findings demonstrated that teachers believe students’ poor autonomy is primarily caused by their inability to focus and their limited vocabulary, while students report that they cannot self-learn ELS effectively mostly owing to the lack of motivation and an inappropriate learning strategy. This confirms the finding of Vu and Shah (2016) in a research investigating Vietnamese students’ self-

direction in learning ELS. Although teachers are aware of the importance of autonomy in learning ELS, they do not seem to fully perform their facilitator roles in students' autonomous learning. In this case, it is suggested that teachers should first identify learners' difficulties (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013) in order for them to best facilitate students' autonomy. Also, it is critical to motivate students to learn autonomously by rewarding them and creating an effective learning environment (Van Etten, Pressley, McInerney & Liem, 2008).

Methods for self-directed English learning

Regarding methods students used for their self-directed English learning, the result revealed that 72.3% of the respondents used 'films/movies/ podcasts in English' to learn ELS, followed by 68.8% of the participants who learn through 'listening to English songs'. 'Doing exercise in books and listening to news in English' are also two other ways chosen by 36.2% and 24.1 % of the participating students, respectively (Figure 10). Students were also interviewed to specifically list out other methods they used to study English listening skills which are not mentioned in the survey. Some methods can be named as communicating with foreigners, playing video games, etc, however the proportion of students using these methods are relatively low.

"I do not have many opportunities to meet and communicate with foreigners so I couldn't practice my listening skills through this method." (Student 2)

"I love playing games, however in the games I often play, there are not many occasions for me to learn English listening skills." (Student 3)

This aligns with the findings of Grover, Miller, Swearingen, and Wood's (2014) study investigating how ESL learners learn ELS autonomously. They found that watching television programs in

English is the most frequent strategy employed by ESL learners in their self- study of ELS.

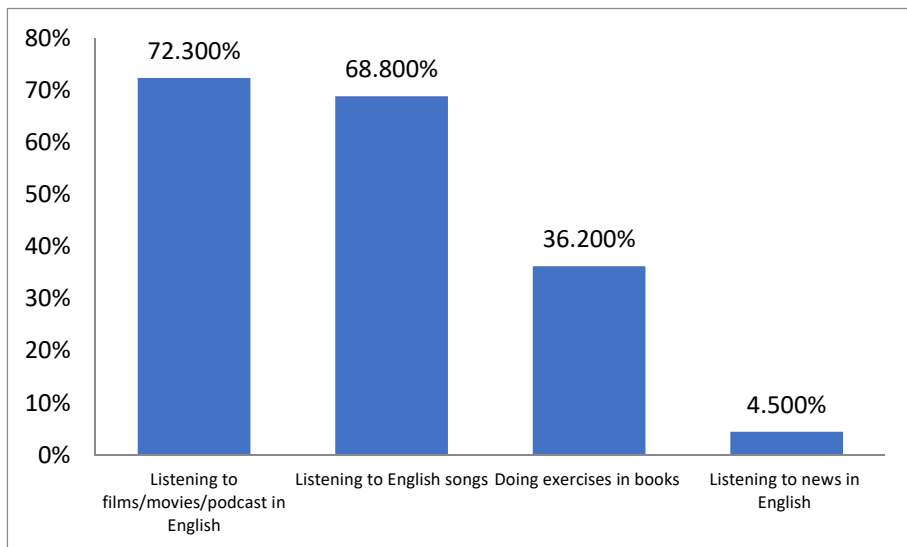


Figure 10: Methods students use to self-study ELS

When being asked about methods by which students used to self-study ELS effectively, 70.2% of the participants suggested that ‘clear instructions on how to self-learn listening skill by teacher’ would assist them in their autonomous learning. This result reveals a mismatch between teachers’ opinion and that of their students. While the participating students show a high demand for support from teachers when it comes to their autonomous learning, most participating educators find that instructing students more in their autonomy is not essential. The finding of this study also strengthens the observation of Abd Rahman, Md Yunus, Md Yunus, Ab. Rahman (2022) in their study exploring perception of students and teachers of learner autonomy at a university. Students place a high value on teacher-hosted learning activities. In their opinion, as teachers were more experienced in organizational skills, they could benefit more when participating in a teacher-led learning activity than a student-hosted activity (Abd Rahman, Md Yunus, Md Yunus, & Ab. Rahman, 2022).

To enhance students' autonomy, the role of teachers in it now demands considerable attention from the teachers themselves. Teachers must therefore be explicit about what they should do to assist students in their own studies.

Furthermore, according to 61 % of students who participated in the study, the 'amount of time for in-class listening' should be expanded. They also held the same opinion as teachers regarding the need for extra exercises and resources to improve their ability for independent learning. In self-studying ELS, students rated 'Access to modern equipment' as vital, with 23,4%. (Figure 11).

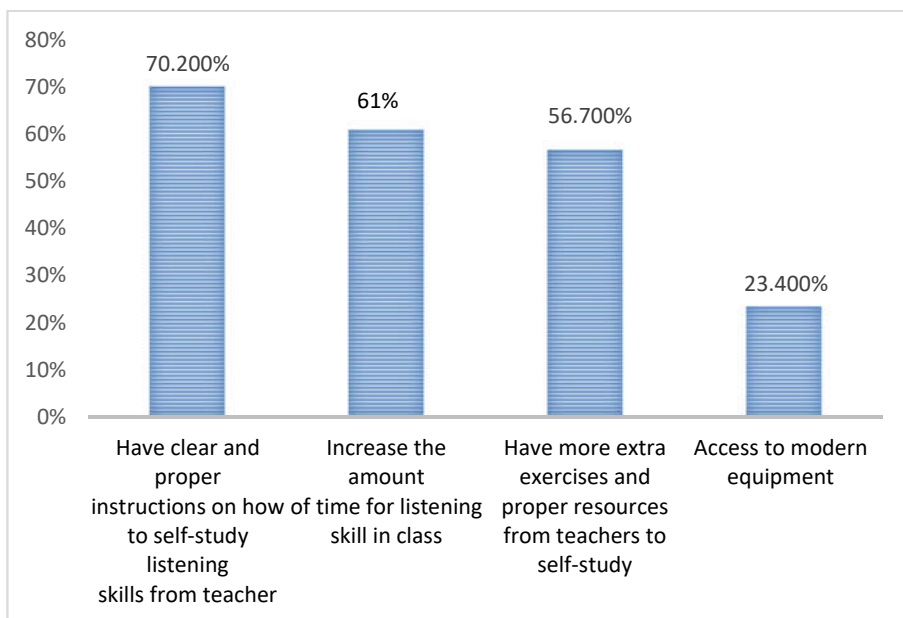


Figure 11: Students' views on how to learn ELS more effectively

It is also noticeable that there is a consensus between teachers and students with regard to the solutions for enhancing the effectiveness of students' autonomy. Both express a strong demand for an increase in in-class time for ELS and accessibility to modern equipment.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This research sheds light on university students' perceptions of learning ELS autonomously and strategies to improve the effectiveness of their autonomy. Our findings prove that although teachers and students are well aware of the importance of independence in learning ELS, teachers must fully facilitate students' autonomy, and students are likely to be ready to learn autonomously.

This study also supplies valuable information which helps broaden our understanding of Vietnamese students' autonomy in learning ELS. For students to have learner autonomy, they must possess the necessary abilities and knowledge. They also need motivation and confidence to make independent decisions and access to resources, social interactions, and psychological support that encourage independent learning. A collaborative effort between students and teachers is essential to support students' autonomous learning. Teachers play a pivotal role in guiding learners towards understanding their role in their learning process and encouraging active participation. Providing additional guidelines, assistance, and encouragement when students face demotivation is crucial. For instance, organizing workshops and tutorials in the early stages of the learning journey can effectively instill autonomy skills in students. Ongoing reinforcement of guidance throughout the course is necessary to strengthen students' autonomy. Moreover, teachers must comprehend the specific needs of learners in order to promote autonomy effectively. By understanding students' individual requirements and tailoring instruction accordingly, educators can create an environment that fosters autonomy in ELS learning.

Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of enhancing learner autonomy in ELS learning and provides practical recommendations for both teachers and students. By implementing these strategies and fostering a supportive learning environment, students can develop greater autonomy in their language learning journey, leading to improved outcomes and increased self-efficacy.

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