# Learner Autonomy in the Vietnamese EAP Context: A Literature Review

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**Abstract**: This literature review explores the current body of research pertaining to learner autonomy in the Vietnamese English for Academic Purposes (EAP) context, investigating themes and research methodologies, conclusions drawn, limitations and possible avenues for further study and new research directions in the future. We demonstrate that although there are many studies exploring the concept of learner autonomy, the definitions as to how this term is described is not clear throughout the literature, and this is a limitation in the current research field. In addition to this, there is significant evidence suggesting that Vietnamese EAP learners are keen to engage in autonomous learning practices and can demonstrate the self-regulation required to do so, which disagrees with traditional conceptions of Confucian heritage culture learning approaches.

**Keywords**: Autonomy, EAP, Vietnam, Higher Education

## Introduction

Learner autonomy is far from a new subject, having been the focus of discussion in language learning since the 1980s (Littlewood, 1999). This is attributed to the perceived benefits of autonomous learning, which have included increased motivation (Lee, 1996; Tagaki, 2003), active participation in the classroom, (Dam, 1995; Natri, 2007), and a greater sense of self-responsibility for students' learning (Cunningham & Carlton, 2003; Mizuki, 2003; Stephenson & Kohyama, 2003).

However, crafting an adequate, all-encompassing definition of learner autonomy is not straightforward, due to a multiplicity of definitions and interpretations in practice. As an example, the concept of learner autonomy has been defined as 'authoring one's own world without being subject to the will of others' (Young, 1986) and 'the ability to self-regulate and self- determine' (Ryan 1991, p210), as well as the 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec, 1981, p3). Others, such as Littlewood (1999) have taken the concept and subdivided it further, proposing multiple levels of autonomy, including proactive and reactive autonomy (1999, p75).

Similarly, authors such as Benson (1997) have argued for technical, psychological, and political dimensions to learner autonomy, which may encompass topics such as learning strategies in technical autonomy, the fostering of psychological autonomy, and learner empowerment in political autonomy (Palfreyman, 2003). Some have postulated that learner autonomy may be considered a human right (Benson, 2000), and that increasing learner autonomy is a more effective method of language learning in comparison to others (Naiman et al., 1978). There are then, a number of interpretations of autonomy, including numerous lenses through which the concept can be viewed. This contributes to the difficulty in analysing the current literature in the Vietnamese HE and EAP context, as although studies may claim to be examining autonomy, the lack of a clear, common definition may lead to different understandings of what autonomy means in practice. Although this has previously been

recognised by other researchers (Nguyen, Tangen and Beutel, 2013) there seems to be no current suggestion as to how this can be resolved in the Vietnamese and wider context. In the following review, autonomy is defined as a broad-spectrum 'ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec, 1981, p3).

In terms of the East Asian. or regional context of this research, it must be recognised that autonomy has been the subject of controversy in terms of cultural origin and appropriacy. Researchers have raised questions of ethnocentricity in the practice of encouraging learner autonomy, and it has been suggested that learner autonomy is often implemented by Western teachers and academics (Palfreyman, 2003). Littlewood (1999, p71) has argued that in language learning contexts in East Asia, learner autonomy may be presented as a Western concept which may not match traditional methods of education. However, empirical research has shown that while autonomous learning might be presented in this manner, it does not mean that students in the East are not keen to employ autonomous learning practices. On the contrary, it has been argued that Asian students 'want to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers' (Littlewood, 1999, p34). In addition to this argument, Littlewood (1999) continues to identify five generalisations surrounding autonomous learning experiences of students in the East Asian context, stating that firstly, students in East Asia will have high levels of reactive autonomy. Secondly, when students are grouped together for learning tasks or projects, they will develop both reactive and proactive autonomy. Thirdly, that students will not have experienced contexts which require individual autonomy, and finally that the language classroom can be a good context in which to develop the capacity of autonomy (Littlewood, 1999, p88). Littlewood does however, accept that these are generalisations (Littlewood, 1999), and this research takes the view that broad-strokes characterisations of learners across multiple nations, cultures and contexts (as of that in 'East Asia') is of little practical use and is not empirically verifiable. Rather, research, and investigations of learner characteristics should focus on the specific context in which it takes place.

Despite this view, a number of commonly held views about East Asian students continue to be put forward in research material, while some authors have actively contested these conceptions of Asian students, labelling them 'cultural stereotypes' (Le Ha, 2004), hence, Vietnamese university learners have attracted more attention as research subjects in recent years, and the 'gap' between English language teaching at university in Vietnam, and the requirements of English in working contexts has recently been explored (Vo, Wyatt and McCullagh, 2016). One explanation for this 'gap' in the Vietnamese context is Confucian values, which are seen as dictating 'traditional beliefs of relational hierarchy in classrooms (Ho & Crookal 1995 cited in Nguyen, Tangen and Beautel, 2013, p211), and Vietnamese EAP learners have been described as 'passive, obedient, and reproductive' (Tuyet, 2013, p75), and familiar with 'rote learning' (Dang, 2010, p3). Similarly Pham (2000, cited in Trinh, 2005, p18), states that 'it is generally believed that it is almost impossible to change the perceived students' passiveness in learning, while language classrooms in Vietnam remain teacher-centered, focusing on grammatical items.' Interestingly, these attitudes recur in other studies in separate geographical regions.

There seems to be a divide in the literature, and in the current research regarding learner autonomy in general, and more specifically, learner autonomy in Vietnam. For this reason, it is an opportune time to comprehensively analyse, investigate, and review the current research, in order to not only draw conclusions about any consensus in the field, but to shape and guide future avenues of research in learner autonomy. Through a more thorough discussion of the important factors relating to the concept of learner autonomy, we aim to attempt to resolve some of the differences currently present in the literature.

**Examining the Literature on Learner Autonomy for EAP Students in Vietnam**

In reviewing the literature, several themes emerge. Firstly, there is strong evidence that Vietnamese students are able to engage in autonomous learning practices, yet are limited by prescriptive exams, traditional learning methods, and lack of guided support for autonomous learning. On the other hand,

there is also evidence that there is no widely agreed upon definition for learner autonomy in the research area, and this is a significant limitation which detracts from the conclusions drawn.

Of the number of studies investigating learner autonomy in Vietnam, one of the most influential is that of Littlewood (2000). This large-scale study investigated common preconceptions surrounding learner autonomy and learner attitudes, drawing comparisons between East Asian and European contexts. Littlewood's (2000) research encompassed 2,307 students across eight East Asian countries including Vietnam, and a comparison sample of 349 students across three European nations (2000, p39). Although Vietnam was not the sole focus of this research, the findings were strongly in opposition to the traditional view of the Vietnamese learner as 'passive, obedient and reproductive' (Dang, 2010, p3). Littlewood (2000, p33) found that the Vietnamese students surveyed showed the strongest disagreement in the sample with the statement 'the teacher's authority should not be questioned'. This stands in contrast to the traditional conception of education in Confucian heritage culture learning environments.

In addition, a second survey item, that of whether knowledge should be passed down from the teacher, revealed that Vietnamese students showed higher disagreement with this statement than any other nation, including European nations such as Finland, Spain, and Germany (Littlewood, 2000, p33). This contrasts strongly with common viewpoints of teachers' roles in the Vietnamese language classroom, such as Dang (2010, p3) who states that 'teachers are used to dictating the class', and Tuyet (2013, p3) who argues that students have a habit of 'learning by heart the knowledge the teacher provides in class'. Although the results of this research are interesting in that they provide evidence of an alternative view of student autonomy in the Vietnamese classroom, no similar replications of this study have been conducted in the eighteen years since its publication. The study also does not reveal whether the survey findings accurately mirror students' behaviors in class, or merely whether students are in favor of autonomous learning in principle, but as of yet do not, or feel unable to put such principles into practice. Littlewood concludes that on the whole 'Asian students want to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers' (2000, p34) and this is the salient point of this research paper, although it is necessary to identify that significant changes in the Vietnamese education system have occurred during the two decades since this research was published, thereby presenting an opportunity for a follow-up study in this area.

Van Thai (2015)'s research may help to explain the disjunct between students' preferences and the learning options available to them. The author explored the role of the impact of assessment on learner autonomy in the teaching of English and American literature, through a survey of 241 English-major students at Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City. Van Thai (2015, p146) states that 'until the early 2000s, most Vietnamese tertiary level students were not ready for learner autonomy'. Van Thai's (2015, p150) findings suggested that assessment methods which required rote learning, unsurprisingly perhaps, had a strong negative influence on students' autonomous learning practices. The findings also suggest that it is perhaps not Vietnamese students themselves who lack autonomy, but that other external factors may limit their ability to demonstrate it in a classroom setting, which could be related to traditional cultural learning values. This explanation could help bridge the gap shown in the findings of Littlewood (2000); that between students' perceptions of their own learner autonomy, and the limited demonstration of these practices in the classroom.

Further confirmation that Vietnamese EAP students are keen and able to learn autonomously comes from Nguyen (2008), who surveyed 177 English major students at a single unnamed university in Vietnam. This study, aside from investigating learners' beliefs and practices in self-regulation and self-initiation, aimed to correlate English proficiency measures with measures of autonomy, through the analysis of skills based on end-of-semester scoring in formalised assessments (Nguyen, 2008, p74). This study is one of the few which specifically details an underlying definition of learner autonomy in the project, defining this as self-initiation and self-regulation by the student. These findings contribute to confirming the generally held view that Vietnamese EAP students in tertiary education are keen to embrace autonomous learning practices (Littlewood 2000; Van 2011; Van Thai 2015). The research demonstrated that Vietnamese learners of English who participated in the study

were motivated in their learning practices and had the ability to regulate their own learning processes and found significant positive correlations between measures of learner autonomy and English proficiency. One key point of interest for further research may be Nguyen's (2008, p74) assertion that learning strategies demonstrated by participants are suggestive not of passiveness, but of covert, or unobservable learning behaviors rather than overt learning behaviors. Further research should aim to investigate whether covert learning practices, which are autonomous in nature, are being misinterpreted in the classroom for quietness, passivity, and low motivation.

Van (2011) explored the perceptions of responsibilities and abilities relating to learner autonomy practices among non-English major students from 24 different universities across Vietnam studying in both undergraduate and graduate education programs (n=641).The research explored learners' perceptions of their responsibilities for self-study and any other self-motivated learning activities which students engaged in both inside and outside the classroom (Van, 2011, p44). Van's findings suggested that there is a divide between undergraduate and graduate study modes in the Vietnamese higher education context, and that undergraduates demonstrated a higher sense of belief in the proposition that they should take responsibility for their own study, and a lower belief in this among graduate students (Van, 2011, p46). In addition, the results of this research suggested that students of both undergraduate and graduate programmes across Vietnam perceive themselves as able to carry out autonomous and cooperative learning activities, and wished to play an active role in deciding course aims, content, and assessment (Van, 2011, p46). A specific strength of this study is the diversity of respondents, both in terms of geographic spread and level of study which may be indicative of a more representative set of results. Despite the students' self-perception of their own ability and willingness to incorporate autonomous learning practices, the majority of respondents seemed unwilling to 'take charge' of actually implementing these practices themselves without support. This suggests once again that it is factors external to Vietnamese students' control that restricts their autonomous learning practices, and for that reason, these must be 'built-in' to lesson and curricula design if these practices are to be more easily demonstrated.

Humphreys and Wyatt (2013) investigated an intervention designed to increase learner autonomy through an action-research methodology at a private university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. They combined Likert-scale questionnaires with focus group meetings and discussions, including eighty-three Vietnamese EAP learners from a range of five different levels of language proficiency, and found that students generally had 'low levels of awareness and involvement in autonomy in practice' (Humphreys and Wyatt, 2013, p57). Specifically, the authors state that most of the participants did not fully understand the concept, and in excess of 80% felt unconfident in planning their own learning, with a further 75% feeling unconfident in identifying areas of strength and weakness within their own English language ability (Humphreys and Wyatt, 2013, p57). Furthermore, of the students surveyed, the majority did not meet the expected hours of self-study, at 20 hours per week (Humphreys and Wyatt, 2013, p57), although the reasons for this were not clearly expressed. Interestingly, the researchers also found that students felt that teachers should be more proactive in supporting autonomous learning practices, assisting with goal-setting and suggesting ideas for resources and self-study, suggesting a form of 'guided autonomy' (Humphreys and Wyatt, 2013, p58). This concept of teacher-supported implementation of autonomous learning practices is highlighted as a potential method for increasing autonomy in several existing studies (Dang 2010; Nga 2012; Ngoc and Ishawita, 2012).

The authors claim that learners entering university after completing secondary school in Vietnam may have acquired 'rigidly held personal constructs as to what language learning involves' (Humphreys and Wyatt, 2013, p53), and that, in contrast to the work of Littlewood (2000), Van Thai (2015), Nguyen (2008), and Van (2011), that these may centre on dependence on the teacher or instructor (Humphreys and Wyatt, 2013, p53). The authors postulate that as a result, making the transition to tertiary education, which may require more autonomous learning practices, can be difficult (Humphreys and Wyatt, 2013, p53).

This study also identified the usefulness of an intervention aimed at promoting autonomous learning practice, in this case an independent learning journal or ILJ. Teachers questioned on the use of the ILJ responded that students appeared to show a high level of autonomous learning (Humphreys and Wyatt, 2013, p60). That said, this study was short in duration at approximately five weeks, and was limited in the lack of student input during the evaluation process. The researchers, drawing on these limitations, suggest that future research in the field follow a longitudinal structure in analysing the efficacy of autonomy-promoting interventions for students. In other geographical contexts, authors such as Aliweh (2011) have studied the use of electronic portfolio interventions in supporting students' writing competence and autonomy. While no significant effects on learner autonomy were found, Aliweh puts forward a strong case for further study of electronic portfolios in increasing learner autonomy (2011, p20), and this may be a potential method of extending the research of Humphreys and Wyatt (2013). Similarly, other authors have examined the use of interventions for improving learner autonomy online, for example, who in an Asian further education learning context designed a learning unit employing online discussion forums, seeing them as 'an opportunity for teachers to raise thought-provoking questions while giving ownership to students in order to foster learner autonomy' (Eckhaus, 2018, p280). This reconfirms the potential of this area of research in future studies of autonomy in the East Asian context.

Nguyen and Gu (2013) investigated the effects of strategy-based instruction, or SBI, on the promotion of Learner Autonomy, which the authors conceptualised as with Nguyen (2008), as learner self-initiation and learner self-regulation. The authors conducted an intervention study with an experimental group of 37 students and two control groups comprising 54 students, all of whom were third year English-major students at a single university in Vietnam (Nguyen and Gu, 2013, p9). Those in the experimental group received an eight-week metacognition training package, which was incorporated into the students' academic writing program. The results of the study demonstrated that participants in the experimental group were able to improve their ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate writing tasks in comparison to the control group. This suggests, in contrast to the views of the participants in other research (Ngoc and Ishawita, 2012) that learner autonomy can be improved among students through the use of learner training (Nguyen and Gu, 2013, p9). Other smaller scale projects have investigated the use of peer-teaching and student selection of learning content (Nga, 2012), and project-based learning (Nguyen, 2017). Nguyen (2017), through the use of a questionnaire analysed with a t-test, found that students' sense of autonomy increased after two semesters of additional autonomous project work was integrated into their curriculum.

Several studies in the Vietnamese context have aimed not just to evaluate students' beliefs, attitudes, and actions towards autonomous learning practices, but have also incorporated teachers' views. Ngoc and Ishawita (2012) conducted a comparative study exploring the attitudes held towards learner autonomy by both teachers and students; collecting data through a questionnaire delivered to 37 Vietnamese teachers of English and 88 pre-intermediate learners of English. One of the authors' key findings is that much like the ideas of guided autonomy (Humphreys and Wyatt, 2013, p58) teachers in the study felt that it was more important to facilitate learner autonomy and train learners to take responsibility for their own learning, rather than leave it up to the learners entirely. In contrast to the common idea that Vietnamese teachers are expected by students to be the expert 'knowers' of the language (Ngoc and Ishawita, 2012, p38), the majority of learners who took part in the research offered similar views to the teachers, with responses stating that an important role for the teacher was to help assist learners in developing autonomy and responsibility (Ngoc and Ishawita, 2012, p38). The authors highlight that the results of the study are somewhat paradoxical. From one perspective, learners' responses seemed to highly advocate learner autonomy practices, while simultaneously implying that in order to be able to take charge of their learning, the students first required input from the teacher, including orientation, guidance, and instruction, in order to achieve the goal of autonomous learning practices (Ngoc and Ishawita, 2012, p38). This result is similar that found in the studies explored above, in that Vietnamese learners are keen to engage in autonomous learning practices but prefer to receive guidance and orientation from teachers on how to do this effectively. This suggests that it is perhaps a matter of confidence which restricts autonomous learning as Ngoc

and Ishawita's (2012) research demonstrates that 'learner participants' were open to what they deem 'Western ideologies' of learner autonomy and learner-centredness.

Nga (2012) investigated Vietnamese teachers' understanding of the concept of learner autonomy, and how these beliefs were applied to teaching practice. Through the collection of both survey data and a range of qualitative methods (interviews, stimulated recall, interviews, and video observations), the researcher found that as a general trend, teachers lacked understanding of the concept of learner autonomy, which matches the findings from other teacher-centred studies (Nguyen, Tangen, and Beutel, 2014). As a result, the researcher concluded that the teachers displayed little evidence of autonomous learning practices in the classroom (Nga, 2012, pii).

Nga's (2012) research also identified a key concern in researching learner autonomy in the Vietnamese context, namely, that there are issues in translating the concept of learner autonomy into Vietnamese, as the standard translation is 'too general, as it doesn't identify the dimensions of learner autonomy that are being discussed' (Nga, 2012, p149), which leads to confusion . In one case, research participants in Nga's study (2012, p153) saw self-study as synonymous with autonomy. Issues with confusion are highlighted by several researchers (Benson, 1997; Nguyen Tangen and Beautel, 2014), and this suggests that developing a single, shared definition for research projects should be a future avenue of study. Finally, Nga expresses the view of other researchers (Dang, 2010; Nguyen, 2010; Oliver, 2004; Phan, 2006), that teachers in Vietnam are seen by students as 'controllers' and 'knowledge providers', and this, among other factors, means that learners do not tend to take responsibility for their own learning (Nga, 2012, p153) as they believe it is the role of the teacher to guide their study. This, may be seen as an explanation of the results showing an existence of teacher-supported or teacher-guided autonomy practices, in the studies of Humphreys and Wyatt (2013) and Ngoc and Ishawita (2012); students will not engage in autonomous learning practices until their teacher initiates this. In summary, Nga's (2012) research suggests that learner autonomy is not well understood among Vietnamese teachers, and possible explanations include the complexity of the term itself, and the traditional relationship between students and teachers, as well as the learning context which limits teachers' opportunities for innovation in the classroom (Nga, 2012, p178). The limitations of this research include the limited scope of the research and that it cannot be said to be consistent with all universities in Vietnam (Nga, 2012, p178).

One of the few studies to focus solely on the point of view of the teacher, rather than students or both students and teachers, comes from Nguyen, Tangen and Beautel (2014) They conducted structured interviews with four university lecturers of unspecified subjects at a university in Hanoi, Vietnam, with the intention of exploring the understanding of learner autonomy in Vietnamese Higher Education. The authors argue that much like in other countries such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia and Korea, the influence of Confucianism,, contributes to a particular image teachers hold of their students as a 'passive, reproductive, and surface learner', and that this leads to 'traditional beliefs of relational hierarchy in classrooms' (Ho & Crookall cited in Nguyen, Tangen and Beautel, 2014, p211). This could explain the unwillingness shown by Vietnamese students to engage in autonomous learning practices without guidance from their teacher, as the cultural expectations of the learning environment held by both teacher and student may restrict autonomous learning practices from being demonstrated independently by the student. The research conducted here focuses more on the lecturers' perceptions of the learner, rather than the beliefs of the learner themselves and therefore enables an alternative perspective of the concept of learner autonomy to be gained.

Nguyen, Tangen, and Beutel's (2014) study is also affected by the complexities of translation equivalence in the concept of learner autonomy. The authors state that in the Vietnamese context, learner autonomy is often translated into a range of different definitions, thus creating confusion and uncertainty. Ultimately, the authors suggest that a clearer definition of learner autonomy be adopted, if not in a global context, then at least for the context of Vietnam, as failure to do so leads to cultural impact affecting the interpretation of the concept of learner autonomy (Nguyen, Tangen, and Beutel, 2014, p205).

The lack of clarity regarding the concept of learner autonomy is therefore a pivotal point of this

research, as the authors state that one reason for lecturers not fostering autonomous approaches to learning in class was the result of a lack of understanding of the concept (Nguyen, Tangen, and Beautel, 2014, p209). However, the authors claim that this is not the largest factor restricting learner autonomy in Vietnam, and state that from their research, the largest factor hindering this is that of centralised final-semester examinations maintaining the status-quo of traditional teaching practices in the classroom,(Nguyen, Tangen, and Beautel, 2014, p209). This is coherent with the author's assertion that bureaucratic constraints render lecturers and students unable to make changes to the learning environment (which could incorporate autonomous learning practices), even if they wished to (Phan, 2006, cited in Nguyen, Tangen and Beutel, 2014, p205). This research highlights the previously discussed issues which are important to consider in further autonomy studies in Vietnam, namely that of clearly defining the understanding of the concept itself the translation of this into Vietnamese. . That said, this research is limited to a small sample size of four lecturers, and thus cannot be said to be representative of attitudes held throughout Vietnamese HE. As an example, one participant was said to believe that learner autonomy was innate in some students and could not be taught (Nguyen, Tangen and Beautel, 2014, p212), yet it seems unlikely that this opinion is shared throughout the HE context. For this reason, care must be exercised when generalising about views on learner autonomy from such a small cohort of participants.

**Conclusion**

By reviewing the work carried out in the field of learner autonomy in higher education EAP in Vietnam, this review has identified several areas of consensus in the literature. A common issue identified by current researchers in the field (Nga, 2012; Nguyen, Tangen, and Beautel, 2012) is that a single definition of learner autonomy is not shared between research projects, and that this can lead to confusion, especially when researching student or teacher beliefs and practices. This issue is further compounded when the term 'learner autonomy' is required to be translated into Vietnamese, as the literal translation does not adequately cover the complex set of practices and behaviours that the term implies in English. For this reason, further research is needed to create a shared, adequate and satisfactory translation which refers to a generally agreed on definition of learner autonomy. This will lead to greater consistency of results among researchers.

The second point of agreement is that despite traditional conceptions of the East Asian learner as being passive learners, multiple studies have demonstrated that on the contrary, Vietnamese learners are keen to adopt autonomous learning practices (Littlewood, 2000; Van 2011; Van Thai 2015). Subsequently, we believe it is now clear that Vietnamese students are not un-autonomous by nature (Trinh, 2005, p25), but are restricted in their ability to engage in autonomous learning practices by the educational culture prevalent in Vietnam (Nguyen, Tangen, and Beautel, 2014) . Several authors have achieved positive results through the use of autonomy-stimulating practices (Humphreys and Littlewood, 2013; Nga 2012; Trinh 2005), and this is an important area for further exploration. Multiple authors advocate for the implementation of autonomous learning techniques by teachers, to offer a 'guided autonomy' practice (Humphreys and Wyatt 2013; Ngoc and Ishawita, 2012) which may further stimulate learner autonomy amongst Vietnamese EAP learners.

Currently, most literature revolves around student and teacher self-assessed surveys, while there are comparatively few studies actively involving change-making practices and implementing autonomy-promoting tools for learners, even though preliminary studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of such tools (Humphreys and Wyatt, 2013). Other studies of this nature should be encouraged, especially those which aim to explore the effectiveness of autonomy-promoting methods and learning resources, or the 'profitability' of autonomy-enhancing interventions (Trinh, 2005, p179) in order to understand the differences between what Vietnamese students think about learner autonomy, compared to how they actually put this into practice. Regardless of the specific methodology used, we agree with the statements made by Dang (2010) in there being a general lack of research examining students' perceptions of learner autonomy within Vietnam and believe that further research in this area, evaluating attitudes and behaviours in regards to autonomous learning practices, may reveal deeper insights into this topic.

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