DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS' AUTONOMY IN SPEAKING ENGLISH: AN INVESTIGATION INTO STUDENTS' PRACTICE AT A UNIVERSITY IN THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM

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Abstract:

Learner autonomy (LA) is currently concentrated in the Vietnamese educational context as it equips learners with the capacity for lifelong learning. For the EFL context, tertiary students encounter numerous challenges practicing language skills, especially English speaking because of lacking the language environment. This study aims at exploring what Vietnamese EFL students practice to develop LA in speaking English. The study using a mix-method approach was conducted at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam with the participation of 102 English-majored students ranging from freshmen to seniors. A questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were used to explore students' practice to develop LA for their English speaking development. The result reveals that the level in practicing LA among groups of students reaches the average, and it also figures out the components of LA in English speaking skills that students have performed as well as activities that students still encounter many obstacles in practicing.

Keywords: learner autonomy, practice, English speaking, activities

1. Introduction

"Learner autonomy" (LA) has been taken into account in language education as an ultimate goal (Dang, 2012; Dickinson, 1994). It refers to the capability to be responsible for one's learning process which allows learners to learn a language effectively (Holec, 1979, cited in Joshi, 2011). These definitions entail that LA plays an integral role in teaching and learning English. In that process, speaking is considered as a productive skill that learners need to possess (Bailey, 2003). It allows learners to be successful in language communication and get a high-paid job after graduating (Baker and Westrup, 2003). Nevertheless, numerous challenges were drawn in the field, especially in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) (Bailey, 2003). Therefore, in order

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to enhance their English speaking skills, EFL learners are encouraged to take control of their own learning.

LA was considered in various western settings and currently is concentrated on the eastern area, especially in Vietnam (Loi, Hang, Pham, & Duyen, 2014). In this context, this issue has been taken under more consideration since 2007 when the credit-based training system has been applied in the training program at the universities (see MOET, cited in Thiep, 2007; Nga, Thuy, & Truc, 2014). Nga, Thuy and Truc (2014) asserted that most Vietnamese EFL learners highly appreciate the importance of LA in language learning. Besides, the result shows that they do not spend time studying in accordance with the amount of time for self-studying required by the credit-training system applied in educational tertiary institutions. The current research shows that Vietnamese learners appreciate the role of LA as well as ready for changes in the learning process while their practice of developing LA was less considered. Besides, tertiary students in Vietnam, especially in the rural areas, encounter a number of challenges in practicing speaking English such as an unavailable language environment (Bailey & Nunan, 2005). For instance, students face difficulties in English speaking regarding accuracy (Phan, Nguyen, H. and Nguyen, G. 2021) and fluency so that English speaking development requires much students' effort in learning English by themselves both inside and outside the classroom. In other words, there is a need to equip learners with the ability to control and process their English speaking progress. From the viewpoint of LA, it intentionally allows them to possess the ability. As a contribution to the speaking field, the study was conducted on EFL students' practice to develop LA for students' speaking improvements at a university in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.

2. Literature review

2.1. Learner Autonomy in language learning
According to Holec (1981), the father of the term, learner autonomy refers to the "*ability to take charge of one's own learning*", and it is "*not inborn but be acquired in either the natural setting or in the formal one*" (cited in Little & Dam, 1998, p. 1). He clarifies it as the responsibilities in five aspects (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012, p. 4):
- determining the objectives,
- defining the contents and progressions,
- selecting methods and techniques to be used,
- monitoring the procedure of acquisition,
- evaluating what has been acquired.

LA refers to the ability to establish, self-monitor as well as be responsible for their choices during learning progress. On explaining the definition, Holec (1981) states that by acknowledging their responsibilities for their learning, learners are able to establish the goals, observe and evaluate them systematically and intentionally (cited in Little & Dam, 1998). In other words, when the learners become autonomous, they are able to carry out learning activities logically with planned actions. Another significant aspect entailed

by Holec's definition of LA is that autonomous learners absolutely use their language knowledge and language skills in real context flexibility (Little & Dam, 1998; Najeeb, 2013). When learners become autonomous, they can handle various situations in which there may be some problems. Therefore, LA not only exists and has a prominent role in formal learning but also in the phase when this process ends. After completing formal education, learners are able to use their knowledge and skills to deal with different situations.

For the last decades, LA has been considered by many researchers, nevertheless, it seems to be an alien term to some EFL teaching contexts. In this context, the learners lack the language environment, which means that learners do not have many chances for practicing while learning a language is lifelong learning and they also encounter numerous difficulties (Hong, 2016). The overview of learning autonomy in Vietnam in the current year was drawn, among more than ten magazines and conference proceedings, there are twenty reports regarding LA in learning and teaching a foreign language (Dinh, 2017). In her study, language skills were also discovered by educational researchers, which includes writing and speaking skills. She also reveals that the majority of study mainly focuses on students, and the majority is non-English-majored students. From this point of view, EFL majored students studying at university should be put under more consideration.

2.2 EFL students' English speaking skills

Speaking plays a vital role in learning a language as well as gaining success in a dynamic society as it can be considered as a tool for communication. Supporting this idea, Baker and Westrup (2003) state that good performance in speaking skill allows learners to get a good job after graduating, and McDonough and Shaw (1993) show that speaking skill helps learners achieve a specific purpose in real-life communication (cited in Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). In spite of its importance, in the traditional method of teaching, reading and writing seem to be prominent while speaking is frequently ignored (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). Regarding students' barriers in speaking performance, Nasri, Namaziandost and Akbari (2019) also find that EFL students encounter a number of challenges in learning English.

These issues are not the exception in Vietnam. Current studies were conducted in the Vietnamese context, and they reveal numerous problems regarding Vietnamese EFL students' speaking skills. This issue was taken into account at the universities in the Mekong Delta with various studies. Vo, Pham, and Ho (2018) conclude that EFL learners face both internal and external factors when conducting a study on English speaking challenges at Can Tho University. Also, Phan, Nguyen, H., and Nguyen, G. (2021) conducted a study on common errors in speaking classes of English-majored freshmen at Tay Do University, and the result shows that they frequently encounter problems with vocabulary, pronunciation, and psychology. These issues also occur with English-majored students at Ba Ria-Vung Tau university as Tram's (2020) finding reveals that

they have to deal with linguistic problems including language features and non-linguistic ones regarding their psychology in the classroom.

Briefly, English speaking takes the researchers' considerations in the EFL setting including the Vietnamese context since it is seen as the essential requirement of international enterprises and other workplaces. Nevertheless, it is not doubtful to claim that EFL students have encountered such problematic aspects in speaking English. Obviously, there is no short supply of suggestions to deal with these issues, and LA, among those, will be taken into account in this study.

2.3 The EFL Students' roles in practice to develop learner autonomy for English speaking development

As the importance of LA has been discussed above, it is undeniable that LA plays an integral role in facilitating language skills development. Supporting this idea, Cotterall (1995) points out the reason for promoting LA in education since it is illustrated that the more adults are involved in the pace, sequence, instruction mode, learning content, the more effective they gain in learning (see Candy, 1998, p. 75). In light of the theories, practical aspects are the consideration, according to Dewey (1904, p. 1), it refers to "*an instrument in making real and vital theoretical instruction; the knowledge of subject-matter and of principles of education*". In other words, with regard to students' practice, it illustrates the specific actions indicating the learning theoretical aspects. To develop LA, students in charge of actualizing their roles indicated in the given studies toward managing their learning.

Paying attention to learners' roles and key components of English speaking skills, the three key points were seriously considered: (1) setting learning goals/ plans for English speaking improvement (ESI), (2) utilizing activities to perform learning actions for ESI, (3) self-evaluating English speaking performance and processes. In fact, they emerged as the key components that numerous researchers draw when suggesting the ways to promote LA.

2.3.1 Setting learning goals/ plans for English speaking improvement (ESI)

Being able to choose the objectives is one of the functions drawn by Holec (1979, cited in Joshi, 2011) to develop LA. Obviously, defining a learning objective plays a vital role if learners start acting. As discussed, English speaking requires learners' effort in mastering the speaking features such as accuracy and fluency. Also, learners are dealing with various obstacles in speaking, learners themselves need to pay attention towards which they need to improve as a prioritized component in English speaking. As a result, determining learning objectives for English speaking is an essential part in fostering LA for ESI.

Determining the learning progress followed by setting learning goals is also crucial in fostering LA in language learning Holec (1979, cited in Joshi, 2011) so that the appropriate plan for practicing English speaking could not be absent if learners are practicing LA for their ESI.

2.3.2 Utilizing activities to perform learning actions for ESI

Following the decision of forming goals and making plans, choosing appropriate learning activities is considered as a means for actualizing the learning plans. Methods and techniques are offered as important parts in promoting LA. What is more, Dam (1995) reveals that performing learning activities may assist EFL learners to promote LA (cited in Little, 2003). Besides, toward strategies for ESI, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) show that appropriate activities are effective in helping EFL students enhance speaking skills (see Boonkit, 2010), which indicates the importance of utilizing activities in practicing speaking. Learning actions may take place inside or outside the classroom; hence, in order to boost LA, EFL learners need to both practice in these contexts (Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002).

According to Little (1991), in formal learning, learners are not able to develop LA without the appropriate interaction with their teacher and classmates. Getting involved in interaction assists learners to manage their own learning well. It concludes that EFL learners should spend time practicing speaking English with friends, teachers, or sharing with their teachers regarding their learning process. Besides, Dam (2011) suggests making small talk, which also promotes LA in language classrooms. Furthermore, using appropriate language plays a vital role in promoting LA (Little, 1998). Therefore, talking with partners in the target language could enhance their LA in speaking English. Due to the fact that speaking carries transmitting message functions, pair and group works are significantly beneficial for EFL learners to develop the function of transaction. In a similar vien, Vilímec (2006) concludes that whole class, pair work and group work are essential while creating activities to develop English speaking skills. As a result, including these kinds of activities could facilitate LA in English speaking development, especially for fluency (Ur, 1981).

2.3.3 Self-evaluating English speaking performance and processes

Regarding self-studying, with a focus on awareness and responsibility terms, Thanasoulas (2000) figures out the characteristics of autonomous learners that are being actively aware of learning style and strategies, being ready for taking risks and completing homework even if it is not checked in the class. It underlies that for practicing LA to develop English speaking, learners need to spend time self-studying for mastering speaking components. In terms of self-evaluation, Dam (1995) asserts that constantly evaluating the learning process may assist EFL learners to promote LA (cited in Little, 2003). Additionally, Berry (2008) indicates that with self-evaluating, learners are able to achieve goals for their learning.

With regard to English speaking, it requires learners' ability to self-reflect their own learning consisting of their English speaking performance and learning process. It relates to learners' capability to determine how to assess their learning (Holec, 1979, cited in Joshi, 2011). He further emphasizes another functional aspect illustrating learners' awareness toward acknowledging the relationship between what, how to learn and the available sources to manage their learning. In other words, learners need to self-reflect

their English speaking process and adapt their goals, strategies to gain further success. However, this process does not mean that students do it by themselves. Dam (1995) claims that the ongoing evaluation is formed by the combination of teacher, peer, and self-assessment (cited in Little, 2003). Getting feedback and self-reflecting allow learners to strengthen good points and improve negative aspects. As Thanasoulas (2000) concludes that students' awareness of learning strategies and learning styles refers to one of the characteristics of autonomous learners, in practice, they are required to be able to identify their needs in self-development.

2.4 A review of previous studies

Dinh (2017) provides an overview of LA research in Vietnam. One of the most important results in researching on students is that they start to be aware of the importance of LA in the educational context at university. Nevertheless, it is merely at the perception, and LA has not been performed through actions yet. She also points out that the prominent challenges are lacking understanding of the learning environment at university, not holding clear goals, and a lack of learning methods (Dinh, 2017).

Supporting the emphasized point, Le (2018) investigated 60 English-majored students' practice to develop LA. Her study was conducted at Dong Thap university and used narrative interviews to collect data. She concludes that students positively perceive LA, but the LA level just reaches the second one among the five developed by Nunan (1997, in Benson & Voller, 2014) in practice. She reveals that most learners do not have a specific goal as well as a daily or weekly detailed schedule for learning. What is more, some of them have learning plans, but they are not actualized effectively because they are distracted by the unpredictable situations. She draws out the role of the teachers as a facilitator, especially in the first years when students need guidance for planning learning goals. The repeated guidance could enhance LA, and the teacher should constantly encourages learners whenever they feel depressed.

As LA allows language learners to develop speaking skills, it would help them deal with a number of challenges. These issues were investigated by many researchers. For example, Vo, Pham, and Ho (2018) administered a questionnaire to 131 English-majored freshmen at Can Tho university, conducted individual interviews with the EFL teachers and observed the speaking classroom to explore English speaking challenges. They found that the internal and external factors constrain students' English speaking performance. Among those, the latter shows to be prominent, which includes a lack of English speaking environment and extracurricular activities. It implies that learners should be highly aware of their independent learning style. The researchers recommend further study on sophomores and juniors in order to figure out other challenges. Regrettably, the study did not explore whether those students have reflected their learning and have any changes to improve their skills.

It can be seen that English speaking problems have been investigated and various challenges were found among the universities. Besides, LA was also taken into account as the integral role in language learning. Considering these aspects, the present study

further explores students' practice towards developing LA in their English speaking skills.

3. Methods

The present study aims to investigate the kinds of activities that EFL students at a Vietnamese university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam practice to enhance the ability controlling their learning to develop their English speaking skills. To achieve the research purpose, a *mixed-method approach* was employed. Particularly, the method was designed as the *explanatory model* in which the quantitative data through the questionnaire was collected first to gain generalized information about the research problem, then the qualitative method with semi-structured interview was carried out to explain those data in-depth (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2012).

The participants of the study consists of a cohort of EFL students studying at Kien Giang university, a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. 102 students among those were selected to participate in the study based on convenience sampling (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). In detail, EFL students studying at the school were chosen from the accessible population of the school. The study involved forty-six freshmen (46.1%), twenty-four sophomores (23.5%), twenty-one juniors (20.6%), and eleven seniors (10.8%). The participants consist of eighty-seven female students (85.3%) and male students (14.7%). Their majors include English Language Studies, English Language for Tourism, and English Language for Business.

Table 3.1: Summary of the information about EFL
students participating in the questionnaire and interview

Students' personal information			Number (N=102, 100%)		Interviewed (n=8)
Gender	Male	15	15.7%		2
	Female	87	85.3%		6
Years of learning at university	Freshmen	46	46.1%		3
	Sophomores	24	23.5%		2
	Juniors	21	20.6%		2
	Senior	11	10.8%		1

The questionnaire delivered to the students contains two main sections except the researcher's introduction and grateful expression to the participants. The first section aims at collecting some basic demographic information. In order to let students feel free to self-report, giving personal information is optional. The two required pieces of information are year of learning at university and gender. The second section focuses on students' actions in developing LA in their English speaking. The framework used to design the questionnaire was adapted from Le's (2018) study, also based on key aspects of LA which were discussed previously. Specifically, the study will examine EFL learners' autonomy regarding three points: (1) *setting learning goals/ plans for English speaking*

improvement (ESI), (2) utilizing activities to perform learning actions for ESI, and *(3) self-evaluating English speaking performance and processes.* The items used in the questionnaire were adjusted from the questionnaire used by Van (2011), which originally adapted from Chan, Spratt, and Humphrey (2002), and Le (2019). Cluster 1 has 6 items, cluster 2 includes 17 items and cluster 3 consists of 5 items. The questionnaire was based on the five-point Likert scale to design: (1) *never*, (2) *rarely*, (3) *sometimes*, (4) *often*, and (5) *always*. An open-ended question was added to get other reports from students about their practice.

Table 3.2: Summary of the questionnaire for EFL students

Cluster	Contents	Items
Setting learning goals (6 items)	Set up learning goals	2, 6
	Set up learning plans	1, 3, 4, 5
Utilizing activities to perform learning actions (17 items)	LA practice inside the classroom	10, 20, 21, 22
	LA practice outside the classroom • Self-study • Interacting with friends, teachers, native speakers	7, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19
Self-evaluating ESS (5 items)	Self-reflect speaking practising process	23, 24, 25, 26, 28
	Reflect thanks to teachers and peers' feedback	27
		Open-ended question

In order to help the participants fully understand the questions and freely respond to the interview, the questions were asked in Vietnamese. The semi-structured interview containing four main questions based on the framework has been administered to collect quantitative data in order to have a deeper understanding of the activities EFL students used to develop their autonomy for English speaking skills (ESS). It was designed based on lists of questions in a narrative interview conducted by Le (2018) investigating EFL students' practice regarding LA. In detail, the interview aims at exploring (1) *students' set learning objectives and plans for ESS*, (2) *students' activities to perform learning action for ESI,* and (3*) students' self-evaluating ESS and learning processes.* Students were invited to be interviewed via the social media Zalo calls and face-to-face for 15 to 30 minutes, at the participants' convenience.

Before officially conducting the research, the researcher piloted the questionnaire and the interview. First, the questionnaire was piloted with a group of students whose characteristics are similar as the target participants. Forty seven students were invited to answer the paper questionnaire, they were also asked to underline, note immediately if any unclear items. Then, a *Scale Test* was run to check whether the questionnaire delivered to EFL students was reliable. The result shows that Cronbach's Alpha is =.87. It means that the questionnaire for EFL students is reliable. The reliability of each cluster was also checked by running the *Scale Tests.* The Cronbach's Alpha of Cluster 1, 2, and 3 in the questionnaire for students are =.65, =.82, and =.85 respectively, which illustrates that each cluster has its reliability. Then, for the semi-structured interview, the researcher

piloted with the participation of one EFL student who was not one of the target participants. The interview was beneficial in terms of the rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee. What is more, when mentioning learner autonomy, the student tended to report the activities in general. Therefore, in the main interview, the speaking aspect was emphasized at the beginning so that the researcher could gain more specific desirable data.

After getting quantitative results, eight students presenting the willingness to share about their practice toward LA were invited to the study. All the interviews were recorded by the recording function of a smartphone.

The obtained quantitative data was analyzed by using the software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. The *Descriptive Statistic Tests* and *One Sample T-tests* were computed to examine teachers' support and students' practice to develop LA in speaking English. To define whether the analyzed data is high or low from the range from 1 to 5, the researcher based on the Oxford's (1990) scale (Table 3.3)

Table 3.3: Key to understand the average

Level	Range
Very high	4.5 to 5.0
High	3.5 to 4.4
Medium	2.5 to 3.4
Low	1.0 to 2.4

All the interview recordings conducted on students and teachers were transcribed, and the lines were numbered. Thematic analysis was applied to help the researcher encode the qualitative information (Boyatzis, 1998). Based on the similarity and differences, the participants' responses were clustered into each highlighted theme including *setting up learning goals for ESI, utilizing activities to perform learning actions for ESI,* and *self-evaluate ESS and processes.*

4. Results

4.1. Results from the questionnaire

After getting the reliability from the pilot result, the twenty-eight item questionnaire was administered to the EFL students studying at the institution to investigate EFL students' practice in developing their autonomy for ESS. The researchers received one hundred and two respondents. A *Scale test* was carried out and the Cronbach alpha Coefficient (α) is =.94, which means that the questionnaire is reliable enough. Each cluster was also checked for reliability, and the Cronbach alpha Coefficients are =.86, =.91, and =.86. The results show in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: The reliability of the questionnaire of students' practice

	Number	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability of each cluster		
			Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
Official questionnaire	102	.94	.86	.91	.86

A *Descriptive Statistic Test* was carried out to examine the total Max, Min, Mean score, and Standard Deviation (SD) of students' practice on developing their autonomy in speaking English. The results show in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: The Mean, Max, Min and SD of students' practice to develop LA for ESI

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Students' practice	102	1.50	4.25	3.1110	.50482
Valid N (listwise)	102				

The results indicated that the mean score of students' practice in developing their autonomy in ESS is slightly above the average level (M=3.1, SD=0.5).

A *One Sample T-test* was carried out to examine whether the mean score of students' practice (M=3.1) and the scale of 3.5, an acceptable mean for a high level of agreement, are the same. The results reveal that there is a significant difference between the two mean scores (t=-4.720, df=46, p=.00). It means that EFL students' practice in developing their autonomy for English speaking improvement is at a medium level.

The Descriptive Statistic Tests were also carried out to examine the mean score of setting learning goals for ESI, mean score of utilizing and observing activities for ESI, and the one of self-evaluating ESS. The results are shown in table 4.3.

Table 4.3: The mean scores of three clusters of EFL students' practice

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Setting goals	102	1.33	4.67	3.09	.63310
Utilizing activities	102	1.53	4.12	3.085	.51592
Self-evaluating	102	1.40	4.80	3.22	.63451
Valid N (listwise)	102				

The results indicate that the mean scores of the three clusters are slightly above the average level (M=3.09, SD=0.6; M=3.085, SD=0.5; M=3.22, SD=0.6 respectively).
In order to deeply explore specific actions that EFL students do for practicing LA, the Frequency Tests were calculated on the items included in cluster 1, cluster 2, and cluster 3 respectively.

First, a *Frequency Test* was run on the percentage of 6 items belonging to cluster 1 to examine which items were most done by the participants.

Table 4.4: Percentage of Students' practice of setting goals/plans

Items	N & R		S		U & A	
	F	P (%)	F	P(%)	F	P (%)
Besides classroom activities and exercises, I set up a plan to improve my English speaking skills.	12	11.8	65	63%	25	24.5%
I set up learning goals to improve my own English speaking skills according to my actual situation.	11	10.7	64	62.7	27	26.4
I adjust my learning plan to improve my English speaking skills as needed.	12	11.8	58	56.9	32	31.3
I set up a schedule to practice speaking English.	22	21.6	53	52.0	27	26.5
I set up a place to practice speaking English.	35	43.3	53	52.0	14	13.8
I set a goal to improve, enhance my English speaking skills based on the training program of the school.	14	12.7	47	46.1	41	40.2

Note: F = Frequency; P = Percentage; N & R = Never and Rarely; S = Sometimes; U & A = Usually and Always

As can be seen in the table, the degree of setting up learning plans for English speaking skills is moderate (63%, n=65), which is also the highest degree among the activities while EFL students set up learning goals and plans. Their learning goals are set up based on their current situations (62.7%, n=64) rather than the training program (46.1%). 52% (n=53) of students sometimes set up schedules and places for practicing speaking. In addition, up to 56.9% (n=58) students state that the frequency of adjusting their learning plans is average.

The second *Frequency Test* was calculated on the percentage of 15 items of cluster 2 to examine the highest frequent activities that students use to perform their learning actions.

Table 4.5: Percentage of Students' practice of utilizing activities to perform learning actions

Items	N & R		S		U & A	
	F	P (%)	F	P(%)	F	P (%)
I look for opportunities to practice speaking English outside of the classroom.	20	19.6	54	52.9	28	27.5
I make use of available resources.	7	6.9	44	43.1	37	36.3
I use my new knowledge when I practice speaking English.	7	6.9	48	47.1	47	46.1
I cooperate and practice speaking with my classmates.	18	17.7	48	47.1	36	35.3
I make notes about why I make mistakes in my speaking skills and have solutions to correct them.	17	16.6	49	48.0	36	35.3
I study in groups or work closely with friends in learning English	15	24.7	51	50.0	36	35.3
I read English newspapers	53	51.9	40	39.2	9	8.8
I talk to my teacher about developing my English speaking skills	57	55.9	36	35.3	9	8.8
I watch programs in English	8	7.9	41	40.2	53	52.0
I listen to English songs	4	3.9	21	20.6	77	75.5
I look for the opportunities to talk to foreigners	34	33.3	49	48.0	19	18.6
I speak English with my friends during discussion activities in speaking session	16	15.7	60	58.8	26.0	25.5

Items	N & R		S		U & A	
	F	P (%)	F	P(%)	F	P (%)
I do English grammar exercises	21	20.5	50	49.0	31	30.4
I join groups to do exercises or practice English speaking skills in the classroom	25	24.5	56	54.9	21	20.6
I ask my teachers when I don't understand something in English	30	29.4	55	53.9	17	16.7
I suggest my opinion to the teacher	44	43.2	48	47.1	10	9.8

The result shows that students frequently listen to English songs (75%, n=77) and watch English programs (52%, n=53). However, also practicing from the authentic resources, students never or rarely read English newspapers as the percentage of 51 (n=53) shown in the table.

The various interaction activities get a half of students' involvements with the average level. In particular, sometimes, 50% students work in group closely while learning English, 54.9% join groups to practice speaking or do English exercises, 58.8% students speak English during class discussions, 52.9% participants look for the opportunities to further practice speaking, and 53.9% students sometimes raise questions to their teachers in English. Also, the table shows that they spend less time talking to their teachers about developing English speaking skills, which made up 55.9% (n=57).

Another *Frequency Test* was computed on the percentage of 7 items included in cluster 3 to figure out the items that EFL students pay more attention to while self-evaluating their English speaking skills.

Table 4.6: Percentage of Students' practice of self-evaluating

Items	N & R		S		U & A	
	F	P(%)	F	P(%)	F	P(%)
I systematized English knowledge (vocabulary, sentence structure, communication structures) I have learned	24	23.5	59	57.8	19	18.6
I analyze my English needs.	28	17.7	59	57.8	25	24.5
I self-assess my English speaking ability.	14	13.7	45	44.1	43	42.2
I check that I have completed the required knowledge of the English presentation, report, etc before presenting it in class.	12	11.8	52	51.0	38	37.2
I self-evaluate my English presentation, report,... after presenting it in class and receiving suggestions from teachers and friends in class.	14	13.7	53	52.0	35	33.3
I evaluate the method of improving my English speaking skills to find the problem of my study.	17	16.7	60	58.8	25	24.5

It is clear to see that the highest level of self-evaluating English speaking skill belongs to the evaluating method they applied in order to figure out problems for their further practice, which made up 58.8% (n=60) students spending a moderate time on it.

The results indicate that 57.8% (n=59) participants spend the average time systematizing English knowledge they learned and analyzing their needs while evaluating their English speaking skills. Also, the table shows that more than a half of

students reasonably self-assess the presentation requirements before performing (51%, n=52) as well as after receiving feedback from their teacher and friends (52%, n=53).

The Independent T-test was conducted to check whether the levels of students' practice among the group of students are different. As the number of participant difference, the researcher carried an *Independent T-test* to examine the difference between the mean of sophomore's practice (M= 2.95) and the mean of juniors' one (M=3.17). The result illustrates that there is no significant difference between the two means (t=-2.792, df=43, p=.177). It means that the level of students' practice to develop LA for ESI between the sophomore and the juniors are the same.

The open-ended questions reveal various activities indicating students' activities they use as LA developing process such as playing games whose interface is in the English language, watching the entertaining channel in English, installing English app on smartphone, accessing website to learn more vocabulary, talking to themselves by forming situations, imitating English songs, films, learning English from social network like Facebook, YouTube, Google, talking to foreigners, doing a test or use an app to check English ability. The information implies that students tend to present the daily activities, and few students mention about evaluating themselves.

4.1. Findings from the interview

The interview revealed students' specific actions in three main areas including setting up learning goals for ESI, utilizing activities to perform learning actions for ESI, and self-evaluating ESS and processes.

4.1.1 Setting up learning goals for ESI

The students stated that they all have a learning goal in the first year. The ultimate goal notably refers to the natural communication as they revealed:

"I will try to make English to become my second language." (Student 2, interview extract)

"In the first two years, I can communicate well." (Student 3, interview extract)

".... communicating fluently is my learning goal." (Student 4, interview extract)

"...in the next year, I need to speak English fluently." (Student 5, interview extract)

"I could communicate in English as I talk to my parents in Vietnamese." (Student 7, interview extract)

On the other hand, some students do not concentrate on the achievement they may gain after graduating from school as the case of the two females:

"My learning goal, actually, has not been set up clearly" (Student 1, interview extract)

"I have no big learning goal" (Student 5, interview extract)

Specifically, their learning goals were detailed according to their current ESS as students figured out different specific goals. For instance, after the first year, some wished to communicate at a basic level, some decided to review grammar, the others want to acquire the IPA:

"I try to speak the IPA correctly, try to catch up the conversation flexibility." (Student 3, interview extract)

"I could talk about a particular topic with Mr. A (a native teacher)." (Student 4, interview extract)

Mentioning learning plans, the majority of students do not hold one, even owning, they could not maintain what they intended:

"Actually, I don't have.... even though I am highly aware of my learning, nevertheless, I do have the ability to set up my own learning plan." (Student 1, interview extract)

"I learned for about 15 to 20 minutes, then I had disturbed stuff so that I had to stop studying." (Student 3, interview extract)

"Usually, I typically learn freely, I learn in my spare time." (Student 4, interview extract)

"I feel that I am incapable of actualizing the plan as quickly as I want." (Student 6, interview extract)

"Learning plan.... um...actually it was not clear enough." (Student 8, interview extract)

After giving information about setting learning goals and planning, specific activities that students used to gain their goals were revealed.

4.1.2 Utilizing activities to perform learning actions for ESI

Technology was mentioned as a prominent chosen tool for students practicing speaking English outside the classroom. Specifically, they have mostly opted the English apps, social media:

"I followed English page on Facebook such as Datio Dat, Dang Tran Tung, ... then I take note..." (Student 2, interview extract)

"I have an app, which has "work check" function,..." (Student 3, interview extract)

"Regarding learning material, typically I go to YouTube to search, I intentionally focus on IELTS materials." (Student 4, interview extract)

"Currently, I use Facebook, in which there are some English learning groups, they share some websites for practicing particular skills. Also, Tik-tok has various videos, but I choose the level which is suitable to me....." (Student 5, interview extract)

A similarity was found among students is that they practice English speaking by repeating the videos, films. It was assumed that reviewing films may encourage LA. The discrimination occurs when the senior claim that it would not help her in practice.

"I had thought that I just watch films, watch films and watch film, but I sought it was not effective." (Student 8, interview extract)

Instead, she revealed:

*"... I found my favourite sources...all relevant videos, related news I was always keen on reading." (*Student 8, interview extract)

It concludes that the sources for students' practice to develop LA typically vary according to their interests. The more interested they are in the activity, the more insistent they were to keep going constantly.

Besides, the result reveals that students tend to imitate their speaking. One activity which favours the students, except the junior, was talking to themselves. The participant affirmed:

"...I imitate what the foreigners said..." (Student 1, interview extract)

"Sometimes I just talk to myself. I raise an issue and then I talk about it or after I watch a movie I try to summarize the movie." (Student 4, interview extract)

"I talk to myself." (Student 5, interview extract)

"I play a role as another interlocutor, and I talk as a conversation." (Student 6, interview extract)

"I watch the video and practice the situations which I set by myself." (Student 6, interview extract)

It concludes that students spend them self-practicing. Also, highly recommendation in learning action is speaking without being afraid of making mistakes,

getting involved in communicating in person with the others, and these suggestions was carried out after students self-evaluate their learning process:

"When we make a mistake, the other will correct us, and when we were corrected, we remember it longer." (Student 5, interview extract)

"... because I found that even though we know that words, that structures but we couldn't utter out, we talk to no one, we are not able to be flexibly catch up the conversation." (Student 8, interview extract)

When being asked about a pair or group of practicing English outside the classroom, students 1 and 3 admitted that they have no pair work outsides. And student 2 practicing by taking messages in English to her friends also agrees that it quite negatively affects the real conversations.

"I think it also certainly affects, ... like we can not realize our mistakes, specifically its pronunciation..." (Student 2, interview extract)

Further practice happened in the second and the third year as they spent time talking to friends in English:

"Usually, I join an English club in Rach Gia city, which is organized in a café at the weekend, once a week." (Student 4, interview extract)

"But I practiced with my roommate at the dorm, whose major is English language. She is a freshman,... for half an hour to an hour..." (Student 6, interview extract)

In fact, the others reported that they practise speaking with their classmates, but it seems to be only occurred when they prepare for the presentation:

"But we only study together when there is a group-work assignment, otherwise most of the time we study by ourselves." (Student 5, interview extract)

"Outside the classroom, we often talk to each other in English, but it's very rare, like "hey, let's learn this" "we should speak in English", then we could speak a little, but It rarely happened, only when we do presentations together." (Student 8, interview extract)

Briefly, the freshmen are less frequently involved in practicing speaking English in pair or group work than the other groups of students.

Toward the support from the faculty, prominently the language environment, all students actively participate in the English group, some claim the frequency of involvement. The following statements demonstrate this point.

*"I participate in exchange group with students of Virginia university, ESZ (English Speaking Zone)." (*Student 2, interview extract*)*

"I join ESZ,….. at least once a week." (Student 4, interview extract)

"I join ESZ ……… I join every week."(Student 6, interview extract)

"I join the ESZ to be able to interact with Mr. A (native speaker) as well as my friends about my English speaking performance and learn from my friends'. Besides, I participate in exchanges with students in Virginia in the US" …. *"I even didn't miss any meetings of the ESZ,... three times a week or all with four sessions."* (Student 7, interview extract)

"I correct my friends, and vice versa so that I feel more sensitive in communicating." (Student 8, interview extract)

In contrast, the others argue that the club does not assist them to develop speaking skills.

"At first, we were also very enthusiastic, also looking for a club to talk about but when it got a little bit, it started to get boring, it didn't last long." (Student 3, interview extract)

"When I first heard about the club, I was also interested in joining. However, later on, due to the nature of the activity, it tends to be an obligation." (Student 5, interview extract)

"Because Mr A said that our participation was considered for the final mark so that we had to come." (Student 5, interview extract)

She also reveals that the reason losing their interest comes from the leader's behaviours. The conclusion was drawn on the support from the faculty such as organizing English clubs, and it definitely affects students' practice to develop their LA in both positive and negative ways.

4.1.3 Self-evaluating ESS and processes
Following the series of activities that students do during the years, they were interviewed to report whether they self-evaluate their ESS as well as their English speaking process. The interview showed that students highly self-evaluate their ESS, and notably based on their own performance in speaking English. Self-evaluation leads to some adjustments in their learning process as well.

"Because I also have to change so that I can improve myself." (Student 1, interview extract)

I feel that my skill has been developed because, at present, my sentences consist of passive structures as well as other structures when it is compared with it before." (Student 2, interview extract)

"I have considered evaluating my English speaking skills, but not insightfully" (Student 3, interview extract)

"It seems to be more and more developed" (Student 4, interview extract)

"I base on the real conversation with foreigners to evaluate." (Student 4, interview extract)

It is easy to recognize that after finishing the first year, students have changed to force themselves for development. Some students assert:

"Starting the second year, my learning goal has been changed into communicating a particular topic in details." (Student 4, interview extract)

"In the first year, I only came to school and followed what the teachers instruct in the class. In the second year, I changed. I started planning to study at home." (Student 5, interview extract)

"Well, after the others can understand what I say, I focus more on grammar and pronunciation correctness, ..." (Student 8, interview extract)

Briefly, students intentionally set up as well as choose some techniques to practice to gain their learning goal. Nevertheless, they do not strictly follow up their learning actions. Notably, students' activities usually include imitation, self-study rather than pair or group work participation, which students even considered as an important role to enhance ESS though.

The particular criteria were not revealed, the majority of students evaluate by their feelings and how they perform through the conversations, however, self-reflection has been done during the learning process and some adjustments in the learning plan were made.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

Generally, students' practice level of developing LA for ESI is not high. With the aim to further explore the activities that could help students develop LA for ESI, students who are willing to share their experience were invited to self-report. The results indicate particular activities in each group of students during the years.

With respect to raising awareness to the importance of learning, most students set up learning plans in the first year that they are able to communicate naturally after finishing the training program. The goals are divided into specific objectives according to students' current ability and also the requirement of speaking classes. However, the result also reveals that some students do not strictly set up a particular goal and insist on achieving it even though they put effort into practicing English. The result is in line with Le (2018) who conducted a study at Dong Thap university in the Mekong Delta and Thu's (2017) report. They emphasized that EFL learners in Vietnamese context face challenges in language learning as they confuse what they should achieve. Another similar result is that students do not follow the learning schedule exactly because of external factors, some students admit that making a plan or insisting on an intended learning schedule is difficult.

With regard to frequent activities, it partly differs from Le's (2018) study which states the incapacity of choosing materials, the participants from the finding report that they have their own sources for practicing English such as Ted Talk, national talk-shows, in which students mainly imitate talks or speeches. Tertiary students tend to imitate the speeches while they are watching a video, films, which partly corresponds with what Asher (2003, cited in Leong & Ahmadi, 2017) asserts regarding imitating teachers' sayings. It concludes that EFL learners are highly aware of the target language used by the others, considering it as a way to practice English speaking in terms of using vocabulary, structures and intonations, which are English speaking key components to gain the accuracy and fluency (Thornbury, 2005). On the other hand, target language is not used to communicate among students in the classrooms, even when students discuss in English speaking sessions. It implies that this is a controversial issue in language teaching because using target language as a means of communication crucially forces LA (Little, 1998).

Focusing more on the sources that students intend to use for their learning, they are interested in using social networks to support their language learning or use technical devices as its friendly interface and multi-function. Putting this phenomenon under the ICT development era, Braine (2003) also concludes that it can be a tool offering learners choices (cited in Dang, 2012) or, as discussed above, Loi's (2014) suggestion in applying blended learning. As what students currently practice, a question relating to developing LA in speaking English thanks to ICT development can be considered.

A considerable aspect to be highlighted is students' practice with pair or group work outside the classroom. The students state that they rarely study with friends except when there is a group work assignment. Working in pairs happens in case they live nearby, which occurs as small talk or message-taking in English. What is more, all the participants reveal that they got involved enthusiastically in speaking English group officially organized with the aim of practicing English speaking. This kind of activity exits as a daily or weekly action in their learning plans; nevertheless, the number of students lose their interest by external factors such as the organized activities and the guiders' attitude, and just some of students are patient and find the activity beneficial. It is inferred

that creating group work or extra activities is extremely useful, but it needs to put students' needs under more consideration.

In terms of self-evaluation, students self-reflect their learning process during the academic years. First, it is noted the relation with previous study conducted by Vo, Pham, and Ho (2018), the current finding instead of drawing out other challenges in speaking skills of sophomores and juniors as the researchers suggest, certain differences in practice among students were emphasized. In detail, these groups of students and juniors have some reflection on their learning process of practice ESS and point out some adaptations. Typically, students evaluate as what they feel, how they perform English when communicating with the other, which is related to the second function of speaking stated by Richards (2008). It concludes that to develop LA, students are advised to consider their strengths and weaknesses, put these issues under their learning goals to see how they should adjust themselves to overcome the challenges and strengthen effective aspects.

In a nutshell, tertiary students typically set a learning goal in the first year at university. Nevertheless, specific goals are varied among the students as they base on their present ESS. However, they could not self-regulate as they could not follow what exactly planned. Besides, all of the participants have positively participated in English speaking groups to improve ESS, however, some external factors such as supporting activities, supporters' attitude affecting their feelings decrease their willingness and frequency of practicing. As the goal of natural communication, most students reflect their ESS based on the understanding messages in social communication. Some changes were slowly emphasized, and there is an assertion that they can further practice when they sought their own interesting activities.

As the result illustrates the variety in students' setting goals and student consistency of tracking the learning plans, the EFL teachers may create the activities at the beginning of courses to let students self-reflect and raise more awareness of their learning. In detail, encouraging students to have their own learning plan which gets along with learning procedures in each course could help students be patient with their schedule. They may find their plan beneficial in the courses, and thus, they can keep going. It requires the cooperation of teachers who teach speaking skills, other skills, and specialist courses.

6. Conclusion

The study conducted at a tertiary Vietnamese context investigates EFL students' practice to develop LA for English speaking improvement. The questionnaire result indicates that students set up their learning goals, plans, and also perform their learning actions by choosing activities, resources, and evaluating their ESS. The levels of doing these sorts of activities are not significantly different and with the average levels. The interviews provide insights into students' practice to enhance LA for ESI. The majority of the interviewees reveal that they hold their learning goals, and draw out a few learning actions. They spend more time practicing by themselves than communicating with others,

and technology exists as a useful tool for their study. However, the insistence in performing their learning actions is considered as a challenge. They also made their own evaluation of their English speaking performance. Some changes regarding learning activities are put under their consideration, and slight adaptations have been actualized. While reporting what they have done for developing LA in ESI, numerous challenges were also mentioned, which regards motivation and support from the others.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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