

Investigating EFL students' self-directed learning: Evidence from a state university during Covid-19 pandemic

Le Tan Cuong^{1,2*}

¹University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

²Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

*Corresponding author: cuonglt@hcmussh.edu.vn

ARTICLE INFO

DOI:10.46223/HCMCOUJS.soci.en.13.1.2386.2023

Received: July 27th, 2022

Revised: November 25th, 2022

Accepted: November 28th, 2022

Keywords:

academic performance; SDL; Vietnam higher education

ABSTRACT

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) occupies a strong position in language education in many countries. Yet, little evidence has been given on this approach among English majors in the setting of Vietnam. The current cross-sectional study, therefore, is an effort to fill up the gap by exploring students' levels of self-directedness in learning and their correlation with academic performance at a state university. The study employed the Self-Rating Scale of Self-Directed Learning (SRSSDL) with five domains consisting of 60 items developed by Williamson (2007) to get responses from 90 English-majored students of 04 cohorts. The data were then analyzed through SPSS, using Independent-sample T-test and One-way ANOVA. Results of the study evidenced that (1) Investigated students were found to be at moderate and high levels of SDL, (2) No difference in SDL scores was found between male and female students, (3) No considerable difference in SDL scores was found among students of different academic years in the same program, (4) There was a direct correlation between students' SDL level and their academic performance. Based on the findings, recommendations are well elaborated as references for teachers who are considering leveraging their students' self-directedness in learning. The study hopefully contributes to the existing literature on self-directed learning in language education.

1. Introduction

Over the past five decades, Self-Directed Learning (SDL) has made considerable contributions to the development of education. The approach is one of the most prominent phenomena for the 21st-century learners (Hussain, Sabar, & Jabeen, 2019). While initial research efforts on SDL mainly focused on adult education, recent literature has expanded this phenomenon to all sectors of education from early childhood to tertiary education (Mahlaba, 2020; Mentz & Bailey, 2020). In the area of language education in higher education, there has been much research on how SDL positively impacts students' learning process. Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, teaching and learning worldwide have been reluctantly transforming to a completely new mode of education in which students' active engagement becomes the major success factor of the entire teaching and learning process. As Mahlaba (2020) stated, the lockdown induced by the Covid-19 pandemic changed the way of communication and forced people to move to online platforms, consequently changed the face of teaching and learning. In such a setting, Loeng (2020)

believed that the field of higher education required a transformation from the authoritative role of the educator into the educator as a facilitator of learning, and self-directed learning should be regarded as a well-suited reflection basis for this shift. The two authors both agreed that there should be a major change in the way of delivering education under the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, SDL seems to be more important than ever before. SDL has gained momentum as the demand for skills that help us to cope in a fast-changing technological globalising world increases (Mentz & Bailey, 2020). Hawkins (2018) believed that we should include SDL in our research and conversations pertaining to language learning strategies, learner autonomy, and self-regulation. Also, Hawkins (2018) insisted that learners of the English language worldwide could greatly benefit from SDL. However, while more and more positive results of SDL have been found in language education in many parts of the world, research on the approach remains limited in the setting of Vietnam's higher education. This study, therefore, aims to measure SDL levels among English majors. The study based its data on an online survey among 90 English majors of 4 cohorts in 2020 and 2021 in the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University - HCMC. Analysis of the data collected confirmed the significance of SDL on students' academic performance, specifically in the case of English majors. Findings from this study hopefully shed light on the necessity of enhancing SDL among students in Vietnam's higher education in general and among those with an English focus in particular.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Self-directed learning as an essential learning approach

Self-Directed Learning has received great interest from educators for decades. Early studies of such an approach were conducted by Knowles (1975) and Tough (1979). Over the years, SDL has evolved and become a demonstration of a student-centered approach. Hiemstra and Brockett (2012) reported that since 1987, there has been an international symposium held annually to share the latest thinking about SDL theory, research, and practice. Looking back, Knowles (1975) defined SDL as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes." (p. 18). This definition has been widely accepted as it covers many aspects of students' learning process. In such an approach, students are actually the ones who take full control of their own learning process and self-evaluate their own progress. Because of this, SDL is always among the most important aspects when it comes to students' learning process.

Current researchers show great consensus on the meaning behind SDL. The approach is among the key components of the 21st Century skills (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013; Tan, Divaharan, Tan, & Cheah, 2011). Hussain et al. (2019) concluded that SDL was becoming one of the most prominent phenomena for the 21st-century learners. Besides the comprehensive definition made by Knowles (1975), over the years, there have been some more specific ones. For Long (1994), SDL is associated with students' goal setting, identification, and selection of resources, and time management. Additionally, Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) and Jagals (2018) shared the agreement that SDL is the process in which learners are responsible for their planning, implementing, and evaluating their own learning process. However, Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) also held the view that to a different dimension, SDL refers to "a goal [*that*] focuses on 'a learner's desire or preference for assuming responsibility for learning.'" (p. 29). The authors clearly paid much attention to what learners like to learn rather than what teachers want them to learn. While Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) limited their understanding of SDL in an institutional setting and

acknowledged the influence of external contextual factors in this learning process, Candy (1991) extended the notion of SDL from an instructional setting to an everyday setting which is informal and non-institutional. Recently, more descriptions about SDL have been updated. Bosch, Mentz, and Goede (2019) described SDL as a goal that is challenging for both educators and students as it requires the role-players to change, take risks, and develop a plan in order to have success. Also, Loeng (2020) considered SDL as a view of learning that seems to stand opposed to a more traditional content-centered practice where the teacher is normally considered as the bearer of knowledge while the learner's experience is of minor interest. Sharing a similar viewpoint, Uys and Citanda (2020) insisted that SDL is what every student can manage to do as it is a natural capacity to learn for oneself without external guidance. Though the definitions are different to some extent, they all agree upon the importance of SDL in students' learning processes and consider it as a student-centered approach.

As a student-centered approach, SDL helps students in many ways. It helps students actively and purposefully approach learning. Knowles (1975) indicated that "people who take the initiative in learning (pro active learners) learn more things, and learn better, than do people who sit at the feet of teachers passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners)" (p. 14). Because of this, they could experience a higher level of retention of what they learn, which makes learning surprisingly better. In addition to this, Fellows, Culver, and Beston (2000) pointed out that when facing a new topic, self-directed learners were capable of setting goals, establishing a workable learning program, adapting the learning program to their preferred learning styles, and evaluating their own level of achievement. Thirdly, thanks to SDL, students could stay motivated and disciplined to go through learning difficulties and could use a variety of resources, as needed, to help them master the material (Fellows et al., 2000).

To effectively apply SDL, students should be equipped with proper strategies. For Long (2000), effective SDL would not be possible without primary and secondary internal processes. For the last several decades, there have been a number of models for self-directed learning. The most influential ones include Long's self-directed learning instructional model (1989), Candy's self-directed learning model (1991), Brockett and Hiemstra's Personal Responsibility Orientation model (1991), Garrison's model (1997), and Oswalt's model (2003). It could be concluded that SDL has grown and become an essential learning approach in higher education. Research on this area of research, therefore, is meaningful for different stakeholders.

2.2. The roles of SDL in higher education

In the last decades, SDL has been an important factor that helps enhance students' academic performance, learning motivation, and other necessary skills. In terms of academic performance, SDL has been found to considerably improve students' academic performance (Abdullah, 2001; Anderson, 1993; Atreya, Nepal, & Acharya, 2020; Bodkyn & Stevens, 2015; Cazan & Schiopca, 2014; Darmayanti, 1993; Gharti, 2019; Harriman, 1990; Khalid et al., 2020; Khalid, Bashir, & Amin, 2020; Khiat, 2017; Long & Morris, 1996; Oducado, 2021). Aslo SDL predicts academic achievement (Cazan & Schiopca, 2014). Decades ago, SDL and its importance were discussed in education. Both Harriman (1990) and Anderson (1993) reported that there was a correlation between students' achievement and their self-directed learning readiness. Similarly, Darmayanti (1993) found a positive correlation between students' self-directed learning readiness and their GPA scores. Long and Morris (1996) even concluded that SDL readiness was found to be positively correlated to students' academic performances in various educational settings. In recent years, the influence of SDL on students' academic performance has been among the interesting issues. Bodkyn and Stevens (2015) in a study among 485 medical students in all

academic years at the University of West Indies came to the conclusion that there is a significantly positive effect of intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning on student performance. Recently, in a study among 590 students carried out by Khalid et al. (2020), SDL was found to have a high correlation with academic performance in students learning online contrary to that of conventional university students. Besides, Khiat (2017) in his study among 1695 adult students reported that students' perceived level of competence in 11 SDL indicators which include Goal Setting, Time Management, Procrastination Management, Assignment Preparation, Exam Preparation, Note-taking Capability, Research Capability, Seminar Class Readiness, Technical Readiness, Online Class Readiness, and Stress Management had directly or indirectly effects on their academic performance. In the same year, Shen (2017) based on responses from 604 college students from college in Taiwan and Teacher Education in Yunnan concluded that self-directed learning and self-efficacy affect student's academic performance. Hence, it is undeniable that SDL considerably contributes to students' academic success.

Together with positive influences on academic achievements, SDL has been found to help improve students' learning motivation (Du, 2013; Fellows et al., 2000; Gharti, 2019; Shi, 2021). Specifically, according to Fellows et al. (2000), students who were self-directed were the ones whose motivation and discipline were good enough to work through the difficult stages of learning and could make good use of a variety of resources, to help them master the material. Together with that, Gibbons (2002) reported that SDL kept learners motivated in pursuing a learning goal and in the entire learning process. In a larger picture, Gharti (2019) pointed out that SDL helped learners to achieve better achievement, effective learning, and higher learning motivation. Additionally, Shi (2021) revealed that students showed a higher level of awareness and capability in self-management, motivation, and persistence as well as self-monitoring in their academic learning in the US university setting thanks to self-directed learning and translanguaging. Clearly, SDL has its importance in keeping students motivated in their learning process.

Another big plus of SDL is that it helps students develop the necessary skills for their students' lives and also for their lives after graduation. Fellows et al. (2000) insisted that the employment of SDL could help develop students' whole person. Abdullah (2001) believed that SDL is the strategy that enables learners to be more effective learners and social beings. According to Gibbons (2002), SDL puts great emphasis on the importance of developing ownership of learning. Based on Gibbons' perspective, SDL helps students initiate activities that might be personally challenging and develop personal knowledge and skills to successfully tackle the challenges. Sze-Yeng and Hussain (2010) supported the idea that SDL is an essential skill that students need to be acquired as a step to lifelong learning. Hwang and Oh (2021) in a recent study among 193 first and second year students in South Korea concluded that SDL had a direct effect on problem-solving ability. Also in a study among 98 students in Indonesia, Lasfeto (2020) stated that the relationship between students' SDL and their social interaction was found significant in the online learning environment. SDL was also found to develop students' adaptability to new situations and environments (Tan et al., 2011), constructivist collaboration (Sze-Yeng & Hussain, 2010), learner autonomy in regard to time, place, and pace of studying (Holzweber, 2019) and critical thinking (Fahim, Bagherzadeh, & Hosseini, 2014). Therefore, SDL really brings learners more opportunities to enhance their academic performance, learning motivation, and necessary skills.

2.3. How self-directed learning helps learners of English as a Foreign Language

In recent years, great contributions of SDL have been found in the area of language education. In terms of language proficiency, a number of studies acknowledged the effectiveness

of SDL. According to Li and Park (2019), L2 learning experience was confirmed to be a predictor of English proficiency. Wichadee (2011) based on results of a 12-week study indicated that English reading proficiency was found to be better thanks to SDL. Also about reading, Li, Majumdar, Yang, Chen, and Ogata (2021) found that the students with high SDL ability demonstrated more reading outcomes in terms of books they could complete and the number of days they read than those who had low SDL ability. Moving to another skill, Majedi and Pishkar (2016) investigated responses from sixty Iranian ESL at the upper intermediate level who participated in an 8-week study and the results showed that participants in the experimental group did outperform the ones in the control one in terms of speaking accuracy. In addition to this, Buitrago (2017) conducted a mixed methods study with the participation of 10 students at the pre-intermediate level in Columbia and the findings evidenced the inclusion of constant self-directed and collaborative speaking tasks in weekly classes could foster students' oral fluency. Regarding writing, data from 30 male EFL learners in a study by Aghayani and Janfeshan (2020) in Iran showed that the SDL method significantly affected pre-intermediate and intermediate students' performance in English writing ability.

Additionally, plenty of research has evidenced the positive impacts of SDL on students' learning skills and attitudes. Grover, Miller, Swearingen, and Wood (2014) in their survey among roughly 400 ESL students revealed that SDL could serve as an instructional strategy that is viable for ESL students who wish to learn English to improve their communication skills with others beyond the classroom. Du (2013) confirmed the usefulness of SDL as a potent learning strategy for foreign language students because this format could result in improvements in the knowledge domain, meta-cognitive skills, and motivation. Dewi, Marlina, and Supriyono (2019) indicated that EFL learners were found to perform with high learning motivation, appropriate learning strategy, good self-monitoring, and high social competence thanks to self-directed learning. It is clear that SDL makes English language learning easier and it is highly recommended for English learners.

2.4. Students' self-directed learning during Covid-19 pandemic

Under the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, when students have to study online or experience blended learning, SDL becomes more and more important. Because of this, various research has been done to investigate aspects of SDL during the pandemic (Chang, Zhang, Wen, Su, & Jin, 2021; Grande et al., 2022; Maphalala, Mkhasibe, & Mncube, 2021; Singaram, Naidoo, & Singh, 2022; Sun, Hong, Dong, Huang, & Fu, 2022; Wahyudi, Artini, & Padmadewi, 2021). However, findings of students' self-directed learning during the Covid-19 pandemic seem quite different in terms of disciplines, genders, and seniority. Atreya et al. (2020) in a study using the Self-Rating Scale of Self-Directed Learning (SRSSDL) developed by Williamson (2007) to assess medical students' self-directedness in learning pointed out that the majority of the students were effective self-directed learners. Additionally, in a study about the Association between SDL Readiness and Academic Achievement of Student-Teachers in Pakistan, Hussain et al. (2019) revealed that there was no significant difference among the participants on the basis of gender or marital status. Also, Cazan and Schiopca (2014) reported that self-directed learners who were in their third year had higher academic performances than those in their first year. When it comes to students' levels of self-directedness in English language learning, different findings are noted. Lee and Kim (2022) based on the data collected from 123 junior-college students who took online English classes indicated that 70% (strongly agree (39.1%) and agree (30.9%)) students agreed positively that they could build the habit of self-directed learning while eleven students (8.9%) disagreed with forming a self-directed learning habit. Besides, Maisyarah (2022) stated that more

than 64% which accounts for roughly half of the students, have fairly high levels of SDL in the speaking class during covid 19 pandemic. Moreover, Do (2022) insisted that results from 64 EFL students (17 males and 47 females) from a local university in Mekong Delta, Vietnam supported students' high level of self-regulation in learning. The results are good news for EFL teachers. However, there exists limited influence of such an approach. In the study among 15 students in the English Education program at the University of Mataram, Indonesia, Dwilestari, Zamzam, Susanti, and Syahrial (2021) revealed that 60% of students were at a moderate level of self-directed learning, 33% high, and 1% in a low one. Similarly, Lian, Chai, Zheng, and Liang (2021) in a study on their perceptions of authentic language learning, SDL, collaborative learning, and their English self-efficacy during the online learning period of the Covid-19 pandemic among 529 university students in China also reported that students showed a moderate level of SDL during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, Aromaih (2021) indicated that the average Saudi EFL learner was not well adjusted to certain aspects of both synchronous and asynchronous modes of teaching-learning with at least two-thirds of the respondents reporting negative feedback on self-directed. Besides, Benabed and Abdelhadi (2021) based on their online survey of 150 first-year EFL students from Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret showed that 29% of the respondents rated themselves as low in engaging in SDL. Findings from Tran (2022) in a study among 20 teachers and 100 students randomly selected from five Vietnamese universities also pointed out that the students were not well aware of their self-regulated learning tasks. Findings from the studies during such hard times definitely reveal meaningful insights into students' directedness in learning, especially in EFL, based on which institutional leaders and lecturers probably can make more informed decisions to better the teaching and learning activities.

As mentioned in the previous section, there have been different perspectives on students' SDL during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the area of research is a growing interest among researchers in many parts of the world, it does not seem to be really dynamic in Vietnam. In such a setting, there has been limited research on EFL students' SDL level during the Covid-19 pandemic, which is clearly a big gap in research and in need of further investigation. The current study, therefore, aims to assess students' levels of SDL and their associations with academic performance during the Covid-19 pandemic. Accordingly, two research questions were developed for the quantitative survey:

- (1) What are the levels of self-directedness in the learning of students in the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature (EF)?
- (2) Is there a correlation between students' level of self-directed learning and their academic performance?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research sample

The research setting of this study is at University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University - HCMC. As a leading university in language education in the south of Vietnam, the university has more than 16,000 undergraduates and graduates including bachelor, master, doctoral, and short-term programs. Participants in the study include 90 English-majored students currently pursuing their bachelors in English language and Literature in the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature. Table 1 shows that 44.4% of the participants are freshmen; 43.3% of them are sophomores and the rest are junior and senior students.

Table 1

Demographic information of respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Freshmen	40	44.4	44.4	44.4
	Sophomore	39	43.3	43.3	87.8
	Junior-Senior	11	12.2	12.2	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

3.2. Research tool

Over the past decades, a number of instruments have been developed and applied to measure students' SDL. Of the most popular ones, the Self-Rating Scale of Self-Directed Learning (SRSSDL) with five domains consisting of 60 items developed by Williamson (2007) was found to be a valid and reliable instrument (Cadorin, Suter, Saiani, Naskar, & Palese, 2011) and has been widely used in different parts of the world (Behar-Horenstein, Beck, & Su, 2018; Koirala, Kafle, & Koirala, 2021; Williamson & Seewoodhary, 2017). Because of this, in this study, SRSSDL is adopted to get data. This self-rating scale is referred to as a useful tool in the diagnosis of student learning needs in order to improve students' academic adjustment (Cazan & Schiopca, 2014). The scale was purposefully redesigned to fit the form of an online questionnaire without changing the meanings of any items in the original version. However, some questions were added to get student's personal information and their academic performance in the latest semester. Levels of self-directedness in learning (Williamson & Seewoodhary, 2017), can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Levels of SDL

Scoring range	Level of SDL	Interpretation
60 - 140	Low	Guidance is definitely needed from the teacher. Any specific changes necessary for improvement must be identified and a possible complete re-structuring of the methods of learning
141 - 220	Moderate	This is halfway to becoming a self-directed learner. Areas for improvement must be identified, evaluated and a strategy adopted with teacher guidance when necessary
221 - 300	High	This indicates effective SDL. The goal now is to maintain progress by identifying strengths and methods for consolidation of the students' effective SDL

3.3. Data collection

Quantitative data were collected from such an online survey in 2020 and 2021 and were then analysed through SPSS using Independent-sample T-test and One-way ANOVA. Question items developed by Williamson (2007) were adopted to measure students' levels of SDL and students' self-declared GPA was noted to assess students' academic performance.

4. Findings and discussion

Related to the first research question, data collected from the survey reveal three interesting findings. Firstly, investigated students were found to be at moderate and high levels of self-directedness in learning. Table 3 shows that only 40% ($n = 90$) of students in this setting, with SDL score ranging from 221 to 263 ($M = 235.33$), achieved a high level of self-directedness in learning while the rest of them at a moderate one. The figures indicate that students' SDL in the investigated setting was relatively modest. As a leading university in Vietnam, students are expected to show a higher level of self-directedness in learning. What is found in the current study is a bit different from the result reported by Atreya et al. (2020) which indicated the majority of the students were effective self-directed learners (74.7%, $n = 56$). This is worth considering and could be regarded as a reminder for teachers to rethink their teaching and learning model and come up with more relevant strategies to help students in their learning process.

Table 3

Levels of self-directed learning

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SDL score	Moderate	54	198.13	17.334	2.359
	High	36	235.33	12.158	2.026

Secondly, no considerable difference in SDL was found between male and female students. Female students' SDL score ($M = 211.54$) is just a little higher than that of male ones ($M = 216.84$). Additionally, Table 4 shows that sig Levene's Test is larger than 0.05 ($\text{sig} = .894 > 0.05$), which means there is no gender difference in terms of SDL. The result is consistent with what was found by Hussain et al. (2019) about differences in gender or marital status. Therefore, it could be inferred that male and female students seem to be fairly equal when it comes to the levels of SDL. This means that when making more efforts on SDL, both male and female students possibly achieve good academic performance. This is an important aspect that teachers need to know when supporting students in learning.

Table 4

Independent samples test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
SDL score	Equal variances assumed	.018	.894	-.940	88	.350	-5.302	5.637	-16.504	5.901
	Equal variances not assumed			-.910	40.922	.368	-5.302	5.824	-17.064	6.461

Thirdly, no difference in SDL was found among students of different years in a program. Unlike Cazan and Schiopca (2014), data from this study showed that there was no statistical difference in terms of academic performance. Specifically, sig Levene's Test (sig = 0.797 > 0.05) and sig ANOVA (sig = 0.563 > 0.05) in Table 5 and Table 6 confirm that differences in terms of academic performance are not noticeable in the investigated participants. It could be inferred that SDL is applicable to students at any stage of their 4-year period of time. Clearly, as long as students have a clear understanding of SDL and make proper efforts, they could have more positive results at any time in their learning process.

Table 5

Test of homogeneity of variances

		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
SDL	Based on Mean	.228	2	87	.797
	Based on Median	.268	2	87	.766
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.268	2	84.746	.766
	Based on trimmed mean	.249	2	87	.780

Table 6

ANOVA

SDL					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between groups	668.803	2	334.401	.578	.563
Within groups	50326.186	87	578.462		
Total	50994.989	89			

Turning to the second research question, the three following findings are noted. Firstly, there was a direct correlation between students' self-directed learning and their academic performance. The finding confirms similar results found in existing literature (Anderson, 1993; Abdullah, 2001; Atreya et al., 2020; Bodkyn & Stevens, 2015; Cazan & Schiopca, 2014; Darmayanti, 1993; Harriman, 1990; Gharti, 2019; Khalid et al., 2020; Khiat, 2017; Long & Morris, 1996; Oducado, 2021). Table 7 shows that the correlation between SDL and academic performance is significant as $p < .001$. It could be inferred that students with higher SDL scores are possible to achieve higher academic performance than those with lower ones. Therefore, it is important for students to maintain a high level of SDL in their learning so that they could perform well.

Table 7

Correlations of SDL score with students' academic performance

		SDL score	GPA
SDL score	Pearson Correlation	1	.431**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	90	90
GPA	Pearson Correlation	.431**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	90	90

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Secondly, students with high SDL scores outperformed the ones with moderate SDL scores in terms of awareness, learning strategies, and evaluation. Table 8 shows that students who have higher SDL scores outperformed those with moderate ones in all aspects. Noticeably, students with high SDL scores outperformed moderate ones in terms of awareness, learning strategies, and evaluation. As can be seen in Table 8, when it comes to awareness, learning strategies, and evaluation while the mean scores of those with high SDL scores achieve $M = 4.153$, $M = 4.025$, and $M = 4.072$, the figures of those with moderate SDL scores in the equivalent categories are $M = 3.494$, $M = 3.535$ and $M = 3.433$. This means that when students are aware of the importance of SDL, apply relevant learning strategies, and evaluate their learning performance, they are likely to have better chances to achieve higher results. Based on this, it is clear that teachers need to understand their students' SDL and give their students a hand when students have a hard time learning.

Table 8

Comparison of SDL mean scores by areas of SDL

	Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Awareness	Moderate	54	3.494	.3493	.0475
	High	36	4.153	.3185	.0531
Learning strategies	Moderate	54	3.535	.4062	.0553
	High	36	4.025	.3272	.0545
Learning activities	Moderate	54	3.241	.4267	.0581
	High	36	3.831	.3495	.0583
Evaluation	Moderate	54	3.433	.4066	.0553
	High	36	4.072	.3335	.0556
Interpersonal skills	Moderate	54	3.320	.4835	.0658
	High	36	3.833	.3061	.0510

Generally speaking, EFL students in the investigated setting were found to achieve moderate and high SDL scores. Also the results reveal that students' levels of SDL had a correlation with their academic performance. This confirms the importance of SDL in students' learning process in general and EFL students' academic performance in particular. The findings once again evidence that language teachers are expected to figure out effective strategies to boost students' SDL as a way to better their academic performance.

5. Conclusions

For decades, SDL has been among recommended strategies for students, starting with medical students and then expanding to students of many other disciplines. This model of learning is proven to get learners more engaged in learning activities, which gradually enhances students' learning retention and helps students obtain higher learning goals. In this study, data collected during the Covid-19 pandemic confirmed that there is a correlation between students' SDL level and their academic performance. The results also indicate that students in the investigated setting showed moderate and high levels of SDL. Additionally, no difference in SDL level was found by gender and seniority. Though the generalizability of the results is limited to 90 students who

replied to the survey, findings from such a study are significant as they provide institutional leaders and lecturers with insights into how their students actually direct their learning during the Covid-19 pandemic and help them better prepare for their upcoming journey. Future studies in similar settings with a larger number of participants and in-depth research analysis could hopefully further explore this issue and reveal more interesting evidence.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it can be suggested that teachers should take more consideration of students' SDL levels. It is advisable for teachers to help students have a better understanding of SDL, recommend them effective ways to maximise the power of such an approach, and provide them with proper and ongoing assistance during their learning process. This might be even more important when the Covid-19 pandemic is still a concern and students are expected to take more control of their own learning pace. Also, no one can be sure if the Covid-19 pandemic is the only one that the world has to suffer or if there are any other possible pandemics. That is why getting to know how our students handle their learning is really a necessity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City [Project number C2020-18b-06].

References

- Abdullah, M. H. (2001). *Self-directed learning* (ERIC digest No. 169). Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication.
- Aghayani, B., & Janfeshan, K. (2020). The effect of self-directed learning on EFL learners' writing performance. *International Journal of Research in English Education*, 5(3), 78-89.
- Anderson, M. R. (1993). *Success in distance education courses versus traditional classroom education courses* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Oregon State University, Corvallis, United States.
- Aromaih, A. (2021). EFL learning during the Covid-19 pandemic: An exploration of best parameters in Saudi Arabia. *Asian ESP Journal*, 17(3.2), 25-42.
- Atreya, A., Nepal, S., & Acharya, J. (2020). Self-rating on self-directed learning: A cross-sectional survey on a cohort of medical undergraduates from Nepal. *Journal of Lumbini Medical College*, 8(1), 43-47.
- Beetham, H., & Sharpe, R. (Eds.) (2013). *Rethinking pedagogy for a digital age: Designing for 21st century learning*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Behar-Horenstein, L. S., Beck, D. E., & Su, Y. (2018). An initial validation study of the self-rating scale of self-directed learning for pharmacy education. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 82(3), 280-286.
- Benabed, A., & Abdelhadi, A. (2021). Investigating Algerian EFL students' online learning readiness. *Journal La Edusci*, 2(4), 14-22.
- Bodkyn, C., & Stevens, F. (2015). Self-directed learning, intrinsic motivation and student performance. *The Caribbean Teaching Scholar*, 5(2), 79-93.

- Bosch, C., Mentz, E., & Goede, R. (2019). Self-directed learning: A conceptual overview. In E. Mentz, J. De Beer & R. Bailey (Eds.), *Self-directed learning for the 21st century: Implications for higher education* (NWU Self-directed learning series volume 1) (pp. 01-36). doi:10.4102/aosis.2019.BK134.01
- Brockett, R. B., & Hiemstra, R. (1991). *Self-direction in adult learning: Perspectives on theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Buitrago, A. G. (2017). Collaborative and self-directed learning strategies to promote fluent EFL speakers. *English Language Teaching*, 10(5), 139-157.
- Cadorin, L., Suter, N., Saiani, L., Naskar, W. S., & Palese, A. (2011). Self-Rating Scale of Self-Directed Learning (SRSSDL): Preliminary results from the Italian validation process. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 16(4), 363-373.
- Candy, P. C. (1991). *Self-direction for lifelong learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cazan, A. M., & Schiopca, B. A. (2014). Self-directed learning, personality traits and academic achievement. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 127(2014), 640-644.
- Chang, W. W., Zhang, L., Wen, L. Y., Su, H., & Jin, Y. L. (2021). Association between online self-directed learning ability and negative emotions among college students during the Covid-19 pandemic: A cross-sectional study in Anhui province, East China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12(720911), 1-10.
- Darmayanti, T. (1993). *Readiness for self-directed learning and achievement of the students of Universitas Terbuka (The Indonesian Open Learning University)* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Victoria, Canada.
- Dewi, N. S. N., Marlina, N., & Supriyono, Y. (2019). The quest of self-directed learning of adult EFL learners in Indonesian higher education context. *Journal of English Education and Linguistics Studies*, 6(1), 73-90.
- Do, H. M. (2022). EFL Students' self-regulated learning strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) 2nd Special Issue on Covid 19*, (2), 22-34.
- Du, F. (2013). Student perspectives of self-directed language learning: Implications for teaching and research. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 7(2), 1-16.
- Dwilestari, S., Zamzam, A., Susanti, N. W. M., & Syahrial, E. (2021). The students' self-directed learning in English foreign language classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journal Lisdaya*, 17(2), 38-46.
- Fahim, M., Bagherzadeh, R., & Hosseini, F. (2014). The relationship between self-directed learning and critical thinking ability of Iranian EFL learners. *International Journal of English Language, Literature, and Humanities*, 2(5), 550-569.
- Fellows, S. B., Culver, R., & Beston, W. C. (2000, June). Keys to success: Self directed learning. In *2000 Annual Conference* (pp. 05-417). doi:10.18260/1-2--8524
- Garrison, D. R. (1997). Self-directed learning: Toward a comprehensive model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(1), 18-33.
- Gharti, L. (2019). Self-directed learning for learner autonomy: Teachers' and students' perceptions. *Journal of NELTA Gandaki*, 1, 62-73.

- Grande, R. A. N., Berdida, D. J. E., Cruz, J. P., Cometa-Manalo, R. J., Balace, A. B., & Ramirez, S. H. (2022, May). Academic motivation and self-directed learning readiness of nursing students during the Covid-19 pandemic in three countries: A cross-sectional study. *Nursing Forum*, 57(3), 382-392.
- Grover, K. S., Miller, M. T., Swearingen, B., & Wood, N. (2014). An examination of the self-directed learning practices of ESL adult language learners. *Journal of Adult Education*, 43(2), 12-19.
- Gibbons, M. (2002). *The self-directed learning handbook: Challenging adolescent students to excel*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Harriman, J. K. (1990). *The relationship between self-directed learning readiness, completion and achievement in a community college telecourse program* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Georgia, Athens, Greece.
- Hawkins, M. W. (2018). Self-directed learning as related to learning strategies, self-regulation, and autonomy in an English language program: A local application with global implications. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 8(2), 445-469.
- Hiemstra, R., & Brockett, R. G. (2012). *Reframing the meaning of self-directed learning: An updated model*. Retrieved May 10, 2022, from <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2012/papers/22>
- Holzweber, A. (2019). Self-directed-learning and e-learning as triggers for higher student motivation in EFL Courses in Tertiary Education. *Journal of Applied Languages and Linguistics*, 3(3), 68-79.
- Hussain, T., Sabar, A., & Jabeen, R. (2019). A study of the association between self-directed learning readiness and academic achievement of student-teachers in Pakistan. *Bulletin of Education and Research*, 41(3), 193-202.
- Hwang, Y., & Oh, J. (2021). The relationship between self-directed learning and problem-solving ability: The mediating role of academic self-efficacy and self-regulated learning among nursing students. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(4), 1-9.
- Jagals, D. (2018). Metacognitive sentience for impact-making research in Curriculum Studies: Mathematics education as case in point. In C. C. Wolhuter (Ed.), *Raising the impact of education research in Africa* (pp. 176-188). Cape Town, South Africa: AOSIS.
- Knowles, M. S. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. Chicago, IL: Association Press.
- Koirala, N., Kafle, S. P., & Koirala, A. (2021). Factors affecting self-directed learning readiness of the undergraduate nursing students from Purbanchal university, Nepal: A cross-sectional study. *Journal of Chitwan Medical College*, 11(3), 31-35.
- Khalid, M., Bashir, S., & Amin, H. (2020). Relationship between Self-Directed Learning (SDL) and academic achievement of university students: A case of online distance learning and traditional universities. *Bulletin of Education and Research*, 42(2), 131-148.
- Khiat, H. (2017). Academic performance and the practice of self-directed learning: The adult student perspective. *Journal of further and Higher Education*, 41(1), 44-59.
- Lasfeto, D. (2020). The relationship between self-directed learning and students' social interaction in online learning environment. *Journal of E-learning and Knowledge Society*, 16(2), 34-41.

- Lee, Y., & Kim, M. (2022). EFL college students' perceptions toward the overall implementation of online class during the Covid-19 pandemic: Focusing on self-directed learning and motivation. *Language Science Research*, (101), 41-66.
- Li, H., Majumdar, R., Yang, Y. Y., Chen, M. R. A., & Ogata, H. (2021) Analysis of self-directed learning ability, reading outcomes, and personalized planning behavior for self-directed extensive reading. *Interactive Learning Environments*. doi:10.1080/10494820.2021.1937660
- Li, N., & Park, H. (2019). The relationships of self-directed learning readiness and motivation with the English proficiency of Korean EFL learners. *English Language and Literature Research*, 45(4), 153-181.
- Lian, J., Chai, C. S., Zheng, C., & Liang, J. C. (2021). Modelling the relationship between Chinese university students' authentic language learning and their English self-efficacy during the Covid-19 pandemic. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 30(3), 217-228.
- Loeng, S. (2020). Self-directed learning: A core concept in adult education. *Education Research International*, 2020(3816132), 1-12.
- Long, H. B. (1989). *Self-directed learning: Emerging theory & practice*. Norman, OK: Oklahoma Research Center for Continuing Professional and Higher Education, McCarter Hall, University of Oklahoma.
- Long, H. B. (1994). Resources related to overcoming resistance to self-direction in learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 1994(64), 13-21.
- Long, H. B. (2000). Understanding self-direction in learning. In H. B. Long (Ed.), *Practice & theory in self-directed learning* (pp. 11-24). Schaumburg, IL: Motorola University Press.
- Long, H. B., & Morris, A. S. (1996). The relationship between self-directed learning readiness and academic performance in a nontraditional higher education program. In H. B. Long & Associates (Eds.), *Current developments in self-directed learning* (pp. 139-156).
- Mahlaba, S. C. (2020). Reasons why self-directed learning is important in south africa during the Covid-19 pandemic. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 34(6), 120-136.
- Maisyarah, M. (2022). *An analysis of students' self-directed learning in speaking class during the pandemic Covid-19 at sman 06 bengkulu tengah* (Doctoral dissertation). UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, Bengkulu City, Indonesia.
- Majedi, N., & Pishkar, K. (2016). Speaking accuracy and self-directed learning. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, 3(1), 246-253.
- Maphalala, M. C., Mkhasibe, R. G., & Mncube, D. W. (2021). Online learning as a catalyst for self-directed learning in universities during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 6(2), 233-248.
- Mentz, E., & Bailey, R. (2020). Preface. In E. Mentz & R. Bailey (Eds.), *Self-directed learning research and its impact on educational practice*. Cape Town, South Africa: AOSIS.
- Oducado, R. M. (2021). Academic performance and the role of self-directed learning, self-esteem, and grit among nursing students. *Self-esteem, and Grit among Nursing Students*, 5(1), 1-9.
- Oswalt, D. F. (2003). *Instructional-design theory for fostering self-directed learning* (Doctoral dissertation). Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, United States.

- Shen, Y. (2017). Comparison study in college students learning English with self-efficacy, self-directed learning, motivation and learning activities in Yunnan and Taiwan of China. *International Journal of Learning and Teaching*, 3(4), 315-318.
- Shi, H. (2021). Self-directed learning for nonnative english-speaking graduate students across disciplines: Translanguaging practices and perspectives. *Journal of International Students*, 11(1), 194-214.
- Singaram, V. S., Naidoo, K. L., & Singh, S. (2022). Self-directed learning during the Covid-19 pandemic: Perspectives of South African final-year health professions students. *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, 13, 1-10.
- Sun, W., Hong, J. C., Dong, Y., Huang, Y., & Fu, Q. (2022). Self-directed learning predicts online learning engagement in higher education mediated by perceived value of knowing learning goals. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 1-10. doi:10.1007/s40299-022-00653-6
- Sze-Yeng, F., & Hussain, R. M. R. (2010). Self-directed learning in a socioconstructivist learning environment. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 9(2010), 1913-1917.
- Tan, S. C., Divaharan, S., Tan, L., & Cheah, H. M. (2011). *Self-directed learning with ICT: Theory, practice and assessment*. Singapore: Ministry of Education, Educational Technology Division.
- Tough, A. (1979). *The adult's learning projects: A fresh approach to theory and practice in adult learning* (2nd ed.). Toronto, Canada: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Tran, L. T. N. (2022). E-learning and learner autonomy in an EFL class in Vietnam. *Language Teaching Research Quarterly*, 27, 9-23.
- Uys, W. F., & Citanda, W. C. (2020). Evaluating undergraduate students' self-directed learning experiences during research-based learning. In E. Mentz & R. Bailey (Eds.), *Self-directed learning research and its impact on educational practice* (NWU Self-Directed Learning Series Volume 3) (pp. 27-66). Cape Town, South Africa: AOSIS.
- Wahyudi, G. S., Artini, L. P., & Padmadewi, N. N. (2021). Self-directed learning in EFL during Covid-19 pandemic: An analysis of teacher's perceptions and students' learning autonomy. *International Journal of Language and Literature*, 5(2), 93-104.
- Wichadee, S. (2011). Developing the self-directed learning instructional model to enhance English reading ability and self-directed learning of undergraduate students. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning (TLC)*, 8(12), 43-52.
- Williamson, S. N. (2007). Development of a self-rating scale of self-directed learning. *Nurse Researcher*, 14(2), 66-83.
- Williamson, S. N., & Seewoodhary, M. (2017). Student evaluation of the usefulness of the self-rating scale of self-directed learning tool in the FdSc in health and social care course. *Journal of Healthcare Communications*, 2(4), 1-7.

