



## THE REALITY OF SELF-STUDYING AMONG ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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### Abstract:

This research was conducted to explore the current state of self-study among English-majored students to review their learning preferences and propose solutions to enhance their English self-study outside the classroom which is beneficial to their language proficiency and academic achievement. To collect sufficient quantitative data, a questionnaire was delivered to one hundred English-majored students at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City. The results show the diversity in how the students select time, forms, self-study sources, places, and contents, revealing their flexibility and commitment to self-study. It is also notable that all of the students, even those with decent self-study, acknowledge the vital role of teachers in the journey of learning English. Overall, the findings have provided readers the diverse insights on how to utilize self-learning strategies effectively while still emphasizing the indispensable role of teachers.

**Keywords:** self-study, English-majored students, preferences, solutions

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, it cannot fail to notice the increasing demand for learning English in Vietnam. It results in the profound significance of how to effectively teach oneself the language. Regardless of its importance, it is surprising that there is very little research concerning the reality of self-study among English-majored students in Vietnam. The gap should be addressed through investigation to gain an understanding of the present situation and potential factors influencing students' self-learning habits, thereby finding solutions to enhance self-study among university students. It has urged the researchers to implement research on English-majored students who are considered successful English learners to investigate how the students teach themselves to be decent English users. To be more specific, the authors attempt to conduct a statistical analysis regarding

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the allocation of self-learning time, the choices of places, contents, and self-study materials, as well as other factors that English-majored students consider in their self-study.

Through the analysis, the study attempts to certify whether self-study is due to learners' preferences or is influenced by other subjective factors, hence exploring whether students need a teacher in their self-learning process or not. In other words, the study manages to offer learners helpful insights on how to be independent and active in learning English. The findings hope to support educators and educational institutions in developing self-learning strategies that can foster a culture of self-directed learning among students.

In alignment with the need for a study on self-study among English-majored students, the research is conducted to:

- Assess the current reality of self-study among English-majored students, providing insights into the common strategies they utilize,
- Explore self-study preferences of self-study and investigate whether they prefer self-studying or getting a teacher's involvement.

To address the above aims, the researchers propose two questions as follows:

- 1) How do English-majored students practice their self-study outside the classrooms?
- 2) Do students prefer self-study or teacher's involvement when learning English?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Self-directed learning theory

The term "self-directed learning (SDL)" was first proposed in 1981 by Henri Holec, who is considered the father of this concept. Holec defines SDL as "*the ability to self-manage one's own learning process*" (p. 3). He also noted that: "*this ability cannot be inherited but must be learned through natural or formal means.*"

It is widely acknowledged that SDL can foster learners to be more proactive and responsible for their learning, in terms of both learning contents and learning styles (Oxford University Press ELT, 2013). According to Littlewood (1999, p. 71), SDL requires that "*learners should completely manage their own learning because all learning can only be done by the learners themselves and also because they need to develop the ability to self-study after finishing political studies.*" In other words, SDL is the transfer of responsibility and power from teachers to students by switching the traditional positions of both (Banerjee, 2011). Macdougall (2008) also states "*it is a type of learning characterized by individualization, self-management, and little dependence on the teacher for validation, and is therefore developmental, rather than is an obstacle to the ability to constructively participate and collaborate in the workplace*" (p. 224). By synthesizing different perspectives on how SDL is defined by the experts, it can be seen that SDL closely correlates with learner freedom, and its goal is to help students be independent and proactive in their learning process.

## **2.2 Advantages of self-directed learning**

Self-study is an important process in developing students' self-management and learning independence. It allows them to choose their own learning content and learning strategies. Thus, it has been suggested that learning autonomy is a vital factor in promoting personal growth and empowering students to become proficient learners capable of attaining a range of academic achievements (Littlewood, 1999). In other words, autonomy in language learning holds the promise of enabling learners to take control of their learning processes. It becomes even more significant as learners come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Encouraging learner autonomy not only fosters independent learning but also promotes understanding and appreciation of various cultures, making language learning a richer and more meaningful experience (Banerjee, 2011). SDL, therefore, is created as an approach to enhancing students' learning autonomy.

## **2.3 Factors affecting SDL in English**

### **2.3.1 Time**

One of the key factors of self-study is the amount of time students dedicate to it each day or each week. Teixeira and Rocha (2010) have proposed that self-study can be enhanced by determining reasonable time to study and review. Time spent on self-study English also refers to how students allocate that time. A student with good self-study tends to set themselves a specific schedule to study every day or week. This daily investment of time improves language ability significantly (Krashen, S., 1985), and effective time management can help him to stay motivated and make continuous progress (Rubin, J., 1975).

### **2.3.2 Form**

Individual learning allows students to focus on their individual needs and learning pace, while group learning can provide opportunities for the exchange of ideas and social learning (Nation, I. S. P., 2009). On the one hand, learning in groups can promote social interaction with those who share the same learning goals, creating diverse and enjoyable environments (Ellis, R., 1997; Hedge, T., 2000). On the other hand, individual learning can facilitate a focus on developing individual skills (Ellis, R., 1997)

Although both are beneficial to learners, choosing which form highly depends on each person's personal goals and preferences. Individual learning helps personalize the learning process and study time, while group learning can create opportunities for community learning and peer support. However, it is highly suggested that combining both forms of learning can create a diverse and interesting environment, helping students develop both personal skills and social interactions while learning a new language.

### **2.3.3 Place**

Determining where to study is also important, and it may affect the way students manage their time. Self-study environments can be diverse, from classrooms to libraries, coffee

shops, or even online spaces, but students tend to prefer a particular location that suits their learning style the most (Benson, P., 2001). However, a quiet and distraction-free environment is highly recommended to enhance the desirable quality of self-study. The online environment is also seen to be a smart choice for an expansive self-study space as it gives students freedom in determining where to study while providing learning materials and resources from any location (Littlewood, 1999).

#### **2.3.4 Content**

Choosing learning content can greatly affect the self-study process. Finding appropriate self-study materials and information sources that match learning goals can help learners significantly improve their language skills (Krashen, 1985). In addition, frequent repetition plays an important role in learning a language (Scrivener, 2005). Preparing new lessons is also a good way to expand vocabulary and grammar (Nation, 2009)

#### **2.3.5 Self-study sources**

Textbooks and newspapers are classic resources for learning English, and books and newspapers are secondary sources to expand learners' vocabulary knowledge and improve their reading skills (Brown, H. D., 2007). In addition, TV and radio programs often provide educational and entertaining programs in English. Students probably benefit from watching and listening to these shows as a result of enormous exposure to English (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Benson and Reinders (2011) and Warschauer and Healey (1998) also recommend exploiting educational applications and websites, as they allow students to access a large number of materials and lectures in the fastest way regardless of time and place. Taken together, using diverse sources can contribute to a flexible learning environment where students are motivated to deliberately expose to English.

#### **2.3.6 Frequency of practicing skills**

Regular practice is a decisive factor in strengthening not only four language skills but also confidence in communication (Nation, 2008). Thus, setting a regular schedule for practicing language skills is extremely important to maintain progress. In short, the frequency of skill practice is a determining factor in making progress in learning English

### **2.4 The role of the teacher in the SDL process**

Constructive feedback in education refers to the process through which teachers provide clear and supportive comments on a student's performance and progress (*Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 112, No. 3, 2020). As part of the constructivist approach to learning, this type of feedback focuses on facilitating students' active engagement in the learning process and helping them construct their knowledge and skills. By offering constructive feedback, teachers play a vital role in guiding students' learning journeys, identifying areas of improvement, and fostering a positive and growth-oriented learning environment (*Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 112, No. 3, 2020). Hence, it cannot fail

to mention that teachers play an important role in promoting student growth and success in the self-managed learning model.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants in this research were 100 English-majored students studying at a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Convenience sampling was employed in this research, as this method provides convenience by taking samples that are located near the authors. They all expressed their willingness to get involved in this study. The questionnaire was administered to all the participants. All the respondents were treated with full respect and dignity.

#### 3.2 Research instrument

The quantitative method is applied for this research and the research tool is a questionnaire that is used to obtain data on the study-learning habits of the participants.

The questionnaire consists of two parts:

##### Part 1:

- 2 multiple-choice questions regarding self-learning time.
- 24 statements regarding self-learning forms (2 statements), places (4 statements), contents (5 statements), sources/references (6 statements), and the frequency of practicing skills (7 statements).

The participants specify their level of frequency with a 5-point Likert scale: (1) Never; (2) Seldom; (3) Sometimes; (4) Often; (5) Always.

##### Part 2:

- 1 multiple-choice question regarding whether students prefer to self-study with or without teacher involvement.
- 5 out of 10 statements regarding the rationale of the above response

The participants specify their level of agreement with a 5-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) No ideas, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly agree

#### 3.3 Data collection and analysis

In the first part of the questionnaire, there are 24 statements divided into 5 categories regarding self-study forms, places, contents, sources/references, and the frequency of practicing skills. Because the five categories are independent, reliability coefficient tests were separately conducted on each category, as shown in the five tables below.

**Table 3.1:** The reliability of all items in SS forms

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.932	2

**Table 3.2:** The reliability of all items in SS places

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.932	4

**Table 3.3:** The reliability of all items in SS contents

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.687	5

**Table 3.4:** The reliability of all items in SS sources/references

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.746	6

**Table 3.5:** The reliability of all items in the frequency of English SS for each skill

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.851	7

Similarly, the 10 statements in the second part of the questionnaire were divided into two parts because they represented two contrasting contents regarding the reasons why students do and do not favor self-study with teacher support.

**Table 3.6:** The reliability of all items in the reasons why English-majored students like learn English with themselves

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.767	5

**Table 3.7:** The reliability of all items in the reasons why English-majored students prefer to learn English with a teacher

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.865	5

As seen from Tables 3.1 to 3.7, the values of Cronbach's Alpha are all within the allowable range of 0.6 - 0.95, showing consistent reliability at an acceptable level. This means that all of the items are sufficiently reliable for the study.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Results

#### 4.1.1 How do English-majored students self-study to improve their English outside their classrooms?

##### A. Self-study time

Table 4.1 below shows that a large portion of the English-majored students (79%) spend 60 minutes per day on self-study. 30 minutes a day is the second most popular self-learning time (29%), while there is a small portion spending only 15 minutes or more than 60 minutes a day on self-study (20% and 21% respectively).

**Table 4.1:** How long do you spend on English self-study after classes?

Items	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
15 minutes a day	20	20.0	20.0	20.0
30 minutes a day	29	29.0	29.0	49.0
60 minutes a day	30	30.0	30.0	79.0
Over 60 minutes a day	21	21.0	21.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.2 below indicates students' commitment to self-study. 32% of the English-majored students choose three times per week, whereas 29% of those choose four times per week, indicating that they invest a lot of time in learning English on their own. 28% of them with a self-learning frequency of twice a week also show that they are still conscious of self-study to maintain their English proficiency. Notably, 11% of the students show a stronger passion for self-study when they learn English more than 5 times per week on their own.

**Table 4.2:** How often do you teach yourself English per week?

Items	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
2 times	28	28.0	28.0	28.0
3 times	32	32.0	32.0	60.0
4 times	29	29.0	29.0	89.0
More than 5 times	11	11.0	11.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

### B. Self-study form

As shown in Table 3, there is a significant difference between individual self-study and group self-study. The mean score of individual self-study (3.63) is much higher than group self-study (2.71). This may indicate that participants tend to value individual self-study more highly than group self-study.

**Table 4.3:** Descriptive Statistics of students' SS forms

Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
By yourself	100	1	5	3.63	1.051
In groups	100	1	5	2.71	1.113

### C. Self-study place

Table 4.4 indicates that English-majored students have various preferences in choosing places for self-study. With the greatest mean score (3.97), "Home" is considered the most preferred site for self-study, while "University Library" is the least chosen location for self-study with the lowest mean score (2.03).

**Table 4.4:** Descriptive Statistics of Students' SS places

Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Home	100	1	5	3.97	1.000
University Library	100	1	5	2.03	1.010
Café	100	1	5	2.63	1.107
University self-study area	100	1	5	2.29	1.149

#### D. Self-study content

Table 4.5 shows that "*Review knowledge of previous lessons*" has the highest average score with a mean value of 3.72. It indicates that English-majored students tend to perceive reviewing knowledge from previous lessons as highly important. However, "*Self-check and evaluate what I studied earlier*" has the lowest mean score (2.99), indicating that the participants do not think that self-testing what they have previously learned is as important as other contents.

**Table 4.5:** Descriptive Statistics of students' SS contents

Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Review knowledge of previous lessons.	100	1	5	3.72	.889
Prepare a new lesson before class.	100	1	5	3.46	.979
Learn advanced and reference documents.	100	1	5	3.24	.878
Self-check and evaluate what I studied earlier.	100	1	5	2.99	1.078
Only do the assigned tasks	100	1	5	3.19	1.134

#### E. Self-study sources

Table 4.6 reveals that English-majored students are exposed to English from diverse sources on their own. Social networks such as YouTube and Facebook tend to be the most popular (M = 3.76). Other sources such as websites, English stories, novels, as well as English learning applications on mobile phones, are also used at an average level with scores from 3.44 to 3.50. However, English club participation has the lowest score (M = 2.36), which may imply that the number of English-majored students participating in English clubs to learn English is not large.

**Table 4.6:** Descriptive Statistics of students' SS sources

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I use different websites to help me.	100	3.69	.800
I watch TV or listen to the radio.	100	3.21	.957
I read stories, novels, and newspapers in English.	100	3.44	.925
I join the English Club.	100	2.36	1.049
I use Social networks (Youtube, Facebook,...).	100	3.76	1.026
I use English Learning Mobile Apps.	100	3.50	.980



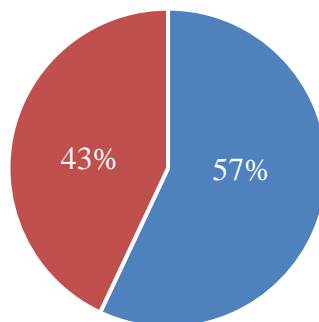
### F. Frequency of English self-study for skills and sub-skills

Table 4.7 shows that Reading and Speaking skills have higher mean scores than other skills, 3.83 and 3.77 respectively, indicating that the English-majored students tend to focus on practicing these two skills. Notably, writing skills (M = 3.43) obtain the highest standard deviation in the table (0.998). This may be because writing is an extremely challenging skill when learning without teachers' guidance. Grammar (M = 3.28) has the lowest mean scores.

**Table 4.7:** Descriptive Statistics of the frequency of English SS for skills and sub-skills

Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reading	100	1	5	3.83	.829
Listening	100	1	5	3.47	.969
Speaking	100	1	5	3.77	.874
Writing	100	1	5	3.43	.998
Pronunciation	100	1	5	3.79	.856
Grammar	100	1	5	3.28	.965
Vocabulary	100	1	5	3.55	.936

#### 4.1.2 Do students prefer self-study or teacher's involvement when learning English?



■ Self-studying   ■ Teacher involvement

**Figure 4.1:** Students' Preference in Learning English

Figure 4.1 shows that 57% of the English-majored students preferred self-study whereas 43% of them prefer learning English with a teacher. To better understand why participants have those different choices, it is necessary to gain more details which are presented below.

#### A. Reasons why English-majored students like self-study

As shown in Table 4.8, the most common reason why English-majored students prefer learning on their own is "Feeling like I can figure it out on my own" (M = 3.68). It reveals that a large portion of students are confident in their self-learning ability and problem-solving skills. However, some students prefer self-study because they assume that teachers are often busy (M = 3.05), or they are not confident when talking to teachers (M

= 2.88), or they do not know what to ask teachers about (M = 2.77), or even they are too busy to meet their teachers (M = 3.23). Altogether, the results demonstrate that confidence in self-study ability and preference for independence in the learning process are decisive factors in students' preference for self-study.

**Table 4.8:** Descriptive Statistics in the reasons why English-majored students like SS

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I don't want to consult teachers because they are often busy.	57	3.05	.953
I am not confident to talk to my teacher.	57	2.88	1.119
I don't know what to ask the teacher.	57	2.77	1.134
I'm busy with work and don't have enough time to ask the teacher.	57	3.23	1.000
It feels like I can figure it out on my own.	57	3.68	1.003

### B. Reasons why English-majored students like teacher involvement

Table 4.9 indicates the most common reason why English-majored students prefer learning with a teacher is their belief that teachers can provide them with tailored courses suiting their learning styles (M = 3.86), or teachers can help them to stay motivated and inspired during the learning process (M = 3.77), or teachers can help them to develop communication skills (M = 3.98), or they can learn from teachers' shared experiences (M = 4.00), or their errors can be corrected immediately by teachers (M = 3.93). These mean scores are all high, showing that teachers play an important role in supporting and facilitating students' learning process.

**Table 4.9:** Descriptive Statistics on the reasons why English-majored students prefer to involve teachers during their learning process

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Teachers provide me with tailored courses suiting my learning style.	43	3.86	.743
Teachers keep me inspired and motivated to learn English.	43	3.77	.782
Teachers help me develop my communication skills.	43	3.98	.636
Teachers share with me their practical experiences.	43	4.00	.845
Teachers correct my mistakes immediately	43	3.93	.737

### 4.2 Discussion

The results reveal that English-majored students have a range of approaches when managing their self-learning time in English. Some dedicate 15 minutes per day while others invest over 60 minutes daily. This demonstrates their flexibility in time allocation and their commitment to self-directed learning. It indicates that they not only understand how to make use of their free time but also know how to tailor their study routines to satisfy their learning objectives. Furthermore, the frequency of self-study is reported as regular among the English-majored students, with most of whom studying at least twice per week. This shows that the students have an awareness of maintaining self-study habits to achieve learning goals.

One interesting finding in the results is that English-majored students tend to prioritize individual self-study over group self-study. This result can be explained based on several reasons. When studying alone, they can easily create a tailored schedule or routine to make them easily keep track of. However, it does not mean that the benefits of group self-study are underrated.

The results also show differences in students' preferences in terms of self-learning places and reference sources. Learning at home is rated higher than in other locations, possibly due to the comfort and convenience of studying alone at home. This may suggest that providing materials and the ability to study at home can make the learning process more effective. Although the conditions of other options such as university libraries, self-study rooms, and café are relatively good, they are not chosen as the go-to self-study places. Additionally, with the advancement of information technology, self-study has become easier for students nowadays. Using media such as social networks (YouTube and Facebook) becomes more popular while participating in an English club obtains less attention.

Regarding practicing the language skills alone, reading and speaking skills are found to be practiced more frequently than the other skills by the English-majored students. It may indicate that the students tend to be more confident in practicing reading and speaking English on their own, along with the ease of access to an enormous amount of reading and speaking materials. However, it is notable that students spend the least amount of time on practicing writing as writing skills remain a difficult skill for EFL students, even for English-majored students. The variation can be also explained by the differences in writing competence, as some students have excellent writing skills while others do not. Regarding subs-skills, it is notable that grammar has the lowest mean score when compared to vocabulary and the four language skills. Besides, pronunciation is chosen by many English-majored students, indicating that this sub-skill is extremely important for learners.

Regarding students' self-study preferences, a notable point is that over half of the English-majored students tend to prefer studying without teacher involvement because they are confident to address problems on their own. This reflects the desire of the majority of English majors for independent learning. Apart from independent learning, studying English with a teacher has received some consideration. This is due to the importance of the teacher's roles and their abilities to design lessons to fit varied learning styles, maintain motivation and inspiration, develop students' communication skills, share real-life experiences, and correct students' errors immediately. It demonstrates that English-majored students still have a positive attitude regarding the teacher's influence on their academic advancement. However, it is worth highlighting that students tend to determine their self-study and hesitate to contact their teachers. One of the reasons is that students are involved in their part-time jobs or extracurricular activities, making it difficult for them to schedule time to meet lecturers.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is found that English-majored students have different ways of allocating self-learning time, choosing self-study places, and self-study sources to meet their learning goals and styles. It offers a satisfying overview of English-majored students' adaptability and dedication to learning English by themselves. It is also discovered that the majority of English majors prefer self-study to teachers' instruction. However, the significance of teachers cannot be underrated.

These findings hope to help universities create courses that encourage both instructor interaction and students' self-study. Those courses should enable students to acquire knowledge most effectively and obtain excellent self-learning abilities.

### **5.2 Recommendations**

#### **5.2.1 Recommendations for the educational institutions**

To facilitate the development of students' English skills and help them achieve their academic goals, universities can implement a series of important proposals. Universities need to create open and diverse learning spaces, encouraging students to participate in both individual and group activities. Additionally, providing platforms of qualified materials is a necessary action for modern learning. To facilitate students' self-study, they need to be provided a platform where they are allowed to access diverse materials, instructional videos, etc. For interactions between students and faculty, universities need to frequently offer exchanging opportunities, including advisory meetings, online forums, or emails, enabling students to conveniently find support for their self-study. For instance, effective time management is one important aspect of self-study, so training courses on time management are highly useful for students to help them be more effective in managing their time for study, work, and entertainment.

#### **5.2.2 Recommendations for students**

To be successful in improving English skills and achieving academic goals, students need a comprehensive study plan. First of all, they should actively participate in classroom and extracurricular activities where they are given a lot of chances to practice English communication. Second, students should not be afraid to approach lecturers for assistance and guidance. Furthermore, students need to build self-learning habits as it allows them to make continuous progress. Not only individual learning but studying in a group can also bring many benefits to self-study. For example, when discussing with others, we are likely to gain a deeper understanding of the lesson rather than passively listening to the lecturer.

### Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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