

# STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING AUTONOMY VIA PROJECT-BASED LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS AT CAN THO UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract:** The current study investigated third-year English-majored students' perceptions towards the development of learning autonomy through implementing a fifteen-week project in one class. This research also aimed to explore the challenges students encountered in project-based learning. The data were collected by means of questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The study results showed that students developed their learning autonomy in terms of independence but their study habits did not change much when project-based learning was implemented. Learners also encountered undesirable challenges involving time, collaboration skills, presentation skills and lack of fundamental specialized knowledge and real-life experiences.

**Key words:** Project based learning, students' perceptions, learning autonomy development

## 1. Introduction

In an attempt to help learners boost their capacity and skills to reach their final learning goal, many different teaching methods have been used in the class. In recent years, student-centered approach in which learners have become more independent in learning outweighed the traditional methods where teachers play a dominant role in the learning process because the student-centered teaching method brings about many benefits, especially the learner autonomy. Learner autonomy has been considered as one of the most essential elements in education since it can facilitate learners to achieve their learning goal effectively. To reach this, many studies in modern foreign language teaching approaches have been carried out in order to create favorable conditions where language learners can work collaboratively and become active, motivated as well as achieve learning autonomy (Ke, 2010; Levine, 2004; Maftoon, Birjandi & Ahmadi, 2013; Yuliani & Lengkanawati, 2017; Zhang, 2015). Project-based learning which focuses on student-centeredness requires students to actively participate in the process of acquiring knowledge and skills with limited teacher supervision. This dynamic teaching approach is also supposed to develop learners' learning autonomy and enhance their learning motivation. In terms of teaching English as a foreign language, project based activities can improve not only learners' language skills but also develop learner autonomy as one of vital components in lifelong learning process. While it is suggested that university students should be autonomous in learning, project-based learning approach has not been widely spread in the context of teaching English at university in Vietnam as it should be in foreign language education. This study aims to examine whether project-based learning approach works in order to develop learner autonomy and to find out

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difficulties English majored students at university are faced with when this method is implemented.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Definition of learning autonomy**

Long (1989) referred autonomous learning or independent learning as self-directed learning. Similarly, learner autonomy is defined as the ability to undertake one's own learning (Holec, as cited in Barillaro, 2011; Sabitha, 2013). It means that the autonomous learner takes an active role in learning process, generating ideas as well as taking advantage of his learning opportunities rather than simply reaching to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992). In other words, autonomous learning is the learner's ability to acquire knowledge independently by processes that the learner determines. Learner autonomy is crucial since it gives learners more opportunities to be independent in their learning.

### **2.2. Definition of project-based learning approach**

As project-based learning has been implemented in various disciplines in the classroom, different definitions of project-based learning (PBL) have been provided. Moss and Van Duzer (1998) propose project-based learning approach as a student-centered pedagogy that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with possible problems to tackle or products to develop. Learners learn by doing or working in groups or individually to explore knowledge as well as respond to a question or problem in a period of time. Similarly, Fried-Booth (2002) defined project-based learning as "student-centered and driven by the need to create an end-product".

According to Markham (2011), project-based learning approach is an integration of knowing and doing. Learners not only acquire knowledge together with elements of the core curriculum, but also apply what they have known to resolve authentic problems and produce results that matter. Besides, PBL students make use of digital tools to create high-quality collaborative products. PBL shifts education focus on the student not the curriculum, which brings about a reward of intangible assets including drive, passion, creativity, empathy and resiliency.

Once students in project-based learning are involved in the various work stages, they will have enhanced connections with self-control over their own learning. As a result, project based learning approach probably fosters learners to become autonomous and lifelong learners (Diffily, 2001). In short, unlike traditional methods of teaching where teachers dominate most of the talking time in class, thanks to project-based learning approach, learners are centered and probably provided with more opportunities to engage in their learning autonomously whereas teachers are considered as facilitators and advisors who support students with sufficient guidance and feedback.

### **2.3. Related studies**

In the last decades, many studies into project-based learning approach have been conducted with various findings. Many studies have clearly shown that learners were highly motivated and had positive attitudes towards independence in learning via project-based learning approach (Ke, 2010; Levine, 2004; Maftoon, Birjandi & Ahmadi, 2013; Yuliani &

Lengkanawati, 2017; Zhang, 2015) study results in an EFL classroom showed that learners became autonomous in terms of self-instruction, self-direction, self-access learning and individualized instruction thanks to project-based learning method. Similarly, Aldabbus (2018) declared that project-based learning approach can help learners not only improve their content knowledge but also develop their psychomotor and social skills including searching information, critical thinking, problem solving, self-evaluation, summarizing and giving presentations which are important for lifelong learning process.

However, learners also tackle certain challenges including time limitation and a lack of autonomous learning experience. Aldabbus's (2018) findings revealed that students encountered different obstacles regarding choosing a significant content, time management, monitoring and assessment, and a lack of facilities during autonomous learning process. Meanwhile, Nguyen's (2017) study results also indicated that students after taking part in project work perceived a higher degree of learner autonomy, but other characteristics of autonomous learning such as self-regulation, self-responsibility and attitudes towards social interaction remained unchanged.

Due to unexpected challenges of project-based learning approach, this approach is not widely used in teaching and learning; However, it is undeniably worth implementing for its numerous advantages to learners to develop autonomous learning. Being motivated by the remarkable benefits of learner autonomy in the learning process, this study aims to investigate how learner autonomy promotes the learning process, students' perceptions as well as the challenges arising when implementing project-based learning approach. Especially, as the development of autonomy learners is also one of the major aims of a university education (Bryde & Milburn, 1990; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Stephenson & Laycock, 1993), the present study was conducted to satisfy this accordingly.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. Participants**

This study was conducted with 44 third-year students enrolled in *English for Tourism* course at Can Tho University, including 42 female and 2 male students aged 20 to 22 who first accessed project-based learning approach, having had English competence (listening, speaking, reading and writing skills). Although the sample of the study is relatively small, the researcher expects that the current study can provide valuable information about the perceptions of students when project-based learning approach is applied in a university and challenges that hinder.

#### **3.2. Research procedure**

At the beginning of the fifteen-week semester, third-year English majored students at Can Tho University were clearly informed of the teaching methods regarding autonomy learning via integrated skills projects. Specifically, students and the teacher first agreed on a theme for the project, determined the final outcome and structured the project. Then, teachers prepared students for language demands of the final project by designing language-improvement activities which probably helped students successfully present the final outcome of the project. Next, students gathered, compiled, analyzed information in group in order to identify information that was crucial to the completion of their projects and they finally presented their final product.

After the fifteen-week course, participants were required to answer the questionnaire regarding to learning autonomy and unexpected challenges they encountered when project-based learning approach was implemented.

As a data collection instrument, the questionnaire was employed in this study since it was considered a favored technique to measure perception as well as challenges in educational research (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2011). Students' responses were measured by using the five-point Likert scale rating from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral or no idea (3), agree (4) to strongly agree (5).

A paper-based questionnaire in this study was adapted from the questionnaire of MaCaskill and Taylor (2010), who suggested a measure of autonomous learning with 12 questions. The questionnaire in the current study included 15 items describing English-majored students' perception towards learning autonomy in terms of independence of learning including elements of responsibility for learning, openness to experience, intrinsic motivation and self confidence in dealing with new activities (7 items) and study habits consisting of time management, procrastination, and attitude to lone working (5 items) and the challenges students face when learning English course via project based learning approach (3 items). This autonomous learning scale presents a simple method of quantifying student autonomy. For analysis, the responses were weighed in a way that a higher value corresponds to greater autonomy. The data was collected and analyzed using the SPSS software.

### **3.3. Research questions**

The purpose of this descriptive study is to seek the answers to the two research questions as follows:

1. What are students' perceptions towards learning autonomy development via project-based learning approach?
2. What challenges do students encounter when learning English course through project-based learning approach?

## **4. Findings and discussion**

### **4.1. Students' perceptions towards the development of learning autonomy via project-based learning**

Students' perceptions towards the development of learning autonomy via project activities were employed in three clusters. Cluster 1 comprises statements regarding students' perception towards learning autonomy related to independence of learning like responsibility, openness to experience, intrinsic motivation and self-confidence in resolving new activities; Cluster 2 are statements investigating student study habits including time management, procrastination and attitude towards lone working; and Cluster 3 consists of statements mentioning students' challenges when the project-based learning method is implemented.

**Table 1.** Students’ perceptions towards learning autonomy in terms of independence of learning

Item (N=44)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
I enjoy new learning experiences through project-based learning approach.	77.3	2.3	20.4
I am open to new ways of doing familiar things.	84.1	0	15.9
I enjoy being set a challenge.	63.6	18.2	18.2
I enjoy finding information about new topics on my own.	81.8	2.3	15.9
Even when tasks are difficult, I try to stick with them.	70.4	9.1	20.5
I tend to be motivated to work by assessment deadlines.	63.6	4.6	31.8
I take responsibility for my learning experiences.	90.9	0	9.1

Regarding the independence of learning, Table 1 shows that most students generally had positive attitudes towards learning autonomy method. In particular, more than two-thirds of interviewees appreciated and experienced project activities. Similarly, over 90% of students were capable of their self-control in their learning and nearly 64% had a desire for learning (Macaskill & Taylor, 2010). About 84% of respondents were willing to apply the new learning approach or they were open to experience in their learning. Approximately 82% found it enjoyable to independently discover new topics for their projects whereas 63.6 % of participants indicated that they were more independent in learning. These findings indicated that students had a high level of readiness for independent learning, and they became responsible for their own learning. Students were more involved in constructing their own knowledge in an autonomous learning context. These findings are in accordance with the previous researches (Ke, 2010; Levine, 2004; Maftoon, Birjandi & Ahmadi, 2013; Zhang, 2015). However, the findings are at variance with those of Nguyen’s (2017) indicating that EFL learners’ attitudes towards self-responsibility remained unchanged.

**Table 2.** Students’ perceptions towards learning autonomy in terms of study habits

Item (N=44)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
My time management is good.	36.4	15.9	47.7
I am good at meeting deadlines.	31.8	25	43.2
I plan my time for study effectively.	47.7	25	27.3
I frequently find excuses for not getting down to work.	29.5	18.2	52.3
I am happy working on my own.	77.2	2.3	20.5

As shown in Table 2, students’ perceptions towards learning autonomy are related to study habits. In particular, 47.7% and 43.2% of respondents did not realize whether they could arrange effectively their time and meeting deadlines when doing project activities respectively. In the meanwhile, less than 48% agreed that they would plan time for study appropriately and over 27% had neutral opinion for this issue whereas more than 52% of interviewed participants had neutral opinion when they would not spend time completing their project. In other words, students were not motivated much in their project activities. It means that students’ study habits have not changed via learning autonomy approach. These findings are similar to the those of Henri, Morrell, and Scott (2018), who reported that students themselves did not become autonomous as they progressed. Surprisingly, more than 77% had positive attitudes to lone working. It means

that project-based learning provides students with the opportunity of more hands on involvement in a project or with the ownership of their study.

#### **4.2. Challenges students encounter when implementing project-based learning approach**

Cluster 3 of the questionnaire shows that the challenges that English-majored students face comprise time, collaboration skills, presentation skills and lack of fundamental specialized knowledge and real-life experiences.

The findings show that the most difficulty is the amount of time because students have to study too many subjects to work together after school. The majority of respondents (more than 50%) find it hard to choose a suitable time for group work because of their different extra-class activities. One interviewed student said, *“I have to spend much time to prepare and finish the product which teacher asks me to do. Moreover, I need to have much more time to prepare my presentation and I feel nervous because there are many deadlines at the same time”*. Or another student admitted: *“I have to spend lots of time finishing the product, but I don't know how to arrange my time effectively in order to do other things in the same period time.”*. Besides that, about 30% of the interviewed students answered that they had to encounter deadlines when doing project-based activities. The results of the present study are similar to those of Mali (2017) and Yuliani and Lengkanawati (2017).

The second common challenge is collaborative skills in the teamwork concept. From learners' point of view, working in groups can cause interpersonal conflicts and unequal distributions of workload among group members. Nearly 30% of participants admitted that it was hard to exchange their ideas with the peers, and they resulted in the argument with their group members during their work and they sometimes could not negotiate their ideas for their task because of too many ideas (e.g. one participant said *“There are many different ideas from many people in group so it's hard to choose the final answer. Truly, it takes a lot of time.”*) or even they had a lot of ideas but could not find out any interesting ideas for their product (e.g. one respondent said, *“We don't choose the suitable topic for the project, don't have new ideas to expand and vary the product.”*). To illustrate this, one interviewed participant explained that *“In my opinion, the most difficult problem is to discuss among group members because in the discussion session there are a lot of various ideas and it takes time for us to balance them”*. In addition, the group could not reach the conclusion after discussion because some students dominated the work and did not allow their group members to take active role in the project activity or even some students were lazy to take part in project activities. One responder complained that *“Some partners did not make anything about our project. I take a lot of time to complete the project by myself”*. Another learner said, *“We still do not know how to divide the work between us”*. Other student complained, *“In my opinion, the most difficult is team work but I have to work on my own without supporting”*. These study results are in line with Shaban Aldabbus's (2018) and Walker's (2001) findings. Cooperative learning plays a critical role to engage teams of students when they work to complete their project since it help students promote academic and social skills. In a project-based learning context, students can become more skillful at learning through cooperation, but successful cooperative work needs to be carefully organized and guided by teachers.

The third obstacle is collaboration. Specifically, about 23% interviewed students agreed that they lacked presentation skills when using project-based learning method in their learning for some reasons. First of all, 50% particularly confirmed that they felt shy, less confident and afraid of making mistakes when presenting their products in front of the class. To demonstrate, one student explained that *"I feel unconfident, shy and afraid of making mistakes when presenting in front of the class"*. These findings are consistent with Beckett's (2002) findings. Moreover, 20% of these argued that they did not receive clear instructions from the teacher whereas some respondents found themselves uninterested in autonomy (e.g. *One student answered, "I haven't received many specific instructions. I have to spend a lot of time to think about how to present the project"*). There is a difference in challenges that students faced when implementing project-based learning method. The findings in the present study reveal that teacher support was not a considerable challenge during their learning, which was different from Kurzel and Rath's (2007) study results. Kurzel and Rath's study showed that the lack of teacher's support was one of the biggest challenges for students when doing project activities. Approximately 20% respondents found that they did not have enough fundamental specialized knowledge and real-life experiences related to their course. One interviewed participant said that *"Maybe I don't go to visit or research a lot of information in other countries, so their culture and history cannot be stored in my mind."*

Last but not least, 6.8% found it hard to be familiar with the project-based learning approach. They declared that they did not have a clear idea about what project-based learning approach means. One of the students mentioned in his responses that *"I think that I am not familiar with the project and teaching method and it was hard to learn right from the start"*. These findings are in accordance with the findings of Yuliani and Lengkanawati (2017), who elaborated learners had lack of autonomous learning experience.

## 5. Recommendations

The results discussed in this paper reveal that most participants would develop independent learning or become responsible for their own learning but not study habits via project-based learning approach. Nevertheless, it is evident that students had to encounter different challenges regarding lack of time, group collaboration skills, presentation skills, fundamental content knowledge and real-life experiences as well. From the present study, possible suggestions should be taken into consideration in order to improve the effectiveness of project-based learning approach.

First of all, students should be instructed how to make use of time appropriately to complete the projects with their peers by working at home or at workplace via some useful online applications like Zalo, Viber, Messenger, Facebook or Twitter which can help learners not only save time but also tackle time constraint due to students' different schedules.

Second, in terms of obstacles to group collaboration, it is suggested that teachers should let learners themselves freely choose their group members since when learners work with the partners they choose, they will be more comfortable and capable of working together more effectively. Moreover, teachers should offer their students more opportunities to be familiar with group work by asking them do more group activities during learning process. Consequently, when learners get familiar with group work, teachers can arrange groups as they want. Besides that, it is

recommended that teachers need to facilitate students to collaboratively specify their clear roles or responsibilities in groups in order to prevent from the undesirable situation in which one student will dominate other students' roles in a group. This solution can both maximize collaborative work and show the equality when working within a teamwork context.

Third, with regards to challenges related to presentation skills, students should be prepared for theoretical knowledge about public speaking which is considered as soft skills that will also probably be vital for their future, and teachers should let students practice public speaking skills in class before they present their final projects. In the same time, teachers can encourage learners to learn presentation skills through valuable websites on the internet like Tedtalk. In addition, teachers can put up scaffolding to help students to perform the complex tasks of the projects on their own.

Finally, teachers should take full responsibility for providing students with fundamental content knowledge or technical terms related to the course and the projects. Besides that, it is suggested that teachers should instruct students how to search information about their projects on the internet or in the library. In other words, teachers need to provide ongoing guidance and be prepared to effectively deal with students' unexpected problems while the students adapt to their autonomous learning roles.

## 6. Conclusion

The study investigates students' perceptions towards the development of learning autonomy when doing project-based activities and common factors that cause challenges for English majored students at university when applying project-based learning approach. It can be concluded from the evidence in the study that although students have not changed their study habits, they become more independent and responsible for their own learning. However, students still face with unavoidable difficulties such as time, teamwork skills, presentation skill, content knowledge and the inexperience in real life when doing projects.

It is worth saying that the present study is exploratory and illuminative since it is limited to the analysis of English majored students at Can Tho University. Due to the limited scope of the research, the study results can, therefore, be regarded as being a modest tentative and could not be a generalization. Nevertheless, the findings in the current study can provide insights into the role of project based learning in developing autonomous learning and the findings are likely to be relevant to those in similar contexts.

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## **NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN VỀ PHÁT TRIỂN TÍNH TỰ CHỦ TRONG HỌC TẬP QUA PHƯƠNG PHÁP GIẢNG DẠY DỰ ÁN: TRƯỜNG HỢP NGHIÊN CỨU CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH ANH VĂN TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC CẦN THƠ**

**Tóm tắt:** Nghiên cứu khảo sát nhận thức của sinh viên năm thứ ba chuyên ngành Anh văn về phát triển tính tự chủ trong học tập thông qua áp dụng phương pháp giảng dạy dự án trong 15 tuần. Nghiên cứu này cũng nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu những khó khăn của sinh viên khi áp dụng phương pháp giảng dạy theo dự án. Dữ liệu được thu thập qua bảng câu hỏi và được thống kê miêu tả. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy sinh viên phát triển tính tự chủ trong học tập cụ thể là tính độc lập trong học tập. Tuy nhiên, thói quen học tập của sinh viên không thay đổi nhiều khi áp dụng phương pháp dạy học theo dự án. Bên cạnh đó, người học cũng gặp những khó khăn về thời gian, kỹ năng hợp tác, kỹ năng thuyết trình và thiếu kiến thức chuyên ngành cũng như kinh nghiệm thực tế khi thực hiện dạy học theo dự án.

**Từ khóa:** Dạy học theo dự án, nhận thức của sinh viên, phát triển tính tự chủ trong học tập