ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS' SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IN VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract - Self directed learning plays a vital role in the process of language learning, especially when students were isolated at home for immediate online learning due to strict social distance in COVID-19 time. The paper presents part of a study which investigated English-majored students' self directed learning in the virtual learning environment in Vietnam. The study applied the sequential mixed method with the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviewas the instruments. The number of participants was 706 English-majored students who experienced the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022 learning online. The findings reveal that students have generally good abilities to self-direct their studies though they have to confront negative feelings like boredom, and tiredness. Based on findings, implications such as clear goals of the subjects, guidance from teachers as well as teaching strategies to deal students' negative feelings are suggested to enhance students' ability to self-direct.

Keywords - Self-directed learning; Online learning; English-majored students; Teaching strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has been reshaping the teaching and learning landscape at all levels of education in Vietnam with a focus on ensuring effective and safe teaching and learning conditions for faculties, lecturers, and students amidst the outbreak. As the first wave of COVID hit Vietnam in February 2020, universities across Vietnam experienced some initial challenges in organizing teaching and learning activities. However, positive changes were soon implemented to adapt to the new conditions(Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021; Vo & Pang, 2021; Vo, 2023).
Universities in Vietnam actively promoted online teaching and learning. Initially, faculty and students used various online platforms and software such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and Zoom for interaction instead of attending physical classes(Lo, 2021; Vo & Nguyen, 2023). Faculty members also utilized popular information technology applications such as Kahoot, Educaplay, Joamboard,etc., to create an effective learning environment similar to that of traditional classes.After a short time, universities quickly reorganized their online teaching and learning to achieve synchronization across all courses and to enhance the quality of online teaching and learning Online courses were held on such platforms as MS Teams and LMS, with training sessions and detailed guidelines provided to lecturers.

Online teaching and learning have created numerous opportunities while also posing many challenges for faculties and students at the tertiary level. Challenges like facilities, lack of preparation for online learning, and negative feelings are found common in online learning and teaching (Derakhshan, Kruk, Mehdizadeh, & Pawlak, 2022; Dorsah, 2021; Huang & Zheng, 2022; Vo, 2021;Wang, 2023). Such obstacles can be reduced if students especially those who are at undergraduate levels have a good control over their study (Vo, 2023). Students' ability to self-direct their learning is considered to be crucial in education, especially tertiary level (Loeng, 2020).

The paper presents the study on students' self-directed learning in emergency online learning conducted in Vietnam during COVID-19 period. The paper aims at finding how good is English-majored students at self-directing their own learning in emergency online learning when preparations for online learning were not made carefully.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Concepts of self-directed learning

The concept of self-directed learning can be traced back to the 1970s (Loeng, 2020). Self-directed learning is a learning process in which individuals take the primary responsibility for their own learning. This includes identifying their learning needs, setting their learning goals, selecting appropriate resources for learning, and evaluating their learning outcomes. Self-directed learning also encompasses a set of personal attributes or characteristics of the learner, including motivation, self-discipline, self-awareness, and critical thinking skills(Long, 1989).

Self-directed learning model

According to Knowles(M, 1975), self-directed learning involves individuals taking the initiative to diagnose their own learning needs and formulate their own learning goals. They then identify resources for learning and select appropriate learning strategies to achieve their goals. Finally, they evaluate their own learning outcomes to determine the effectiveness of their learning process.
According to, Grow(1991), the model of self-directed learning is divided into four stages:

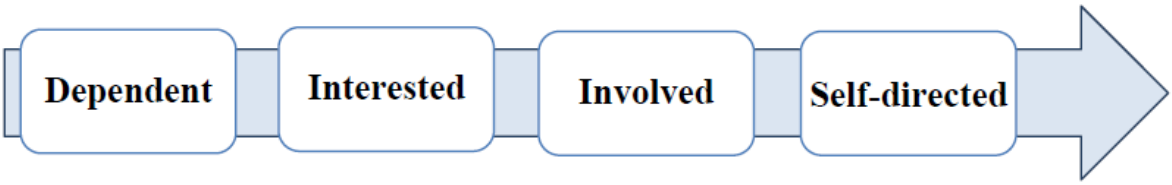


Figure 1- The four-staged directed learning model

In the first stage, the level of learners' self-directed learning is quite low and they depend much on their teachers. They need to be directed what to learn, how to learn and teachers play the role of coachers with immediate feedbacks to push students' learning. The second stage is considered to be the one with "moderate self-direction" in which students are motivated to self-direct their own learning by teachers' motivating techniques. In the third stage "learners with immediate self-direction", students have their skills and knowledge to self-direct their own learning. The fourth stage is the highest one called "learners of high self-direction" when students are able to set their own goals and direct themselves to achieve the goals without teachers' support. Often, the fourth level of self-direction is quite high and not all leaners can get to this level.

Why self-directed learning?

The focus of self-directed learning is on students; in other words, it is student-centred. In self-directed learning, students play the key role in the process of learning in which thet themselves set their own golas and take initiatives to achieve such aims (Knowles, 1975). With self-directed learning, learners are more likely to persuit their continuous life long learning when they can manage their study well, and they do not depend much on their teachers. In self-directed learning, teachers are facilitators which help learners to direct their learning paths on the right way.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study applied the quantitativeapproach. The onlinequestionnaire and semi-structured interviews were employed to gather data for the research. The number of participants were 706 who all experienced the first semester of the 2021-2022 school year learning online. These students are English-majored students. The number of female students surpassed male ones with 652 female students (92.4%) and 54 male ones (7.6%).

The questionnaire which was adapted from the one developed by Hung, Chou, Chen, & Own(2010)has 7 parts. Yet, the data used in this article is just one part from the questionaire. This part has 7 items which tell readers of how good English-majored students are at self-directing their own learning. The part has a high reliability with Cronbacl Alpha level at .849. The interview was designed to further support and explain what was discovered from the quantitative data.

IV. FINDINGS

With the Linkert scale 1-5, the interval will be 0.8. It means that when the mean value is above 3.4, the result is positive. Specifically, if the mean value is from 3.4 to 4.2, most of participants select "Agree" to response to the item. In this research, the mean value of all 7 item is 3.74, denoting that English-majored students are generally good at self-directing their learning in online classes.

Among the 7 items, the highest mean value belongs to the one expressing students' expectations for the learning performance with 4.01. English-majored students, followed by the item about students' learning independencewith the mean value 4.0. English-majored students are active in their study when the mean value of the item is high (3.94). The mean value of the item 1 is 3.75, denoting that English-majored students actively have their study plan to get good results in the semester. Students try to solve their problems by seeking helps or support form classmates and teachers (The mean value of the item 2= 3.94). Yet, they are not good at managing time when the mean value of the item 3 is 3.21, which means that students select "neutral" option for this item.

Table 1
How good English-majored students are at self-directing their own learning

N.	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I carry out my own study plan.	706	1	5	3.75	.958
2	I seek assistance when facing learning problems.	706	1	5	3.94	.901
3	I manage time well.	706	1	5	3.21	1.025

4	I have high expectations for my learning performance.	706	1	5	4.01	.919
5	I think that I would be able to schedule time to provide timely responses to other students and/or the instructor.	706	1	5	3.65	.907
6	I am comfortable asking for assistance when needed.	706	1	5	3.64	.971
7	I am comfortable learning independently.	706	1	5	4.00	.898

Data from the interview further explain what is revealed from the questionnaire. 19 out of 20 students responded that they created their plan at the beginning of the semester based on the course requirement and kept on carrying the plan during the semester. However, they admited that it was quite hard to manage their time when they stayed at home studying online. In Vietnam where the living condition is not high, students have to share rooms with their brothers or sisters, so they do not have private space to focus on their study. In addition, they are distracted by lots of other online activities like chatting, and Facebook.

"Q: It is found from the questionnaire that English-majored students in Vietnam carry out their study plans quite well. What do you think of this fact?

A: That is definitely right for my case. After one year (2020-2021 academic year) of studying "on and off" (online and offline modes of study), I know that if I do not have a specific plan right at the beginning of the semester, I will get into troubles easily as online learning requires us to control ourselves well.

Q: But the data from the questionnaire also show that students do not have good time management. Why?

A: Ah, this is another story. It is quite hard to control our schedule when learning online at home. My sister is very naughty. She is noisy and often disturbs my study. And I aslo easily fall in chatting with friends during the lecture and wandering on the internet when my lecturer asks us to do exercises "

(One extract from the interview with a female student)

The interview indicates that students are more relaxed in seeking for help from lecturers and classmates online. They find it less stressed to contact their lecturers via online chat or MS Team than meeting them face-to-face in normal situations. As a result, they are able to get support and interact with lecturers and friends comfortably.

"Q: The questionnaire data reveal that students are relaxed seeking for help or support from lecturers and friends in online learning. How about you?

A: I think it is the truth for most of students.

Q: Why?

A: You know, when we are not in front of lecturers, talking about our study, we will be more relaxed. Often in face-to-face classes, my lecturers ask me to meet in the office, which makes me reluctant when i need help. But with online classes, it would be easier and more comfortable."

(One extract from the interview with a male student)

To sum up, English-majored students have good ability to self-direct their study in the emergency online learning.

V. DISCUSSION

The ability of self-directing is very vital in online learning as it is one dimension that decides learners' readiness for online learning (Hung et al., 2010). It is found that English-majored students have good ability to self-direct their study. Such findings agree with previous research in the world and also in Vietnam. According to Kasim(2022), self-directed leaning ability plays the key role in emergency online learning among pre-service teachers in Turkey. Those with goo ability to self-direct their study would be able to maintain their academic self-efficacy and motivation at high level. It is also found that in Turkey students in education sector generally have good ability of self-directing. Another study in China shows that self-directed learning ability in online learning environments has positive impacts on students' learning(Song, 2005). The ability of self-directing in study comes from various factors such as

learners' autonomy, learners' independence and learners' motivation. There is a correlation among these factors with self-directed learning ability. In Vietnam, it is found that EFL students have good ability to control their online learning(Vo, 2023).

VI. IMPLICATIONS

The self-directed learning ability of English-majored students can be enhanced if the following solutions are applied:

a. For students:
The self-directed learning ability of students will be improved if they are actively conscious of their learning and cultivate self-directed learning skills during the learning process. Students need to be flexible and creative in their studies, improve their knowledge, skills, and self-capacity.Online learning requires high autonomy, especially with exercises designed on LMS. The readiness for self-directed learning of students will be increased if they actively follow the guidance of the lecturer during the learning process and have specific plans for their studies.

b. For lecturers:
The self-directed learning ability of students in online courses will increase if lecturers provide specific guidance and support for students during online learning. The level of self-directed learning can be raised if students are provided with specific requirements, based on which they can reasonably orient their learning. Moreover, detailed guidance on assessment and evaluation, as well as learning outcomes, will help students have a better understanding of the course requirements and be more self-directed in their learning process. Lecturers need to understand the nature of learning motivation and the important role of promoting and inspiring independent learning in order to choose suitable teaching methods to create motivation and maximize learning opportunities, encourage students to participate in the learning process, and focus on lesson planning to ensure the independent learning development of students.
Lecturers can also promote students' active learning through teaching methods that increase participation and student autonomy in learning, such as discussions, presentations, independent project exercises, and typical research exercises. Lecturers need to continuously evaluate the level of readiness for self-directed learning of students to meet their learning needs and social development.

c. For the University:
To improve the self-directed learning ability of students, universities need to focus on planning to adopt an approach that places students at the center to create conditions for lifelong learning improvement. Students need to be provided with guidance and counseling services to develop their self-directed learning skills, and the university needs to create a supportive learning environment that encourages students to become more self-directed learners.

VI. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, English-majored students have a good ability to self-direct their study. Yet, such level can be still improved if students, lecturers and universities recognize the importance of self- directed learning in the success of education and have suitable policies, teaching methods, as well as strategies to enhance such ability. However, the findings presented in this article is just one small part of a research which is on learners' readiness for online learning. Therefore, data for the analysis is limited. Further studies with more carefully designed instruments and on larger scales should be done to provide better findings.

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