

# Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of learner autonomy factors: An analysis of gender, major, and tenure differences

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perceptions of Learner Autonomy (LA) factors among students in the context of English language acquisition in Vietnam. Specifically, the study examines the potential impact of students' gender, major, and tenure on their perceptions of these factors. A quantitative comparative research design was employed, utilizing survey-based methodology to collect data from a sample of 117 Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The data were analyzed using Independent-samples t-tests to identify significant differences in perceptions across gender, major, and tenure groups. The results indicate that, overall, gender does not significantly impact students' perceptions of the examined learning factors. However, gender differences were observed in the clusters of teachers' behavior and teachers' instructions, suggesting variations in how males and females perceive these aspects of LA. The study also reveals that students' majors, specifically English Teacher Education and English Studies, do not significantly influence their perceptions of LA factors. Furthermore, students' tenure in the program does not significantly shape their perceptions of these factors. Accordingly, the results provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers in the field of language education, highlighting the need for gender-responsive approaches and inclusive educational practices to promote LA.

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## 1. Introduction

The English language holds universal significance, playing a crucial role in facilitating communication, expanding opportunities, and fostering social interactions. In Vietnam, English education is a central element of a national initiative supported by the Ministry of Education and Training (Nguyen, 2018). This initiative aims to equip Vietnamese adolescents with the necessary skills for autonomous use of foreign languages, particularly English, to enhance communication, academic pursuits, and professional prospects. The objective is to propel the country's modernization efforts (Nguyen, 2019).

However, the process of acquiring the English language is complex and influenced by various internal and external factors (Paradis, 2011). Among these factors, Learner Autonomy

(LA) holds significant importance. LA involves learners taking responsibility for their own learning journey while benefiting from the guidance and resources provided by educators (Dwee & Anthony, 2017; Little, 2007). Autonomous learners, who possess heightened self-awareness and motivation, often achieve higher levels of language proficiency (Liu, Wang, & Ryan, 2015; Oxford, 2015).

Given the importance of LA, it is essential to explore how different demographic factors impact students' perceptions of the factors influencing their LA. By understanding the relationship between students' demographic information and their perceptions, educators, and policymakers can tailor instructional strategies and support systems to meet the specific needs of diverse student populations (Akareem & Hossain, 2016). Such insights will help optimize the English language learning process and enhance the effectiveness of educational initiatives, thereby contributing to the overall success of language education programs in Vietnam. To this end, this study seeks to answer the following research question.

*To what extent do Vietnamese EFL students differ in their perceptions of LA factors in terms of demographic variables of gender, tenure, and major?*

## **2. Theoretical basis**

### **2.1. Learner autonomy**

Learner Autonomy (LA) denotes an individual's control over their learning, encompassing goal setting, independent decision-making, and self-assessment of outcomes (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981). Scholars highlight the learner's willingness to assume learning responsibility, and autonomy as knowledge construction freedom (Benson, 2011). Little (1994) posits LA as an interdependent product, highlighting the role of social connectivity in learning. Littlewood (1999); Sanprasert (2010) distinguish between Proactive and Reactive Autonomy. The former involves active learning through goal-setting, strategy selection, and self-assessment, while the latter depends on external stimuli. Reactive Autonomy is a foundational step towards Proactive Autonomy, promoting learners' independent resource management (Sanprasert, 2010). Proactive learners, being more active and independent, tend to learn more effectively and exhibit higher motivation than their Reactive counterparts.

### **2.2. Factors affecting learner autonomy**

This investigation pivots upon the theoretical frameworks postulated by Bliidi (2016); Nguyen and Habók (2020), with the intent to scrutinize the determinants exerting influence upon LA. Within this context, several factors surface as instrumental in cultivating LA: voluntariness, learner agency with flexibility in academic choices, peer facilitation, volitional components (motivation and pedagogical beliefs), and capacity (encompassing ability, desire, and autonomy). Voluntariness, along with the liberty to immerse oneself autonomously within the learning process, is considered cardinal to the development of LA. The facet of learner agency, coupled with flexibility in the selection of academic pathways, equips learners with the ability to critically delineate objectives and formulate strategies for their achievement. Peer facilitation and interdependence, seen through the lens of social learning, occupy a prominent place in the maturation of LA. Volitional components such as learner motivation and beliefs pertaining to the instructor's role are instrumental in contouring learners' perceptions and application of autonomy. Capacity, in this context, embodies metacognitive awareness and skills, motivation, and the empowerment required to govern the learning process. Taken collectively, these determinants are believed to contribute in a meaningful way towards fostering LA. It, therefore, facilitates the process of language acquisition.

### ***2.3. Demographic information and one's perceived learner autonomy***

#### *2.3.1. One's gender and perceived learner autonomy*

Gender significantly influences students' perceived LA, an effect attributable to a confluence of factors including perceptual biases, emotional expression, socially constructed roles, and cognitive abilities, all of which are often associated with gender due to sociocultural and biological influences. Perceptual biases, informed by gender, can influence how students assess their personal abilities and competence, which subsequently can affect their self-perceived LA in the learning process. For instance, societal stereotypes that suggest men excel in leadership positions or certain academic domains may engender heightened feelings of autonomy among male students in these contexts (Brands & Kilduff, 2014; Cheng & Lin, 2012; Lee & Huang, 2018). Conversely, female students may experience diminished autonomy due to gender biases that call into question their perceived abilities. Social roles and norms, often dictated by gender, can also affect students' self-perceived LA in learning. Stereotypes concerning masculinity and femininity have the potential to influence judgments of aptitude and appropriateness for particular academic subjects or professions (Bligh, Schlehofer, Casad, & Gaffney, 2012). As a result, students may perceive themselves as more autonomous in subjects and careers that align with traditional gender norms. Differential perceptions of emotional expression based on gender can also exert an influence. Women are often socialized to be more proficient in recognizing and articulating emotions, whereas men are more commonly associated with the recognition of anger and aggression (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Clements & Schumacher, 2010). These disparities may affect how students perceive their own emotional intelligence and that of their peers in learning contexts, which could consequently influence their perceived LA. Lastly, cognitive abilities linked to gender, such as men's reported superior performance in spatial tasks and mental rotation activities, may also impact perceived LA (McBurney, Gaulin, Devineni, & Adams, 1997). In conclusion, the relationship between gender and perceived LA is a complex and multifaceted construct, underpinned by a network of interconnected factors.

#### *2.3.2. One's major and perceived learner autonomy*

The selected academic discipline can exert considerable influence on students' perceived LA. This perception pertains not merely to the learning modus operandi and methodologies frequently adopted within a specific field, but also to the ways in which the discipline informs learners' cognitive mechanisms, philosophical perspectives, and self-identity. Various academic disciplines underscore different modalities of knowledge procurement and cognitive processing. For example, disciplines within the domain of natural Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) typically stress empirical methodologies, logical reasoning, and analytical thinking. This emphasis can precipitate an enhanced sense of LA in these areas for students, as they are frequently tasked to independently conduct investigations and resolve intricate problems (Akdere, Hickman, & Kirchner, 2019; McGee, Saran, & Krulwich, 2012). Conversely, disciplines in the humanities and social sciences often foster interpretative acumen, critical thinking abilities, as well as qualitative analytical skills. Consequently, students in these domains may perceive themselves as possessing heightened autonomy in investigating diverse perspectives and participating in nuanced, critical discourse (Goodchild & Janelle, 2010; Nicholas & Labig, 2013). In addition, a student's academic discipline can significantly shape their perceptions of professional opportunities and future career trajectories (Gebbers, Pantelidis, & Goss-Turner, 2020; Villarejo, Barlow, Kogan, Veazey, & Sweeney, 2008). Anticipated future pathways and the potential for autonomy within a chosen professional sphere can influence how

students perceive their autonomy as learners. Lastly, the choice of an academic discipline contributes to the formation of students' self-identity, which can be congruent with personal values (Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000). If a student profoundly identifies with their chosen field, they may experience a greater sense of LA and engagement in their scholarly pursuits.

### *2.3.3. One's tenure at university and perceived learner autonomy*

The length of university enrolment, or university tenure, can profoundly impact students' perceived LA. As students progress through their higher education journey, they usually acquire a more profound comprehension of their major's academic standards and prerequisites, thereby escalating their sense of control over their academic endeavors. One salient factor pertains to the evolution of academic engagement over time. As students become increasingly acquainted with the expectations and cultural milieu of their chosen discipline, they generally develop enhanced motivation and investment in their scholarly pursuits (McPherson & Schapiro, 1999; Silverman, 2001). This augmented engagement can bolster their perceived LA, as they experience heightened competence and confidence in navigating their educational voyage. University tenure also exerts an influence on students' social integration. As students spend an extended period within their selected discipline and university, they typically experience enhanced assimilation into academic and social communities, improving their sense of affiliation and overall gratification (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Rubin & Wright, 2017). This improved social integration can further amplify perceived LA, as students feel more supported and emboldened in their educational environment. Moreover, the advancement of university tenure exposes students to diverse viewpoints and rigorous coursework, facilitating personal growth and transformation (Martin, Sellnow-Richmond, & Strawser, 2020; Siegfried & Walstad, 2014). As students cultivate new skills, acquire novel knowledge, and undergo personal identity evolution, they are more likely to experience heightened autonomy in their educational journey. Lastly, university tenure also equips students for their prospective careers. The competencies and knowledge gleaned over the span of their studies, along with the cultivation of professional networks and opportunities, contribute to career readiness (Etmanski, 2019). This can further magnify students' perceived LA, as they can perceive the direct applicability of their learning to their future vocational paths.

## **3. Methodology**

### ***3.1. Research design***

This study employed a quantitative comparative design to explore students' perceptions of factors influencing LA within EFL acquisition, with a specific focus on demographic impacts (gender, university tenure, and major). Data were collected via a survey, a proven tool for gathering broad, quantitative responses. The objective was to identify any statistically significant relationships or differences between demographic variables and students' perceptions using analytical techniques like chi-square tests or regression analysis. The study's results bear implications for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers by suggesting demographic-informed instructional strategies to foster LA and enhance EFL acquisition.

### ***3.2. Participants***

A total of 117 Vietnamese students engaged in English learning from a Vietnamese university voluntarily participated in the study. The demographic attributes of the participant sample reflect its alignment with the research objectives, thereby affirming its appropriateness in addressing the research question. A comprehensive presentation of the participants' demographic data is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Demographic data of participants

<b>Total number of participants</b>		n = 117 (100%)
Gender		
-	Male	n = 24 (21.5%)
-	Female	n = 93 (79.5%)
Tenure		
-	03 years	n = 62 (53.0%)
-	02 years	n = 55 (47.0%)
Major		
-	English Teacher Education (ETE)	n = 22 (18.8%)
-	English Studies (ES)	n = 95 (81.2%)

**3.3. Data collection**

The questionnaire used for this study was a meticulously designed instrument for data collection that aimed to evaluate various aspects of students' perceptions of LA. Adapted from the works of Blidi (2016); Nguyen and Habók (2020), it employed a structured approach that comprised demographic questions and a 30-item Likert scale. The questionnaire, displayed in Table 2, primarily measured eight factors associated with learner autonomy.

**Table 2**

Structure of the questionnaire

No.	Clusters	Items	Measured contents
1	Voluntariness	1 - 4	To explore the voluntary aspect of participation in self-directed learning programs, capturing students' sense of responsibility, caring attitude, and enthusiasm in these settings
2	Learner Choice and Flexibility in Study Options	5 - 7	To evaluate the degree of flexibility students perceived they had in changing various aspects of their study options, such as objectives, contents, and learning processes
3	Peer Support	8 - 10	To look into how students interacted, negotiated, and collaborated with their peers
4	Beliefs About the Teacher's Role	11 - 15	To measure students' perceptions about their teachers' roles, behaviors, instructions, pedagogical knowledge, and characteristics in developing LA
5	Motivation for LA	16 - 18	To assess students' motivation for autonomous language learning and whether motivation facilitated their entry into the learning situation and increased LA
6	Abilities	19 - 23	To focus on students' understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, their comprehension of tasks while learning, their use of effective strategies for completing learning tasks, and the utilization of essential skills contributing to LA such as planning, self-evaluating, and monitoring

No.	Clusters	Items	Measured contents
7	Freedom	24 - 27	To examine the degree of freedom students felt they had in choosing learning materials and activities, expressing themselves in learning, and making decisions in the learning and teaching process
8	Desire	28 - 30	To capture students' desire to identify and pursue specific learning goals, complete specific tasks, and solve problems in their learning process

The questionnaire, which had been disseminated to a purposive sample of 117 students through Google Forms, achieved a 100% response rate. This high engagement level, coupled with rigorous examination by the research team and an expert in the field to ensure reliability and validity, underlines the robustness of the collected data.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Data gathered from the survey was subjected to quantitative analysis using SPSS software (version 26) aiming to discern the impact of demographic factors on Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions of variables influencing their LA. To ascertain data reliability, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, an internal consistency measure, yielded a high-reliability index of  $\alpha = .96$ , indicating dependable data and questionnaire alignment with intended constructs. Independent Sample t-tests were conducted to probe the influence of demographics on students' perceptions, providing statistical evidence of any significant relationships, thereby enhancing study rigor and validating results. The p-value, indicating the probability of observed results if no actual effect exists, was calculated. Compared with the value of .05, a p-value less than that value suggests a significant impact of demographic factors on students' perceived LA, while a p-value greater than or equal to .05 lacks sufficient evidence for the same. Interpreting these p-values enables the determination of statistically significant impacts of demographic factors on students' perceptions.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Results

#### 4.1.1. Gender-based analysis

Table 3 delineates the outcomes of the t-test investigating the presence of any statistically significant disparity between students' perceptions concerning the determinants influencing their LA with gender as the differing variable.

**Table 3**

Gender-based analysis

Measurements	Gender	N	Mean	SD	SEM	p
Voluntariness	Male	24	3.82	1.00	.21	.15
	Female	93	4.11	.84	.09	
Learner choice and flexibility in study options	Male	24	3.88	.72	.15	.62
	Female	93	3.95	.56	.06	
Peer support	Male	24	3.88	.82	.15	.79

Measurements	Gender	N	Mean	SD	SEM	p
Beliefs about the teacher's role	Female	93	3.93	.94	.10	.11
	Male	24	3.68	.67	.14	
	Female	93	3.96	.78	.08	
Motivation for LA	Male	24	4.07	.86	.18	.52
	Female	93	4.19	.84	.09	
Abilities	Male	24	4.08	.77	.16	.68
	Female	93	4.16	.80	.08	
Freedom	Male	24	3.77	.76	.15	.26
	Female	93	3.98	.83	.09	
Desire	Male	24	3.92	.75	.15	.76
	Female	93	3.97	.84	.09	

The results of the t-test indicate that gender generally lacks a significant impact on students' perceptions of the examined factors. In other words, gender, broadly, appears to exert minimal influence on students' perceptions of learning factors, signifying analogous perceptions and experiences among both genders in various aspects of their learning environment.

#### 4.1.2. Major-based analysis

Table 4 elucidates the results derived from the t-test scrutinizing whether there exists any statistically meaningful distinction in students' perceptions regarding the elements shaping their LA, contingent upon their academic majors of English Studies (ES) and English Teacher Education (ETE) as the variables of differentiation.

**Table 4**

Major-based analysis

Measurements	Major	N	Mean	SD	SEM	p
Voluntariness	ES	95	4.08	.84	.09	.40
	ETE	22	3.91	1.04	.22	
Learner choice and flexibility in study options	ES	95	3.94	.60	.06	.97
	ETE	22	3.93	.59	.13	
Peer support	ES	95	3.93	.92	.09	.74
	ETE	22	3.86	.90	.19	
Beliefs about the teacher's role	ES	95	3.91	.76	.08	.97
	ETE	22	3.90	.80	.17	
Motivation for LA	ES	95	4.15	.83	.08	.58
	ETE	22	4.26	.92	.20	

Measurements	Major	N	Mean	SD	SEM	p
Abilities	ES	95	4.14	.77	.08	.99
	ETE	22	4.14	.91	.19	
Freedom	ES	95	3.96	.79	.08	.48
	ETE	22	3.83	.91	.19	
Desire	ES	95	3.92	.79	.08	.20
	ETE	22	4.17	.95	.20	

The results indicate no major-specific effect on student perceptions in all researched factors ( $p > .05$ ). Therefore, it is concluded that the variable of major of students appears to exert minimal influence on their attitudes within these contexts.

#### 4.1.3. Tenure-based analysis

Table 5 shows the results procured from the t-test, probing the existence of any statistically consequential discrepancies in students' perceptions of the factors that influence their LA, predicated on their duration of enrolment at the university as the varying element.

**Table 5**

Tenure-based analysis

Measurements	Tenure	N	Mean	SD	SEM	p
Voluntariness	03 years	62	4.05	.89	.11	.99
	02 years	55	4.05	.87	.12	
Learner choice and flexibility in study options	03 years	62	3.89	.65	.08	.37
	02 years	55	3.99	.52	.07	
Peer support	03 years	62	3.94	.85	.11	.85
	02 years	55	3.90	.98	.13	
Beliefs about the teacher's role	03 years	62	3.92	.76	.10	.84
	02 years	55	3.89	.78	.11	
Motivation for LA	03 years	62	4.11	.78	.10	.41
	02 years	55	4.24	.91	.12	
Abilities	03 years	62	4.16	.73	.09	.84
	02 years	55	4.13	.87	.12	
Freedom	03 years	62	3.95	.72	.09	.87
	02 years	55	3.92	.92	.12	
Desire	03 years	62	3.92	.79	.10	.54
	02 years	55	4.01	.86	.12	



The result outcomes denote that across all factors, the p-values suggested tenure's minimal influence on students' perceptions ( $p > .05$ ). Thus, it can be inferred that tenure does not considerably affect students' perceptions within these domains.

#### **4.2. Discussion**

This research delves into the nuanced dynamics of gender disparities in the Vietnamese context, illuminating the intersection between gender and perceptions of LA. Notably, it resonates with existing literature affirming the minimal impact of gender on LA perceptions in Vietnam, thereby buttressing the notion of educational gender equality (Fotiadou, Angelaki, & Mavroidis, 2017). Yet, it also highlights the disparities between genders, particularly concerning the perception of teachers' behaviors and instructional practices. These disparities echo earlier research on divergences in pedagogical perceptions (Katz, 2017) and warrant further examination of related behaviors and strategies, which could potentially shed light on these gender-specific disparities (Klein et al., 1994). Culturally ingrained gender norms in Vietnamese society may be a significant contributor to these perception disparities. Specifically, Vietnamese females are traditionally encouraged to be compliant and responsive to authority (Thorson & Diwan, 2001), which may make them more sensitive and receptive to teachers' behaviors and instructions. This heightened receptivity could play a role in why they perceive the influence of teachers' conduct and guidance on their LA differently than their male counterparts. Moreover, several other factors shape these perception disparities, including educational gender biases, subject-based gender expectations, and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. Males are often encouraged to assert independence, which may influence their response to pedagogical practices (McBurney et al., 1997). Simultaneously, the underrepresentation of female educators could influence students' attitudes towards self-directed learning (Brands & Kilduff, 2014; Lee & Huang, 2018). Furthermore, gender-tied expectations in academic achievement and career paths might also shape students' perceptions of the pedagogical impact on LA (Cheng & Lin, 2012). Together, these factors provide a multifaceted perspective on gender-specific disparities in the perception of LA in the Vietnamese context.

Contrary to previous studies indicating significant LA perception disparities across disciplines (Johnson, 2020), the results of the current study suggest equal educational experiences and LA opportunities in Vietnam's English Teacher Education and English Studies programs. The need for parity in these programs is two-fold. The former responds to the demand for proficient English teachers, imparting language skills and pedagogical techniques (Freeman, 2017; Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020). It is pivotal in a globalized world where mastering an international language is crucial. The latter affords students extensive exploration of the English language, culture, and literature, fostering analytical capabilities and cultural understanding, useful in sectors like translation, publishing, and tourism (Phan, 2011). Maintaining parity in both programs ensures the readiness of English learners and researchers for the growing demand for advanced language proficiency.

The results align with previous research suggesting no significant correlation between program enrollment duration and students' perceptions of factors affecting their LA (Rovai, 2002), although certain variables such as language proficiency or self-efficacy may indirectly influence LA (Dwee & Anthony, 2017). In the Vietnamese context, several factors undermine LA perception irrespective of enrollment duration. The traditional, teacher-centered educational model, emphasizing rote learning, restricts LA development (Vu, 2021). Similarly, cultural norms advocating authority respect and teacher deference, along with the assessment-centric education system, hinder an assertive and active learning approach (Truong, Hallinger, &

Sanga, 2017). Furthermore, inconsistent application of learner-centered pedagogies across institutions could also impede LA development (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017; Shah, 2020). Thus, unless the pedagogical and cultural context evolves, enrollment duration might not significantly impact LA perceptions.

### **5. Conclusions & recommendations**

This study examined students' perceptions of LA factors within the context of EFL acquisition in Vietnam, focusing on demographic variables such as gender, tenure, and major. The results generally indicated no significant impact in terms of gender on students' perceptions of learning factors. Major-wise, no substantial differences were observed between students majoring in English Teacher Education and English Studies, indicating similar educational experiences and autonomy development opportunities. Lastly, tenure at the university did not significantly influence students' perceptions of the examined factors, suggesting that length of study does not substantially affect attitudes and perceptions related to learning autonomy. These results offer key insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers in the field of language education, although further exploration is necessary to understand the underlying nuances.

The results of this study underscore the pedagogical value of considering individual differences and student diversity in language education, emphasizing the role of educators in promoting LA. While gender did not predominantly influence learners' perceptions of instructional factors, variations in teacher behavior and instructional perceptions mandate a reflective approach to instruction, incorporating diverse strategies and fostering autonomy-supportive behaviors catering to the distinct needs of male and female students. The educators' role in shaping students' perceptions is crucial, necessitating clarity in instructions, encouraging self-directed learning, fostering collaboration, and implementing professional development programs. The congruence in perceptions among students of English Teacher Education and English Studies implies the feasibility of curriculum amalgamation to optimize LA. No significant influence was discerned regarding students' program tenure on LA perceptions, thus necessitating the inception of autonomy-enhancing strategies early in the educational journey. Flexibility in study options, peer interaction and collaboration, choice, and autonomy-supportive instructions could bolster language learning, thus fostering LA.

This study, conducted with a specific, relatively small sample of Vietnamese university students, underscores potential limitations to the findings' generalizability and representativeness. The reliance on self-reported student perceptions could also be influenced by social desirability bias and subjective interpretations. To enhance external validity and a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions, future studies should consider a larger, more diverse sample, multiple data sources, and different educational contexts. Incorporating qualitative studies could yield deeper insights into students' experiences and perceptions of LA, and exploring other demographic factors such as age, language proficiency, and socioeconomic status could offer a nuanced understanding.

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