Pivotal roles of teachers and students in enhancing an active learning environment

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The success of a language class does not simply depend on the students’ achievement of learning outcomes. However, this is mostly expected by educators who advocate applying outcome-based education. Indeed, it is how the teacher and the students within a class can create an environment where active learning is of greater importance. This paper discusses the results of a case study at a selected faculty. The data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 12 full-time teachers and staff and surveyed responses from 233 students taking an honors undergraduate program of English at a selected public university in Ho Chi Minh City. This case study aims to analyze difficulties encountered by both students and teachers in building an active learning environment for a program. It also aims to identify the roles of teachers and students in doing so. As found in the study, major difficulties in building an active learning environment include the fixed curriculum, large class size, students’ low autonomy, limited learning resources, and the wide gap between teachers’ teaching activities and students’ expectation. In order to successfully create an active learning environment at Vietnamese universities, it is suggested that teachers should be more reasonably flexible, open-minded and helpful throughout the teaching process, while students are expected to be more critical, self-directed and disciplined in learning. Several major pedagogical implications for both teachers and students are also well elaborated.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, higher education institutions directly confront a growing pressure of meeting students’ needs and improving their learning experience. Covid-19, however, has prevented faculty and institution administrators from entirely depending on external factors to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in their own settings. Therefore, it is time for faculty and institution administrators to reconsider the learning environment in their institutions and make a major shift from the current learning environment to a more active one that is hopefully more adaptable for the students. If the ultimate goal of education is the students’ achievement of learning outcomes, then one of the key roles of teachers and students is to create
a learning environment whereby learning is fully promoted and optimized. Based on Kurt Lewin’s field theory and his concept of living space, Kolb and Kolb (2005, p. 199) introduce the concept of “learning space,” which refers to “a dynamic nature of learning style and its formation through transactions between the person and environment.” In this regard, how the teacher can help students in a specific classroom context to become active learners readily responsible for their learning and successful attainment of their learning outcomes is of crucial significance and thus worth further investigation and investment in almost any context of teaching.

In order to ensure the quality of an educational program in Vietnam today, it is imperative that the academic director or the like create a learning environment conducive to fully promoting teachers’ and students’ active cooperation and co-creation of knowledge, skills and character development. At the university level, building up an active learning environment is no longer a need but a must if the institutions do not want to lag behind the game. In the setting of program level at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, the paper reports key results of the study aiming to (i) analyze the difficulties encountered by both students and teachers in building an active learning environment of a selected undergraduate program in English and (ii) identify the roles of teachers and students in building an active learning environment. Accordingly, the study is an effort to answer two guiding research questions, including:

1. What are the difficulties encountered by both students and teachers in building an active learning environment in a selected undergraduate program in English?
2. What should the teachers and students do to enhance an active learning environment in the selected undergraduate program in English?

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Diversity of definitions and features of active learning?

What is active learning? The term has long been discussed, debated, and distinguished in the history of education, as early as Socrates’ dialogue, to François Rabelais’ model of Renaissance education, to Dewey’s reflective thinking in the 1930s, to Bruner’s discovery method in the 1960s (Rubin & Hebert, 1998). Active learning is then driven by developing higher-order thinking or intellectual skills, such as problem-solving and synthesizing (Bloom, 1953).

Active learning is a broad term related to multiple strategies and aspects of both the external and internal factors of a classroom context. Active learning is not entirely a new term since as early as the decade of 1980s, or much earlier, scholars had already discussed the term and proposed a new look at the terms as a “modification” of traditional learning, by proposing “creating excitement in the classroom” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Scholars would name the term as opposite of passive learning. Active learning may take different meanings such as “participatory learning” (O’Loughlin, 1992, p. 792), “experiential learning” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), “learning with technology” (Laird & Kuh, 2005), or being independent and autonomous in learning (Pospisilova, 2018).

Creating an active learning environment is of significant value. The context of today’s creative multimedia allows scholars, educators, and technologists to produce various types of activities, strategies, facilities, among others. Active learning can be enhanced in multiple ways, ranging from the way the teachers design activities that are challenging to students, or learning
activities that involves the interpersonal interaction between students and others (Chi, 2009; Hendriks & Maor, 2004; Moore, 1989) or using “clickers” to facilitate small group discussion (Daniel & Tivener, 2016) in the context of widely-used technology in education. Neo, Neo, and Kwok (2009) utilize multimedia technology such as Web 2.0 tools (i.e., blogs) to create a cooperative learning environment and a learning community within the class.

In their study, Saville, Zinn, Neef, Norman, and Ferreri (2006) propose a term called “inter-teaching” that promotes the students’ active thinking and practices. They believe that “inter-teaching allows students to work at their own pace during each class session but incorporates deadlines for the completion of course assignments, which may obviate student procrastination” (p. 50). The purpose of “inter-teaching” is to help the instructor identify questions that posed difficulties for students; “the instructor then uses this information to construct a short lecture designed to address any questions the students requested,” as reported in their experiment. The authors believe that the classroom will be more active than the traditional lecture-based classes.

Vu (2015) conducted a case study to investigate active learning among a group of Vietnamese students in an ICT-enhanced blended learning environment in Australia and found that “in order to develop active learning characteristics, students need to be facilitated and supported by an educational environment in which knowledge content, learning environment, teaching approaches and assessments are carefully designed with a thoughtful integration of ICT to engage students in more effective study” (pp. iii, 193-196).

From the constructivist perspective, active learning is used to indicate cases in which the learning activities are purposefully designed to challenge students’ critical thinking as well as critiquing skills. In a constructivist active learning environment, as Gazibara (2018) argues, the students take an active role in learning and take responsibility for their actions, which leads to their “learning autonomy”.

It can be seen that whatever definition the term active learning may take, whatever features it is characterized and whatever techniques or strategies it may be associated with, active learning is commonly found as indispensable to any efforts, both in-class and out-of-class, to shape students’ self-regulation and self-directedness in realizing their goals.

2.2. Roles of teachers and students in an active learning environment

According to Gazibara (2018), “the constructivist active learning environment is directed to students,” meaning the students themselves should take an active role in learning and continue to evolve into “autonomous individuals” who can “think critically about the real world, develop their potentials, and take responsibility for their own actions” (p. 184). In such a learning environment, the teacher plays a pivotal role as a designer and planner for students’ learning. It can be commonly found in the review above of varied definitions that an active learning environment should allow the students to be fully engaged in the teaching and learning activities, being self-directed and readily taking responsibility for their actions.

Though Dale’s cone of experience (1969) may be controversial, it does give readers, educators and practitioners an idea of maximizing how the learners learn through actual, visual, experiential learning that usually takes place at the higher order of thinking skills such as analyzing, evaluating, designing or creating other than at a lower order of thinking skills like listening, reading, listing, explaining, etc. It is through active learning, the students are expected to experience the real learning and thus master the skills, the knowledge and the reflection if
entailed. Among many other authors, Sprawls (2008) advocates the use of Edgar Dale’s Cone of Experience, especially in describing and reviewing the evolution of models for medical physics education and training. In relation to experience learning, a much commonly found model of learning called “Learning Pyramid” adapted and collaborated by the National Training Laboratories Institute at Bethel, Maine (NTL Institute, 2009), presents how the learners should learn based on how and what they are experiencing via a combination of audio and visual modes of message transmission and delivery (Figure 2). This model is also discussed in relation to the upside-down model of the known Bloom’s taxonomy, making the learning pyramid an interesting one and persuasive. However, the latter still receives critical critique (Letrud, 2012), arguing that these two hypothetical models are constructed mostly based on “intuition” rather than rigorous evidence.

Despite that counter-arguments exist, active learning continues receiving serious attention from more scholars and proponents of how to fully engage the learners in their classes regardless of whatever context the classes may take place. Gazibara (2018) identifies an active learning environment as the one where the teacher:

- Appreciates a “formative evaluation and continuous feedback to students,” which is an important integral component in the students’ learning process and is focused on monitoring the students’ program and planning future learning activities;
- Provides collaborative support being integrated into all other features of a rich active learning environment;
- Allows “different interpretative possibilities”;
- Clarifies the aims and contents of the course to the learners;
- Creatively organizes the teaching and learning activities;
- Acknowledges students’ interests and needs.

As characterised by such distinctive features, proponents of active learning, including (Gazibara, 2018), strongly advocate the maximization of determinants of students’ learning autonomy in terms of their active participation in the lessons, their effective use of pre-knowledge in co-construct the meaning and values of the lessons, the application of learner-centeredness in class, development of students’ metacognition, etc. These can be considered both the “individual and social aspect of active learning.” In so doing, the teacher, in a specific class
context, is expected to be a ‘smart’ designer for learning, intelligently predicting and planning how the learners should learn, given the available resources. The teacher’s duty is thus highlighted as a trigger for learning.

Regarding the learners’ role in learning, as aforementioned and argued, the learners’ responsiveness and sense of responsibility are undeniable in their learning success and goal achievement. In an active learning environment, besides the characteristics such as self-regulation, self-directing learning, responsible learning taken by the learners, the teacher’s role cannot fail to be included. In fact, both are expected to play in harmony; a teacher’s active teaching cannot work well without the students’ active learning. An excellent teacher would definitely fail if his or her students fail to learn or at least participate in the learning process. Saville et al. (2006) emphasize that “inter-teaching”, as mentioned earlier, has several perceived positive effects, of which active learning is highlighted. For example, inter-teaching involves group (typically dyadic) discussion and by participating in a dyadic discussion, “students engage in active learning,” whereby they frequently practice the skills that form the behavioral repertoires teachers ultimately wish to shape” (p. 58). Also, inter-teaching may be effective because “offering preparation guides to students helps create a clear link between study and test materials, thus increasing motivation, decreasing test anxiety, facilitating learning, and resulting in better retention of course material” (p. 59).

In Vietnam, Le and Vu (2020) argue that building a teaching and learning strategy is considered an essential task for both teachers and students. Through their case study at ten institutions in Ho Chi Minh City, they somehow propose a relatively new paradigm in developing active teaching and learning strategies for both teachers and learners in order to optimize their learning. The suggestions focus on the three important components of knowledge, skills and attitude (KSA) among the learners and teachers so that they both can prepare for a better and more active classroom context.

Given the findings and argument from the authors above, we can see the essential role of the teacher in creating an environment whereby students are put in a context that requires their undeniable role of being active learners. A harmonious combination between the teacher and students is needed to guarantee success. First, the teacher is expected to create an active “learning space” in the class, in which three important conditions should be met as Barkley (2010, pp. 24-38) suggests, including “creating a sense of classroom community,” “helping students work at their optimal level of challenge,” and “teaching so that students learn holistically,” thus promoting “synergy” in such learning space. Second, the learners, as immersing themselves in such a holistically synergy-promoting learning environment, are expected to fully engage in learning and constructing meaningful lessons by themselves, besides the teachers’ instruction. Motivation and active learning are in fact, interwoven together; while teachers are more likely to promote the students’ engagement and help students feel as though they are part of the learning community, the students can create synergy in the class that is well-motivated by the teacher.

2.3. Students’ active engagement in both in-class and out-class activities

In an active learning environment, students’ experience is highly emphasized in promoting the true values of their learning. In this respect, Kolb and Kolb (2005) define the experiential learning space in English Language Teaching (ELT) as “attracting and repelling forces (positive and negative valences) of the two poles of the dual dialectics of action, reflection
and experiencing, conceptualizing, and creating a two-dimensional map of the regions of the learning space.” The ELT learning space concept does emphasize that “learning is not one universal process but a map of learning territories, a frame of reference within which many different ways of learning can flourish and interrelate. It is a holistic framework that orients the many different ways of learning to one another.” The enhancement of experiential learning in higher education, therefore, can be achieved by creating learning spaces that aim to promote growth-producing experiences for learners. It can be seen that in order to maximize the active learning space in a class or a context of a school, Dewey’s principles (1938) can be applied here, which include:

- Respect for learners and their experience
- Begin learning with the learner’s experience of the subject matter
- Creating and holding a hospitable space for learning
- Making space for conversational learning
- Making space for development of expertise
- Making spaces for acting and reflecting
- Making space for inside-out learning
- Making space for learners to take charge of their learning

(as cited in Kolb & Kolb, 2005, pp. 207-208)

As discussed, the role of both teachers and students, especially the former, is to create a suitable learning space within the class context. By “class” here, it is well-argued that the term should go beyond the physical boundary of a room. “Class” should now be taken as the learning space, either physically, or virtually or both. And this is true for today’s teaching condition when classes can go “virtually” as soon as they should be.

2.4. Students’ motivation, engagement and active learning environment

According to Barkley (2010, pp. 6-7), active learning seems to result from student motivation through a transition stage of engaging and then automatically becoming active in any kind of activities assigned. Whatever contents in class are not important, active learning would not happen if the students seemed to “shut” their eyes, mind and heart for the acceptance of new things. The author proposes a Venn model, as shown in Figure 3, that shows the interrelation among motivation, student engagement, and active learning. It is argued that “a classroom filled with enthusiastic, motivated students is great, but it is educationally meaningless if the enthusiasm does not result in learning.” Conversely, students who actively learn but do so reluctantly and resentfully are not engaged. As a result, “student engagement is the product of motivation and active learning.” It is a “product” rather than a “sum” because it will not occur if either element is missing.
Barkley (2010) offers a relatively comprehensive yet simple definition of learning. “Learning is a dynamic process in which the learner builds his or her mind by constantly making and changing connections between what is new and what is already known.” Deep, long-term learning occurs when changed connections result in reformatted structures—whether these structures are described as schemata or neuronal networks (p. 23). Embedded in such a definition and the argument above regarding the triad relationship among motivation, student engagement, and active learning are the pioneering role of the teacher as a skillful designer of learning and for learning. Instead of waiting for the students to readily and actively learn, the teacher has to design various learning activities, even in a reversed manner, that help learners do more work and even better work than they used to be passive. The learning environment, both inside and outside the class, should be active and made active at all costs.

In relation to an active learning environment, experiential learning theory can be reiterated here for its usefulness in pedagogy. Kolb’s experiential learning cycle consists of four key stages, starting with (i) concrete experience where the learner is actively experiencing an activity (e.g., a laboratory session, field class), then (ii) reflective observation, where the learner is consciously reflecting on that experience, continuing with (iii) abstract conceptualization, where the learner is being presented with/or trying to conceptualize a theory or model of what is (to be) observed and finally with (iv) active experimentation, where the learner is trying to plan how to test a model or theory or plan for a forthcoming experience. The last stage is to reflect on the concrete experience, starting a new learning cycle (Healey & Jenkins, 2000; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

If the teacher’s role is important, then how the teacher designs learning activities that students can actively engage and experience is of greater importance. The theoretical underpinnings above lay a strong foundation for the study that investigates further into the pivotal roles of teachers and students in creating and promoting an active learning environment. Specifically, such theoretical underpinnings allow the researchers to design a research tool that considers the different aspects of an active learning environment. The roles of teachers and students are also well explored in both the questionnaire and the interview protocol.

3. Methodology

This case study was conducted at a selected program at a public university in Ho Chi
Minh City that was established in the 1950s. The quantitative data were collected from survey responses from 233 students taking an honor undergraduate program in English Linguistics and Literature, as shown in Table 1. Responses were obtained from 233 students (out of the total number of 293 students accounting for 79.5%). Among 233 student respondents, 26.6 % (62 out of 233) are males and 73.4 % (171 out of 233) are females. It is noted that the study purposefully did not collect data from freshmen, assuming that they may not have been well-exposed to the learning environment at the faculty after the first few courses in one semester yet.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic information of student respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ analysis

Findings are also backed up by the qualitative data collected from 12 semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers and staff of the same program, including two administrators (Dean and Vice Dean), seven lecturers (two of whom are also department heads), and three supporting staff (who are academic assistants and student affairs assistants). These two data sources were analyzed, discussed, and interpreted in light of the above theoretical underpinnings. The paper also summarizes primary challenges and difficulties encountered by both the students and teachers at this selected faculty in building an active learning environment, besides understanding the existing advantages. The interview and survey also aimed to identify the roles of teachers and students in such as learning environment. The theoretical underpinnings presented above laid an important foundation for constructing the five-item protocol for the semi-structured interview and the specific items in the survey questionnaire. The following section mainly reports the major results of the study, specifically focusing on the findings in terms of students’ collaboration in learning, difficulties encountered by teachers and students in building an active learning environment.

4. **Result and discussion**

4.1. **Students’ awareness of their responsibilities and collaboration in learning**

It is found that in this selected undergraduate program in English Linguistics and Literature, there are a number of factors that can make creating an active learning environment an easier process. Firstly, being accredited by ASEAN University Network-Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) as early as in 2013 at the program level as one of the best programs in English language education in Vietnam, the program was believed to have provided the learners with very good quality education. The high level of students’ entry quality was widely observed by all 12 teacher and staff interviewees when asked what their general evaluation of the learning environment at this selected faculty. This result was also backed by the high mean score of 3.93, as shown in Table 2. Such mean scores were obtained from the average overall mean scores of the five items that asked the student respondents to self-evaluate their awareness of learning
while learning at the faculty. Table 2 indicates that the students were confident of how active they are in collaborating with their classmates to get the learning tasks well-done, being very responsible for their roles in group assignments, and making efforts to develop their critical thinking, teamwork skills, etc. during their interaction with groupmates.

**Table 2**

Student respondents’ awareness of their learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ awareness of their learning</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B.5.1. I actively collaborate with classmates to get the tasks done well</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>.624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.5.2. I develop critical thinking during my interaction with groupmates</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>.794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.5.3. I show high responsibility for what I am supposed to do in my group</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>.662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.5.4. I have good opportunities to develop my social skills. (e.g., teamwork skills, time management skills, problem-solving skills...)</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.5.5. I am assigned to give comments on the effectiveness of the tasks and how productive my teammates are</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>1.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>233</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ analysis

At such a satisfactory level in this faculty context, the results are also positively meaningful and valuable to the teachers. All 12 out of 12 interviewed teachers and staff believed that their students’ high entry quality, as shown in the high entrance exam results every year, tended to better adapt to their teachers’ teaching strategies. It can be said that both the survey and interview results indicate students’ awareness of their responsibility in cooperation and learning.

**4.2. Teachers’ qualifications as a decisive factor to promoting an active learning environment**

As found in the selected case, the good qualifications of the teaching staff in the program in terms of higher degrees earned and years of teaching experience was a very good advantage to an effort of building up an active learning environment. All 12 lecturers and staff in the interviews emphasized this competitive advantage of the teaching staff, say more than 50% of the teachers at the selected faculty (20/32) have received international training programs, either in their master or doctoral program or both. Such teachers’ international exposure and experiences continue to be shared among the younger staff, extending their “teaching and learning approach” to many. With a solid foundation of knowledge and experience, the teaching staff in the investigated faculty brought students more valuable lessons. Data from the survey reveals that 53.2% of students believe class activities are quite practical, while 34.4% of the responses consider them entirely practical, which means 87.6% of the students appreciated what they experienced in class. The other big plus is that the coordinating team works well, supporting online and offline students. The “coordinating team” currently includes newly graduated English
majors who are now teaching assistants and soon become lecturers upon completing the master’s program. In short, it was found that the teaching staff’s expertise and qualification plays a significant role in an active learning environment at the selected program.

Also, teachers’ expertise in assessments is highly important, especially in creating an active learning environment. Surveyed students answered the question that focused on 11 items regarding the assessment contents, test methods, assessment criteria, evaluation indicators, the authenticity of the test contents, mode of delivery, and feedback given. In this study, 45.5% of responses show that what is tested in courses in the program is quite close to real-life problems, while 30.9% report that the tests are always related to what may happen in society. Besides, 66.9% of students in the survey (n = 233) report that assessments in the program always require them to apply what they learn in the courses to solve questions in the tests. The obtained data shows average mean scores of 11 items, ranging from 2.93 to 3.92 (n = 233), of which the highest mean scores were about the clarity of assessment criteria communicated to students by their course teachers. Except for the lowest mean scores of 2.93 for the student’s evaluation of the test contents in relation to reality, the remaining issues in terms of teachers’ correction of errors, feedback giving, assessment methods and criteria were all positively recorded from 3.00 and above (n = 233). In addition, 10 out of 12 interviewed teachers also believed that teachers’ expertise and literacy in assessment since they would be more about how to assess the learners for learning, not just of learning.

As reflected in the positive responses from the data, the investigated setting has advantages in relation to its curriculum, students’ background, teaching staff qualification, coordinating team and assessment that are favorable for the new learning approach. However, the data collected from the interviews and surveys in this study indicate that both teachers and students in this program face difficulties building an active learning environment.

4.3. Difficulties encountered by teachers in building an active learning environment

The results from the interviews and survey show that teachers’ three main difficulties in building an active learning environment include a relatively fixed curriculum, passive students, and limited training about active learning. Firstly, though the curriculum in the investigated setting is good and accredited, it is not flexible enough. It actually meets most requirements of a good curriculum and has been used for years. Teachers are required to strictly follow the guidelines and suggested agenda as well as forms of assessments clearly stated in the course syllabi of the program. Teachers can actually make some adjustments in their teaching process, but the major elements that directly determine a course’s quality are fully under control. Because of this, even when teachers want to make a significant change in the course contents or in the forms of assessments, they are not confident to do that as they may violate the faculty guidelines. That might be why 09 out of 11 teachers interviewed in this study agree that what is included in the curriculum is relatively fixed and what a teacher can actually do with the learning contents is surprisingly limited. Therefore, these teachers suggest that the curriculum in an active learning environment should allow teachers to flexibly tailor the contents for multi-level learners. Also, according to them, assessments should be different depending on the objectives of different courses, not in the forms of 30% for the mid-term test and 70% for the final one like what we currently have. 73% of responses in the survey also indicate that students are not happy with the curriculum. They reported that they were interested in what could really motivate them to move forward. They expect more authentic content integrated in class activities. Clearly, handling such a fixed curriculum while ensuring students have a good learning experience is a challenge to teachers in this program.
Another difficulty drawn from the data analysis is that students do not actively participate in their learning process. In this study, the results in Table 3 show that the mean scores of student respondents’ self-evaluation of their learning responsibilities range from \( M = 2.11 \) to \( M = 3.78 \) and the average rate of all 11 items is 3.25, which is not very high. Notably, regarding discussing and proposing their own opinions to teachers (\( M = 2.11 \) for item B1.11, and \( M = 2.31 \) for B.1.12, respectively), as shown in Table 3 below, students tended not to demonstrate their active roles in interacting with their teachers for better achievement of their learning outcomes. They seemed to be very much dependent on their teachers and accepted what they were supposed to learn in class. They actually make efforts in class (\( M = 3.78 \), Item B1.2), but they do not maintain their learning pace well outside of class, as indicated by a lower mean score of 3.15 (Item B1.3).

Table 3

Students’ self-evaluation of their active learning and responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ responsibilities and activeness</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B.1.1. I have clear learning goals.</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>.852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.2. I make efforts to participate in-class activities.</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>.732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.3. I make efforts to join activities beyond class time.</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.4. I ask questions about what I am not clear in class.</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>.866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.5. I reflect on the effectiveness of my decisions in my learning process.</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>1.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.6. I select relevant learning strategies.</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>.924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.7. I track my learning progress to adjust and improve it appropriately.</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>.905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.8. I effectively manage my personal resources (ex: time, money…) to get my learning tasks done.</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.9. I actively explore learning content and self-construct knowledge</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.10. I am ready to moderate group discussions.</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>1.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.11. I make proposals about learning content with my teachers when necessary.</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>.992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.12. I have discussions with my teachers about my test results.</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>.970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>233</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ analysis
Additionally, interview results reveal that 08 out of 12 teachers were not happy with their students’ productivity and efforts made for learning. These teacher interviewees expected their students to work harder in class and at home. The numbers here indicate that students did try hard in class, but not in the entire learning process, both in and outside the classroom. This makes it harder for students to use their learning resources and fully develop their knowledge and skills as teachers only have limited time working with them in class. As a result, without or limited time working at home, students had limited time getting prepared for new lessons or deepening their understanding about what they have learned in class. Because of this, no matter how hard the teachers may try, students’ academic performance might not be as high as expected. Students’ passive participation prevented teachers from boosting the quality of teaching and learning in an active learning environment.

Finally, as reported by teacher interviews, they do not have proper training about active learning and how to build an active learning environment. Ten out of twelve teachers, when asked about active learning, replied that they did know about active learning, but what they could tell about it was just at the very beginning level. They believed that “teachers need to work harder and students need to actively engage in class activities,” but they did not specifically mention what teachers may do to make a big change and explain how and why teachers should do that. It can be concluded that to really create an active learning environment, training teachers is an essential step. Generally, teachers should be well prepared for a transition to active teaching approaches before they can help students become more active learners and participate in an active learning environment.

### 4.4. Difficulties encountered by students in building an active learning environment

In terms of students’ difficulties in an active learning environment, the data pinpoints four major concerns in terms of limited training on active learning for students, low learning autonomy among students, limited learning resources, and expectation-gap between students and teachers. First, from the perspective of teacher interviewees, they were fully aware of students’ participation in orientational activities as required both by the faculty and the institution in the first semester of the program, but this may not be sufficient because during the whole learning process, say, of four years, they would likely encounter various problems, especially in how to actively and effectively learn and survive through college years. As shared by Teacher 7, “if we just have orientation activities at the beginning stage of the program, students may not have many questions to ask, but when they face problems in later semesters, there is a limited platform for them to ask for advice.” Regular orientation to students, on this account, is regarded as an effective way to remind students of what they need to prioritize in their learning and hence lead them in the right direction. Eight out of twelve teachers joining the interviews shared the same suggestion that the faculty should provide more regular orientation activities, preferably at the beginning of each semester or at least every two semesters, as a way to keep students on the right track during their time in university.

The second difficulty is the low level of learning autonomy among students. As indicated in Table 3 above for Item B.1.7, B.1.8, and B.1.9, students do not spend much time engaging in tracking their learning progress regularly (M = 3.52), managing their resources (M = 3.47), and exploring learning contents and self-constructing knowledge in learning (M = 3.21). These mean scores for such important representation of students’ active and autonomous learning were expected to be much higher. The data reveals that students realize their limited engagement in
learning (B1.7-12). Still, they find it hard to change their habits, which may lead to a wide gap between the students’ academic performance and their potential capabilities for better growth. It is implied that there should be a more forceful yet motivating way to encourage active learning among students. This finding and implication coincide with interview results by 10 out of 12 teachers who blamed the students for their low readiness and responsibility for learning and their frequent procrastination in assignment completion. In such a circumstance, teachers always need to constantly motivate their students in class, but the improvement seems to be in slow progress. To sum up, students find it hard to improve their learning autonomy although they receive plenty of support from their teachers and supporting staff from the faculty.

The third difficulty involves the diversity and availability of learning resources and the students’ willingness to access the so-called limited resources in their university. Unlike in large universities in other countries where students have better exploration of the provided library accounts to easier access to their university library and others in its network, the selected case is quite different. Though all students are provided library account at the beginning of the program and equipped with library use skills, the majority of students in this study claimed that their access to learning resources is not as expected, especially in the context of booming electronic resources of updated knowledge in the world. As revealed by the survey results, 85% of student respondents (198 out of 233) were looking for more useful learning resources, despite the fact that the faculty’s English resource center with more than 7,500 specialized titles specifically and the university library with other resources are available. 100% of teacher and staff interviewees (12 out of 12 interviewees) also raised their high concerns and expectation of more updated and diversified resources for learning (of course, for teaching and research as well). The university, and especially the selected faculty, should figure out a better solution to help students better access to the updated world of knowledge via a network of libraries of various universities in the world. Another thing that seems to discourage students from searching for more resources is that what students are required to do in class can normally be found in textbooks or web-based resources. However, we know that free resources on the internet do have their limitations. The reliability of the resources the students use, therefore, is definitely a concern when they are asked to complete a more advanced task in their learning process. Such requirements are related to teaching and learning activities planned by their teachers should be reconsidered in order to better promote the students’ readiness and willingness for more searching of useful learning resources. It is clear that getting access to learning resources plays a vital role in students’ learning, especially in an active learning environment.

Last but not least, a wide expectation gap between students and teachers seems not explicitly opened and encouraged in the selected learning environment. While the students may not want or dare ask questions, propose ideas, seek feedback, etc., the teacher’s duty is to create a learning environment whereby the students and the teacher are well-collaborating for a meaningful lesson. As recalled from the survey results in Table 3 for item B.1.11 and item B.1.12 (M = 2.11 and M = 2.31), these low mean scores may be interpreted as students are not confident in initiating conversations with their teachers, which seriously limit their chances to let their teachers know how much interesting the learning contents are and get further feedback from their teachers. And if this is the case, the teachers are expected to create a “venue” within the class for the students’ sharing and communicating of such difficulties, if any. This is also shown in results from the interviews; 07 out of 12 teachers in our interviews report that most students follow teachers’ instructions without questions or any signs of involvement. Given such,
the teachers expect students to be more confident in interacting with them in class. Based on the interview and the survey data, it can be inferred that the expectation gap between teachers and students in a Vietnamese class needs to be deliberately addressed. This explains why students agree or disagree with their teachers. They choose to be silent and attentively listen to their teachers’ instructions, which should not be quite acceptable in a university context. Whether they say “yes” or “no”, the students should be encouraged to be open and express their thoughts critically and constructively. This is a serious obstacle that may cause negative influences on students’ learning process.

4.5. Teachers and students’ roles in enhancing an active learning environment

The findings of the current study indicate that to make a learning environment active, teachers are expected to be (i) reasonably flexible in choosing what to teach, (ii) open-minded in listening to their students and (iii) helpful in their teaching process. First and foremost, flexibly choosing what to include in their lesson plans is the teacher’s fundamental activity in an active learning environment. For such students with high starting points at the program entrance like in this selected program, students’ expectation is definitely much higher than those in regular programs. Therefore, choosing what to teach is especially critical to the success of the class as well as maintaining an active learning environment. In our interview, Teacher 6 insisted that “teachers’ responsibility is mainly related to choosing what to teach and how to convey it to their learners effectively.” Sharing a similar idea, Teacher 2 believed that “lessons should be designed in a flexible way so that they can encourage students to actively search for answers from various resources and learn by doing in their learning process.” Discussing the way to visualize the learning contents, Teacher 3 stated that “the role of teachers is to integrate practical knowledge into learning tasks and instruct students on how to get the tasks done well.”

It is understandable that there is a limit of flexibility in choosing what to teach in a course at the university level, as prescribed in a course syllabus; however, in an active learning environment, teachers should be the ones who could confidently and creatively balance what should be covered and what students might want to learn within the framework of the agreed curriculum and course syllabus assigned to a particular course.

The second mission that teachers in an active learning environment should take is to be open-minded in listening to their students. The more teachers listen to their students, the better their understanding of their students’ learning needs is. In this study, 12 out of 12 teachers and staff taking part in our interviews suggest that teachers should listen to their students so that they could have an idea of what their students are interested in and how much they like their teaching. Table 4 shows positive data about the psychological environment in the investigated setting. The values of mean scores ranging from M = 2.94 to M = 4.07 reveal that the learning environment in the investigated setting is open enough for students to show their voice in what they do in class. Notably, in the same table, the data as shown in item B.7.4 about teachers’ listening to their students’ opinions (M = 3.70), B.7.7 about teachers’ willingness in welcoming new ideas (M = 3.48) and B.7.8 about teachers’ acceptance of students’ errors as an essential part of a learning process (M = 3.72) indicates that teachers in the investigated setting show their positiveness in listening to their students, which is a good start for students’ further engagement in the course.
Table 4
Students’ evaluation of the psychological environment at the selected case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key features of psychological environment</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B.7.3. The atmosphere in class is positive and comfortable</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>.765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.4. Teachers listen to my opinions</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>.807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.5. Teachers do care about my emotions</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>.993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.6. Teachers do care about issues in my learning</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>1.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.7. Teachers enthusiastically welcome new ideas</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.8. Teachers accept my errors as an essential part of a learning process</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>.922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.9. I am motivated to try, make errors, and learn from them</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.10. I am clearly explained about the purposes of my class activities</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>.935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.11. I am clear about the requirements of each activity in class</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>.834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.12. Teachers go around class to support us</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>.970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.13. I can share my viewpoints about the effectiveness of each activity in class</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.14. I have good relationships with my classmates</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>.888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.7.15. I have good relationships with my teachers</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>.894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>233</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ analysis

Lastly, good teachers are those who are helpful to their students in their teaching process. The teachers will fail if their students are not learning. As teachers will never be able to lead students throughout their entire learning process, the student’s effort in continuing their academic endeavors is a must. Ideally, a successful teacher should encourage and ensure that the student’s learning process goes smoothly. In this whole process, the unfailing role of the students is indispensable, as well. Results from our interviews with teachers reveal many interesting points in relation to teachers’ support. All 12 interviewed teachers and staff confirmed their
“readiness to help” whenever their students were in need, but several of these interviewees (05 out of 12 interviewees) also complained that oftentimes the students were quite “inactive”, especially in asking for help and questions regarding what they did not understand and even sometimes, they did not know what they did not understand. As suggested by interviewed teachers, this issue should be addressed while attempting to build up an active learning environment. In more positive responses, Teacher 7 emphasized the facilitative role of teachers in class as “pivotal facilitators who constantly support students in their learning process.” In addition to this, Teacher 2 holds the view that teachers should be like “coaches” who introduce students to the issues, recommend them on what to do to go through and give them “constructive feedback.” It was clear that teachers are found to be the key ones in promoting an active learning environment in class, thus helping them achieve their learning goals by themselves.

4.6. A stronger need for maximizing the students’ potential in an active learning environment

Regarding the students’ roles in an active learning environment, the study findings indicate that they are expected to be more critical about their learning goals, active in participating in-class activities, and maintaining good discipline. The first thing students should be familiar with is to be more critical about their learning goals. Students are expected to be sure about what they are heading for and visualize them. If students have any problems constructing their goals, “they were expected to ask their teachers for help,” as suggested by the majority (10 out of 12) of interviewed teachers. As the most important element of a learning process, setting up clear learning goals enables students to go on the right routes in their learning. As interviewed, 08 out of 12 teacher respondents reported that a great number of students in their class do not have clear learning goals, which leads to the fact of their low learning motivation. They do not know exactly what they really want to achieve after a period of time actually slows their learning down.

As presented in Table 2 above, the survey results show not very high mean scores for Item B1.1. about the learners’ understanding of their learning goals (M = 3.74, n = 233). This is not peculiar to a few students, but quite commonly found among learners. It is critical that to be successful in an active learning environment, students are highly expected to make more efforts in critically developing their learning goals and make great efforts to achieve them.

Secondly, students are expected to actively participate in-class activities. As mentioned in Table 3, students are not confident in asking their teachers or reflecting on their learning experience. This is the factor that prevents teachers from checking their students’ understanding and building up more relevant learning content. Therefore, 10 out of 12 teachers (except two supporting staff) in the interviews suggest that students should show their active participation in class, despite the fact that they had always encouraged the students, too. The students should make questions or comments either to get to know more about the lesson or contribute to it, as Teacher 5 said. In this way, students may consider themselves as the ones who actively explore the knowledge and have a better learning experience. What is more, students are expected to check out the new lessons in advance and do further reading to double-check the points discussed in the lessons after class. In such a way, students can possibly improve their learning retention and obviously lead to higher academic performance.

Finally, maintaining good discipline in learning is a must for students in an active learning environment. In this study, 07 out of 12 interviewed respondents complained about students’ disciplines. Their comments include students’ “bad time management,” “lateness,” “procrastination,” among others. These are the things teachers can see and remind students in
class. Without their teachers, students may even commit other habits outside the classroom that may negatively affect their active learning. Therefore, 10 out of 12 respondents in the interviews recommend the faculty to include discipline into the agenda of the orientation activities at the beginning of each program so that students can be better prepared for their next steps. However, as the administrators shared, orientation sessions have been done well, but more might be needed from the class teachers while teaching, given that “passive learners” may need more constant “pushing forces” for their responsiveness and responsibility to be fully exhibited. As teachers in an active learning environment are supposed to be more productive in designing more tasks for students, students really need good discipline to take full control of themselves to get the tasks done as required. Maintaining good discipline is expected to enable students to meet the requirements of their teachers and, little by little, enhance their involvement in their learning. In this regard, it can be argued that both teachers and students should play a decisive role in making the learning environment active.

5. Suggestions and conclusions

The brief analysis of data and discussion of results above have pointed out several advantages in creating an active learning environment in the investigated setting in terms of the well-established and regionally accredited academic program, qualified teaching staff with international experiences and exposure, a quality student at the point of entry as well as an effective supporting and coordinating system. However, implied in the findings and discussion of results are several considerable difficulties of both teachers and students that need a radical address from both teacher side and student side. While the academic program in the investigated setting and the physical conditions of teaching and learning in terms of teaching facilities and resources need continuous improvement in response to increasing stakeholders’ needs and demands, both teachers and students play equally important roles in creating a more active learning environment. They are both expected to take more responsibilities to prepare the latter for a more effective yet challenging learning environment.

“Learning is a dynamic process that consists of making sense and meaning out of new information and connecting it to what is already known. To learn well and deeply, students need to be active participants in that process”, as argued by Barkley (2010, p. 94). In simple terms, active learning typically involves doing something—for example, thinking, reading, discussing, problem-solving, or reflecting. In this regard, Barkley (2010, pp. 94-113) selects from different literature and suggests a list of 12 specific tips and strategies (T/S) for teachers in order to make “active learning” a reality in class. Such tips and strategies are shown in Box 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T/S</th>
<th>Tips and strategies for active learning by Barkley (2010)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Be clear on your learning goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Clarify your role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Orient students to their new roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Help students develop learning strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Activate prior learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Teach in ways that promote effective transfer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Teach for retention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Limit and chunk information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Provide opportunities for guided practice and rehearsal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Organize lectures in ways that promote active learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Use reverse or inverted classroom organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Use rubrics to give learners frequent and useful feedback.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Box 1. Tips and strategies for active learning by Barkley (2010)
Several of Barkley’s suggested tips and strategies are recently found in the analysis of data and results above, but it is well noted that the author tends to over-emphasize the role of teachers as compared to the students’ roles in their learning.

Though many teachers are confident of their teaching experience and expertise in terms of years of teaching, it can be plausibly argued from the study results and proposed that even though the teacher needs to actively play the role of a skillful organizer, planner, and designer for learning, especially via helping the students to:

(i) Be clear on their learning goals;
(ii) Clarify their roles in class and out-of-class from the study;
(iii) Be fully aware of their new role(s) as an active learner in the new learning environment;
(iv) Activate their prior learning to the current and future learning contents;
(v) Sensibly develop active learning strategies.

In this regard, the paper needs to specify and reiterate the meaning and use of the term “active learning” as discussed quite extensively above. It can also be ascertained from the study findings that the teacher should be able to:

(vi) Organize lectures in ways that promote active learning;
(vii) Be flexible in teaching and planning the lesson for students’ learning;
(viii) Be highly adaptable to the new learning environment, thus actively looking for updated and appropriate resources for students’ learning;
(ix) Provide sufficient opportunities for students’ maximal learning;
(x) “Teach for retention” (Barkley, 2010, p. 100), as promoting the full development and acceptance of knowledge from three dimensions “emotional connection, sense and meaning” (Barkley, 2010, p. 100);
(xi) Use “reverse or inverted classroom organization” (Barkley, 2010, p. 98) whereby the students are planned and driven to actively participate in activities both in- and out-class;
(xii) Apply assessment-based teaching and learning activities (with rubrics of evaluation criteria aligned with the learning goals for both in-class and out-of-class graded work), thus raising full awareness, attention and active participation of the learners.

What is more, as originated and inferred from the study results, the learners are highly expected and recommended to actively perform the roles of an active learner. While the key 21st-century skills, either 4Cs or 5Cs, or more Cs, should be better incorporated into the curriculum of English language education, the paper proposes that the learners need to practice “active thinking” in their mind before they can practice “critical thinking, collaboration, communication and creativity” (4Cs). Arguably, the learners today should readily prepare for the new learning environment, not waiting until invited. The learners today should “grab” and even “create” the opportunities for themselves to grab. The students should be highly self-directed in learning, being highly responsible for and responsive to unexpected situations that might emerge in a not a normal way. Self-directedness is a starting point to help students gradually form their own long-term habit for realizing their learning goals in an educational program or their long-term goals of life. Especially, the Covid-19 pandemic’s influence today helps us witness success stories of learners who can be better self-directed in their learning.
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References


