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ONLINE LEARNING AND ITS POTENTIAL IN DEVELOPING EFL LEARNER AUTONOMY: ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract:
Learner autonomy is now regarded as a desirable goal in tertiary education as it is found to comply with learner-centered approaches and enable students to pursue life-long learning (Sinclair, 2000a; Ciekanski, 2007). In the time of COVID-19 pandemic, the essential to conduct in-depth investigations into leaner autotomy and online learning has become more urgent, especially in the context of a university in Vietnam. This quantitative research responded to such a pressing call by exploring two aspects: (1) the students' perception of online learning, and (3) the potentiality of online learning for developing learner autonomy. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires administered to 199 English-majored students in the context of a university in Mekong Delta. The results revealed that the students possessed positive perceptions toward online learning. Furthermore, the potentiality of online learning was explored including the ability of (1) planning learning experience, (2) evaluating learning performance, (3) determining learning goals, (4) self-controlling learning process, (5) taking responsibility for learning decision. Last but not least, this study expected that the proposed pedagogical implications will contribute to the innovation of promoting learner autonomy in online learning in the context of a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam.

Keywords: online learning, learner autonomy, the potentiality of online learning, students' perception

1. Introduction

In 2019, the Coronavirus originated in Wuhan, China, and then spread out around the world. It rapidly began developing as a worldwide crisis of COVID-19 pandemic (Toquero, 2020). It globally froze almost all human works and extremely led to terrible

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consequences. As a not-able-to-avoid consequence, the educational system was impacted worldwide by the pandemic as well (Vu et al., 2020). All the schools were forced to be closed, and the teachers and the students were not permitted to teach and study in person. As a result, education had to find out how to transfer knowledge without transferring the virus, and how to maintain education in a new situation. Then, they were instructed to turn in-person teaching and learning into distanced one thanks to technology (MOET, 2020). It blew a new wind into education although virtual teaching and learning were not a newness in education. Thus, it can be concluded that COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant changes in education. Especially the shift from the traditional classroom to the online classroom. (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020).

Additionally, learner autonomy was investigated in several studies; however, those merely emphasized the role of learner autonomy in face-to-face classrooms. In addition, research on the potential of online learning for learner autonomy has not received the much attention within Vietnam as in other countries, especially in the Mekong Delta. Recently, scholars in the Mekong Delta have recently become interested in the concept of learner autonomy, though most have chosen to examine it as its whole (Nguyen, 2016; Dang, 2020), rather than focusing on online learning in particular. Furthermore, the correlation between online learning and learner autonomy in the context of the universities in Vietnam, especially the Mekong Delta, has not still examined with an adequate level of attention. After realizing the importance of learner autonomy and the potential of online learning, I recognize that it is important to conduct a study to find out the students' perception of online learning and its potential for developing learner autonomy.

In conclusion, for the aforementioned reasons, this current study aims to investigate the perception of learners on online learning and the potentiality for autonomy. Then the potential of autonomous learning in an online learning environment would be explored in this present paper.

2. Research aims and Research questions

2.1 Research aims

This present study aims to:

1) Identify EFL students' perceptions of learning English online during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2) Investigate the potential of learning online in the development of EFL students' learning.

2.2 Research questions

To achieve the above aims, this research is conducted to address the answers to the two following questions.

1) What are EFL students' perceptions of learning English online?

2) To what extent does learning online potentially develop EFL students' learning autonomy?

3. Literature review

3.1 Definition of online learning

Online learning has become a key component of global education. The term online learning actually appeared over two decades when the web-based system WebCT was developed as the first Learning Management System (LMS), which later become Blackboard (Singh and Thurman, 2019). Since then, online learning has included many distinct and overlapping terms such as e-learning, blended learning, online education, online course, and so on. In addition, when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, to maintain continuing education, Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning is practiced in most countries around the world (Hodges et al, 2020), which adds one more term to the above list from another viewpoint.

Online learning is focused not only on the online context, but also includes computer-based learning platforms, delivery methods, genres, formats, and media (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). Besides, online learning supports overcoming the obstacle of limited duration, location of instructors, and learners (Dabbagh & Nanna Ritland, 2005). Active learning student-centered pedagogical techniques are widespread in an online learning setting, which encompasses a broad variety of pedagogical practices (Baker, 2003; Browne, 2005).

According to the theoretical model developed by Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (2000) the creation of an effective online educational community consists of three critical components: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence.

However, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the term emergency remote teaching raises a new definition of online learning. Different from online learning defined above, emergency remote teaching refers to a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode in which it implements fully remote teaching solutions for education that would otherwise be delivered in person or in a blended or hybrid classroom (Hodges et al, 2020).

3.2 Definition of student learning autonomy

Learning autonomy has been defined differently by different researchers. Autonomy originated from a word in Greek, auto-nomos (Voltz, 2008). In this case, "*auto*" means "*self*" and "*nomos*" means "*rule or law*". Auto-nomos is defined as where one gives oneself his/her own law. Originally, auto-nomos is used in politics (Boud, 1981). Later, this concept prevailed in any field such as philosophy, medicine, and psychology to indicate a capacity of justifying reasons for doing something (Dearden, 1972). In terms of education, this capacity refers to school autonomy, teacher autonomy, and learner autonomy (Dang, 2012). However, this present research centers on learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy in language learning first appeared in Holec's report in 1981, and it is defined as an "*ability to take charge of one's own learning*". It is a definition that is cited the most by numerous scholars in their literature over time (Benson, 2001). Gradually, this definition is innovated by several scholars. As Hedge (2000), he changed the phrase "*take charge of*" to "*take responsibility for*" and explained it in depth. He stated that LA refers to the ability to take responsibility for their own learning and to plan, organize, and monitor that process of learning independently of the teacher. Besides, Cotterall (1995) elucidated LA through the lens which considered the degree of learners' capacity in using a set of tactics for taking over control of their own learning. These tactics are comprised of the ability to identify goals, select materials, and tasks, plan practice opportunities, and monitor and self-evaluate learning progress. Those variables are considered as the elements of metacognition emphasizing self-regulation in learning progress (Trinh, 2005). In other words, metacognitive factors, for example, skills for planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning. Consenting to Cotterall (1995), Benson, in 2001, defined LA as the ability of the learners to manage their learning.

Based on the definition of learner autonomy proposed by Holec (1981), several scholars reflected perspectives on the categorizations of learner autonomy in various contexts but in different ways (Nguyen, 2011). In this respect, Benson (1997) is acknowledged as one of the first researchers who suggested three dimensions of autonomy, namely "technical", "psychological", and "political" dimension. According to the technical perspective, learning skills or learning strategies are crucial for students to discover learning by themselves, and learner training is a core issue in language instruction. From the perspective of psychology, learner autonomy is considered as the capacity to take charge of one's own learning, which is similar to the aforementioned definition in Holec's work (1981). Regarding the political perspective, autonomy focuses on the ability to take control over the learning content and learning process. Gradually, those three dimensions have been developed by several researchers. Oxford (2003) expanded them into four perspectives including technical, psychological, sociocultural, and political-critical ones. In this research, learner autonomy is conceptualized from a combination of technical, psychological, social, and political dimensions. Each of them is briefly described in the table below.

Table 3.1: Dimensions of Learner autonomy (Benson, 1997; Oxford, 2003; Trinh, 2005)

Dimensions	**Description**
Technical	Emphasize learning activities taking place outside of formal educational contexts without the aid of teachers
Psychological	Focus on the capacity for students to take responsibility for their own learning
Social	Center on conditions in which students take control over the content and process of their learning
Political	Highlight the roles of cooperation and social interaction in language learning

3.3 Related studies

Hidayati and Husna (2020) attempted to conduct a study to investigate and obtain information about the experience the students encountered with online learning and their perception toward it, and how those experiences shape their autonomous learning potentially. This study employed a quantitative approach. An adopted online questionnaire was delivered to 71 students at a high school. Data analysis was performed utilizing both descriptive and inferential statistics to explore and understand the trends and correlation between the students' experience during online learning and the potential of learner autonomy in the online learning environment. The findings indicated that the students possessed quite a good online English learning experience. Additionally, most of them perceived learning English online as fairly enjoyable, yet many of them showed considerable potential to act as autonomous learning. Besides, this study revealed the positive correlation between the potential to learn autonomously and the experience of online English learning. Furthermore, the study implied that both the teacher and the learners gradually become more accustomed to online learning and learning autonomy. Generally, this study contributed an overview of learners' experience in learning online and the potential to develop learner autonomy for the students. However, the findings of this study have still not explored the perception of students at the tertiary level and the potential to develop learner autonomy, which is highly recommended to explore in Viet Nam.

Serdyukova and Serdyukov (2013) researched to identify the major factors which impact on students' independence and autonomy in online learning. In other words, they attempted to understand what contributes to and what interferes with independent learning in online classes. Their study investigated students' attitudes and self-evaluations related to independent learning from 65 students in the program of postgraduate teacher education at a School of Education. The findings from two questions in the survey indicate that they rely on straightforward course structure and unambiguous organization of the class, direct leadership, support, or even pressure from the instructors and they prefer working individually to working with potential peers. Those findings, surprisingly, are not equivalent to autonomy supported by self-sufficiency and self-efficacy. Besides, the findings revealed several challenges the students had to combat with during learning online. Although the results from the study indicated the opposite of learner autonomy, it contributed to the manipulation of students' individualism and the barrier to learner autonomy. As a result, the researchers further recommended some suggestions to conduct research that is expected to develop learner autonomy in the future.

Zhong (2018) conducted research to test how a student engaged with technology-mediated environments to meet his own learning needs and goals and how his autonomy developed in online environments. The author employed interviews in two different timescales in order to collect data from a representative learner who met the requirement of the study. The findings revealed that there was a significant development in learner autonomy. In other words, the learner had a wide range of materials to select for his

course. Moreover, the learning conditions facilitated an interdependent and social dimension in his autonomous learning. Eventually, the paper explored his ability to regulate his self-directed study. Although this current study showed positive results toward learner autonomy, the number of participants was too small. Therefore, the results were not reliable enough to convince the rs. Thus, to increase the degree of reliability, the author should widen the number of participants involved.

The above research, it revealed that the perception of the students in online learning environments has not studibeen ed well yet, which is attractive in educational research in the context of COVID-19, especially in Vietnam where online learning is quite new to both the teachers and the students. Besides, students in universities are expected to be the most suitable learners of learning online; however, there are not many studies focusing on this group. Moreover, several research indicated that online learning possesses the potential for developing learner autonomy in language learning. As a result, it is necessary to conduct research in tertiary education to explore the students' perceptions toward learning autonomy and the potential to evolve learner autonomy in this context.

4. Material and Methods

4.1 Research instrument

To explore the students' perceptions of online learning and its potential for learner autonomy, a descriptive study using a quantitative method approach was employed. A questionnaire was employed to collect quantitative data from the students at a university in Mekong Delta. The questionnaire consisted of three sections, namely demographic information, students' perception, and the potentiality of online learning for developing learner autonomy. The table below indicates the summary of the questionnaire.

Table 4.1: Summary of the questionnaire

Sections	**Number of items**
Demographic information	3
Students' perception of online learning	20
Potentiality of online learning for learner autonomy	21

4.2 Participants

The invitations were delivered to students who were willing to join the survey. All the participants had to meet the prior requirement that they experienced in online learning. The data were collected from 199 students at a university in Mekong Delta. Among them, regarding gender, the percentage of female participants was much higher than males, 82% and 18% respectively. Regarding the academic year, there were 75 sophomores (37.7%), 74 juniors (37.2%), and 50 seniors (25.1%) involving in.

Table 4.2: Summary of the information of EFL students participating in the questionnaire

Background information	Categories	Number (N=199)
Gender	Male	36
	Female	163
Year of learning at university	Sophomore	75
	Junior	74
	Senior	50

4.3 Data collection and data analysis

To ensure the validity of the instrument, I sent this questionnaire to two experts in this aspect to ask for their comments. After receiving feedback from them, I refined my questionnaire before delivering it to the participants. Before delivering the questionnaires to the participants, the researcher conducted a trial version of this questionnaire to examine its reliability. 15 participants who were different from formal participants were invited to attend this phase. I selected them because they were similar to my formal participants. Furthermore, due to possessing similar characteristics, they could support me to measure reliability as well.

They would answer the questions in this questionnaire via Google Form and time was counted at the same time. This helped the researcher predict the duration of this questionnaire when it was delivered.

There was eleven female (73.3 %) and four male (26.7%) participants overall. They were from 18 to 22 years old. Besides, the peak of age fell into the age of nineteen with 60 percent.

After collecting data from the participants, I coded them and used SPSS to measure the reliability of my questionnaire. The result from the scale test indicated that the reliability was *alpha = 0.859*. With alpha = 0.859, the inventory was a reliable tool to be used for data collection.

After piloting the questionnaire, it was employed to collect the official data. The group of EFL students majoring in the English Language at a university in the Mekong Delta received the questionnaire via Google Form after their lecturer forwarded the link to them. There were 199 respondents returning after the specified deadline of one week.

The data collected from the questionnaire were coded and analyzed by using the software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.

The Descriptive Statistic Tests and One Sample T-tests were computed to examine students' perception of online learning and the potentiality for learner autonomy. To measure the level of the analysed data from the range from 1 to 5, the researcher based on Oxford's (1990) scale (Table 3.3).

Table 4.2: Key to understanding the average

Level	Range
Very high	4.5 to 5.0
High	3.5 to 4.4
Medium	2.5 to 3.4
Low	1.0 to 2.4

Independent T-tests were computed to examine the difference between the mean scores of the male and female participants toward their perception on learning online and the clusters of the potentiality of online learning for developing learner autonomy.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Students' perception of learning online

5.1.1 The reliability of the questionnaire toward students' perception of online learning

In Section 2 of the questionnaire, the instructions for each item were explained initially. To collect data for students' perception of online learning, the students were asked to select their answer by marking a scale of the individual item ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Then, the data were subjected to SPSS for statistical analyses.

After collecting the data from 199 questionnaires, a reliability analysis was run using SPSS. A Scale Test was run to check the reliability of the inventory. The result revealed that the internal consistency of the questionnaire was α=.839, and it was higher than 0.70 (the required coefficient). The result indicated that the questionnaire was a reliable tool for data collection. The table below displays the result as aforementioned.

Table 5.3: Reliability Statistics of the questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.839	20

The researcher was confident enough to count the students' overall agreement on online learning and its potential for learner autonomy after the reliability of the questionnaire reached an acceptable level. The mean of the questionnaire responses from all 199 students was calculated using SPSS.

5.1.2 Students' perception of online learning

To investigate the average level of participants' agreement on online learning, a Descriptive Statistics test was run using SPSS. Table 4.2 indicates the results of the test.

Table 5.2: Descriptive Statistics of participants' agreement on online learning

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Online learning	199	1.00	5.00	3.35	.50

The mean score of participants' agreement was medium (*M=3.35, SD=.50*). The results indicated that the students' agreement on online learning is at a medium level (Oxford, 1990).

After that, an Independent Sample T-test was employed to compare the mean scores of male and female participants regarding their perception of learning online. The results indicated that no significant difference between the two means was observed (*t=0.978; p=0.689*). Participants' perceptions of online learning were the same regardless of gender.

Regarding questionnaire items analysis, some statements appeared to be generally agreed upon while others seemed to be viewed differently. Firstly, an item related to the location where online learning could take place reached a high average of 4.18, which indicated that the students were satisfied with the chance they had to select a learning space.

Secondly, the students perceived the freedom in selecting learning resources as a benefit, namely learning materials and application (*M=3.92* and *M=3.76* respectively). They preferred seeking the materials by themselves to receiving the ones provided by the teacher. Moreover, the average of 3.88 indicated that the students agreed at a high level that online learning supported them in independent learning. Furthermore, their responsibility for learning could be taken when they learned online. This can be investigated with a high average score of this item (*M=3.67).* This evidence suggested a highlight for learner autonomy of the students when they learned online.

Nevertheless, the students complained much about the stability of the internet connection. The average score was viewed at a high level (*M=3.66*), which indicated that the students had a negative perception of the stability of the internet connection.

Next, the students possessed a positive perception of relaxation while learning and the time of learning online. It can be approved due to the approximately high level of the average score (*M=3.61 and M=3.52*). It can be inferred that the students appreciated the relaxation in learning while they learned English.

However, the students showed a negative perception of online learning due to the less-effective interaction with their friends and their teachers. They agreed that the absence of peer-interaction and teacher-student interaction prevented them from the enjoyment of online learning. The average was recorded as *M=3.36* and *M=3.21* respectively. The students also stated that the overload of assignments from the teacher prevented them from meeting the deadline (*M=3.26*). During learning online, various difficulties and challenges were recorded. The average of 3.27, 3.20, and 2.95 belonged to the difficulties they faced and the prevention of those from improving students' language skills and the absence of enjoyment in learning online respectively. However, there was

a conflict that some of them quite agreed with the potential of online learning in facilitating them to learn English well (*M=3.17*).

Because most of the students belong to the high-tech generation, the problems hardly came from technology devices. An average of 2.64 was observed to justify their disagreement on this item. Besides, as aforementioned, the students disagreed on the item related to learning instruction. They perceived that there was the existence of an explanation from the teacher for the tasks assigned (*M=2.63*). The following table depicts all the items of students' perception of online learning in the questionnaire in the order of their average rate.

Table 5.3: Students' perception of online learning

No	Questionnaire item	Mean	SD
3	I like learning English online because I can learn from home.	4.18	0.78
5	I like learning English online because I can freely search for learning resources other than those provided by the teachers.	3.92	0.92
4	I like learning English online because I can learn independently.	3.88	0.88
6	I like learning English online because I can know numerous English learning applications.	3.76	0.94
8	Learning English online makes me more independent and responsible in my learning.	3.67	0.98
11	I don't like learning English online because the internet connection is bad.	3.66	0.95
1	I like learning English online because I can learn in relaxation.	3.61	0.95
2	I like learning English online because it is not timely.	3.52	1.01
15	I don't like learning English online because there is no interaction with friends.	3.36	1.07
12	I don't like learning English online because there is a huge workload given.	3.28	1.10
20	I face many difficulties in learning English online.	3.27	0.93
10	I don't like learning English online because there is no interaction with the teacher.	3.21	1.00
19	Learning English online troubles me to improve my English skills.	3.20	0.94
7	I'm able to learn English well through online learning.	3.17	0.94
18	It's hard for me to follow online English learning.	3.16	0.99
17	I don't like learning English online because teachers give me many new applications consuming my mobile phone's memory space.	3.15	1.14
16	I don't like learning English online because it is monotone and boring.	2.95	1.14
9	I don't like learning English online because I can't learn without teacher supervision.	2.73	1.09
14	I don't like learning English online because I am not good with technology.	2.64	1.17
13	I don't like learning English online because there is no explanation from the teacher.	2.63	1.12

5.2 Students' perceptions of the potentiality of online learning in developing their autonomy

5.2.1 The reliability of the questionnaire toward students' perception of the potentiality of online learning for developing learner autonomy

To find out students' perceptions toward the potential of online learning for learner autonomy, section 3 of the questionnaire (20 items) was employed in the current study.

Participants were asked to select their answers by marking a scale of the individual item ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The data were subjected to SPSS for statistical analyses.

After collecting data from 199 responses to the questionnaire, the researcher coded them and used SPSS to measure the reliability. The result from the scale test indicated that the reliability was $\alpha = 0.916$. With $\alpha = 0.916$ which was higher than .70 (the required coefficient), the inventory was a reliable tool to be used for data collection.

When the reliability reached an acceptable level, the researcher was confident enough to count the students' overall agreement on mentioned strategies and challenges. The SPSS was employed to calculate the mean of all 199 students' responses to the questionnaires.

Then, a Descriptive Statistics test was run to investigate the average level of participants' agreement on the potential of online learning for learner autonomy. Table 4.4 illustrates the results of the test.

Table 5.4: Descriptive Statistics of participants' agreement on the potential of online learning for learner autonomy

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Potential of online learning for learner autonomy	199	1.00	5.00	3.62	.54

According to the result, the mean score of participants' agreement was high (*M=3.62, SD=.54*). The results indicated that the students' agreement on the potential of online learning for learner autonomy is at a high level (Oxford, 1990).

An independent sample T-test was calculated to compare the mean scores of male and female participants regarding the potential of learning online for learner autonomy. The result indicated that no difference between the two means was observed (*t=.18; p=.99*). Participants' perception of the potential of online learning for learner autonomy is the same, taking gender into consideration.

5.2.2 Learning activities for independent learning

To find out which activities the participants did while they learned independently, a question was conducted to collect the data. It could be observed that they attended in different activities which were believed to enhance their competence. The first rank of those activities was listening to music with more than 80%. The next position was watching English movies and TV programs. They accounted for 75,9% and 49,7% of the participants respectively. The participants were informed that they also played games in English. The data from the questionnaire recorded that approximately half of them learned English while playing a game. More than a third of participants reported that they read articles and books in English (46,7% and 36,7%).

In addition, studying English books attracted many students. The participants reported that more than 37% of them selected studying from books as one of the activities

they did when they learned independently. Furthermore, writing in English followed by 35,2% of participants selected.

Peer coaching and peer interaction were one of the strategies selected by the participants to practice English. The data from the questionnaire indicated that more than 20% of the participants learned English with their friends. Besides, they interacted with their friends or even their family members in English and they believed that those people were able to facilitate them in improving their language skills, especially speaking skills. Specifically, the data from the questionnaire revealed that 34.2% of the participants selected to communicate in English with their friends, 31.2% of them learned English with their friends, 29.1% of them communicated with foreigners, and 12.1% of them chose to communicate with family members in English. Figure 4.1 below demonstrates the percentage of each type of activity the participants selected to learn when they learned independently.

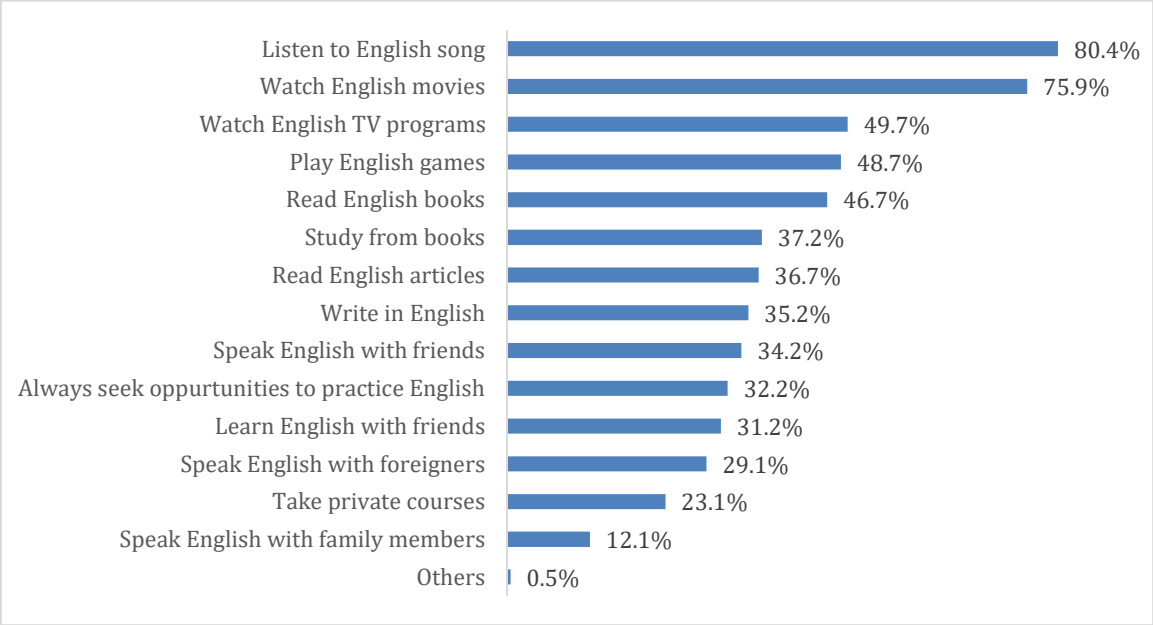

Figure 5.1: Learning activities in independent learning

5.2.3 The potentiality of online learning for developing learner autonomy

The official qualitative data can be categorized into 5 themes of the potential for learner autonomy in online learning, namely (1) planning learning experience, (2) evaluating learning performance, (3) determining learning goals, (4) self-controlling learning process, (5) taking responsibility for decisions and assessment of learning needs.

5.2.3.1 Planning learning experience

The quantitative data revealed that students' planning learning experiences in the online classroom were the potential for learner autonomy. The results of the first theme of the potential consist of two items which are shown in Table 4.5 below.

Table 5.5: Students' responses on their planning learning experience

Items	N	Mean	SD&D (%)	Neutral (%)	A&SA (%)
3. I'm able to decide what to learn next in my English course.	199	3.68	8.04	31.66	60.80
4. I can plan my learning by my own.	199	3.64	9.55%	30.65	59.80

As can be seen in Table 4.5, the participants quite agreed that online learning was the potential for them in planning their learning (*M=3.66*). To be more specific, more than 8% of the participants disagreed with Item 3 that they were able to make the decision on the learning curriculum; however, more than 60% believed that they had a choice in making a decision about what they learned next, while approximately one-third of the participants keep neutral about this potential. On the other hand, the result of the data from Item 4 revealed that the ability to self-plan learning was practiced while the participants learned online (*M=3.64*). They believed that they were able to set a plan for their own learning, 59.8% of the participants agreed, while 30.65% of them had no opinion about this. Nevertheless, more than 9% of the participants regretted claiming that they could not plan their learning by themselves.

A Descriptive Statistics Test was run to find out the average level of the EFL students' attitudes toward planning learning experience. The results were presented in Table 4.6 below.

Table 5.6:4 A Descriptive Statistics Test of the EFL students' attitudes toward the planning learning experience

		N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Cluster 1	Planning learning experience	199	1.00	5.00	3.66	.735

From Table 4.6, it can be seen that the mean score of the students' agreement of planning learning experience is 3.66 (*M=3.66; SD=.735*). The finding indicated that EFL students' attitudes towards planning their learning experience were highly positive.

An independent-sample T-Test was conducted to investigate whether there was any difference between the attitudes of the male student (*M= 3.69*) and those of the female students (*M=3.65*) towards planning learning experience. The results indicated that there was no significant difference *(t=-0.30, df=197, p=.762)*. This implies that male and female students' attitudes toward planning their experience are not different.

5.2.3.2 Evaluating learning performance

The students' perception of the ability to evaluate learning performance was measured on the questionnaire. The results from the data reported that the participants were able to evaluate their own learning performance. Table 4.7 below presents the second theme of the potential of online learning for learner autonomy, which consists of three items.

Table 5.7: Students' responses on their evaluating learning performance

Items	N	Mean	SD	SD&D (%)	Neutral (%)	A&SA (%)
1. I'm able to identify my strength in learning English.	199	3.71	.794	5.53	31.66	62.81
2. I'm able to identify my weakness in learning English.	199	3.96	.771	4.52	16.58	78.89
10. I can evaluate what I have learned.	199	3.57	.884	11.56	30.15	58.29

The results from the data reported that the participants agreed with being able to determine their strengths (*M=3.71, SD=.79*). More than 61% of the participants agreed that they acknowledged what they did well, and less than half percent of the participants were confused about their ability. However, only 5.53% of the participants were afraid of identifying their strengths. On the other hand, the agreement of the participants for Item 2 was much different from the one for Item 1. Specifically, only 4.52% of the participants were not able to determine their weaknesses, and this was less than the one who agreed that they were not able to determine their strengths (5.53%). However, more than 16% of them were neutral on Item 2. The percentage of the participants who agreed on their ability to define their weaknesses was approximately 80%, which was much higher than the percentage of participants who agreed on identifying their strengths.

A Descriptive Statistics Test was run to find out the average level of the EFL students' attitudes toward evaluating their performance. The results were presented in Table 4.8 below.

Table 5.8: A Descriptive Statistics Test of the EFL students' attitudes toward evaluating their performance

		N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Cluster 2	Students' attitudes toward evaluating their performance	199	1.00	5.00	3.75	.652

From Table 4.8, it can be seen that the mean score of the students' agreement of evaluating their performance is 3.75 (*M=3.75; SD=.65*). The finding indicated that EFL students' attitudes toward evaluating their performance were highly positive.

An independent-sample T-Test was conducted to investigate whether there was any difference between the attitudes of the male student (*M= 3.86*) and those of the female students (*M=3.72*) towards evaluating their performance. The results indicated that there was no significant difference *(t=-1.14, df=197, p=.25)*. This implies that male and female students' attitudes towards evaluating their performance are not different.

5.2.3.3 Determining learning goals

To collect data on the ability to determine the learning goals of the students, Item 5 was conducted. The result from the questionnaire was reported in Table 4.9.

Table 5.9 Students' responses on their determining learning goals

Item	N	Mean	SD&D (%)	Neutral (%)	A&SA (%)
5. I can make target in my learning by myself.	199	3.72	7.54	27.14	65.33

As can be seen in Table 4.9 most of the students agreed that they could make targets in their learning on their own (*M=3.72*). specifically in Item 5, only 7.54% of the participants denied their ability to determine their target. Additionally, 27.14% of the participants kept neutral with their ability to determine their own target. However, more than 65% of the participants agreed that they possessed the ability to identify the target for their own learning without the need for any support from others.

A Descriptive Statistics Test was run to find out the average level of the EFL students' attitudes toward determining their learning goals. The results were indicated in Table 4.10 below.

Table 5.10: A Descriptive Statistics Test of the EFL students' attitudes toward evaluating their performance

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Students' attitudes toward determining learning goals	199	1.00	5.00	3.72	.840

From Table 4.10, it can be seen that the mean score of the students' agreement of determining their learning goals is 3.72 (M=3.72; SD=.84). The finding indicated that EFL students' attitudes toward determining learning goals were highly positive.

5.2.3.4 Self-controlling learning process

The data of the self-controlling learning process were collected from 6 Items in the questionnaire. The results indicated that they, in general, were able to control their learning process by themselves. Table 4.11 indicates the results of the self-controlling learning process.

Table 5.11: Students' responses on their self-controlling learning process

Items	N	Mean	SD&D (%)	Neutral (%)	A&SA (%)
7. I can solve difficulties in my learning.	199	3.43	14.57	35.68	49.75
8. I can accomplish the tasks by myself without much detail instruction from the teacher.	199	3.09	30.65	36.68	32.66
9. I can prevent negative effects on my learning.	199	3.30	21.11	33.67	45.23
11.I can learn on my own without much teacher involvement.	199	3.08	32.16	33.17	34.67
12. I like to learn on my own outside school time.	199	3.64	9.05	34.17	56.78
13. I like to find other resources of learning out of the ones prepared by my teacher.	199	3.68	7.04	34.17	58.79

It can be observed that there were 6 items measured. To be more specific, in Item 7, nearly half of the participants agreed that they were able to solve the difficulties by themselves; however, approximately 15% of them claimed that they did not possess the ability to find out solutions for their difficulties on their own. Besides, the participants perceived their task accomplishment without much instruction from the teacher was different; however, the percentage of the participants' agreement was similar (Item 8). Specifically, 31% of them disagreed that they were able to complete the tasks from the teacher without instruction. Similar to the percentage of their disagreement, 32.66% confirmed that they were able to accomplish the tasks without any instruction from the teacher, and one-third of them kept neutral on this item.

In addition, the data on the ability of the students to prevent negative effects on their learning were collected from Item 9. More than one-fifth of the participants disagreed that they owned the ability to solve the problems which negatively impacted their learning. Although 33.67% of them were not able to define that ability, approximately half of the participants agreed that the negative effects on the learning process were prevented by themselves.

In Item 11, the data of the learning without much teacher involvement were collected. They claimed that online learning provided them with opportunities to learn without teacher involvement. Specifically, 34.6% of participants agreed with the practice of learning without teacher involvement; however, 32.16% of them did not. Furthermore, they preferred learning outside the classroom. More than half of them indicated their preference for learning outside the school, while only more than 9% of them disagreed with self-learning outside the classroom.

In addition, the students showed their preference for searching for more learning resources besides the one prepared by the teacher. The participants agreed that when they learned online, they preferred finding more learning resources on their own (58.79%). Nevertheless, only 7.04% of them disagreed with this item and more than 34% of them had no opinion on this.

A Descriptive Statistics Test was run to find out the average level of the EFL students' attitudes toward the self-controlling learning process. The results were demonstrated in Table 4.12.

Table 5.12: A Descriptive Statistics Test of the EFL students' attitudes toward the self-controlling learning process

		N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Cluster 2	Students' attitudes toward self-controlling learning process	199	1.00	5.00	3.37	.667

From Table 4.12 it can be seen that the mean score of the students' agreement of the self-controlling learning process is 3.37 (*M=3.37; SD=.67*). The finding indicated that EFL students' attitudes towards the self-controlling learning process were highly positive.

To consider whether there was a significant difference between the attitudes of the male students *(M=3.58)* and those of the female students *(M=3.32)* towards self-controlling learning process, an Independent-Samples T-Test was conducted. The results disclosed no significant difference between the attitudes of the male and students' agreement on the self-controlling learning process *(t=-2.11, p=.36)*. The findings indicated that the male and female students in this current study have the same level of positive attitudes towards the self-controlling learning process.

5.2.3.5 Taking responsibility for decisions and assessment of learning needs

Responsibility in learning was one of the dimensions of learner autonomy that should be ensured by the students. To measure whether online learning possesses this potential, eight items were conducted to collect data. Table 4.13 below demonstrates the results of those items.

Table 5.13 Students' responses on their taking responsibility for decisions and assessment

Items	N	Mean	SD	SD&D (%)	Neutral (%)	A&SA (%)
6. I can suggest activities for my classwork.	199	3.41	.894	13.57	39.70	46.73
14. I like to have choices in the way I learn.	199	3.93	.766	3.52	20.60	75.88
15. I want to be involved in deciding learning activities.	199	3.72	.784	4.02	36.18	59.80
16. I want to be involved in deciding learning topics.	199	3.76	.812	5.03	32.66	62.31
17. I want to be involved in deciding learning target.	199	3.70	.898	8.04	32.16	59.80
18. I like to be asked for opinion about the learning process I like.	199	3.70	.833	6.53	34.17	59.30
19. I want to be given tasks/assignment that I can choose.	199	3.82	.819	4.02	30.15	65.83
20. I don't really like to be strictly controlled in my learning.	199	3.86	.954	8.04	26.13	65.83

Firstly, item 6 was conducted to collect the student's perceptions of their suggestion for classwork. The results indicated that 46.73% of them agreed that they were able to raise their voice on suggesting the classwork when they learned online. However, more than 13% of them reported that they had no choice for their classwork, while approximately 40% of them perceived that they were not involved in making suggestions for classwork. In item 14, the result from the data showed that most of them preferred to select their learning strategies. Specifically, more than 75% of them claimed that they would like to choose the way they learned on their own, while 20.60% of them kept neutral. Nevertheless, only 3.52% of the participants reported they did not prefer to make any selection on learning strategies.

In online learning, making the decision of different learning aspects was emphasized. Items 15, 16, and 17 clarified the potential for learner autonomy. In general,

more than 59% of the participants agreed that they decided their learning activities, learning topics, and learning targets when they learned online. More than 32% claimed that they did not concern with involving in making the decision. Whereas the participants reported that they would not like to involve in making a decision on learning activities, topics, and targets. The percentage of them counted for 4.02%, 5.03, and 8.04 respectively. A Descriptive Statistics Test was run to find out the average level of the EFL students' attitudes toward taking responsibility for decisions and assessments. The results were illustrated in Table 4.14 below.

Table 5.14: A Descriptive Statistics Test of the EFL students' attitudes toward taking responsibility for decisions and assessment

		N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Cluster 2	Students' attitudes toward taking responsibility for decisions and assessment	199	1.00	5.00	3.74	.60

From Table 4.14, it can be seen that the mean score of the students' agreement of taking responsibility for decisions and assessment is 3.74 (*M=3.74; SD=.60*). The finding showed that EFL students' attitudes towards taking responsibility for decisions and assessment were highly positive.

An independent-sample T-Test was conducted to investigate whether there was any difference between the attitudes of the male student (*M= 3.72*) and those of the female students (*M=3.8*) toward taking responsibility for decisions and assessment. The results indicated that there was no significant difference *(t=-0.62, df=197, p=.38)*. This implies that male and female students' attitudes towards taking responsibility for decisions and assessments are not different.

6. Discussion

Many of the ideas identified from participants' responses in this study were in line with the present literature on promoting learners' autonomy in online learning. To that end, the views of these students supported much of the current literature on learners' autonomy. The findings show that the students had a positive perception of online learning. The findings also explored the potentiality of online learning for developing learner autonomy. These are discussed below.

6.1 The students' perception of online learning

The findings of this study indicated that the students found online learning enjoyable. The freedom in the selection of time and location of online learning provides the learner the flexibility to practice learning online. In line with Bast (2020), flextime is considered an advantage of online learning, especially during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing and lockdowns were obligated by the government. Moreover,

Faize and Nawaz (2020) reported that online learning is regarded as flexible in terms of time and space as in the findings of this study.

Besides, the learning resources are various in online learning environments. The internet is considered an informative learning resource, which facilitates the student in accessing knowledge easily. Specifically, the students are free to select their learning materials for online learning (Li and Tsai, 2017), and the variety of learning materials provides them with different aspects of their knowledge.

The findings reveal that the improvement in language skills and competence was perceived by the participants. Bast (2020) emphasized in his study that facilitating effective teaching-learning in online mode has become more relevant in post-COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the findings of this study are in line with many studies such as Hiyadati and Husna (2020) and Muljana and Luo (2019).

As aforementioned, online learning provides learners with the opportunities to practice independent learning and take responsibility for their own learning. In previous studies, it is pointed out that the advantages of online learning put the learners into the readiness for promoting learner autonomy (Zhong, 2018; Phan, 2015; Hiyadati and Husna, 2020).

However, the overload of assignments in online learning was identified as one of the problems from the results of this thesis. The students complained that the teachers assigned them many assignments in a short duration, and they had to handle many courses at the same time, which was reported to make the exhausted and stressed when they learned online. This drawback of online learning is also found in the findings in the study of Hayadati and Husna (2020).

6.2 Students' perceptions of the potentiality of online learning in developing their autonomy

Considering this finding, the current study came out with a promising development of the autonomous learner. The results indicated the students' agreement on items related to planning learning by themselves, evaluating learning performance independently, determining learning goals on their own, self-controlling, and taking responsibility for their learning. These attributes are crucial in autonomous learning and serve as autonomy indicators (Blidi, 2017).

This finding contradicts some previous studies, in which the majority of students were found to have a high dependence on the teacher and were not ready to act as autonomous learners (Cirocki et al., 2019) which refers to the spoon-feed tendency of the teacher and high dependence of the students on the teachers (Basri, 2020; Samah, 2009).

As mentioned in chapter 4, the students were able to plan their learning by themselves; therefore, online learning can provide them with a variety of learning resources and explicit learning activities. This is similar to the finding of Ribbe and Bezanilla (2013) that online learning can foster the student's autonomy by allowing them permission of determining what they learn next.

Moreover, self-assessment and self-evaluation are believed to be one of the dimensions of promoting learner autonomy (Murphy, 2014). In line with this, the ability of the students to evaluate their learning performance was recorded in this study. The students believed that they could identify their strengths and weaknesses by themselves to seek appropriate learning strategies for improvement. As a result, the finding indicates that the students' autonomy is potentially developed in the environment of online learning.

Besides self-evaluating, the students were able to determine their learning needs and learning goals. The findings of this study reported the participants identified both their short-term and long-term goals to achieve when they learned online. Moreover, it is similar to research that confirms that the students' consciousness toward their learning objectives can be fostered in the environment of online learning (Ribbe and Bezanilla, 2013). Online learning is believed to bring students the opportunities to evaluate their learning performance and identify their learning targets, which is also investigated in the study of Hidayati and Hanus (2020).

Furthermore, the student claimed that they were able to control their learning by themselves. They put their learning under their control by solving the problems, preventing the negative effects, and accomplishing the assignment on their own. This self-controlling ability is believed to be the potential for promoting learner autonomy in the environment of online learning. This result is in line with the previous studies, Zhong (2018), Lazorak et al. (2021).

In addition, in the online learning environment, the student's perspectives listen. The students are allowed to make decisions on their learning aspects and take responsibility for their learning. Practice taking responsibility for their own learning is considered

The notion of affordance indicates a perspective that views the world as a meaning-filled setting that offers countless opportunities for actions (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Undoubtedly, technology has given language learners unparallel opportunities for autonomous study. However, affordances only define potential effects, and they are not actual ones. The active learner, not the technology, is the key to maximizing the potential in promoting their autonomy. Students must retain their engagement so that they can detect the value of technology and make decisions that will allow them to realize the potential that the online environments have given them (Van Lier, 2004).

7. Recommendations

From the findings and the limitations of the current study, some suggestions can be made for further research as follows. Firstly, a larger sample of the population for the study ought to be extended so that the study can generalize the results to all groups of students at tertiary education in Mekong Delta. Moreover, learner autonomy was one of the popular research topics in the level of higher education, and because the sample of this study was the students merely, the perception of the teacher should be paid more

attention. It can be justified that the perspectives from different lenses may generalize the whole picture of learner autonomy in tertiary education. Besides, the scope of this study emphasized the tertiary level and on the online learning environment, therefore, further research can continue investigating the area of learner autonomy in other levels of education and other learning environments. In addition, this study focused on the potential of online learning in promoting learner autonomy; thus, further research ought to emphasize on the practice of learner autonomy and appropriate strategies for promoting learner autonomy in online learning environments.

8. Conclusion

This current study was aimed at understanding their perception of online learning and its potential for promoting learner autonomy in online learning environments. The results highlighted that the students enjoyed their learning in online environments. Firstly, the findings reveals that the students have positive perception toward online learning. The duration and location of online learning was considered as flexibility of online learning. Moreover, the variety of learning resources, applications, and learning materials provide them with different selections for their learning. Furthermore, online learning made them more independent and responsible for their own learning. The relaxation and excitement of online learning significantly contributed to their enjoyment when they learned online.

Secondly, regarding the potentiality of online learning, the findings addressed that online learning was a high potential for promoting learner autonomy. Specifically, the students were able to practice planning their learning on their own and determine their learning goals. Moreover, they had opportunities to evaluate and self-controlling their learning performance when they learned online. The result indicated that taking responsibility for their learning support for the students to practice in online learning. In summary, online learning was an ideal environment for the improvement of students' autonomy.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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