

Cultural and Situational Constraints on Undergraduate Students' Performance of Learner Autonomy in EFL Learning

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Abstract—The complexities and variations of learner autonomy in language learning, both conceptually and operationally, have been extensively examined in recent literature. With the current shift towards a social perspective, there is contemporarily greater emphasis on socio-cultural factors and their connection to local contexts. Acknowledging the significant contribution of individual preference, attitude, and motivation from a particular Asian context, the study employed a retrospective approach to understand the factors that mediated EFL students' performance of learner autonomy in Vietnam, where learning independence has been significantly encouraged recently. The research participants were guided to talk about (i) the learning activities that they had done, (ii) their reflections on those activities, and (iii) their future plans in individual semi-structured interviews. The analysis showed that students' performance of learner autonomy was basically mediated by attributes at personal and situational and cultural levels. Available learning opportunities, familial expectation, and examination scheme in a certain context appeared to be the most dominant factors in shaping students' autonomous learning behaviors. Further analyses indicated a significant impact of teachers on students' adoption of a learning activity or behavior. The study calls for a holistic approach to fostering learner autonomy in the higher education sector in Vietnam and beyond.

Index Terms—learner autonomy, culture, personal preference, higher education

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most challenging problems in Asian educational reforms lies in fostering independence in students' learning approaches, particularly in cultures that traditionally emphasize obedience in class participation (Dang, 2010). The multifaceted nature of learner autonomy in language learning, both conceptually and operationally, has been extensively deliberated in contemporary literature (Benson, 2011). As the construct has undergone a social turn, scholars increasingly highlight the significance of socio-cultural factors within local contexts (Chong & Reinders, 2022). This study critically examines the contributions of a specific context to students' performance of learner autonomy, offering insights for enhancing this capacity within the educational reform agenda in Asian contexts. The investigation utilizes a socio-cultural theoretical framework to analyze mediating factors at personal, situational, and cultural levels, contributing to the understanding of autonomy promotion in diverse educational settings.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Learner Autonomy in Second Language Learning

Learner autonomy in foreign/second language learning is described as a very 'complicated' (Little, 2003) or 'multifaceted' construct (Smith & Ushioda, 2009). It is often defined as a capacity which enables learners to control their learning activities more effectively and engage in them more actively in both school and life-long learning (Dam, 1990; Little, 1991). This capacity is illustrated by students' ability to initiate, monitor, and evaluate learning processes (Little, 2003). Learner autonomy is shaped by students' readiness to learn; their access to peer support through the learning community, and opportunities for topic selection in resource-rich language laboratories (Healy, 2007; Chik et al., 2018). The formation of learner autonomy is also resulted from how these attributes interact with one another and the level of control over these processes that learners wish to take. Learners are seen as both independent individuals who want to modify their living situation for their own sake and members of generalized socio-cultural groups who are attached to specific values and relationships. As a result, learner autonomy is identified as a socially and culturally situated variable, affirming the multifaceted nature of this construct.

The concept of learner autonomy has principally been examined from four different perspectives, namely *technical*, *psychological*, *socio-cultural*, and *political-critical* (Benson, 2006; Healy, 2007; Oxford, 2003; Sinclair, 2000). These perspectives might initially seem different and even conflicting, but they actually complement each other. The influence of the learning environment (a technical perspective) and individual traits (a psychological perspective) are two crucial,

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interconnected factors in the formation and growth of learner autonomy (Dang, 2012). Negotiations and interactions between an individual with their situation (socio-cultural perspective) are in a shared space. These interactive behaviors in a community are driven by a desire for more effective learning outcomes, more agency and better life quality (political-critical perspective). It has been suggested that research should cover as many perspectives as possible as they are not mutually exclusive but rather contribute to a holistic understanding (Oxford, 2003). Driven by these four perspectives on learner autonomy and considering the contemporary social turn, this research study acknowledges the significant contributions of socio-cultural factors in shaping students' perceptions and their performance of learner autonomy. Therefore, the socio-cultural perspective of this construct is employed as the theoretical foundation for the current investigation.

B. Mediating Factors of Learner Autonomy

Major factors that may have direct influence on the performance of learner autonomy include personal preference, attitude, and motivation. Students with different learning preferences may be interested in different levels of activity flexibility and interaction (e.g., Braine, 2003; Figura & Jarvis, 2007; Nguyen, 2009; Smith, 2003). Some may prefer to work on their own, while others like to cooperate with peers in groups. In addition, some are more active in the online learning space, while others tend to engage more in offline learning activities.

Similarly, students with different learning attitudes and beliefs may also perceive similar learning opportunities differently (e.g., Trinh, 2005; Wallis, 2005). For example, while some students with rote learning habits probably favor grammatical lessons and drills, others may prefer learning by completing projects. Part of the students' autonomous learning capacity is associated with attitude (Dam & Legenhausen, 2010), and it can contribute to students' EFL proficiency. Benson (2010, 2016) argues that positive attitudes can lead to high expectations, and this enables students to implement their learning plans and monitor their learning progress. Although learner autonomy and attitude are not always observable and measurable, a positive relationship between the two appears to be obvious.

The relationship between learner autonomy and motivation has also been argued to be strong (Jiang & Peng, 2023; Murray et al., 2011). Motivation is suggested to be influential on students' performance of learner autonomy (e.g., Aoki, 2001; Miller et al., 2005; Schwiendhorst, 2003, 2008). Those who are more motivated may be more eager in looking for learning opportunities and maintaining more effective learning engagement (Reinders & Balcikanli, 2011). Motivated students are also suggested to take part in autonomous learning behaviours more frequently (Tok, 2011). Other research shows that the relationship between learner autonomy and motivation is very complex (Lamb, 2010). Hozayen (2011) argues that motivation can empower learner autonomy, while others (Lamb, 2001; Lamb & Fisher, 1999) suggest that an increase in learner autonomy can enhance students' motivation. It seems that this relationship is interactive rather than unidirectional.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Taking an exploratory perspective, the study reported in this paper aims to understand the factors that foster and inhibit students' performance of learner autonomy in the context of EFL learning in Vietnam. Participating in the study were eleven EFL undergraduate students in a public university. They were eighteen or nineteen years old and at the upper-intermediate or advanced level of English proficiency. Data was generated from the semi-structured interviews, and theme analysis was employed for data interpretation.

The teaching practices with which these students experienced were mainly teacher-dominated, given that there were 45-55 students in each class. Teachers had to use a sound system in the classroom to be heard by students. Although collaborative activities such as group work and pair work were not the primary mode of class interactions, they were sometimes used by the teachers. Some entertainment-oriented activities, such as listening to English songs and watching movies, were also conducted apart from the regular lessons. Native speakers of English were invited to have informal talks with students once or twice during the semester, depending on each teacher's network of contacts.

A. Research Instrument

To gain insights into students' performance of learner autonomy and possible mediating factors, the data collection process of the study was designed to be able to accommodate the widest possible range of responses from the participants. An individual semi-structured interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Cohen et al., 2018) was the tool selected to give students opportunities to report their learning behaviors and judgments in their learning contexts according to a set of guided questions. Interview questions were kept fairly open to give students enough space for expression while taking into consideration the local socio-cultural insights such as relationship maintenance, a positive atmosphere, and suitable motivating stimuli during the interviews (Dang & Robertson, 2010). Closed-ended questions were often used first to direct the conversation and culturally build up the participants' confidence and motivation around the topic.

The interview questions for students to reflect on, in the semi-structured interview, focused on students' behaviors of initiating, monitoring, and evaluating their learning processes with particular consideration to those reported by Martinez (2008) and Smith and Erdogan (2008). For example, to address the initiating process, the study used questions such as *'Do you often look for opportunities to communicate in English such as making friends with English-speaking people, speaking English to friends, going to the English-speaking clubs, reading newspapers in English? Why do/don't*

you do that? What encourages or prevent you from continuing to do that? Similarly, to understand students' monitoring process, employed questions were *'Do you often stick to a learning plan? Do you often make modifications to your original plans such as changing the deadline of a task or replacing an activity with another? How often do you do that? Why do (not) you do that? What does that mean to your learning? Can you give some examples?'*.

B. Interview Protocol

All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the mother tongue of students to maximize the level of reliability and validity of the data collected. During the semester, the whole cohort of 247 students was invited, and eleven of them voluntarily participated. At the interview, participants were given time to express themselves. They were also encouraged to talk about any events that were of interest to them, and to provide examples to illustrate their retrospective descriptions. In addition, they were advised that they could use any English words or phrases convenient for them to express their opinions during the interviews (Dang & Robertson, 2010).

After pseudonyms were applied, the interview data were transcribed and translated into acceptable English for analysis. An overall investigation of the transcripts was conducted to understand the data as a whole. A code list was developed and revised during the coding process. The personal background and experience of the interviewer was used to support the interpretation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). General themes emerged from the data along with the participants' exercise of the autonomous learning processes. The factors that were indicated to mediate the participants' performance of learner autonomy were categorized and discussed.

IV. FINDINGS

To extract groups of factors contributing to students' performance of learner autonomy in the local learning context, a theme analysis was conducted with the interview transcripts collected from students' reflective descriptions of their learning behaviors. The analysis showed that personal preference, motivation, and attitude were the most important factors that influenced students' autonomous learning behaviors in the offline learning space. These three mediating factors were reflected at both personal and situational levels. For example, students might be motivated by a friend's impressive achievement and make a learning plan, but they would probably ignore it soon after that because they preferred a more flexible learning arrangement to working with a set plan. It could be seen that the motivation triggered by situational attributes contributed to the shaping of students' autonomous learning behavior. However, this behavior was not successfully maintained because it did not match the students' preference.

A. Effect of Preference

A between-subjects theme analysis indicated that personal preference was one of the most influential factors in mediating students' autonomous learning behaviors. Of the eleven students participating in the interviews, ten said that they performed planning activities as part of their monitoring learning processes. Their plans could be made for a year, a semester, a month, a week, or even a day. They fully understood that a learning plan could help them monitor their learning activities successfully. However, they were not always interested in doing this. For example, Student 9 was a very task-oriented female. She made a semester plan for her EFL study at the beginning of the semester and weekly plans based on the school schedules and her living place, given that she shared a room with some others in the school dormitory.

Whilst Student 9 appeared to be very well-organized, Student 10 seemed more relaxed and only made learning plans sometimes, depending on particular situations. He said:

I make no plan for my learning because it is me. I learn what I like at a particular time, [not guided or regulated by a plan]. However, if the examinations come, I'll make a detailed plan... [because] I'll be more motivated to study... I am not sure if I'll make learning plans in the future because I am an unplanned person. (Student 10)

Student 10 knew that making learning plans was useful for time management and effective learning. However, this learning behavior was not aligned with his personality, and he therefore performed it only in special situations where his personally driven methods were not effective enough. Other situational factors, such as time constraints and entertainment activities, also influenced students' preferences for making plans. For example, Student 7 indicated that she had to give up planning activities because she commuted to school every day, and the local bus service was not reliable. It always took her more time than expected. Even if she had a learning plan, it could not help her monitor her study effectively. Meanwhile, Student 3 said that she was not a well-disciplined person, and her learning plans were often delayed due to other social activities.

In contrast to the ten students who had at least some level of planning for their learning activities, Student 6 did not do any planning at all. This female described herself as a romantic person and claimed that her learning activities could be only driven by her psychological mood. These differences suggested that planning was not always one of the local students' preferences for learning activities. Those who were more task-oriented and practical, such as Student 9, tended to perform more planning activities for their learning. Meanwhile, those who were more relaxed, such as Student 6, did not value planning much. These two extreme approaches of students tended to demonstrate who they were in their learning activities. In contrast, those who did not have a strong personality, such as Student 10, tended to use different

learning preferences in different situations. These examples suggested that both personal and situational attributes played a role in their preference for the adoption of an autonomous learning behavior.

Personal preference was also reflected in the students' adoption of goal-setting behaviors. Ten of the eleven students in the interviews said that they set goals for their EFL learning. Their goals were usually general, such as reading a few books and improving their spoken skills. However, three students presented very specific goals. Student 3, an ambitious girl with a tight learning plan, targeted a grade point average of 8.0 for the semester to win a scholarship. Student 1 aimed to increase his grade point average by 0.2, and Student 11 wanted to achieve a score of more than 750 in a TOEIC test. It seemed that strongly task-oriented and competitive students tended to set specific goals for their learning. Meanwhile, those who thought that their learning performance was lower than the others in the class did not make their goals specific. However, based on the data collected in this study, there was insufficient evidence to draw any firm conclusions on goal setting behaviors.

The only student who did not set any learning goals described herself as a shy girl. She came from a province and stayed in the school dormitory. Therefore, her social activities in the city where she studied were limited. She indicated that it was not necessary to set goals because learning EFL was her interest. She seemed to suggest that goal setting was only necessary for those who did not want to study hard. They needed such learning goals to remind them of their EFL learning activities. In her case, because she was fully aware of her EFL study and always tried her best, she did not need to set any learning goals. She also implied that it was better to be guided by a personal desire than a goal in EFL learning.

Students' preferences were also evidenced in their choice of learning initiatives and evaluation behaviors. Nine of the eleven students interviewed indicated that they either went to an English-speaking club to look for speaking opportunities or formed a group of friends to practice English speaking skills. In addition, they often asked their friends to evaluate their learning performance. Although these nine students were all interested in working with others, their engagement in these initiating and evaluating learning opportunities was different. For example, Student 2, who appeared to be extroverted in her behaviors and served on the organizing committee of an English-speaking club, was very interested in the speaking activities of the club. She said:

I think that my English is not good yet. The English-speaking club is a very good environment for me because I can speak English and improve my communication skills there... [As a committee member], I also have opportunities to practice public speaking skills. (Student 2)

Learning alone, particularly, appeared to be the learning preference of Students 5 and 11. Although they were somewhat confident about their English competence, they were not interested in interacting with others. Student 5 initiated her learning processes by speaking and reading to herself and recording it. She then listened again to the recordings and evaluated her own performance. Student 11 often looked for new learning opportunities in books and practice tests. He evaluated his learning by checking his answers to a test with the answer key and continued to learn from that. Both Students 5 and 11 knew about the availability of opportunities for interactive learning around them, but they were not attracted to participate. They seemed to be introvert in their learning behaviors.

B. Effect of Motivation

Data analyses suggested three sources of motivation that contributed to the shaping of students' learner autonomy. The first was related to personal interests. Some students were interested in some areas of knowledge or skills, and they would perform any autonomous learning activities to satisfy their interest. The second came from the learning successes of their friends or peers. Students with this type of motivation like to be as successful as some other people that they know. The third was associated with a bright picture of high achievement profiles. These students wanted to attain high scores and become an outstanding member in their group. It could be seen that these three primary sources were both internally and externally motivated. While the one originating from personal interests seemed to be more internal; the one associated with friends' successes seemed to be more external; and the one of being outstanding in a group implied both internal and external attributes.

Of the eleven students interviewed, only Student 6 reported that her learning behaviors were not much motivated by learning achievements. She was primarily motivated by her interest in the literature of different nations in the world. Therefore, she always looked for literature works and read them no matter the language in which they were written. She sometimes read both Vietnamese and English versions of a work to comprehend it better. She also added that:

I rarely pay attention to my classmates' learning achievements. I don't care much about that... I sometimes check with my teachers if I do not feel happy with my assignment grades... but I never check with my friends. (Student 6)

What Student 6 said indicated a non-interactive pattern of learning behaviors. She seemed to be alone in pursuing her own interests because it might be difficult to find someone who could share the same interests. In addition, she seemed to enjoy reading alone and did not want to be bothered. Her learning behaviors were mainly directed by the motivation for a better understanding of literature works. The motivation associated with gaining better learning achievements than friends and becoming outstanding in the class did not have a strong impact on her learning behaviors. The following examples further illustrate the effects of the three sources of motivation on students' variations in adopting learning behaviors.

As the study participants majored in EFL, it was understandable that they all had a certain degree of interest in mastering English language skills and developing their understanding of English-speaking countries. They often looked for friends with the same interests and formed study groups to enhance their English language competence. For example, Student 2 reported that:

A friend of mine from the University of Finance and Banking was very interested in improving her English skills... Therefore, she and I invited two others, and we meet every Friday and Saturday evening. Each of us presents a topic to practice English speaking skills in general and public speaking skills in particular. (Student 2)

Similar behavior of creating collaborative learning opportunities was also adopted by Students 3 and 9 in more casual situations. These two often paired with another friend and talked about their concerns in daily life. If it was difficult to find a suitable partner, they tended to study alone or interact with the internet. For example, Student 1 affirmed that she would prepare her lessons very carefully in advance if the topic was one of her interests such as Hemingway or English and American literature. She also looked for more information on the internet. However, if she was not interested in the topic, she would only have a glance at it. This pattern of learning behavior resembled many others such as Students 3, 4, and 7.

Given a cultural tradition of community orientation in Vietnam, the cohort of students in the study generally knew about one another. In addition, students' learning results were always publicly released. Therefore, students generally knew of their friends' learning performance, and this had an impact on their autonomous learning behaviors. Apart from Student 6 who was internally motivated only, nine of the other ten reported that they often used their friends' learning achievements to inform their own learning behaviors. Different aspects of their friends' learning performance were taken into consideration. For example, in class, when a friend said something, Students 1 and 3 often paid attention to his/her pronunciation and intonation; meanwhile Students 2 and 4 focused on word usages, tenses, and grammatical structures.

In addition to personal interests and friends' achievements, three students reported that their autonomous learning behaviors were motivated by the possibility of securing a bright future by holding many successful positions. This source of motivation was interpreted as being triggered by both internal and external attributes. Students might develop intrinsic motivation for being successful during their growth in a certain socio-cultural situation. This kind of motivation could also be developed during their EFL learning as they sought to compete with all their peers. Student 5, for example, looked for more learning challenges by taking extra EFL classes in another language school. She liked to catch up with her friends and attain good scores. She wanted to successfully enhance her language competence to secure a good job. A similar example was reported by Student 6, whose desire for learning success was expressed in a continuous learning plan.

As I aim to be a high achiever, I often prepare the lessons in advance. I examine the topic, look up new words, and read through the lessons... [After each lesson,] I look for additional information about that topic from other resources. (Student 6)

C. *Effect of Attitude*

As identified from the analysis, attitude was an important factor in mediating students' performance of learner autonomy. Nine of the eleven students reported that their school textbooks were boring, and that was why they did not care much about reading them. For a typical example, both Students 2 and 10 agreed that the textbooks were not interesting enough for them to read and they did not find them useful for their learning. Therefore, they did not enjoy reading them. Such comments were also firmly acknowledged by Student 11, who said:

I think there is nothing to read in [those textbooks]. I just need to improve my four language skills [speaking, listening, reading, and writing]. Attending classes and reading the textbooks do not help me learn better. Really, nothing at all... So, it is better to make my own learning plan and follow it. (Student 11)

It appeared that because these students had a negative attitude towards the school textbooks, they tended to look for learning opportunities in other places. Student 10 looked for interesting materials in local bookshops, while Students 1 and 4 were more interested in materials on the internet. In contrast, because Students 5 and 6 did not hold a negative attitude towards the textbooks, their learning behaviors were developed around the textbook activities. Therefore, the learning behaviors of Students 5 and 6 tended to be less interactive but more task-oriented. Meanwhile, students such as 1 and 4 preferred more interactive learning behaviors and even aimed to develop soft skills such as teamwork and public speaking. These differences also suggested that students' attitudes towards the school textbooks could mediate their levels of working with reference materials.

The impact of attitude on autonomous learning behaviors was also evident in the students' activities of checking their work. Student 9 was the only one who reported that she did not check her work before submission because she did not want to read her work again and felt disappointed with it. Her comments suggested that she might never think that she did her work well, and self-evaluating her work could not make her work better. However, the other ten students disagreed with this idea. They thought that reviewing their own work before submission was necessary and they always did this. Further analyses indicated that the students' levels of review were dissimilar. Seven students said that they often looked over their work for spelling and grammatical mistakes because they thought such mistakes had to be avoided. Meanwhile, three other students said that they reviewed their work very carefully because they loved reading

their own work (Student 4) or wanted to express their respect to their teachers (Student 1). Student 11 even sent his work to his peers for evaluation because he thought that an independent reader could more easily identify his mistakes.

The mediating effect of attitude was also reflected in several other learning behaviors of students. Student 10, for example, indicated that one of the reasons that he did not regularly participate in the speaking activities in English speaking clubs was his uncertainty about its effectiveness. Similarly, both Students 1 and 2 said that they would give up writing small essays and planning activities in the future if their language competence was not improved. This suggested that an attitude towards a learning behavior was constituted by reflective judgments. Students often became interested in a learning activity, tried it for a while and evaluated the outcome. If they were satisfied with that outcome, it was likely that they would develop a positive attitude towards that learning behavior and continue to perform it. Otherwise, they would substitute it with another one of their interests.

Importantly, the requirements from class teachers had a strong impact on students' learning behaviors. Nine of the eleven students participating in the interviews agreed that the textbooks were boring, and generally their learning activities were developed independently from the textbooks. However, all of them said that they would read the textbooks carefully if it was required by their teachers. Such an obedient behavior suggested the important role of the course requirements and the teachers themselves in students' learning behaviors. Students seemed to think that the requirements from the teachers were those of the course and needed to be fulfilled. They might also tend to strongly believe that their teachers' advice was important, and they should follow this. In either of these two cases, the teachers' advice played a much more important role in mediating students' learning behaviors.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Factors Associated With Preference

Variations in students' personal preference were suggested to direct their autonomous learning behavior into different orientations. Students who are confident about their EFL competence prefer to overcome challenging learning tasks. Therefore, they tend to make their learning goals and plans specific (Students 9, 11, and 1, for example). In contrast, students who are passionate about EFL learning appear to focus less on planning activities and form general goals. It seems that they enjoy the learning process rather than the ultimate outcome. Although most EFL teaching practices such as communicative language teaching, cooperative teaching, or student-centeredness aim at facilitating interactive and collaborative learning opportunities for students, it is difficult to measure if such process-oriented learning behaviors can produce better quality learning than the outcomes-oriented approach.

Findings on students' preference of interactive learning patterns also suggest the importance of personality and trust as also reported in Yu (2021). For example, Students 2 and 4, who favor interactive learning, appear to be sociable. In contrast, Students 5 and 11, who favor individual learning, appear to be reluctant to work with others. Prior research in the context of Japan (Nelson & Carson, 1998) and China (Yang et al., 2006) emphasizes that students have skeptical perceptions of working with peers. They value their friends and peers' contribution to their learning, but they do not always think that it is useful. Therefore, it is likely that they tend to detach from their peers when given a chance. As they do not trust their friends' collaboration for their EFL development, they often do the learning task alone, as reported by Student 1 in the interview. This also implies that the method of member allocation in group work is critical. An inappropriate group formation technique can negatively affect the quality of learning engagement and hinder the promotion of learner autonomy.

Apart from individuals with extreme personalities, the mediation of learner autonomy is described as socially conditional. For example, students would have joined English speaking clubs regularly if they had lived near the clubs (Student 10) or if they had had a friend with whom to go (Student 8). Hence, they sometimes chose to stay at home and work with other materials. These students tend to be flexible in their learning behaviors which are primarily shaped by the contemporary situation. It seems that these students are more capable of managing different learning contexts as reported in Basri (2023). Nonetheless, this does not necessarily guarantee optimum success, especially for students with a low level of learner autonomy because the situational factors play a decisive role in their learning behaviors. This also means these students may respond positively to different teaching approaches. They can adopt an interactive or individual learning behavior without hesitation for the completion of a learning task.

B. Factors Associated With Motivation

The three sources of motivation which contribute to the shaping of students' autonomous learning behaviors appear to be associated intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and motivation intensity (termed by Gardner, 1985 and Ely, 1986). Reports from students in the current study indicate that these three patterns of motivation tend to trigger different patterns of autonomous learning behaviors. Students with intrinsic motivation in an area of knowledge, for instance, seem to prefer to work alone with the materials of their interest. They tended to detach from the class activities and did not care much about their classmates' learning performance. They planned, created, and engaged in the learning activities regardless of the social constraints from the learning environment. Nevertheless, it seems that such students will be able to engage very actively in class activities if they find a match between their learning motivation and the course objectives. To do this, apart from the suggestion by Aoki (2001) to engage students in a learning activity to

gradually increase their motivation, the current study suggests developing mutually shared learning content and objectives during the course.

The students who appear to be more motivated by external factors, such as peers' success, opt for flexible learning behaviors. As they would like to be better than their classmates, they often form pairs or groups with close friends and initiate learning opportunities. If finding a partner from their class is difficult, they tend to use other channels or even just study alone. This again implies the importance of grouping techniques and activity organization to facilitate students' learning engagement. It also reflects a shortcoming of the current teaching practices in creating study groups. Meanwhile, students motivated by both internal and external factors appear to perform more diverse patterns of autonomous learning behaviors. They tend to detach from their classmates in their learning behaviors. They seem to like learning alone with their highly personalized plan and in their own way or collaborating with people other than their classmates. In addition, they use their peers' achievement and progress for the development of their own learning goals. They also seem more committed to their learning plans regardless of social distractors or obstacles.

Students' perceived level of EFL competence in relation to that of their peers is important in predicting their autonomous learning behaviors, and this is applicable for different types of motivation. In such a collectivist society as Vietnam, learners often value the relative performance of an individual in comparison with others within the group rather than in reference to an absolute set of indicators. Therefore, students tend to regulate their learning behaviors according to their friends' performance. If they think that they are making better progress than their peers, they probably become more motivated in their learning (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Nevertheless, if they think their peers are more successful in learning achievements, their motivation needs to be fostered by teaching practice. Prior research shows that explicit instructions (Wacho, 2006) and motivational strategies (Guilloteaux & Dornyei, 2008; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2011) can increase students' learning empowerment and motivation. However, this has not been validated in the context of Vietnam.

C. Factors Associated With Attitude

Students holding a positive attitude towards course textbooks tend to develop their learning behaviors based on the textbook activities. Meanwhile, other students' learning behaviors are initiated and shaped by people and resources elsewhere. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the development of various learning attempts that may not necessarily match with the course objectives. It is also noted that students' attitude towards a learning activity can be reshaped during their learning process, which changes their autonomous learning behaviors. This conclusion is an addition to the argument that different students can have different attitudes towards the same learning activity (Hart, 2002). In other words, teaching practice can play an important role in changing students' attitudes towards a learning space by helping them recognize the advantages of taking part in it.

Further analyses also suggest that even when students hold the same attitude towards a learning activity, their autonomous learning behaviors can be performed at different levels. For example, some students only do spell and grammar checks when reviewing their assignments, while others tend to focus more on the content although they all have a positive attitude towards this learning activity. This suggests either a difference in the level of attitude or the anticipation of social factors. However, an interactive combination between these two alternatives should be more logical, as attitude can be governed by both individual and situational factors (Dornyei, 2003). More noticeably, it can be changed according to experience (Elyildirim & Ashton, 2006). These suggestions again emphasize the complex pattern of mediating factors on the performance of learner autonomy.

Of the factors influencing students' attitude, the teachers' instruction appears to be the most significant. It is likely that students in the study context strongly believe their teachers' advice. Although nine of the eleven interviewees reported that they did not develop their learning activities around the textbook, if their teachers asked them to do an activity in the book, they would definitely do so. They seem to automatically modify their attitude as instructed by the teachers. Their obedience seems to reflect the cultural and educational philosophy which is deeply rooted in the Vietnamese culture. Of course, there should be the anticipation of a power relationship and course requirement, but students did not seem to perceive any zone for learner autonomy development when teachers are involved. On one hand, this makes the role of teachers even more critical in nurturing learner autonomy because they need to help students understand the possibility of negotiating and debating with them. On the other hand, it is easier for teachers to facilitate the class activities in the way they want. Students may have a negative attitude towards an initiative at first, but they have a chance to modify it because they actually take part in that initiative.

VI. CONCLUSION

The investigation reported in this paper shows that different patterns of autonomous learning behaviors are triggered by variations in preference, motivation, and attitude. Although the analyses attempted to separate these factors when examining the performance of learner autonomy to maintain the clarity of the presentation, it is suggested that these factors interact with one another before having an effect on a learner. Such evidence is also aligned with the argument that there is a positive relationship between motivation and attitude (Dornyei, 2003) or an association among preference, belief, and attitude (Bullock, 2011). These suggestions call for a large-scale project on learner autonomy promoting

pedagogies, particularly in such a context as the contemporary Vietnam where both deep and surface learning orientations co-exist.

Preference, motivation, and attitude are in turn mediated by personal, situational, and social factors. Thus, teachers need to allow opportunities for students to tailor learning activities to suit their own self. Of course, this teaching and learning approach needs to be negotiated with students. They can be encouraged to use their prior learning experience and personal strategies flexibly during learning processes. They also have opportunities to reflect on their performance and modify their behaviors, if necessary, to obtain better outcomes (Dam & Legenhausen, 2010). Hence, when carrying out a learning activity, they are guided to target linguistic objectives (Lamb, 2010) and enhance their learner autonomy capacity. To design these activities properly, it is necessary for teachers to draw on social attributes in the local context.

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