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Learning English Beyond the Classroom: Perception and Practice in a Vietnamese Context

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Out-of-class learning activities, though a relatively new area in the literature on autonomy, have attracted growing interest among scholars and teachers. With the widespread development of the internet, the increasing globalization and the burgeoning of numerous technological tools through which learners can practice their English, out-of-class learning is becoming more and more popular. This article is an attempt to offer some insights into the perception of the usefulness and the frequency of using out-of-class learning activities by students majoring in English in Vietnamese EFL contexts. It therefore begins with a brief review of previous studies on out-of-class learning, followed by a description of the research design. After the data collection and analysis, a discussion of the results and pedagogical implications is also provided.

Background of the Study

The current English language teaching and learning context in Vietnam can be characterized by three noticeable features: teacher-dominated classrooms, an exam-oriented education system, and teachers' subjective assumptions about learner autonomy and English ability levels. First, the teaching practice in Vietnam is depicted as "giving learners the fish" rather than "teaching them how to fish" (Lap, 2005). Teachers are normally considered as "the master of knowledge" (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996) and their job in the classroom is limited to transmitting this knowledge to their students rather than encouraging them to learn independently. Moreover, the influence of Confucian ideology engenders a traditionally-held belief that learners are not allowed to challenge their teachers directly as it is an act of disrespect and may cause the teacher to lose face (Nga, 2014). A corollary of this teaching situation is the fact that learners appear to be passive receivers of knowledge and "tend not to be supported in developing autonomy during the educational process" (Nga, 2014). Second, the educational system in Vietnam places a huge emphasis on exams. Besides numerous end-of-course, end-of-trimester, and progressive tests, there are two national exams administered annually: the high school entrance exam and the university entrance exam, in which English is a core component. As a result, learners are more concerned about their immediate goal - to pass exams rather than to widen their knowledge and expertise. This situation exposes English teachers to the challenge of whether to adopt an exam-oriented or a communicative development approach to language teaching (Hiep, 2005). Third, English teachers in Vietnam tend to take learner autonomy for granted. This probably originates in the assumption that learners, particularly at tertiary levels, are mature enough to

make decisions on their own learning. Moreover, policy makers, syllabus designers, and teachers normally presume the language needs of students and their English proficiency levels (Brogan & Ha, 1999). Thus, they decide to choose good books that are available on the market for teaching with the belief that these imported materials, as designed, compiled, and revised by prominent scholars in the "West", should not be questioned in terms of their usage and effectiveness. It should be noted, however, that these materials are not intended for the specific context of Vietnam. Therefore, without being appraised and adapted by teachers, they are more or less irrelevant to the lives and experience of Vietnamese students, which does little to foster their independent learning.

The teaching and learning of English at the tertiary level in Vietnam is *par excellence* an illustration of the situation described above. The teacher-centered approach to language teaching, the burden of tests and exams, and the rigid dependency on imported materials conspire to render the learning of English as unsatisfactory according to the expectations of the stakeholders. However, the overall picture is not that gloomy. With the "open door" policy of the government and the recent admission of Vietnam to the WTO, English enjoys a higher status in society. Additionally, the increasing availability of the internet, social media, and English programs offers learners greater access to out-of-class learning activities, which may help them better their learning experience. It is this aspect of learner autonomy that this article is focused on, with the aim of shedding some light on what learners do to improve their English outside the classroom, what the teachers should do, and how to foster these habits.

Previous Studies on Out-of-class Learning

Despite a relatively new territory in the field of learner autonomy, out-of-class learning has received quite a lot of interest from scholars and teachers. Suh, Wasanasomsithi, Short, and Majid (1999) conducted a study of eight international students enrolled in an intensive ESL program at Indiana University in Bloomington and arrived at the conclusion that most of the participants relied heavily on independent leisure activities such as watching television, going to the movies, and listening to music to improve their conversational English skills, particularly listening comprehension. Pickard (1996) studied out-of-class English learning activities by 20 German-speaking first-year undergraduate students on a European business studies degree program at Humberside University and found that the passive activities of listening and reading were frequently undertaken due to the easier accessibility of materials while opportunities for speaking and writing activities were limited. He further commented that those participants chose to do so on the basis of their own needs rather than being imposed by the teachers. Similar results were reported by Yap (1998) and Littlewood and Liu (1996), who respectively examined out-of-class learning activities of secondary school students and tertiary students in Hong Kong. Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002) reported that out of the 22 activities suggested, 10 out-of-class activities, which are more related to communication and entertainment through English – such as sending emails in English, watching English movies, using the internet in English, and talking to foreigners – were widely undertaken by students because they were more interesting than the other activities. Hyland (2004) looked at out-of-class learning from a different angle. She found that Hong Kong students, when choosing out-of-class activities, had a tendency to focus on the private domain which did not involve face-to-face contact rather than the public domain due to the prejudiced implications attached to using English in Hong Kong society and the fear of negative judgment. She further indicated that more consideration should be given to the private domain of out-of-class learning as it is less threatening to identity and easier for students to control. A common research finding is that learners choose out-of-class learning activities on the basis of their preferences and the availability of the needed resources. Another consideration which may be of equal importance is whether or not learners' perception of the usefulness of out-of-class activities corresponds with their actual practice. This will be discussed in more detail in this article.

Research Design

Research Questions

This research was conducted at a university in Vietnam to examine English majors' perceptions of the usefulness of out-of-class English learning activities and how frequently they actually practice those activities. Therefore, the following questions are considered:

1. How useful do students think out-of-class activities are for improving English?
2. How frequently do they practice these activities?

Participants

A total of 40 third-year English majors at Quy Nhon University (QNU), Vietnam agreed to take part in the study. Half of the participants were from teacher training (pedagogical) classes and the other half included students from English for general purpose classes. Although both disciplines follow the same curriculum, the pedagogical classes receive more training on techniques and skills for teaching, while the others are primarily equipped with translating and interpreting skills.

Instruments

The main instrument for this study is the questionnaire devised to investigate students' reported out-of-class activities in English. Participants were required to rate the usefulness and the frequency of 15 suggested activities on a 5-point Likert scale (see Appendix 1). The suggested activities were based on previous research as well as on the context-specific practices of Vietnamese teachers and learners. An open-ended question was also included to discover other activities which were not included in the questionnaire. Additionally, to enhance the validity of the study as well as to capture different perspectives of the participants' responses, a group interview was conducted after the administration of the questionnaires. Eight out of 40 participants (4 pedagogical students and 4 general English students) were chosen for the interview. The interview prompts primarily focused on participants' justifications and clarifications of their responses to the questionnaire.

Procedures

Questionnaire administration and interviews were handled by a teacher who held a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics. First, the questionnaire was piloted with a group of 10 fourth-year English majors from the same department. Modifications were made and mistakes corrected in light of their responses. It was then distributed to 40 third-year English majors, who were given time to think carefully before rating the items. After finishing the questionnaire, eight students participated in an audio-recorded group interview. Vietnamese was the medium of communication, but data were translated into English for the analysis.

Findings

Perceptions of the Usefulness of Out-of-class Activities

Students were asked about the usefulness of 15 suggested activities in English. It can be seen from Table 1 that "speak with foreigners", "listen to songs", "participate in English clubs", "speak with other

students", and "surf the internet" were the most useful activities as perceived by students. In general, students tended to place more emphasis on interactive activities; the majority of the most perceived useful activities involved face-to-face communication. This can be further explained by their comments in the interview afterwards, as seen in the following excerpts:

The ultimate goal of learning English is to speak English well. Therefore, talking with other people, especially with foreigners in English is very useful.

During the first year I was very sad because I couldn't understand what the English teachers say in class and couldn't speak English with others. Then I participated in our department's English club and I felt more confident because I could talk to other members and learn from senior students.

I will not be shy when speaking English with my roommate because her English is as bad as me.

Interestingly, "listen to songs" was rated as the second most useful activity, but when asked about this, most of the interviewees said that it was because many of their teachers let them listen to English songs before classes and asked them to do this at home to improve their English. Paradoxically, they showed their willingness to take up the activity as recommended by their teachers, but could not provide their own rationale for the decision. This finding is illustrated by a participant who mentioned, "I'm not sure about his but because all of my teachers said that it is useful, then I think it's useful, too."

TABLE 1
Participants' Reported Usefulness of the Out-of-class Activities

Activities	Average scores
Speak with foreigners	1.5
Listen to songs	1.6
Participate in English clubs	1.9
Speak with other students	2.0
Surf the internet	2.1
Write emails	2.2
Watch TV programs	2.2
Watch movies/ DVDs/ VCDs/ YouTube	2.4
Listen to the radio	2.4
Write to pen-pals	2.4
Read novels	2.5
Read newspaper and magazines	2.5
Read academic books and articles	2.7
Chat on Facebook	3.1
Play games	3.2

(1=very useful; 5=not useful at all)

Frequency of Using Out-of-class Activities

Among the 15 suggested out-of-class activities, "listen to songs", "watch movies", "watch TV", "speak with other students", and "listen to the radio" were most frequently selected by students. It is noticeable that apart from "speak with other students", none of the most useful activities as perceived by participants are actually used outside the classroom. This can be attributed to various reasons among which accessibility of resources and individual preferences were the most cited. For example:

It is much easier to find English TV programs, movies or radio stations on the internet than to find

someone who can speak English face-to-face with you.

Watching TV or movies in English is like killing two birds with one stone. You can study English and entertain simultaneously.

TABLE 2
Participants' Reported Frequency of the Out-of-class Activities

Activities	Average scores
Write to pen pals	4.8
Send emails	4.4
Speak with foreigners	4.2
Read novels	4.2
Read newspaper and magazines	4.0
Participate in English clubs	4.0
Surf the internet	3.8
Read academic books and articles	3.5
Chat on Facebook	3.2
Play games	3.1
Listen to radio	3.0
Speak with other students	2.9
Watch TV	2.7
Watch movies/DVDs/VCDs/YouTube	2.4
Listen to songs	1.7

(From the least frequent to the most frequent)

It is interesting that "speak with foreigners", albeit considered by students as the most useful activity, was hardly employed in reality. All interviewees pointed to the fact that there were few opportunities for them to meet and converse with native English speakers.

Discussion

The tendency to choose out-of-class learning activities depends on various factors which have been discussed in previous studies. In this small-scale study, three outstanding themes emerged out of a number of perspectives, namely, the contrast between students' belief and their actual practice, the effect of career orientation, and identity construction.

First, although participants acknowledged the usefulness of such activities as "speak to foreigners", "speak to friends", or "participate in English clubs", they tended to focus more on activities that did not involve face-to-face interaction when it came to actual practice. This lent support to the finding reported by Hyland (2004), who used the terms private domain versus public domain. The students here preferred private activities to public activities largely due to the restricted availability of resources and personal interest rather than to the avoidance of "interpersonal risks" and "criticisms of others" (Hyland, 2004).

Second, participants' responses to the third section in the questionnaire unraveled an important perspective - the effect of career orientation on learners' choice of activities. Almost a quarter of the participants suggested "translate Wikipedia's English pages into Vietnamese", and quite a lot of others proposed "peer tutoring" as additional activities to the provided ones. The group interview afterwards helped illuminate this. The general English interviewees revealed that another activity they usually did outside the class was to find English information on a particular theme (an event, a famous person, a description of something) on Wikipedia and translate it into Vietnamese. This helped enhance their pool of vocabulary and boosted their translating skills because they hoped to become professional translators

after graduation. Similarly, the pedagogical students reported that they normally did the readings and exercises in preparation for each class and took turns explaining what they understood to their partner in a didactic way. This was helpful for them as they would do the same to their students in the future. It was clear that career orientation influenced the way learners practiced English outside the classroom. Research at a larger scale into this perspective of out-of-class learning merits more consideration.

Finally, in her study, Hyland (2004) found that learners avoided using English in public settings because they were afraid that other people would see them as showing off. This was, however, in stark contrast to what was found in this study. Despite the limited possibility of encountering native English speakers, the students here availed themselves of any opportunities to use English. They did not fear negative judgments imposed on them by others. Instead, they were convinced that people would consider them as talented, educated, and knowledgeable citizens:

I'm proud of myself because when I talk to foreigners on the street, people stand around and look at me with admiration.

I'm useful for the community because for example, a lot of my neighbors came and asked me to translate the "user instruction" part written on the labels of imported products like medicine or milk.

Through using English, those students gradually constructed their identity as skilled and useful members of their community of practice, which in turn further motivated their out-of-class learning.

Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

Although there are a variety of activities that learners can do to improve their English out of the formal setting of the classroom, their choice depends on numerous factors. Teachers should be aware of those factors so as to offer their learners the best orientation. The findings from this small-scale study indicate that:

1. Although there is a mismatch between the public and private domains of out-of-class learning activities, they both benefit learners in one way or another. Teachers should make this clear to learners and offer suitable advice depending on specific contexts.
2. Helping learners to build up the independent learning habit should not be conducted all at once. Instead, this must be a gradual process, enabling learners to set goals and adopt appropriate monitoring and evaluating approaches. The example of participants who considered "listen to songs" as a useful activity but cannot provide a rationale for their perception should be considered.
3. Inviting native English teachers to attend classes and converse with students can be a potential alternative to helping learners build up their confidence in communicating, thus giving them more courage when encountering the same situation in reality.

As a final note, despite the fact that there were interesting findings, the study is quite small in scope within the purview of an EFL context. Replication attempts with larger sample sizes in various EFL contexts are welcome as are studies which delve into specific categories of out-of-class learning.

The Author

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3. Beside these activities, what other activities do you do outside the classroom to improve your English skills and how often do you do them?

Thank you very much for your cooperation!