
An Investigation into Learner's Autonomy and Vocabulary Learning Strategies among Grade 12 Students at a Vietnamese High School

^[1]Nu Do Thi, ^[2]Que Nguyen Thi*^[1]Ly Nam De High School, Thai Nguyen, Vietnam^[2]Thai Nguyen University of Sciences, Thai Nguyen, Vietnam

Abstract. Learner autonomy is a huge assistance for learners in vocabulary learning since it provides the learners with numerous diverse privileges such as independency from teachers and therefore, should be thoroughly investigated to see whether it promotes vocabulary learning. This study employs correlational research design to determine students' level of learning autonomy, find out students' vocabulary learning strategies and finally figure out the relationship between the two factors on grade 12 students at a Vietnamese high school. Results from the study show that students' levels of learning autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies are generally at medium levels and there is a significant relationship between them. Suggestions and recommendations will thereby be given to ensure the successful teaching and learning of English vocabularies in an EFL setting.

Key words: learning autonomy, vocabulary learning strategies, relationship, Vietnamese high school

Introduction

Language, the element for understanding the community of its speakers consists of a set of grammatical rules and vocabulary items. Therefore, vocabulary is an important sub-field of language learning, with which learners are able to use four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Vocabulary learning is incredibly noteworthy to English language acquisition. It is unfeasible for a learner to communicate without the required vocabulary. This importance is recognized regardless of L1, L2, or EFL learning (Decarrico, 2001).

However, learning words is an incremental process involving a variety of sub-processes. One noticeable process is primarily concerned with lexical entry, i.e., the enrichment, refinement of lexical information, which many EFL learners lack (Nan, 2004). It is obvious that, with a limited vocabulary repertoire, it is very difficult for learners to effectively engage in any reading or speaking activities. Accordingly, they need an effective way to improve their vocabulary size.

According to Schmitt (2008) and Teng (2014), there are mainly two approaches concerning vocabulary acquisition, namely incidental learning and intentional learning. However, because of the limited time for intentional and explicit teaching of every word in classrooms, many researchers have resorted to incidental vocabulary learning. It is obvious that when learners try to understand the embedded meaning of the context, then the acquisition of words occurs subconsciously (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999).

Language learning strategies and principles in recent years have shown the shift in the roles of learners from passively receiving information from teachers to actively finding the information from peers and other sources for their deep understanding. In order to effectively make use of resources available, learners should become 'self-instruction', 'self-access', 'self-study', 'self-education' learners. In other words, 'the autonomous learner' is what a student should become since learner autonomy is believed to produce positive outcomes to develop life-long learners.

* Corresponding author

One of the aspects of language learning that has the greatest potential for adopting learner autonomy is vocabulary. However, Wenden (1991) stress that being aware of different learning strategies also help language learners become more efficient autonomous learners and users. Therefore, it is essential to determine whether there is a relationship between learning strategies and learner autonomy to better students' learning outcomes in vocabulary or not.

This study attempted to examine the relationship between students' level of learning autonomy and their use of vocabulary learning strategies by grade 12 students at Ly Nam De High School, Thai Nguyen province of Vietnam.

Methods

The study employed the correlational research design to determine whether there was a correlation between students' level of learning autonomy and their use of vocabulary strategies. The respondents of this study were 145 students studying in grade 12 in their second semester of the academic year of 2019-2020 at Ly Nam De High school, Thai Nguyen province of Vietnam.

The research instrument used in the study is a questionnaire adapted from Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies to collect data of the respondents' background and use of VLS; and a checklist of learner's autonomy in learning developed by Sakai, et al. (2008) using the Likert's scale rating from 1 to 5.

The data gathered were described statistically using mean, Correlation coefficient R, R squares and Pair Samples T Test for the inferential analysis.

Data were expressed as Mean \pm SD. Difference were considered significant at $P \leq 0.05$.

Results and Discussion

The following are findings and interpretation of the data with supported research results and evidences.

Demographic Information of the Participants

Table 1. Students' background information

Students' background information	Participants
Number	145
Sex	79 males (54.5%) 66 females (45.5%)
Age: 17 (93.1%) 18 (5.5%) 19 (1.4%)	
Have you been introduced with vocabulary learning strategies before?	
Yes	30.3%
No	69.7%
Do you think whether you're good or bad at vocabulary depends on your learning strategies?	
Yes	96.6%
No	3.4%

There was a total of 145 students participating in the study in which 79 were males and 66 were females. It is noticeable that two thirds of the students claimed that they had never been introduced with vocabulary learning strategies before, which took up for 69.7%.

The Use of Students' Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Table 2. Vocabulary learning strategies by participants

No	Strategies	Mean	SD	Interpretation	Rank
1	Memory	3.14	0.50	Medium Use	1
2	Determination	2.91	0.50	Medium Use	2
3	Cognitive	2.86	0.34	Medium Use	3
4	Social	2.70	0.40	Medium Use	4
5	Metacognitive	2.31	0.23	Low Use	5
	Overall	2.78	0.39	Medium Use	

General vocabulary learning strategies used by grade 12 students at Ly Nam De high school were reported in Table 2. Congruent with results of each feature, the overall interpretation of VLS was also categorized as **Medium Use** with an overall mean of **2.78** and SD of **0.39**.

As revealed from the results, Memory strategy outstood other strategies as it ranks first in the level of frequency with the overall mean of 3.14 and a verbal interpretation of "Medium Use". This was followed by three other categories including Determination, Cognitive and Social strategies with the lower means of 2.91, 2.86 and 2.70 respectively and an interpretation of "Medium Use". However, Metacognitive strategies was found to be the least frequent strategies among VLS to be used by participants with a mean of 2.31 and marked as "Low Use".

Specific Vocabulary Learning Strategies

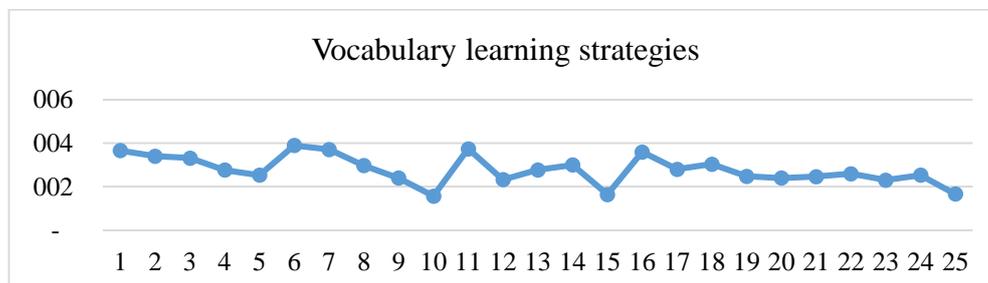


Figure 1. Distribution of the use of vocabulary learning strategies

The distribution of students' use of vocabulary learning strategies can be observed in Figure 1. above. It is apparent that about half of students' approach in learning vocabulary scattered at the medium frequency from 2.61 to 3.40; while one fourth belonged to high frequency level and three other strategies were very low used (strategies 10, 15 and 25). The rest of strategies were allotted in the low frequency level, ranging from 1.81 to under 2.60. It is also interesting to note that most of the strategies rated as high and medium frequency belong to strategy to memorize and discover the meaning of words while strategy to use and widen new words was described at medium or low frequency level.

Level of Learner Autonomy

As mentioned in Chapter 4, in order to answer the second research question concerning with how autonomous the LND High school students are, an autonomous learner checklist was adapted by Spratt et al.(2002) and redesigned on the base of the characteristics of autonomous learners including responsibilities toward learning, abilities and autonomous learning activities

outside the classroom. The data collected from the autonomous learner checklist was computed and analyzed as follows.

Table 3. Learner autonomy checklist

No	Learner autonomy	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1.	I know my strengths in language learning	3.46	0.83	High Degree
2.	I know my weaknesses in language learning.	3.52	0.57	High Degree
3.	I can easily set goals for my learning	3.14	0.67	Medium Degree
4.	I know what and how I am learning	2.49	0.22	Low Degree
5.	I am confident that I can learn English.	2.34	0.22	Low Degree
6.	I can check how much progress I make.	2.84	0.38	Medium Degree
7.	I often keep record of my studies such as assignments, attendance and test scores.	3.12	0.63	Medium Degree
8.	I actively seek and use more language learning strategies for my language study.	3.04	0.54	Medium Degree
9.	I often assess my study.	2.84	0.32	Medium Degree
10.	I can control my learning by using the necessary learning strategies.	2.41	0.18	Low Degree
11.	I ask my partner and teachers for help whenever I need.	3.56	0.55	High Degree
12.	I am ready to be proactive in my learning process	2.74	0.29	Medium Degree
13.	I often practice speaking English with my teachers.	2.70	0.39	Medium Degree
14.	I often practice using English with friends.	3.46	0.86	High Degree
15.	I make use of opportunities to talk to foreigners in English.	1.80	0.19	Very Low Degree
16.	I often read newspapers, magazines and books in English.	3.01	0.44	Medium Degree
17.	I often read web pages in English.	3.04	0.54	Medium Degree
18.	I often write e-mails in English.	3.23	0.53	Medium Degree
19.	I often watch and listen to English learning TV and radio programs.	2.66	0.39	Medium Degree
20.	I often keep a diary in English.	2.14	0.23	Low Degree
21.	I often listen to English songs to improve my English.	3.43	0.60	High Degree
22.	I often do extra English exercises from different sources, such as texts, newspapers, Internet etc.	2.66	0.39	Medium Degree
23.	I study to prepare for proficiency tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC	2.37	0.16	Low Degree
24.	I am able to apply the knowledge learned in classroom to the real-life outside classroom	2.58	0.32	Low Degree
25.	I often watch English movies without subtitles.	1.77	0.22	Very Low Degree
	Overall	2.81	0.43	Medium Degree

Table 3 showed the results of the individual items obtained from the checklist and the result of these items, which indicates that the degree of students' autonomy was at **Medium level** ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.43$).

Looking at the table in more specific details, it is obvious that the study revealed participants to be highly autonomous in learning with **High Degree** in five aspects when "*I ask my partner and teachers for help whenever I need*" ($M = 3.56$), "*I know my weaknesses and*

strengths in language learning”(M = 3.52, 3.46), “I often practice using English with friends” (M = 3.46), and “I often listen to English songs to improve my English” (M = 3.43).

Additionally, some aspects of students’ learning were labeled as **Low Degree** of Autonomy in statements such as “I am able to apply the knowledge learned in classroom to the real life outside classroom” (M = 2.58), “I know what and how I am learning” (M = 2.49), “I can control my learning by using the necessary learning strategies.” (M = 2.41).

Finally, students were rated with a **Very Low Degree** in two aspects of “I make use of opportunities to talk to foreigners in English” (M = 1.80) and “I often watch English movies without subtitles” (M = 1.77).

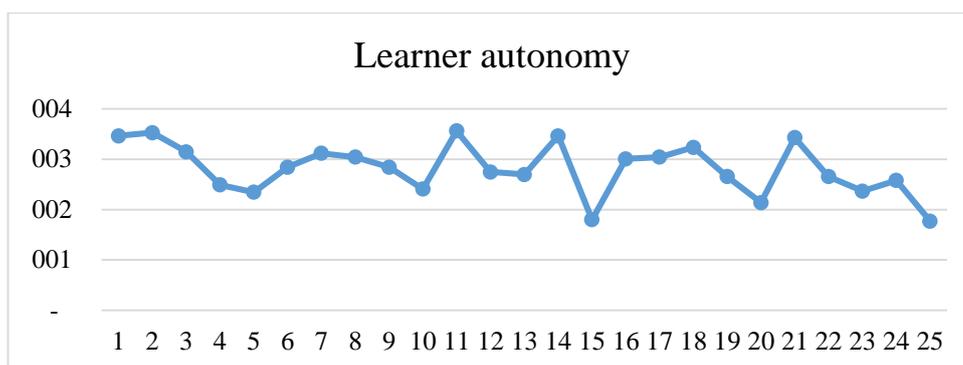


Figure 2. Distribution of students' level of learning autonomy

As can be observed from the above figure, about half of students’ learning autonomy scattered at the Medium Degree from 2.61 to 3.40 (48%). A similar number of students’ learning autonomy was leveled at High and Low Degree (44%) while two aspects were rated as Very Low Degree (Items 15 and 25). It is also interesting to note that most of the strategies rated as high and medium frequency belong to strategy related to students’ perceptions on their responsibilities and abilities in in-class learning while items concerning abilities to learn and use English outside classroom were mostly described at medium or low level.

Relationship between Students’ LA and VLS

Results of determining the form, direction and degree of correlation on a graph and by regression analysis.

The linear relationship

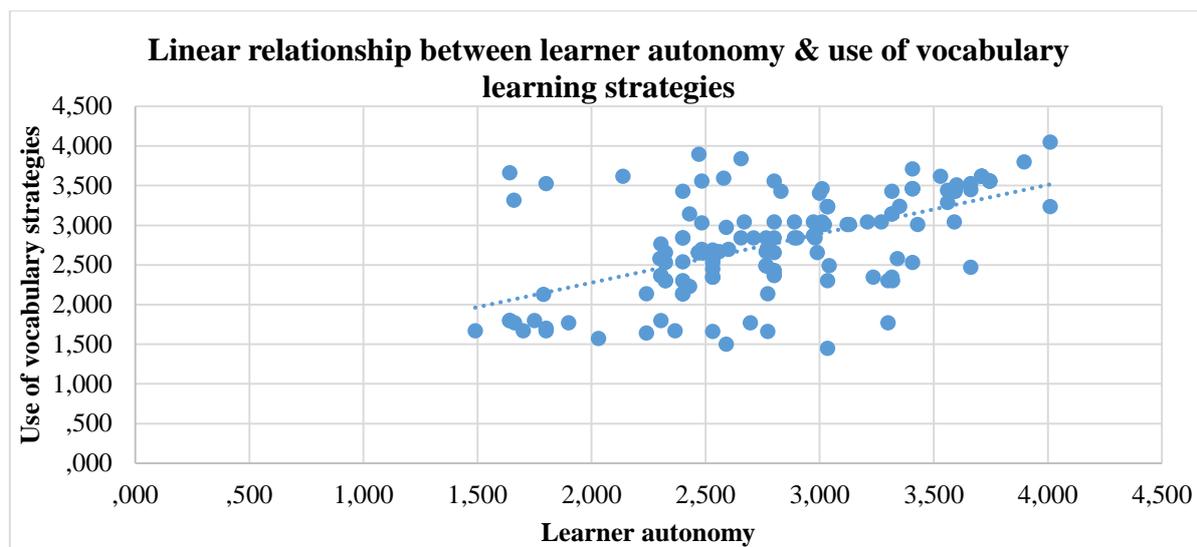


Figure 3. The linear relationship between LA and VLSs

As can be seen from Figure 3, the correlation between the students' level of learning autonomy and their use of VLS was linear pattern. The direction of the association was positive. The spread of the scores displays a moderate to high correlation between the two variables.

The regression of the correlation

Table 4. The regression of the correlation

	Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	14.801	1	14.801	67.798	.000 ^a
	Residual	31.218	143	.218		
	Total	46.019	144			

Note: a. Predictors: (Constant), Use of VLS

It is obvious from the table that $F = 67.798$ and $P\text{-value} = 0.000$ which is smaller than 0.05 , so it can be affirmed that the linear pattern exists. This further confirms that there was a correlation between two variables: students' level of learning autonomy and their use of vocabulary strategies.

The coefficient size of the relationship between the students' VLS and level of LA

Table 5. Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.567 ^a	.322	.317	.46723

Note: a. Predictors: (Constant), Vocab Learning Strategies

Table 10 shows clearly indicates the coefficient size of the relationship between two variables. It is clear that the size of the coefficient is shown by $R = 0.567$ ($0.5 \leq R < 0.7$) and $R^2 = 0.322$ ($0.25 \leq R^2 < 0.5$) which indicates a **rather large or strong correlation** between two variables. It means that students' use of vocabulary learning strategies was much related to their level of learning autonomy. In other words, students' level of learning autonomy predicted their use of vocabulary strategies at a rather large or strong level.

Table 6. Coefficient size in the pattern

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.351	.180		7.509	.000
	Vocab LS	.522	.063	.567	8.234	.000

Note: a. Dependent Variable: LA

As can be seen from Table 11, $t_1 = 8.234$ and $p\text{-value} = 0.000$ which is significantly smaller than 0.05. Therefore, it is affirmed that there is a positive correlation between two variables. This means that when the students' use of vocabulary learning strategies increases, it causes the learner autonomy to ascend.

$P\text{-value} = 0.000$ which is significantly lower than 0.05, the Null hypothesis is rejected, so it can be affirmed that the linear pattern exists. This means that there was a significant correlation between two variables: the students' use of VLS and the LA.

The results of determining the relationship between VLS and LA with Paired Samples T-test.

Table 7. Mean and SD of the scores

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Learner Autonomy	2.7968	145	.56531	.04695
Vocab LS	2.7691	145	.61388	.05098

Table 12 reveals the mean value, the number of cases, standard deviation and standard error for the two variables of learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies and students' level of learning autonomy compared in the Paired samples T-test.

Table 8. The correlation between students' use of VLS and Level of LA

		LA	VLS
LA	Pearson Correlation	1	.567**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	145	145
VLS	Pearson Correlation	.567**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	145	145

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation of determination between Students' students' use of VLS and the LA is 0.567; $r = 0.567$ and the significant value ($p=0.000$) which revealed that there was a positive linear relationship between the students' use of VLSs and the learner autonomy. The result indicated that the use of VLSs and the learner autonomy of the participants were significantly positively and linearly correlated. This means that their use of VLSs increases with the learner autonomy. In other words, the more VLSs students use, the more autonomous learners they are and students' level of LA predicts their use of VLS.

Table 9. The Paired Samples Test Analysis of the scores between 2 variables

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
LA - VLS	.02766	.55028	.04570	-.06267	.11798	.605	144	.000

Table 9 further affirms that students' level of learning autonomy and their use of vocabulary learning strategies were rather strongly and positively correlated ($r=0.567$, $p < 0.005$). There was a significant difference between level of learners' autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies ($t_{144} = 0.605$). On average, learners' level of autonomy was 0.2766 points higher than Vocabulary learning strategies (95% confidence interval of the difference). This finding finds confirmation with study conducted by Nguyen (2012) which concluded that students' use of VLSs helped improve students' learner autonomy and learner autonomy entailed higher use of vocabulary learning strategies.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

Here are major findings of the study:

1. Vocabulary learning strategies were used at medium level of frequency by grade 12 students at Ly Nam De High School students. Specifically, the most frequently used strategies were Memory strategies while Metacognitive was least frequently used.
2. The level of learning autonomy by these participants was also measured at medium level. In particular, a majority of students of grade 12 at Ly Nam De high school were rated at moderate level or lack of autonomy in using English outside classroom.
3. There is a linear, positive and rather strong correlation between students' uses of vocabulary learning strategies and their level of learning autonomy. Thus, the findings implied that the more VLSs students use, the more autonomous they become.

Recommendations

In order to make VLSs effective as well as help students become more autonomous, some issues should be taken into consideration as follows.

First of all, teachers of English should introduce language learning strategies, particularly vocabulary learning strategies as shown from the results that nearly 70% of students had never been introduced with vocabulary learning strategies before. However, it should be noted that not all the identified strategies suit all types of individual preference and no strategy fits all contexts. Therefore, English educators should try to apply different strategies to meet a variety of students' level, teaching conditions and learners' motivation and encourage them to use more often when learning English in order to promote learners' autonomy significantly.

Secondly, from the findings of learner autonomy checklist, most of items of learner autonomy found at low and medium levels were in the category of learning process awareness and abilities to use English outside classroom. Therefore, using LLSs can help students set short term and long-term goals for their learning, apply and adjust, then control their learning by using necessary strategies. The findings also found that the students were not willing to talk to foreigners or use English outside classroom contexts, therefore, extracurricular activities outside schools should be encouraged, particularly activities which involved communication with foreigners.

Thirdly, using VLSs effectively was found to have a positive effect on learner autonomy in this study. However, improving learner autonomy also depends on many other factors, such as teachers, motivation and attitude, belief, society and education, previous learning. Hence, teacher should be autonomous first, and then create an autonomous learning environment in relation to a specific context to cultivate the learners who can continue their lifelong learning independently. Therefore, in order for learners to be actively involved in learning process, they should share their responsibility with their teachers for their learning outcome.

In short, in order to promote students' learner autonomy effectively, the above implications raised from the study should be taken into account, especially using VLSs in learning English to promote their learner autonomy in learning, thereby, their learning outcomes will be increased. The study once again encourages teachers and students to employ VLSs as a part of a study course to foster learner autonomy.

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