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Non-majored English Students' Learning Autonomy through Extensive Listening at a Public University

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Abstract

Enhancing English language proficiency, especially in listening skills, is crucial for students completing General English Courses at universities in Vietnam these days. Unfortunately, non-majored English students are often overlooked in assessments of this vital skill in their final exams, resulting in a lack of autonomy in their language learning, particularly in listening. This research explored students' perspectives on fostering autonomy through extensive listening activities, conducting a qualitative case study with 10 non-majored English students. Interviews revealed that extensive listening motivated students' learning and improved their listening skills. However, despite these benefits, the findings highlighted a need for educators to play a more active role in designing and delivering comprehensive guidance in extensive listening strategies. This study contributed valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on optimizing learning autonomy in English language education.

Keywords: *Learning autonomy; Extensive listening; Motivation; Listening strategies; Non-majored English.*

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Introduction

Listening constitutes a crucial skill in the learning journey, playing a crucial role for language learners. This skill not only offers diverse perspectives but also serves as a bridge to connect with other cultures, broadening our vision and enhancing our ability to express ourselves, particularly in speaking. As highlighted by Waring (2010), a profound understanding of the listened text contributes to the acceleration of word recognition speed, a heightened awareness of grammar usage, identification of collocations, and overall efficiency in cognitive processing. However, this proficiency is not uniformly emphasized across all student cohorts, especially within the context of General English Courses where non-majored English students may find themselves facing challenges that go beyond the traditional assessments.

In the academic setting of Vietnam, General English Courses represent a diverse and inclusive educational space where students, irrespective of their major, engage with foundational English subjects. While language proficiency is acknowledged as a key component, the nuances of how non-majored English

students navigate and develop their skills, especially in listening, often remain understudied. This oversight is particularly notable in final exams, where the assessment of listening skills may not receive the attention commensurate with its significance. The consequences of this oversight are far-reaching, contributing to a deficit in learning autonomy, particularly in the domain of listening skills. Learning autonomy refers to the capacity of learners to take charge of their learning, make informed decisions, and actively engage in the learning process (Benson & Voller, 1997). For non-majored English students, the absence of a comprehensive evaluation of their listening skills may hinder their ability to autonomously engage with and master this essential aspect of language acquisition.

To address this gap in understanding and to explore avenues for enhancing learning autonomy, this research undertakes a qualitative case study focused on non-majored English students within a public university in Vietnam. The specific focus is on the role of extensive listening activities in fostering autonomy, motivating learning, and improving listening skills. The existing gap in understanding the dynamics of non-majored English students' experiences with listening skills within the Vietnamese university context forms the rationale for this research. While numerous studies have explored language learning strategies, autonomy, and proficiency development, there is a scarcity of research specifically addressing the unique challenges and opportunities faced by non-majored English students in the realm of listening skills. Furthermore, the oversight in the assessment of listening skills during final exams raises questions about the extent to which non-majored English students are encouraged to develop autonomy in their language-learning journey. Autonomy in language learning is considered a crucial factor in long-term success, as it empowers learners to take control of their learning process, make informed decisions, and adapt to diverse learning contexts (Benson & Voller, 1997; Little, 1991).

Therefore, this research aims to achieve an understanding of how non-majored English students in a Vietnamese public university experience and navigate the development of listening skills through extensive listening activities. The specific objectives are to explore non-majored English students' perspectives on the role of extensive listening activities in motivating language learning and to identify the challenges and opportunities faced by non-majored English students in developing learning autonomy through extensive listening activities.

The research aims to address the following research questions:

1. *What are the non-majored English students' perceptions about extensive listening?*
2. *How does extensive listening affect their learning autonomy?*

Literature review

Learning Autonomy

The concept of learning autonomy in language education has been a prominent area of research, reflecting the ongoing efforts to understand how learners can take charge of their learning processes. Early

research by Holec (1981) and Benson and Voller (1997)) laid the groundwork for conceptualizing learning autonomy in language education. Holec introduced the term "autonomous learning," emphasizing the learner's capacity to take responsibility for their learning process. Benson expanded on this, emphasizing self-directedness and decision-making as integral components of learning autonomy. Later studies, such as those by Little (1991) and Gardner and Miller (1999), delved into the multifaceted nature of autonomy. Little's work introduced the concept of "strategic learning," highlighting the intentional and goal-oriented nature of learner autonomy. Gardner and Miller emphasized the motivational aspect, noting that intrinsically motivated learners often exhibit higher levels of autonomy.

Research consistently identifies various factors influencing the development of learning autonomy. Motivation remains a central theme, with Deci and Ryan (2013) Self-Determination Theory suggesting that autonomy supports intrinsic motivation. Vygotsky (1980) sociocultural theory underscores the role of social interactions, emphasizing the collaborative nature of autonomy development.

Educational contexts also play a crucial role. Littlewood (1999) argued that autonomy is nurtured through educational practices, and certain pedagogical approaches, such as task-based language teaching and communicative language teaching, have been associated with promoting learner autonomy (Ellis, 2003). Within language learning, autonomy is particularly relevant. Littlewood (1999) highlighted the active role of learners in language acquisition, advocating for pedagogies that empower learners to make choices and take responsibility. Extensive reading, as explored by Day and Bamford (1998), emerged as a practice linked to autonomy, allowing learners to select texts based on interests and set reading goals. The development of listening skills in language learning has also been a subject of autonomy research. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) explored how learners can actively engage in developing listening skills autonomously, employing various strategies such as goal-setting, material selection, and reflective practices.

While the promotion of learning autonomy is widely acknowledged, challenges and critiques exist. Benson (2006) argued that the emphasis on autonomy may disadvantage certain groups, and Smith (2008) suggested that the concept itself may be idealized and challenging to implement universally.

In conclusion, previous research has significantly contributed to the understanding of learning autonomy in language education. The conceptualization has evolved from early notions of autonomous learning to encompass multifaceted aspects such as motivation, social interactions, and educational practices. Language learning autonomy, whether in the form of strategic learning, extensive reading, or developing listening skills, remains a dynamic area of exploration.

Extensive Listening

Extensive listening has emerged as a significant pedagogical approach in language education, particularly for honing listening skills. This section explores the foundational research on extensive

listening, including its definition, its roles in language learning, and various activities associated with this approach. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how extensive listening contributes to the development of listening skills.

Extensive listening is a pedagogical concept that encourages learners to engage with a large volume of authentic listening materials for an extended period. It stands in contrast to intensive listening, which involves a focused and detailed examination of shorter audio segments. The primary goal of extensive listening is to expose learners to diverse language inputs, fostering comprehension, fluency, and a natural assimilation of language patterns (Rost, 2002). Candida (2021) defined extensive listening as a method for honing English listening proficiency. It involves engaging with a variety of recordings, videos, and interviews centered around a common theme. It is commonly accomplished by viewing movies, YouTube videos, TV series, documentaries, and TV news, or by listening to songs, radio news, online stories, and similar media (Chang, 2018).

Moreover, extensive listening is characterized as an "individualized listening activity with large amounts of target language input of learners' interests and at their levels" (Yeh, 2014). Nation and Newton (2008) underscore that improvements in listening skills are likely when learners participate in tasks that prioritize meaningful input and fluency development, incorporating extensive listening to easily comprehensible and interesting content. The core principles of extensive listening involve the use of self-selected listening materials and a focus on understanding the meaning while listening (Schmidt, 2016). This approach provides a contextual understanding of the audio content and facilitates the acquisition of a broader vocabulary. Additionally, learners have the autonomy to decide how many times they wish to listen to the tracks in extensive listening activities.

Extensive listening offers various advantages, as highlighted by several studies (Chang & Millett, 2016; Chang et al., 2019; Dwi et al., 2019; Mendelsohn, 1994; Renandya & Farrell, 2010; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Firstly, extensive listening proves to be motivating and enjoyable (Ucán, 2010). Through EL practice, students can select spoken texts within their proficiency levels and on topics that interest them. When students find the spoken text both understandable and interesting, it contributes to an enjoyable listening experience. By allowing learners to select materials aligned with their interests, this approach renders the language learning process more enjoyable and, consequently, sustainable over the long term. Secondly, extensive listening aids in the enhancement of listening fluency and the automatic recognition of spoken texts. By providing students with the opportunity to practice listening to spoken texts within their proficiency levels for an extended period, EL builds their confidence and familiarity with normal speech rates. This repetitive engagement aids in the internalization of common language structures and vocabulary, empowering learners to respond more spontaneously in real-life communicative situations (Renandya & Farrell, 2010). Thirdly, EL contributes to an enhancement in students' listening comprehension. Exposure

to diverse linguistic inputs enables learners to adapt to the rhythm and flow of authentic discourse, contributing significantly to improved listening proficiency (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Finally, EL fosters autonomy in learners. Engaging in EL encourages students to take responsibility for their learning by selecting listening materials based on their personal needs. It prompts them to monitor and evaluate their listening activities, promoting a sense of independence and self-directed learning.

In short, extensive listening is a crucial language education approach, emphasizing refined listening skills. It involves self-selected, authentic materials, fostering comprehension and fluency. Learners autonomously decide on listening frequency. Advantages include motivation, enhanced fluency, improved comprehension, and autonomy.

Methodology

Design

To address the research objectives, a qualitative case study methodology was employed. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors in their natural context (Merriam, 2009). The case study design is particularly suitable for investigating phenomena within their real-life context and gaining insights into complex issues (Yin, 2017).

Participants

The study involved 10 non-majored English students selected purposively from three EFL classes at the University of Industry and Trade, Ho Chi Minh City. Each class usually consists of approximately 50 students. Out of these, 10 students were chosen, 5 females and 5 males, aged between 19 and 21 years old. All participants were sophomores who had to study three English General courses, including English 1, 2, and 3 during three semesters. Each course, conducted in each semester, comprised 45 hours of in-class study and 90 hours of self-study. It focused on basic English with four skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit rich, detailed accounts of participants' experiences with extensive listening activities, motivation, challenges, and the perceived impact on their listening skills (Merriam, 2009). Subsequently, ten students were invited to participate in in-depth interviews via Zoom, lasting approximately 30 minutes each. Detailed notes were taken on how extensive listening was perceived and how it affected students' autonomy in learning listening. The questions included:

- 1. What do you think about extensive listening?*
- 2. How does extensive listening affect your learning autonomy?*

The qualitative data obtained would be analyzed thematically using Nvivo software to identify patterns, trends, and emergent themes.

Results and Discussion

The qualitative case study involved in-depth interviews with 10 non-majored English students to explore their perspectives on fostering autonomy through extensive listening activities. The analysis of their responses provides valuable perceptions about how these students view extensive listening as a pedagogical tool and its impact on their language learning journey.

Research question 1: What are the non-majored English students' perceptions about extensive listening?

Most of the participants consistently expressed high levels of motivation during extensive listening activities. The autonomy to choose materials aligned with their interests and proficiency levels contributed significantly to their motivation. The selection of spoken texts that were both understandable and interesting created an enjoyable learning experience. The ability to engage with materials of personal interest not only motivated students but also made the learning process more enjoyable. For instance, one representative said that:

"I love that I can choose what I want to listen to... It makes me excited to learn because I can pick things that I find interesting and fun..."

Furthermore, extensive listening proved to be instrumental in enhancing participants' listening skills. Through consistent exposure to diverse listening materials within their proficiency levels, students reported heightened comprehension, fluency, and the ability to recognize spoken language patterns. The immersive nature of extensive listening contributed to an enhanced understanding of normal speech rates, empowering students to navigate real-life communicative situations with increased confidence. Therefore, most of the interviewees admitted that they felt more active and autonomous than before when they were involved in listening to anything they wanted, making them better and more confident not only in listening but also in speaking. One student said that:

"I can understand people better now, ... and I don't feel lost when they speak fast."

Another student said:

"It's like my ears have become more familiar with the language."

Autonomy in material selection is also reported by most of the participants. Specifically, the interviews underscored the key role of autonomy in material selection. Participants appreciated the freedom to choose listening materials based on their interests, creating a sense of ownership in their learning journey. This autonomy in selecting materials tailored to individual preferences contributed to a more personalized and relevant language learning experience. Most of them expressed the same idea that:

"Being able to choose what I want to listen to makes me feel like I have control over my learning... It's not just about studying; it's about enjoying the process...."

One added:

“For example, I can choose songs, news, podcasts, YouTube, etc... There are a lot of things I can search for and practice listening online.”

However, apart from positive viewpoints, the respondents brought some certain challenges in autonomy in learning to listen through extensive listening. For example, more than half of the participants expressed a sense of neglect in assessments related to listening skills, particularly in final exams. Therefore, they felt that sometimes they lost motivation. It means that this perceived oversight posed a challenge to the full realization of autonomy among non-majored English students. The absence of recognition in assessments raised questions about the comprehensive evaluation of their language learning, signaling a potential gap in the autonomy afforded to these students. In particular, one student responded that:

“Sometimes I feel like nobody cares about how well I can understand and communicate. It's all about exams, and they don't test what I'm really good at.”

As a result, most of the participants raised their voices on the role of teachers and educators. While autonomy in material selection was valued, participants emphasized the crucial role that instructors could play in guiding extensive listening activities. The need for comprehensive guidance from their teachers emerged as a recurring theme in the interviews. Participants expressed a desire for more active involvement and support from their teachers, ranging from the creation of structured learning materials to personalized feedback. This highlights the students' recognition of the collaborative nature of language learning, where teachers serve as facilitators in optimizing the benefits of extensive listening. One said:

“... I wish our teachers would guide us more on how to make the most of extensive listening....”

Another said:

“... Sometimes it feels like we're on our own, and it's a bit overwhelming... I think my teacher should guide me more, just make sure that I keep focusing on learning.”

To conclude, the interview report provides an understanding of non-majored English students' perceptions of extensive listening. While the autonomy in material selection and the positive impact on motivation are evident, challenges in autonomy recognition and the desire for comprehensive guidance from educators indicate areas for improvement. The findings emphasize the need for a collaborative approach in which educators play an active role in guiding extensive listening activities, optimizing the benefits of autonomy, and addressing the identified challenges among non-majored English students.

Research question 2: How does extensive listening affect their learning autonomy?

The second research question aimed to explore how extensive listening activities impact non-majored English students' learning autonomy. The analysis of interview information provides insights into the relationship between extensive listening and the cultivation of autonomy among these students.

First, most of the participants indicated motivation and a sense of responsibility when learning through listening extensively. They considered extensive listening as a motivating factor that contributed to a heightened sense of responsibility among themselves for learning English. The autonomy to choose materials aligned with personal interests and preferences empowered students to take ownership of their learning journey. The interviews revealed that extensive listening, by providing a sense of agency, encouraged them to be more proactive and responsible in their language learning endeavors. For example, one participant answered that:

“I feel more responsible for my learning now. I can choose what I want to focus on, and it makes me feel like I have a say in my studies.”

Second, the informants expressed challenges in autonomy recognition. They showed feelings of neglect because of a lack of assessments of listening skills in their final exams. Therefore, this challenge raises questions about the extent to which the autonomy cultivated through extensive listening should be recognized and evaluated within the formal assessment framework.

“I wish they would recognize our effort in listening. Exams are important, but they should test what we’re good at, not just what’s easy to grade.”

As a result, some of the interviewed students showed a desire for comprehensive guidance. While autonomy in material selection was appreciated, participants expressed a desire for more comprehensive guidance from educators. The interviews emphasized the need for their lecturers to play a more active role in designing and delivering extensive listening strategies or activities. This encompassed the creation of structured learning materials, offering targeted feedback, and integrating extensive listening into the curriculum. The desire for guidance reflected a recognition of the collaborative nature of language learning, where educators contribute to the optimization of autonomy. *"We want our teachers to guide us more on how to make the most of extensive listening. It shouldn't be all on us; they can help us do it better,"* one respondent emphasized.

Moreover, the collaborative learning approach was mentioned by most of the participants. Specifically, the interviewees highlighted a shift toward a more collaborative learning approach, where students and peers or students and teachers can work together to optimize the benefits of extensive listening. Participants expressed the belief that a more interactive and supportive role from not only their friends but also their teachers could bridge the autonomy gap. Teachers can provide guidance and support, ensuring that extensive listening becomes an integral and recognized aspect of language learning for non-majored English students. Peers can work together in terms of their same interest-based groups to enhance learning through extensive listening activities. Some students showed that:

“I think teachers can help us more in making extensive listening a part of our learning. It should be a team effort, not just something we do alone.”

The interview results on how extensive listening affects learning autonomy reveal a perspective from non-majored English students. While motivation and a heightened sense of responsibility are evident outcomes, challenges in autonomy recognition and the desire for comprehensive guidance from educators indicate areas for improvement. The findings underscore the importance of a collaborative approach, where teachers can actively contribute to the cultivation of autonomy through extensive listening activities among non-majored English students.

Conclusions

Vietnamese universities have witnessed a surge in the importance assigned to English language proficiency, aligning with the demands of a globalized world. English serves as a gateway to international collaboration, academic excellence, and professional success. Consequently, universities across Vietnam have integrated English courses into their education programs, aiming to equip students with the necessary linguistic skills.

Within this framework, non-majored English students, who may not have English as a focal area of study, find themselves navigating a curriculum where language proficiency is both a requirement and an opportunity. While these students contribute significantly to the diversity of the academic community, their experiences, and challenges in developing language skills, particularly in listening, have not received comprehensive attention.

The importance of listening skills in language acquisition cannot be overstated. Listening is not only a receptive language skill but also a foundation for effective communication. It influences speaking, reading, and writing skills, contributing to integrated language proficiency (Rost, 2002). Despite its centrality, the assessment and development of listening skills for non-majored English students may not be accorded the same priority as for those majoring in English. Therefore, this research holds significance at multiple levels. Firstly, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge by shedding light on the experiences of non-majored English students in a Vietnamese university context, particularly concerning listening skills development. Secondly, the study provides insights into the potential of extensive listening activities to motivate language learning and enhance listening skills. Thirdly, the research addresses the broader discourse on learning autonomy, emphasizing the role of educators in guiding non-majored English students toward effective language learning strategies. In practical terms, the findings of this research can inform educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers about the specific needs and challenges faced by non-majored English students in the realm of listening skills. The recommendations emerging from the study can contribute to the refinement of language education policies and practices, ensuring a more inclusive and effective learning environment for all students.

In conclusion, this research examined the experiences of non-majored English students, specifically focusing on the development of listening skills through extensive listening activities. By addressing the existing research gap and exploring the impact of such activities on motivation, skill enhancement, and autonomy, this study hopes to provide valuable insights that can contribute to the ongoing discourse on English teaching in Vietnamese higher education.

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