

EFL LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM ON LEARNER AUTONOMY IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

In the educational context, the increasing interest in the hybrid learning method combining both traditional face-to-face classroom and online activities (Pishva et al., 2010) has given rise to different e-learning platforms, among which, a Learning Management System (LMS) which is one of the most commonly used tools to supplement conventional lectures. In order to investigate the impact of an LMS on EFL learner autonomy, the current study was conducted at a university in Central Vietnam. Twenty-five students randomly selected from a faculty were invited to participate in focus group interviews to elicit qualitative data regarding their perceptions on the effect of the LMS on their autonomous learning. The findings indicate that the EFL learners in this study seem to be aware of the positive impact of the LMS on their autonomous learning, which can be shown by the fact that they can initiate, monitor and evaluate their learning process. Some implications for instructors were also proposed to enhance the support of the LMS for EFL learners.

Keyword: platform, Learning Management System (LMS), learner autonomy

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, rapid technological innovations and advancements have paved the way for new foreign language teaching and learning approaches, particularly blended learning in university settings. In the educational context, the increasing interest in such hybrid learning method combining both traditional face-to-face classroom and online activities (Pishva et al., 2010) has given rise to different e-learning platforms. Learning Management System (LMS) is one of the most commonly used tools to supplement conventional lectures. The role of this platform has been strongly underscored during the severe Covid-19 pandemic when many countries have closed schools and higher institutions to contain the spread of the virus. In addition, it is during the coronavirus crisis that a majority of students have displayed substantial potential to act as autonomous learners (Hidayati & Husna, 2020). That is to say, students have been encouraged and required to develop their autonomy as well as ability to engage themselves in online learning through a wide array of mobile applications and learning management platforms.

In Vietnam, different LMS software applications have become dominant, especially in higher institutions and have proven to be of great use regarding school / course announcements, course registration, lecture delivery, exam revision, assignment submissions and forum discussions. Some of the popular systems include Smas, Mi, Eschool, Vietschool, Blackboard and Edusoft (Nguyen, 2020), to name just a few, all of which have allowed the teaching and learning process to take place in a digital environment. Regardless of the fact that the Covid-19 outbreak has brought significant disruptions to education across the country, some

universities optimistically consider this ample opportunity to promote the digitalization of learning materials and the investment in ICT infrastructure and the training of human resources to transform the conventional teaching and learning approaches.

Like other similar East Asian countries, Vietnamese learners are deeply influenced by Confucian-value heritages (Nguyen, 2015) and thus, a typical classroom structure, even for foreign language learning is rigidly hierarchical regarding teacher-student relationship (Le, 1999). According to Dang (2010), although learners have traditionally been known for laborious and hard study, they are often regarded as passive learners who depend almost entirely on teachers, i.e. always trying to listen attentively to the lectures, taking notes and then replicating their memorized knowledge in exams. Moreover, there still exist some other problematic issues in the context of EFL teaching and learning such as large class sizes, shortage of resources and conventional teaching methods (Phan, 2013; Tran, 2013). Therefore, when it comes to supportive factors for autonomous learning like freedom, choices and negotiation (Dang, 2010), it appears to be rather challenging for EFL learners in Vietnam, even at a university level. Nevertheless, together with dramatic innovations in education, learner autonomy has recently captured special attention in this nation. This was represented in national policies on university education reform focusing on “the renovation of undergraduate from year-based to credit-based, renovation of teaching methods orienting towards developing the positiveness, self-awareness activeness, creativity and self-study ability of learners, and enhancement of foreign language (English language) education” (Hoang, 2017, p. 3) to improve the learner proficiency, meet the demand for industrialization, modernization and international integration of the country. Such policy can be considered as a favourable condition for research to develop learner autonomy in the educational context in Vietnam.

In fact, a plethora of research has been undertaken with regard to the possible impacts of technological tools or the integration of LMS into courses at tertiary level on EFL teaching and learning. There are also a number of studies which have been implemented to investigate the issue of learner autonomy and suggestions to improve this ability. However, very few researchers have focused their attention on the relationship between LMS and learner autonomy, which means that it has not yet been established whether LMS has any impacts on autonomous learning. Moreover, according to Dang (2010), despite LMSs enjoying widespread use in higher institutions, the tools have not been exploited to their fullest by instructors probably because they have not been completely aware of its ultimate strengths in incorporating them into course activities. In Vietnam, although both LMS and learner autonomy have become topics of interest in recent years, there has been little discussion on LMS as a mediator for students’ self-directed learning, except for a study conducted by Dang in 2010. Therefore, this present paper aims to investigate EFL learners’ perceptions on the impact of LMS on their autonomy and some factors helping facilitate this process. To fulfill these aims, a research question needs to be addressed: What are EFL learners’ perceptions of the impact of the LMS on learner autonomy?

LITERATURE REVIEW

LMS in Education

In recent years, with the rapid advancement of developing technologies, the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) has increasingly drawn educators' attention (Wang, 2008). By integrating the e-learning technologies into course offerings, conventional classroom techniques of course deliveries have been remarkably transformed (Bottino and

Robotti, 2007; Stokes, 1999; Sutherland et al., 2004). Learning management system (LMS) is software for delivering, tracking and managing training. According to Carmichael (2019), LMS is defined as “teaching and learning environments where participants can interact, communicate, view and discuss presentations, and engage with learning resources while working in groups, all in an online setting”. Most of LMSs are web-based to facilitate access to learning content and administration. According to Vovides et al. (2007), an effective LMS incorporates a variety of functionalities that can provide learners with extensive scaffolding and help transform them into self-regulated learners. An LMS can bring multiple advantages consisting of increased availability, quick feedback, improve two-way interactions, tracking and building skills (Bradford et al., 2007).

In a digital era, the learning process has become more diverse, dynamic, and complicated. Thus, with the incorporation of interactive materials, LMSs can support instructors particularly regarding the implementation of non-linear learning design. This offers plenty of potential to transfer online course design from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogies and to allow learners more opportunities to choose and explore their own learning path. Herse and Lee (2005) also share this view claiming that an LMS “can be used as a catalyst for self-reflection and to help facilitate change from passive to active learning” (p.51). Similarly, Lonn and Teasley (2009) also stated that the instructor plays a key role in facilitating learning interactions, engagement and promoting deeper and meaningful learning experience among learners. To explore students’ online learning experience and its benefits regarding the use of various features on an LMS, Tseng (2020) categorized different LMS dimensions into three groups including Content, Communication and Evaluation together with their teaching techniques, practices and particular technological tools. For instance, as for the Communication aspect, announcements, instant messaging, discussion board as well as video messages and comments provide dynamic communication channels between learners and the instructor. Some techniques or practices can be adopted such as providing students a variety of ways to communicate and interact to help build a sense of community and foster group cohesion among students or the instructor involving in discussion activities to enhance social presence and improve their learners’ metacognition.

Learner Autonomy

Since learner autonomy has been considered to be one of the ultimate goals of the educational process for a long time (Benson, 2001, 2009; Waterhouse, 1990), there have been a number of definitions of this issue. It is the willingness and capacity to “act independently and in cooperation with others as a socially responsible person” for one’s learning (Dam, 2003, p. 137) and to transform in a deliberate and flexible way between behaviours driven by individuals and groups to meet their needs (Lewis, 2014). Learner autonomy can also be defined as the freedom learners are offered and their ability to turn contextual constraints into affordances for autonomous action (Benson, 2011; Lewis et al., 2017). Learner autonomy also necessitates the active involvement, reflection and appropriate target language use of learners (Little, 2004). Therefore, learners must be responsible for their own learning process and its outcomes. In addition, learner autonomy has also been evidenced to be dramatically related to several supportive factors such as high motivation, willingness to communicate and self-efficacy, which determine the language learning success both in English as a second language (ESL) and in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Dickinson, 1995; Little, 1990).

As learner autonomy is interpreted in diverse ways, different models / frameworks have been suggested in the literature. These can include models of learner autonomy concerning

stages of development initiated by Nunan (1997) consisting of awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence. Nevertheless, this model can be regarded as irrelevant under certain circumstances (Dang, 2012). Littlewood (1999) proposed a two-level self-regulation process including reactive and proactive autonomy. After that, a simplified version of Nunan's model (1997) was put forward by Scharle and Szabo (2000) who claimed that learner autonomy is a three-stage process involving raising awareness, changing attitudes and transferring roles. However, according to Dang (2010), these theoretical models have "challenged assumptions of the non-linear development of learner autonomy" (p. 55). Therefore, several researchers (Littlewood, 1996; Macaro, 1997, 2008; Benson, 2001) have constructed other models of learner autonomy relating to areas of control that have been claimed to bear some similarities on account of the interrelated nature of their components.

The current study employed a framework of learner autonomy synthesized from previous models by Dang and Robertson (2010). Using thematic analysis, they categorized different dimensions of learner autonomy into three kinds of processing including initiating, monitoring and evaluating learning. According to Dang and Robertson (2010), the initiating learning process includes attributes regarding the understanding of personal learning preferences, goal setting, study plan preparation and the creation of learning opportunities. The process of monitoring learning is comprised of learning engagement and maintenance while the evaluating process involves the assessment of learning outcomes. These processes may operate sequentially or simultaneously during students' learning (Figure 1).

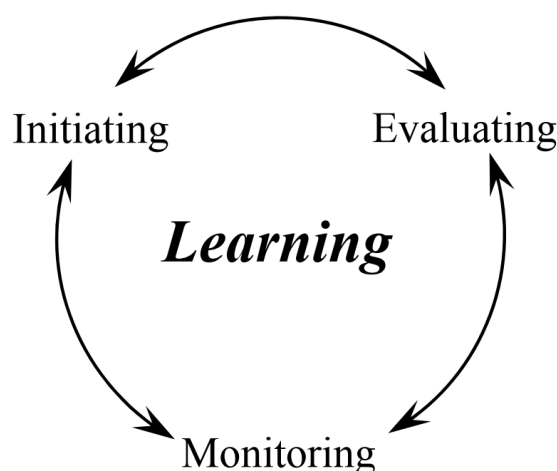


Figure 1: The cyclic relationship of the three intertwined processes of learner autonomy (adapted from Dang & Robertson, 2010)

LMS and Learner Autonomy in Language Learning

Technology has become an essential part of the discourse on autonomy in the field of language education in the 1970s and their relationship can be considered dynamic since autonomy affects learners' perceptions of the role of technology in relation to language learning and vice versa, the influence of technology on the practice and improvement of learner autonomy. In recent years, there is a vast amount of literature on the interaction of technology and autonomy in both formal and informal learning contexts with the goal of supporting the development of learning autonomy with technology in their respective contexts. As one of the most widely used technological tools, LMSs have also been receiving much attention; however, the impact of

LMSs on learners' autonomy, particularly in the field of foreign language learning has not been fully investigated. In Vietnam, there seems to be very few studies into this issue, except for the one implemented by Dang and Robertson in 2010. Their research examines Vietnamese students' perspectives on socializing and academic activities as well as the relationship between them. Some practical suggestions for EFL teaching practices with the incorporation of the LMS are also proposed in this study.

METHOD AND SAMPLING

In this current study, a qualitative method, specifically, semi-structured interview was mainly employed because this method attempts to investigate the everyday life of various groups of people and communities in their natural setting and make sense of, or explain phenomena regarding the meaning people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Moreover, according to Myers (2009), "qualitative research is designed to help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live". The system through which qualitative data are retrieved is considered to be unique, which makes qualitative research well-suited for giving actual and descriptive data (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). For the current study, focus group interview was used as the design with qualitative analysis for data interpretation. This method involves group discussion of a small number of participants in an informal setting which focuses on a particular issue / problem (Wilkinson & Silverman, 2004). The research chose this instrument because this can create an amicable atmosphere in which the students can feel comfortable and relaxed to share their opinions. Moreover, focus group interviews can enable the researcher to elicit data from more people but save a great deal of time.

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Language Teacher Education (FLTE), the University of Foreign Language Studies (UFLS) which is located in Central Vietnam. 25 students of the English Language Teaching Division were randomly selected for the interview. They were divided into five groups for an interview arranged at a time convenient for all of them. These participants have been familiar with the school's LMS since the first semester of their program and they have to engage themselves with different functions of the LMS in almost every course at the university. Therefore, during the Covid-19 crisis, the students experience a relatively smooth transition to the school's online learning systems, including the LMS.

In terms of analysing data gathered from the interviews, the responses were audio-recorded with the interviewees' permission. After having all of the responses transcribed, the semantic content analysis (SCA) was employed to analyze the answers of participants. SCA allows researchers to quantify and research the words that speakers use to express themselves (Roberts, 1997; West, 1997). Because semantic choices have been demonstrated to reflect speakers' underlying cognitive and affective processes, researchers have used SCA to identify individual differences between speakers along psychological dimensions (Durlau et al., 2007). SCA can help interpret the structures of discourse and build insights and evidence when doing qualitative research. Therefore, in this thesis, SCA was employed to analyze the impact of the LMS on different learner autonomy dimensions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The LMS used in the current research was to support the learners throughout different courses of the program in a variety of ways from task accomplishment to knowledge exchange and evaluation. Based on their responses, thematic analysis indicated that the students' perceptions

of the benefits of the LMS on their autonomous learning can be categorized into three dimensions including ability to initiate, monitor and evaluate the learning process.

Ability to Initiate Learning Process

The LMS enabled almost all students to take active roles in participating in the learning process. Out of twenty-five students who took part in the interview, nineteen participants said that they logged onto the LMS almost every day; the other students admitted that their frequency of accessing the LMS is around three or four times per week mainly because they had to deal with assignments or group work as required for most of the courses.

Students said that they often had access to the LMS because they wanted to get updates on the latest information related to the courses from their classmates and teachers.

"To be honest, in the beginning, I was just curious whether there were any interesting or useful things there on the LMS. But then, I recognized so many posts were put up, which caused me to sign in to the class or the course more frequently" (S1)

"When the course was integrated with the LMS, I would have to do more assignments, so I needed to read and did more research into more materials carefully. That was why I took part in the LMS- integrated courses more often." (S3)

Furthermore, the posts or discussion forums on the LMS stimulated students to participate in the learning process. Eighteen students added that many topics posted on the system by their teachers or friends made them interested and wanted to know more relevant information.

"During the course of English Writing Skills C1.2, instructors often created individual or group discussions on the LMS so that my classmates could share tips or strategies or experience to write a complete VSTEP Writing. Therefore, we could learn and share with each other advanced vocabulary, complex sentence structures. This fuelled my interest in writing. Although this was a difficult skill, thanks to active exchanges in online discussions, I have been able to be more confident in my writing ability." (S6)

"I was very active on the LMS, and I often created discussions to share my ideas with my classmates." (S13)

"When I had access to some interesting resources or topics on the LMS, I downloaded them to my computer so I could learn more and sent them to my friends." (S19)

However, some others supposed that:

"I didn't participate in discussions very often. I only did it when the teacher requested. However, if I found out interesting academic material on the LMS, I would download it immediately." (S5)

"I only participate in teacher-created discussions, and didn't create any discussions on the LMS. However, if I saw any good documents from my friends, I would read and take notes if necessary." (S14)

That means although the LMS stimulated students to engage in the learning process, it also depended on their learning attitude. Students who participated with interest and with a positive attitude often accessed the system more often than those who did not actively study on the LMS. In addition, the LMS also contributed to boosting interaction and communication between students:

"When I received replies from my friends about my post, I felt very happy. They helped me know more about what I should do to promote and improve myself. Then I would try to remember their names and knew more about them in other discussions on the LMS as well as in the real life." (S18)

"Thanks to the anonymous function of the system, I felt more confident in communicating and expressing opinions with people during online learning." (S22)

What engaged the learners the most to the LMS was the content shared by their peers and instructors on this platform. They believed that most of the posts were useful and related to the academic knowledge of the courses, which was the main reason for their high frequency of visits to the website. Despite the fact that a few of them logged onto the LMS when required by the teachers, it cannot be denied the fact that such expectations from the teachers would gradually increase their learners' online habit for knowledge and ideas exchange, contributing to improving their performance. This is in line with the findings of Dang and Robertson (2010) who also indicated that the quality of contributed content was the most significant factor attracting the learners' attention and facilitating communication between them.

Ability to Monitor Learning Process

As the participants' responses revealed, most of them logged into the LMS almost every day and the common reason was that they were aware that completing tasks on the LMS was also part of the course assessment, they regularly checked up this system *"to make sure they didn't miss any latest information or assignments from teachers and classmates"* (S1). However, the six remaining students said that their frequency of monitoring learning progress on the LMS depended on the requirements of the course. If the course was not too important for them, they would not check-in or update information that often. This proved that monitoring the process of learning on the LMS also depended on the learning consciousness of each student.

In addition, the LMS was considered to help learners monitor their learning process more effectively through different functions such as "Calendar", "Timeline", "Events", "Upcoming Events", or "Private Files".

"The platform allowed me to put a tick to confirm when a task has been completed. The system also updated me knowing what percentage of the course assignments I have accomplished. This has been very functional for me to track my progress." (S24)

"The 'Calendar' section on the LMS automatically updated to remind us how many assignments needed to be completed and when they had to be submitted. Hence, we could plan to complete the task on time." (S17)

Moreover, the LMS gave the students a great deal of flexibility in terms of time and places.

"I can choose anytime I want to log in and do the tasks on there. There are quite a lot of exercises that I have to deal with for every course." (S14)

"I actually prefer to manage my learning in my own way, I mean, sometimes I enjoy studying at home, working on the assignments on the LMS, which is much more convenient for me". (S22)

In addition, the LMS was also deemed to make communication between teachers and learners easier.

"The LMS provided us with additional useful materials related to the lessons. In classroom sessions, sometimes the teacher wanted to show us further interesting videos or materials but time is limited. Nevertheless, thanks to the appearance of the LMS, teachers could easily share them and I could refer to them in my spare time. Besides, I thought that the LMS also made it easier for teachers and learners to stay in touch." (S8)

The LMS has offered the students different functions enabling them to monitor their learning process better and the learners appear to be satisfied with these applications. This shows that learners are active and responsible for their learning because they should be the center of their learning process. Therefore, it is very important that the instructors should design sufficient amount of assignments on the LMS which are engaging and relevant for the learners, which can promote their self-study a great deal.

Ability to Evaluate Learning Process

All of the participants agreed that the LMS activities offered them an enormous opportunity to evaluate themselves.

"Whenever submitting an assignment on the LMS, after a short period of time, the teacher would grade and update the score on the system with his/her comments or feedback. This really helped me know what my strengths are and what I needed to ameliorate. Additionally, this score was only shown to me, so if I got a low score, I wouldn't be embarrassed to my classmates." (S2)

Besides, there are 16 students who conceded that the LMS also allowed them to know more about their friends' abilities.

"When I participated in discussions or through the posts that my friends shared on the LMS, I could somewhat understand their abilities or qualifications. There were some participants who have some very short response to general topics, with occasional errors in spelling and structure. However, there were people who gave very long and informative responses, the evidence was clear and reasonable, and when we read it, we could learn a lot more." (S10)

"There were some students in the class who did not talk much, but on the LMS, they are very active to share many interesting and useful posts. That gave me a different evaluation on these students." (S1)

"I can compare my answers with friends, and if I realize that I have something missing in my exercises or find several interesting sharings, I often take notes to learn in the future." (S15)

The students gave different evaluations to their peers showing that they became active in reflecting and evaluating on the contents, the threads as well as the discussions. Although these comments of evaluation could be rather subjective, they were necessary regarding allowing them to assess their own learning and gaining a better understanding of the capabilities of their peers. Therefore, the learners could find appropriate strategies to improve their learning progress.

However, the other nine demonstrated that using LMS participation for assessment purposes was not always precise.

"I think a posting probably made some mistakes but the reason is because they did not check it carefully. This can be annoying sometimes."

"I knew there were some learners who obtained great accomplishments in class in spite of not uploading lots of postings on LMS and attending the online courses often. Therefore, it was not quite satisfactory to evaluate their ability based on performance on the LMS only" (S5)

From the interview results above, although the LMS offered students plenty of opportunity and means to evaluate their own learning or that of others in the classroom, through the comments or scores which were updated on the LMS; however, due to some external factors, using the LMS as a means of assessment was not always accurate. This can be consistent with the result of the research conducted Song and Hill (2007) as it revealed that the way of reacting to peers' comments might be an obstacle because learners are more likely to doubt the validity of peers' knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In general, the EFL learners in this study seem to be aware of the positive impact of the LMS on their autonomous learning, which can be shown by the fact that they can initiate, monitor and evaluate their learning process. Comparing with results found by Dang and Robertson (2010), it can be stated that the relationship between the system and the ELF learner autonomy in the Vietnamese context is interwoven and cyclical of the three abilities. Based on the findings, some implications should be proposed for the instructors concerning the course contents as well as the assignment of the subject to engage them in the learning process more effectively. However, some limitations can be identified from the current research, especially in terms of the small sample size and the shyness and passiveness of some participants. Therefore, further studies could be implemented in a larger scale to depict more aspects of learner autonomy with the support of different LMSs in the field of EFL teaching and learning.

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