

## Research Article

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**Author for correspondence:**

Thi Thanh Huyen Phan

✉ [ptthuyen@agu.edu.vn](mailto:ptthuyen@agu.edu.vn)

✉ An Giang University, An Giang, Vietnam  
Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam



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## Exploring English Majors' Perceived Autonomy in English Language Learning: An Analysis of Demographic Differences

Thi Thanh Huyen Phan , Sang Truong Huynh 

**Abstract**

**Background/purpose.** Learner autonomy has been a burgeoning interest among language researchers and practitioners. Given extensive research into the construct, it remains necessary to explore it from a wider context. This study thus aims to investigate the perceptions of autonomy in English language learning among English-major students at a Vietnamese university, particularly focusing on how demographic factors and academic disciplines influence these perceptions.

**Materials/methods.** Drawing on a survey research design, the study quantitatively explored 334 students' perceptions about their autonomy in learning English through 40-item questionnaires and open-ended questions using Google Form.

**Results.** From both an overall questionnaire and cluster measurements, findings revealed that English majors positively perceive their autonomy in learning English at a high level. Their demographics of gender, age and academic years of study did not influence their perceived autonomy related to learning English. However, the students of English Teacher Education differed statistically from their counterparts in English Studies over two perceptions of autonomy: first, in their beliefs about their teacher's role, and second, freedom in learning between students from rural and urban areas. Besides, findings from the open-ended questions indicated four common strategies teachers deployed to promote their autonomy in learning English, comprising testing, homework and assignments, checking their participation in classroom activities, and group work.

**Conclusion.** English-major students had a high level of perceived autonomy in learning the English language, with notable differences based on majors and geographical location.

## 1. Introduction

Learner autonomy (LA) is primarily concerned with one's capacity to take responsibility for their own learning (Benson, 2011; Little, 2022). In English language education, LA is well documented as one of the individual difference variables among English learners since it precedes their learning progress and achievements (Jehanghir et al., 2024). Extensive research has worked towards this variable, taking both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide insightful understandings about how English learning is moderated in connection with personal attributes (i.e., Nguyen & Habók, 2021; Rajib & Jahan, 2024; Teng & Mizumoto, 2024), which have identified factors that affect LA in English learning. For example, Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) draw on teachers' beliefs about and practices of LA regulations and find that curriculum, society, learning motivation and independence, and low English proficiency impede tertiary students' autonomy. Also, the literature has documented such influential factors on LA as teacher and learner backgrounds, discrepancies between learner and teacher expectations, teacher support, inadequate teacher autonomy, and large-size classes (i.e., Basri, 2023; Nasri et al., 2017). Additionally, researchers note that heavy workloads, lack of learning resources, and cultural factors determine Vietnamese learners' autonomy in English language education (i.e., Dang, 2024; Linh & Loi, 2024; Tran, 2019; Trinh, 2005; Tuan, 2021; Yen et al., 2024). However, little analysis of how demographic differences, such as age, gender, academic years of study, majors, GPA rankings, and geography impact EFL students' autonomy has been undertaken within different teaching contexts (Modrek et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2024).

Against this global background, Vietnamese researchers have explored LA in various classroom contexts, particularly regarding a shift from teacher- to learner-centeredness (Linh & Loi, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Phan et al., 2024). Given this, little is known about the level of autonomy of English-majored students in Vietnam's higher education system. Therefore, our research seeks to fill this gap by adopting a validated tool (Nguyen & Habók, 2021) to investigate how EFL learners perceive autonomy in English language learning, especially by focusing on analyzing how demographics influence their autonomy. The study is guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent do Vietnamese EFL students perceive their autonomy in learning English?
2. How does their perceived autonomy differ regarding their gender, major, age, GPA rankings, academic years of study, and geography?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Conceptualizing LA

LA has recently emerged as a central component of English language education, emphasizing the importance of learners' taking responsibility for their learning process. Various means of conceptualizing LA has been documented in the literature by reflecting the diverse ways of understanding and implementing it in educational contexts (Benson, 2007; Benson & Lamb, 2020; Chong & Reinders, 2022; Little, 2022; Littlewood, 1996; Murray, 2020; Sinclair, 2000; Vieira, 2017). Foundational in the field is how Holec (1981) describes autonomy as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3). Building on his work, Dam (1995) defines LA as a "readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and cooperate with others as a socially responsible person" (p.1). Benson (2011) adds that LA is a multifaceted construct that relies on learners' metacognitive knowledge and skills, reflection, and deliberate action. LA is also conceptualized differently as a set of skills that can be learned and applied in self-directed learning (Benson & Voller, 1997) and as a psychological (Little, 1991) or social construct (Murray, 2020). While this variety may represent different perspectives of LA in the literature, we specifically define LA in this study as a concept

consisting of learners' readiness (how they are motivated and perceive their roles) and competence (i.e., metacognition, desire, and freedom).

## **2.2. Measuring LA**

The literature shows a clear interest and need, and a perceived benefit is involved when language LA is measured. However, attempts to measure LA often seem to be difficult, with researchers stating that measuring autonomy in learning is often 'problematic' (Benson, 2001, p. 54) or both 'problematic' and 'difficult' (Mynard, 2006, p. 3; Lai, 2011, pp. 43-45) because it is multidimensional and changeable and not expressed through a single behavior that can be easily observed or described (Benson, 2007; Little, 2022). This, however, does not mean that educators should not assess or measure this ability. Above all, an important goal of education is to help learners become autonomous in their learning. Researchers, teachers, and practitioners within English language teaching and learning have devised many different ways to help learners develop their language skills alongside promoting their autonomy in language learning. Without evidence, it is difficult to affirm that learners have made real progress or to demonstrate the success of the method used by teachers to promote learners' autonomy. Therefore, there should be some way to assess how learner autonomy is disseminated in a specific educational context or whether teachers are successful in supporting the development of student autonomy (Benson, 2007, 2011, 2013; Chong & Reinders, 2022; Everhard & Murphy, 2015).

The literature reveals that a range of tools has been deployed to evaluate learner autonomy, characterized by using perceptual, performance-based, and observational methods. Regarding the first, previous studies mostly use questionnaires as a predominant evaluation tool to gauge learners' self-reported perceptions of their autonomy (e.g., Chong & Reinders, 2022; Haque et al., 2023; Le & Nguyen, 2022; Nguyen & Habók, 2021; Teng & Mizumoto, 2024). Interviews have also employed to gather qualitative information, often combined with questionnaires to provide a richer data set to research learner autonomy (Lu & Liu, 2016; Teng, 2024; Wongyimyong & Soontornwipast, 2024). Regarding performance-based methods, such language proficiency tests as IELTS or TOEFL have been administered pre-and post-intervention to measure the value of autonomy-promoting activities. These tools assume that greater autonomy correlates with improved language performance, though causation remains challenging to establish. Language tasks like vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, and writing are used both for assessing proficiency and observing autonomy-related behaviors. These provide valuable insight into how learners apply autonomous strategies. For observational methods, field notes, learning analytics, and project reports are used somewhat to capture nuanced behaviors and contextual factors influencing autonomy or serve as real-time and authentic evaluations of LA (Lu & Liu, 2016).

Among these methods, measuring LA using questionnaires is most common and also essential because it helps lessen the discrepancies between how learners perceive autonomy and their actual autonomous practices. These methods also measure the underlying capability rather than merely focusing on the autonomous behaviors, particularly those that demonstrate reactive autonomy (Little, 2022; Smith, 2003). This focus on LA measurement highlights the need for rigorous scales that are validated, practical to use in classrooms, and mostly suits Vietnamese students. In our research, we deemed the questionnaire developed by Nguyen and Habók (2021) to be suitable to explore how Vietnamese EFL students perceive autonomy in English language learning.

## **2.3. Related studies**

Aziz et al. (2024) examine the impact of metacognitive strategies on critical thinking and LA in Indonesian school settings. Using a mixed-methods approach, these authors combine quantitative pre-test and post-test data with qualitative insights from interviews and observations. Their research reveals that students' argumentative writing skills and independence in learning were significantly

improved after a four-week intervention focusing on metacognitive skills of planning, monitoring, and self-reflecting. While the study showed that students slightly improved their writing skills, its overall impact on critical thinking and LA was statistically insignificant. It is therefore necessary to further explore long-term effects and to deploy a robust tool to examine the relationship between metacognitive strategies and LA.

Melvina et al. (2023) investigate the interplay between motivation and LA among Indonesian EFL students by exploring the influence of students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on their autonomy and find out that intrinsic motivation significantly impacts EFL students' willingness to take responsibility for their own learning journey. Those with higher intrinsic motivation demonstrated higher levels of autonomy, in that they set learning goals, manage resources, and problem-solve. Extrinsic motivation, despite being less impactful, initially stimulated students to engage in autonomous learning activities. The authors highlighted the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation through meaningful tasks and supportive environments and depicted such challenges as students' relying on external rewards and being little aware of self-regulated learning strategies. Therefore, motivational strategies should be integrated into EFL curricula by incorporating learner-centered activities and providing consistent feedback to increase both motivation and autonomy.

Lee and Lee (2024) explore how EFL college students in Korea perceived the essentials of LA in English conversation classes and identify what qualities students needed to become proficient in English communication. These authors used the questionnaire of Nguyen and Habók's (2021) [see our judgment in the final paragraph of Section 2.2], translated it into Korean, to assess 40 vocational college students' autonomy in an English conversation course. They found that the students strongly emphasized the teacher's facilitative role in fostering LA, unlike in Western contexts, which often prioritize learner independence and consider motivation and desire to be the least significant. Students also valued confidence as a primary attribute of autonomous learning in oral communication. The questionnaire identified critical gaps in students' perceptions of autonomy, particularly regarding motivation and independent learning practices. Lee and Lee's (2024) study argues that flexibility and effectiveness are important in capturing LA across culturally specific settings and offers practical strategies for curriculum design and autonomy-supportive teaching in East Asian vocational education.

Zenouzagh et al. (2023) also use [as we did: see our reference above] Nguyen and Habók's (2021) questionnaire to measure LA in Iranian education according to its text-based and multimodal computer-mediated communication, engagement satisfaction, and writing quality among 40 EFL learners from language centers. These authors' used the questionnaire before and after learners engaged in collaborative writing tasks through Moodle and a text-based forum to determine their autonomy levels. Findings reveal that the text-based modality significantly improves LA and cognitive and behavioral engagement while the multimodal communication promotes emotional and social engagement. While the learner's writing performance improved within both modalities, the text-based group demonstrated slightly better quality. Satisfaction in both groups was influenced by the nature of learner, teacher, curriculum, and internet-related dimensions, with internet quality being the most criticized factor. The study of Zenouzagh et al. (2023) supports our choice of Nguyen and Habók's (2021) questionnaire because it shows how it adapts suitably to diverse technological environments, and thus its ability to measure nuanced changes in LA resulting from innovative teaching methods. It helps validate the questionnaire's reliability for assessing autonomy among learners in technologically enhanced EFL learning contexts.

In Vietnamese education, Nguyen et al. (2024) focus on the variables: gender, type of major, and study duration at university to investigate how English language students perceive LA. Their study, which collected survey data from 117 Vietnamese EFL students, reveals that, while they generally value the importance of LA, students' gender, type of major, and study duration generally had no

significant impacts on their perceptions of LA. However, female students more strongly ranked teacher support than their male counterparts. The questionnaire in this study, which was also adopted from Nguyen and Habók's (2021) model (see above), enabled researchers to identify patterns in how LA is perceived and practiced, offering actionable strategies for educators. The study emphasized the need for tailored approaches to promoting autonomy, particularly to address the specific needs of students based on demographic and academic backgrounds. However, it recruited the participants with two and three academic years at university, which may constrain the generalizability of findings to broader Vietnamese EFL student populations.

Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) examine first-year EFL students' readiness for autonomous learning in Vietnam. They also adapted Nguyen and Habók's (2021) questionnaire to assess the essential components of autonomy, comprising motivation, self-regulation, and beliefs about teacher roles. Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) find that freshmen showed a moderate level of readiness to engage in autonomous learning. Their traditional views on the teacher's authority, however, often lowered their initiative and confidence in being autonomous in learning. This study reinforced the need for early intervention on autonomous learning strategies to improve first-year students' capabilities. The model questionnaire proved its versatility in assessing learners' preparedness for autonomy at different educational stages.

Generally, the literature review has confirmed that Nguyen and Habók's (2021) questionnaire is sufficiently versatile and reliable to measure LA autonomy across various educational and cultural contexts. In Vietnam, this model has been applied to assess EFL students' perceptions of autonomy in higher education contexts. The literature also highlights the importance of cultural and institutional factors on learners' ability to self-regulate, plan, and monitor their learning journey. Common findings reveal that learners rely on the teacher's role and need more structured teacher support to develop LA. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate LA in curriculum design and explicitly teach LA to learners. In international research, this questionnaire has been adapted to investigate different populations of learners, such as Korean non-English majors and Iranian EFL students. These studies reveal that such cultural factors as teacher support, confidence, and peer collaboration play important roles in fostering autonomy. For instance, while Korean students highly valued the teacher's role, Iranian students demonstrated improved autonomy in technologically mediated environments. For instance, while Korean students highly valued the teacher's role, Iranian students demonstrated improved autonomy in technologically mediated environments. In short, the model questionnaire's adaptability across contexts provides insights into the factors shaping autonomy. However, differences in cultural expectations and learning environments highlight the need for LA to be evaluated and measured according to its location so it is broadly nurtured.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research design***

A descriptive survey design was chosen because it is well suited for assessing demographics in educational research thanks to its efficiency, standardization, and capacity for quantitative analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design enables us to gather large amounts of demographic data, such as age, gender, and education level, from a wide population in a short time. Such data are often categorical in nature and thus can be compared across different groups and statistically analyzed to identify patterns and disparities.

The data collection was conducted in a public university in Vietnam. Before commencing the study, we obtained permission and ethical approval to work with potential participants. We also informed them about the study's objectives and their right to withdraw from the research at any point and guaranteed the confidentiality of their personal information.

### 3.2. Participants

A total number of 334 Vietnamese undergraduate students (104 males and 230 females) were recruited using Slovin's formula (Ryan, 2013). This formula can be used to determine an optimal sample size in survey research from a known population. It is useful in survey research and helps to ensure that the sample can represent the larger population while maintaining efficiency in data collection. The participants in this study were selected through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling techniques that allowed us to access the sample size based on its availability in a Vietnamese public university (Table 1).

Slovin's formula:  $n = N/(1+Ne^2)$

n: sample size

N: total population of the participants

e: desired margin of error (a 5% margin of error)

**Table 1.** Demographic information

Type		N	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	104	31.1
	Female	230	68.9
Age	18 or below 18	80	24.0
	19	73	21.9
	20	82	24.6
	21	78	23.4
	22 or above 22	21	6.3
Majors	English Teacher	107	32.0
	English Studies	227	68.0
Academic years of study	Freshmen	84	25.1
	Sophomore	81	24.3
	Junior	82	24.6
	Senior	87	26.0
GPA	Excellent	4	1.2
	Very Good	78	23.4
	Good	132	39.5
	Average	42	12.6
	Below Average	0	0
Geography	Unspecified	78	23.4
	Rural	166	49.7
	Urban	155	46.4
	Suburban	13	3.9

Two majors were purposely targeted, with 107 students from English Studies and 227 from English Language Teacher Education. There were 84 freshmen, 81 sophomores, 82 juniors, and 87 seniors. GPA scores varied: Excellent (4 students), Very good (78 students), Good (132 students), Average (42 students), Below average (0), and unspecified (78 students). The participants reported their geographical differences: rural (166), urban (155), and suburban (13) areas. They were fully informed about the research aims and voluntarily participated in the questionnaire using Google Form. Their personal information was kept confidential throughout the study.

### 3.3. Data Collection

To explore English-major students' perceptions of autonomy in learning the English language, the model questionnaire was primarily employed to collect quantitative data. It comprised two sections and used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to evaluate participants' responses. Section A aimed to explore English majors' demographic information: age, gender, major, academic years of study, and GPA scores whereas Section B focused on their perceptions of autonomy in English language learning, including (i) 40 items within five clusters derived from Nguyen and Habók's (2021) model, and (ii) two open-ended questions asking for detailed responses on teacher strategies to foster LA in English language learning activities. The English version of the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese, the participants' mother tongue, and then carefully cross-checked by four lecturers in English, including one PhD holder and three MA holders, to ensure the validity of the translated content.

The first stage of the questionnaire was piloted on 54 participants who shared similar characteristics to the target participants, with its reliability coefficients above 0.7 for the whole questionnaire and its five clusters. Then, upon official data collection from participants, the reliability coefficients were checked again using a scale test (see Table 2). The Cronbach's Alpha revealed that reliability coefficients were all above 0.7, ensuring the questionnaire's internal reliability for the further analyses.

**Table 2.** Cronbach's Alpha test results

Clusters	Item ranges	Cronbach's Alpha
Metacognitive skills (15 items)	1 - 15	.954
Beliefs about teacher's role (8 items)	16 - 23	.908
Motivation and desire (5 items)	24 - 28	.886
Freedom (7 items)	29 - 35	.933
Metacognitive knowledge (5 items)	36 - 40	.901
Total (N=334)		.976

## 4. Results

Both Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk Tests were administered to assess the normality of data. Table 3 illustrates that a non-normal distribution was found across five clusters of perceived autonomy throughout the tests ( $p < .05$ ). Moreover, we examined skewness and kurtosis coefficients across five clusters. The results showed that the coefficients fell outside [-1.5; 1.5] range, indicating that our study violated the assumption of univariate normality (Tabachnick et al., 2007). Therefore, non-parametric tests were administered for the further analyses between the mean scores.

**Table 3.** Tests of normality

	Kolmogoro		v-Smirnova		Shapiro-Wilk	
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Metacognitive skills	124	334	.000	.900	334	.000
Beliefs about teacher's role	094	334	.000	.935	334	.000
Motivation and desire	143	334	.000	.855	334	.000
Freedom	133	334	.000	.890	334	.000
Metacognitive knowledge	185	334	.000	.807	334	.000

#### **4.1. English majors' perceived autonomy in learning English**

We conducted the Descriptive Statistics to calculate learners' perceived autonomy in English language learning at both overall and cluster levels.

According to Oxford's (1990) scale, learners generally demonstrated a high level of agreement on their autonomy in English language learning ( $M=3.89$ ,  $SD=0.72$ ). Given differences in their level of perceived autonomy across the clusters, they were still at a high level. In detail, metacognitive knowledge was the highest ( $M=4.14$ ,  $SD=0.82$ ), followed by motivation and desire ( $M=4.04$ ,  $SD=0.84$ ) whereas their beliefs about the teacher's role bottomed at  $3.77$ ,  $SD= 0.79$  compared to other clusters in Table 4. The remaining clusters, including freedom and metacognitive skills, weighed at a comparable level ( $M=3.88$ ,  $SD=0.86$  and  $M =3.83$ ,  $SD=0.76$ , respectively).

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics of perceived autonomy in learning English

Clusters	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Metacognitive skills	1.00	5.00	3.83	0.76
Beliefs about teacher's role	1.00	5.00	3.77	0.79
Motivation and desire	1.00	5.00	4.04	0.84
Freedom	1.00	5.00	3.88	0.86
Metacognitive knowledge	1.00	5.00	4.14	0.82
Overall	1.00	5.00	3.89	0.72

The common strategies, as presented in Table 5, the teachers used to promote English majors' autonomy in learning English included testing (19,4%), homework and assignments (18,9%), and participation in classroom activities (19,1%), followed by group work (10,2%). The remaining strategies, such as, self-study, teacher's feedback, monitoring learning progress and outcomes, teacher's instructions, and other methods, made up below 8%.

**Table 5.** Students' responses to the open-ended question about teachers' strategies to foster LA

<i>Methods</i>	<i>Responses/proportions (N=334)</i>
Testing (quizzes, tests, and exams)	65 responses (19,4%)
Homework and assignments	63 responses (18,9%)
Participation in classroom activities	64 responses (19,1%)
Group work	34 responses (10,2%)
Self-study	25 responses (7,5%)
Teacher's feedback	23 responses (6,9%)
Monitoring learning progress and outcomes	20 responses (6,0%)
Teacher's instructions	16 responses (4,8%)
Other methods	10 responses (3,0%)

#### **4.2. English majors' perceived autonomy in learning English by gender, major, age, academic years of study, GPA rankings, and geographical features**

The quantitative dataset followed a non-normal distribution (see Table 3); therefore, non-parametric tests were employed accordingly. First, we used a Mann-Whitney U test to compare learners' level of their perceived autonomy in English language learning by gender, major, and geographical features. Regarding the geographical features, participants hailed from three different areas; however, due to the limited size (N= 13) from the suburban area, mean comparisons regarding learners' perceptions of autonomy were conducted only between rural and urban areas.

**Table 6.** Gender-based differences

Clusters	Gender	N	Mean rank	Mann Whitney U Z	Asymp. Sig. (2- tailed)
Metacognitive skills	Male	104	164.14	11611.000	.669
	Female	230	169.02	-.428	
Beliefs about teacher's role	Male	104	166.53	11859.500	.902
	Female	230	167.94	-.123	
Motivation and desire	Male	104	179.63	11859.500	.120
	Female	230	162.02	-1.554	
Freedom	Male	104	168.20	11887.000	.929
	Female	230	167.18	-.090	
Metacognitive knowledge	Male	104	176.35	11040.000	.255
	Female	230	163.50	-1.138	
Overall	Male	104	170.27	11672.000	.724
	Female	230	166.25	-.353	

Table 6 reveals that there were no statistical gender-based differences regarding English majors' perceptions of their autonomy in English learning at the overall level ( $U=11672.000$ ;  $Z= -.353$ ;  $p= .724$ ) and across five clusters: metacognitive skills ( $U=11611.00$ ;  $Z= -.428$ ,  $p=.669$ ); beliefs about teacher's role ( $U=11859.500$ ;  $Z=-.123$ ,  $p=.902$ ); motivation and desire ( $U=11859.500$ ;  $Z= -1.554$ ;  $p=.120$ ); freedom ( $U=11887.000$ ;  $Z=-.090$ ;  $p=.929$ ); metacognitive knowledge ( $U=11040.000$ ;  $Z= -1.138$ ,  $p=.255$ ). This means that both males and females perceived their autonomy similarly in learning the English language.

**Table 7.** Major-based differences

Clusters	Majors	N	Mean rank	Mann Whitney U Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Metacognitive skills	SPA	107	155.97	10911.000	.134
	NNA	227	172.93	-1.500	
Beliefs about teacher's role	SPA	107	147.04	9955.500	.008
	NNA	227	177.14	-2.666	
Motivation and desire	SPA	107	163.25	11689.500	.578
	NNA	227	169.50	-.557	
Freedom	SPA	107	158.07	11135.000	.218
	NNA	227	171.95	-1.231	
Metacognitive knowledge	SPA	107	164.17	11788.000	.662
	NNA	227	169.07	-.438	
Overall	SPA	107	153.92	10691.000	.077
	NNA	227	173.90	-1.766	

No statistically significant differences by two majors were recorded with respect to English-major students' perceived autonomy in learning English (Table 7) at the overall level ( $U=10691.000$ ;  $Z=-1.766$ ;  $p=.077$ ) and across four clusters: metacognitive skills ( $U=10911.000$ ;  $Z= -1.500$ ,  $p=.134$ ); motivation and desire ( $U= 11689.500$ ;  $Z= -.557$ ;  $p=.578$ ); freedom ( $U= 11135.000$ ;  $Z= -1.231$ ;  $p=.218$ ); metacognitive knowledge ( $U=11788.000$ ;  $Z=-.438$ ,  $p=.662$ ). By contrast, their perceived autonomy across the two majors demonstrated a statistical difference regarding their beliefs about the teacher's role, with a mean rank of 147.04 for the English Language Teacher Education major and a mean rank of 177.14 for the English Studies major ( $U=9955.500$ ;  $Z= -2.666$ ,  $p=.008$ ).

**Table 8.** Geography-based differences

Clusters	Areas	N	Mean rank	Mann Whitney	Asymp. Sig. (2-
				U	tailed)
				Z	
Metacognitive skills	Rural	166	157.13	12222.000	
	Urban	155	165.15	-.775	.438
Beliefs about teacher's role	Rural	166	162.00	12698.500	
	Urban	155	159.93	-.201	.841
Motivation and desire	Rural	166	154.09	11718.500	
	Urban	155	168.40	-1.390	.165
Freedom	Rural	166	150.49	11120.000	
	Urban	155	172.26	-2.109	.035
Metacognitive knowledge	Rural	166	152.72	11490.500	.094
	Urban	155	169.87	-1.672	
Overall	Rural	166	155.90	12018.500	.308
	Urban	155	166.46	-1.019	

As illustrated in Table 8, both rural and urban students similarly perceived their autonomy at an overall level ( $U=12018.500$ ;  $Z=-1.019$ ;  $p=.308$ ) and across four dimensions: metacognitive skills ( $U=12222.000$ ;  $Z=-.775$ ,  $p=.438$ ); beliefs about teacher's role ( $U=12698.500$ ;  $Z=-.201$ ;  $p=.841$ ); motivation and desire ( $U=11718.500$ ;  $Z=-1.390$ ;  $p=.164$ ); metacognitive knowledge ( $U=11490.500$ ;  $Z=-1.672$ ,  $p=.094$ ). However, urban students' perceptions of their autonomy in English learning were statistically higher than those from rural areas in their freedom (Mean rank\_rural =150.49; Mean rank\_urban =172.26;  $U=11120.000$ ;  $Z=-2.019$ ;  $p=.035$ ).

Kruskal-Wallis test was run to compare learners' perceived autonomy in English language learning by academic years of study and GPA rankings.

**Table 9.** Differences in perceived autonomy by academic years of study

Clusters	Academic years of study	N	Mean rank	Kruskal-Wallis H	Asymp. Sig.
Metacognitive skills	Freshmen	84	160.45	2.031	.566
	Sophomore	81	179.01		
	Junior	82	160.94		
	Senior	87	169.78		
Beliefs about teacher's role	Freshmen	84	162.67	1.412	.703
	Sophomore	81	177.59		
	Junior	82	161.63		
	Senior	87	168.30		
Motivation and desire	Freshmen	84	154.08	3.706	.295
	Sophomore	81	179.96		
	Junior	82	161.92		
	Senior	87	174.11		
Freedom	Freshmen	84	152.09	2.992	.393
	Sophomore	81	169.78		
	Junior	82	174.35		
	Senior	87	173.79		
Metacognitive knowledge	Freshmen	84	154.27	2.513	.473
	Sophomore	81	171.01		
	Junior	82	167.92		
	Senior	87	176.61		
Overall	Freshmen	84	158.62	1.767	.622
	Sophomore	81	177.28		
	Junior	82	163.62		
	Senior	87	170.63		

Regardless of academic years of study at the university (Table 9), students' perceived autonomy revealed no statistically significant differences at both the overall measurement ( $H=1.767$ ;  $p=.622$ ) and across five clusters in their perceived autonomy: metacognitive skills ( $H=2.031$ ;  $p=.566$ ); beliefs about teacher's role ( $H=1.412$ ;  $p=.703$ ); motivation and desire ( $H=3.706$ ;  $p=.295$ ); freedom ( $H=2.992$ ;  $p=.393$ ); metacognitive knowledge ( $H=2.513$ ;  $p=.473$ ). It can be illustrated that the students, irrespective of academic years of study, were all autonomous in English learning.

**Table 10.** Differences in perceived autonomy by GPA rankings

Clusters	GPA rankings	N	Mean rank	Kruskal-Wallis H	Asymp. Sig.
Metacognitive skills	Excellent	4	266.88	5.912	.206
	Very good	78	178.31		
	Good	132	163.31		
	Average	42	162.98		
	< Average	0	0		
	Unspecified	78	161.12		
Beliefs about teacher's role	Excellent	4	179.88	6.357	.174
	Very good	78	148.67		
	Good	132	179.48		
	Average	42	179.46		
	< Average	0	0		
	Unspecified	78	158.97		
Motivation and desire	Excellent	4	228.75	8.370	.079
	Very good	78	190.40		
	Good	132	163.18		
	Average	42	151.88		
	< Average	0	0		
	Unspecified	78	157.18		
Freedom	Excellent	4	194.88	2.707	.608
	Very good	78	170.67		
	Good	132	174.73		
	Average	42	156.08		
	< Average	0	0		
	Unspecified	78	156.83		
Metacognitive knowledge	Excellent	4	149.25	5.358	.252
	Very good	78	177.97		
	Good	132	176.07		
	Average	42	152.60		
	< Average	0	0		
	Unspecified	78	151.49		
Overall	Excellent	4	227.38	2.339	.674
	Very good	78	173.22		
	Good	132	168.08		
	Average	42	160.71		
	< Average	0	0		
	Unspecified	78	161.38		

As presented in the Table 10, learners' perceived autonomy, both at the overall and dimensions of perceived autonomy in learning English, revealed no statistically significant difference across GPA rankings, indicating that given their GPA rankings, the students were all autonomous in learning English.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. The results of the first research question

Results revealed that English-majors' perceived autonomy in learning English is generally high, indicating that they were highly autonomous in learning English. The finding is congruent with the studies across diverse contexts and language development aspects (i.e., Haque et al., 2023; Lee & Lee, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Tuan, 2021) despite different scales that measure learners' perceptions of their autonomy in learning English language. Contextual accounts further explain such a high level of perceived autonomy in learning English (Dang, 2024). In our research, English is regarded as an essential requirement in the participants' educational program and is tied directly to their job prospects as interpreters, translators, and teachers in English. Students thus tend to exert greater autonomy in their learning as long as learning knowledge is intended to encourage their personal and professional development (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Basri, 2023).

Besides, given that English-major students must acquire the IELTS certificate with a minimum band score of 6.5, the participants are trained in response to the IELTS format by means of selective tasks in the coursebook, and also instructed through various meaningful lessons, activities, and approaches, task-based language teaching. For example, these are learner-centered and grounded in second language acquisition theory, all of which might foster students' exposure to language development and autonomous learning (Trinh, 2005; Vieira, 2017). However, curriculum-based factors, including activities and tasks irrelevant to learner needs, could lead to their low level of autonomy in learning English (Borg and Alshumaimeri, 2019). In this sense, it can be inferred that the needs of language development among English-major students from the existing curriculum, meaningful tasks and activities in our study appeared satisfactory, hence exerting their greater autonomy in language learning, which is likely seen as a contributor to such a high level of perceived autonomy in learning English.

With regards to assessment methods in enhancing LA, Tran's (2019) research findings revealed that learners in the higher education context demonstrated a low level of autonomy in learning English due to the negative washback of assessment as well as teachers' low understanding of assessment in LA development. Against this academic background, lecturers in our study, which is part of a larger project, have received formal training on testing and assessment methods and syllabus design from experts in the field and are required to map assessment methods with their existing syllabi to maximize the students' learning outcomes, which in turn, to some extent, fosters the students' autonomy in learning English.

This high level of perceived autonomy in our study, despite its convincing evidence, may also suggest a "mask of autonomous behaviour" (Breen & Mann 1997, p. 141), which means the students might have pretended to express their autonomy during the lessons to please the teacher or to gain better grades in class. It would therefore need both long-term examination and teachers's careful observation to portray LA manifestation thoroughly.

#### *Metacognitive knowledge*

The students' metacognitive knowledge with the highest mean score outweighed the other dimensions of their perceptions of autonomy, thus indicating that the English students were aware of their own strengths, weaknesses, motivations, personal needs, learning styles, and expectations of successful English learning, regardless of demographic and contextual variables. These findings echo previous studies that emphasizes learners' positive perceptions of autonomy and the critical role of metacognitive knowledge in autonomous learning (Teng, 2024; Tran, 2019; Wongyimyong & Soontornwipast, 2024). However, the absence of significant geographical differences regarding metacognitive knowledge in our study contrasts with Dang's (2024) finding that rural learners fall

behind in regulating their metacognition because of their fewer resources and less exposure to learner-centered methods, although its overall differences between urban and rural students are similar to Dang's study. While further research is needed to find out if the students participating in our research possess intrinsic learner traits, it might rather reflect uniform instructional practices in our study, where the disparities in metacognitive knowledge between rural and urban students have likely been minimized.

### ***Metacognitive skills***

In our study, metacognitive skills are concerned with learners' ability to set learning goals, plan, make decisions, manage time, and evaluate their own English learning. The mean score of this cluster (see Table 4) accords with similar findings in related studies on learner autonomy among EFL students (Arabai, 2022; Tuan, 2021). The similarity of these findings across various EFL contexts highlights the universal perception on the importance of fostering LA in language acquisition. It also emphasizes the value of autonomy-supportive teaching strategies to enable students to take responsibility for their own learning.

No statistically significant differences occurred in this cluster of metacognitive skills across gender, major, geography, academic year, or GPA rankings among English-majors in our research, irrespective of student differences. This lack of variation suggests that students' self-reported metacognitive skills are consistently nurtured across diverse demographics, likely reflecting the influence of learner-centered instructional practices (Wongyimyong & Soontornwipast, 2024), and standardized curricula (Teng, 2024; Teng & Mizumoto, 2024). However, this uniformity may also reflect the shortcoming of the questionnaire used in this study, in that it might capture broad aspects of metacognitive skills but fail to discover delicate differences in how students apply these skills (Nguyen et al., 2024).

### ***Beliefs about teacher's role***

The students believed that their teachers play crucial roles in setting goals, choosing meaningful materials, correcting mistakes, tracking learning progress, providing guidance and explanations, deciding time and the objectives of learning English for the students. The students' self-reports extracted from the open-ended question provide in-depth evidence of such a high level of their perceived autonomy when learning English, with respect to the teachers' use of autonomy-promoting strategies. Those self-reported strategies regarding the teacher's role in learner autonomy regulations, to large extent, align with studies (Arabai, 2021; Zenouzagh et al. 2023) which emphasized the teachers' facilitative roles and curriculum-based factors to improve students' LA within language learning. By contrast, some studies indicated that teachers' roles were believed to downplay learner creativity in language learning (i.e., Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022) and that spoon-feeding tendencies of teachers hinders LA within language learning (Basri, 2023).

### ***Motivation and desire***

Our results revealed that the students were autonomous in learning English regarding their motivation and desire. This cluster involved English majors' willingness to set learning goals, sustain effort, and persist in their learning, driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsically, they reported being genuinely interested in mastering English for personal development, while extrinsically, they were inspired by practical outcomes, such as career prospects, academic success, and social mobility.

The high score reflects the English majors' commitment to improve their English proficiency, proactively by engaging in learning activities, and self-regulating and maintaining enthusiasm despite challenges. These findings align with studies in EFL contexts (i.e., Melvina et al., 2023; Nguyen & Habók, 2021). Moreover, the cluster highlights the role of positive reinforcement from teachers and

peers, as supported by Teng (2024), where collaborative tasks increase learners' motivation and self-efficacy.

### *Freedom*

The findings on the cluster of Freedom revealed that English-majors perceive a high level of autonomy in making decisions about their learning. This perception of freedom suggests that students feel confident in being able to control and engage in certain aspects of their learning, such as negotiating with teachers and peers about learning problems, selecting study strategies, and evaluating progress. Such findings support the importance of EFL learners' freedom in learning English both generally (Little et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2024; Tuan, 2021) and specifically in language skills such as vocabulary (Teng & Mizumoto, 2024), and writing (Nguyen & Habók, 2021; Salimi & Shams, 2016; Teng, 2024; Zenouzagh et al., 2023). Taken together, we can conclude that if EFL learners study English in a stress-free condition where they are supported by both their teachers and partners, they are more likely to acquire higher levels of LA. In this respect, Krashen (1982) posits that the affective filter hypothesis is crucial to acquiring language. Accordingly, such emotional factors as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence impact upon the success of language learning. A low affective filter, when fostered in supportive and stress-free learning environments, helps students absorb language input more easily and become more autonomous learners.

### **5.2. The results of the second research question**

Our results revealed that English-major students' demonstrated a similar level of perceived autonomy in learning English irrespective of gender, GPA rankings, age, and academic years of study. In other words, their autonomous attitudes towards learning English were not changeable given the above-mentioned factors regarding their demographics. This aligns with Nguyen et al.'s (2024) findings that revealed that no statistical difference was observed in relation to English-major students' academic years of study but contrasts with the research by Yen et al. (2024) that acknowledged English-major students, with different years in college, had expressed varying levels of perceived autonomy in learning English; that is, while sophomores had the lowest, juniors demonstrated the highest level. Regarding gender-based differences in LA, English-major students in the current research finding, whether male or female, were similarly autonomous in learning English, contrary to Nguyen et al. (2024) who identify a statistical difference between female and male English-majored students' perceptions of their teachers' behaviors and instructions. In addition, the students who majored in English studies were more autonomous than those with English Language Teacher Education, concerning their beliefs about the role of the teacher. Also, urban students statically had a higher level of perceived autonomy than rural students, despite their small difference. Lastly, remaining factors — GPA rankings and age — did not bear on their perceived autonomy in learning English. Such discrepancies regarding LA might relate to influential factors, such as contexts, culture, and individual differences (Dang, 2024; Linh & Loi, 2024).

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into English-major students' perceived autonomy in learning English language, revealing a generally high level of autonomy among participants. Although demographic factors comprising gender, GPA, age, and academic years of study showed no significant influence on their autonomy, differences were noted based on students' majors and geographical location. Specifically, English Studies students and urban students demonstrated slightly higher levels of perceived autonomy. These findings highlight the complex interplay of individual and contextual factors in fostering LA and emphasize the importance of tailoring pedagogical strategies to respond to diverse learner needs. This study provides valuable implications for fostering autonomy-supportive and reasonable teaching practices in EFL education. Regulated collaborative activities, self-reflective learning tasks, and opportunities for learners to

make decisions or choices are necessary to promote LA in the English classroom. Standardized curricula appear to firmly ensure uniform skill development across diverse learner groups, making them a valuable model for scalable educational initiatives

## 7. Limitation and Suggestion

This study surveyed 334 English-majored students from a university, which was quite a small sample compared to the extensive numbers of almost 200 higher education institutions in Vietnam. However, as mentioned earlier in this paper, our research aimed to investigate EFL students' perceptions about their autonomy in English language learning from a specific education setting, especially in relation to their demographic differences, rather than to generalize the findings. Future research, therefore, could recruit participants from various Vietnamese universities and deploy a mixed-method approach, embracing qualitative data from perhaps interviews or focus groups, to provide deeper insight into students' perceptions, experiences, and the circumstances underlying autonomy.

Also, the delicate discrepancies observed in this study, particularly in rural areas, suggest further emphasis on resource distribution and personalized support in under-resourced settings. Longitudinal studies could be employed to track how LA evolves over time and its sustained impact upon academic and professional achievements. Additionally, experimental studies should investigate the worth of targeted interventions, using digital learning tools, task-based teaching, and peer collaboration, to increase LA. Policymakers and educators should prioritize expanding access to learning resources in rural areas while continuing to integrate autonomy-supportive strategies into curricula. Finally, cross-national studies could apprise us of how different cultural and institutional contexts influence the development of LA, and offer valuable implications for global EFL education practices.

## Declarations

**Author Contributions.** TTHP: original manuscript preparation, conceptualization, review-editing and writing; STH: methodology, data analysis, Vietnamese-English translation.

**Conflicts of Interest.** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**Data Availability Statement.** The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author (TTHP) upon reasonable request.

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### About the Contributor(s)

**Thi Thanh Huyen Phan** has worked as a lecturer and teacher trainer in English language teaching and learning for more than 20 years at An Giang University, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. Her research interests include English language education, culture in language education, learner autonomy, and language policy and planning.

Email: [ptthuyen@agu.edu.vn](mailto:ptthuyen@agu.edu.vn)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9374-4663>

**Sang Truong Huynh** is currently a lecturer in English at An Giang University, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. His research interests include task-based language teaching, second language acquisition, and learner differences in English language learning.

Email: [htsang@agu.edu.vn](mailto:htsang@agu.edu.vn)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7879-0516>

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