



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation.

Some Recommendations for Building and Enhancing English Self-Directed Learning Skills outside the Classroom for Students of the Advanced Program at the University of Finance - Marketing

Bui Thi Nhi

University of Finance - Marketing, Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: **Bui Thi Nhi** (bt.nhi@ufm.edu.vn) This research is funded by University of Finance – Marketing

Article Info

ISSN (online): 2582-7138

Volume: 06

Issue: 01

January-February 2025

Received: 09-12-2024

Accepted: 12-01-2025

Page No: 1504-1508

Abstract

The outcomes of undergraduate education can be influenced by various factors, among which learners, as the central agents in the teaching and learning process, play a pivotal role in determining the overall quality of education. Self-directed learning is considered an optimal method that empowers students to take control of their learning journey. This article aims to share insights into the challenges students face in self-studying English outside the classroom while also proposing solutions to develop and enhance self-study skills, thereby fostering foreign language proficiency.

Keywords: Self-directed learning, skills, self-study competency

1. Introduction

The growing importance of English in Vietnam's integration into regional and global communities is undeniable. Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW on comprehensive educational reform underscores the significance of foreign language proficiency, particularly English, as a cornerstone for national development and international competitiveness (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2013)^[5]. Similarly, the National Foreign Language Project 2020^[1], spearheaded by the Ministry of Education and Training, identifies English as a vital instrument for advancing international cooperation and improving the quality of the nation's young intellectual workforce (MOET, 2008).

English proficiency enables individuals to access cutting-edge knowledge, actively engage in global initiatives, and address the demands of an increasingly interconnected job market. Furthermore, it equips the younger generation with the adaptability required to navigate rapid technological advancements and capitalize on emerging opportunities. Recognizing these benefits, Vietnam has prioritized English education across all levels and sectors, integrating it into strategic national policies. By positioning English as a bridge for international engagement, Vietnam not only enhances its global presence but also fosters a skilled and competitive workforce, laying a strong foundation for sustainable growth and development.

As a result, numerous studies have been conducted and conferences organized with the ultimate goal of enhancing training effectiveness through innovations in teaching methodologies. However, there has been little attention given to a crucial factor that determines the success of the educational process: learners' self-directed learning. Only through a conscious commitment to studying and research can learners actively acquire knowledge, develop a proper attitude toward learning, and meet the educational objectives of the 21st century, as emphasized by UNESCO: "Learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be."

2. Content

2.1 What is self-directed learning? (SDL)

Self-Directed Learning: An Essential Approach in Modern Education

Educators may define self-directed learning (SDL) in various ways; however, all definitions converge on the idea that SDL is a

process where learners play a central role and take responsibility for managing their own learning journey. Garrison (1997)^[6] emphasizes that SDL involves a combination of *self-management*—the regulation of learning activities, resources, and social contexts—and *self-monitoring*—the process by which learners observe, evaluate, and control their cognitive strategies. This dual process underscores the critical role of motivation and willpower in shaping and sustaining learners' efforts. While motivation drives decision-making, willpower ensures the persistence required to complete tasks and achieve goals. For SDL to be effective, the balance of control in the teaching and learning process must gradually shift from the teacher to the learner. Students must be empowered to exercise their independence and autonomy by setting their own goals and deciding what to learn and how to accomplish their tasks within a given curriculum framework. However, as Guthrie *et al.* (1997)^[8] highlight, SDL should not be misconstrued as solitary learning. Instead, it is inherently collaborative, as students often engage in SDL through meaningful interactions with teachers and peers.

In recent years, SDL has gained significant recognition as a vital educational approach, particularly in light of the rapidly evolving demands of the 21st century. This approach not only fosters autonomy, critical thinking, and lifelong learning skills but also aligns seamlessly with the dynamic requirements of modern education. For instance, Uus *et al.* (2021)^[13] examined SDL within the context of middle-school students' autonomous outdoor learning. Their research defined SDL as an approach in which learners take the initiative, with or without external support, to diagnose their learning needs, set goals, identify resources, select and implement strategies, and evaluate outcomes. This definition underscores the importance of self-regulation and autonomy as integral components of the learning process.

Further, SDL's role has been explored in higher education, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Khodaei *et al.* (2022)^[9] investigated SDL in the context of higher education's adaptation to post-pandemic challenges. They defined SDL as the process by which students independently manage their learning activities without external guidance, developing self-directed and self-paced learning skills through educator-prepared content. This perspective highlights the role of SDL in fostering both independence and adaptability, which are essential traits for navigating uncertain and rapidly changing environments.

From a broader perspective, Gray (2024)^[7] offered a nuanced understanding of SDL by distinguishing it from traditional education. He defined SDL as learning that emerges from self-chosen activities and life experiences, regardless of whether these activities were intentionally designed for educational purposes. This definition places significant emphasis on the learner's agency and the organic nature of acquiring knowledge through real-life experiences.

Recent definitions of SDL collectively emphasize the importance of learner autonomy, proactive management of the learning process, and the integration of personal experiences into education. Moreover, the California Learning Resource Network (2024)^[4] reinforces this view by defining SDL as a process where individuals take responsibility for their own education, including goal-setting and planning for their academic, professional, and personal development. This approach is characterized by flexibility and autonomy, allowing learners to determine their pace and

direction. The emphasis on adaptability and personal responsibility aligns with the demands of Industry 4.0, where continuous learning and skill acquisition are pivotal.

Adding to this perspective, the World Economic Forum (2023)^[14] identifies SDL as a central component of Education 4.0. It advocates for personalized and self-paced learning, moving away from standardized systems to approaches tailored to individual learner needs. This personalization enables learners to take control of their educational paths, a necessity in an era characterized by rapid technological advancements and complex global challenges. Modern perspectives on SDL underscore three critical aspects: (1) learner autonomy, where students actively engage in their education rather than passively receiving information; (2) responsibility and initiative, which require learners to take charge of identifying their learning needs, setting goals, and evaluating progress; and (3) empowerment, which involves creating environments that support students in making decisions about their learning paths.

In the context of the modern educational landscape, SDL aligns well with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability. As technology continues to evolve, SDL also incorporates the ability to effectively leverage digital tools and resources, equipping learners with the skills needed to navigate complex, information-rich environments. The convergence of SDL and digital proficiency reflects the evolving educational paradigms aimed at preparing learners for the challenges and opportunities of Industry 4.0.

In conclusion, contemporary perspectives on SDL emphasize its pivotal role in fostering adaptability, technological competence, and lifelong learning. These attributes are essential for students to thrive in an ever-changing, technology-driven world, making SDL a cornerstone of modern education.

2.2. The importance of self-study ability for university students

Biochemistry professor at Boston University, Isaac Asimov, once famously stated, “*Self-education is, I firmly believe, the only kind of education there is.*” The vastness of human knowledge far exceeds what can be conveyed within the confines of a structured curriculum and limited classroom time. The reality is that university education fundamentally involves a research-oriented cognitive process in which students independently acquire knowledge, cultivate skills for their future careers, and actively participate in the pursuit of new scientific discoveries.

Numerous studies on students' self-directed learning affirm that those with self-learning skills demonstrate a heightened sense of responsibility in making their learning process meaningful and exhibit greater self-regulation (Garrison, 1997)^[6]. Self-directed learning implies that once engaged in this process, students become curious and eager to explore new knowledge (Bolhuis, 1996)^[2]. They perceive challenges as opportunities to overcome, possess a strong desire for change, and exhibit enthusiasm for learning (Taylor, 1995)^[11]. Taylor also observed that these individuals are motivated, persistent, independent, disciplined, confident, and goal-oriented learners.

Moreover, SDL enables students to become effective learners and active contributors to society, fostering lifelong learning habits. This, in turn, equips them with the adaptability and resilience needed to face the challenges and difficulties that

future work and life may present. Given the critical role of SDL as outlined above, it is evident that developing an appropriate and effective self-learning method can unlock latent potential and create a powerful intrinsic motivation for learners.

The ability to engage in SDL is crucial for university students, as it fosters autonomy, enhances academic performance, and prepares them for lifelong learning. SDL, often referred to as self-directed learning, involves students taking initiative in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying resources, and evaluating their progress.

▪ **Autonomy and personal responsibility**

SDL empowers students to take control of their educational journey. By setting personal learning objectives and determining the means to achieve them, students develop a sense of ownership over their education. This autonomy not only enhances motivation but also encourages a deeper engagement with the material. As Garrison (1997)^[6] notes, students with SDL skills exhibit greater awareness of their responsibility in making the learning process meaningful and demonstrate an increased capacity for self-control.

▪ **Enhanced academic performance**

Research indicates a positive correlation between SDL skills and academic success. A study by Tekkol and Demirel (2018)^[12] found that university students possessing strong SDL abilities tend to achieve higher academic performance. These students are better equipped to manage their time effectively, employ appropriate learning strategies, and adapt to various academic challenges. Moreover, the study revealed a moderate positive relationship between SDL skills and lifelong learning tendencies, suggesting that these skills not only contribute to immediate academic success but also to ongoing personal and professional development.

▪ **Development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills**

Engaging in SDL requires students to analyze information critically, assess various perspectives, and solve problems independently. This process cultivates essential skills that are highly valued in both academic and professional settings. According to Bolhuis (1996)^[2], self-directed learners are characterized by their curiosity and readiness to explore new knowledge, viewing challenges as opportunities to overcome and demonstrating a desire for change and enthusiasm for learning.

▪ **Preparation for lifelong learning**

In today's rapidly changing world, the ability to learn independently is indispensable. SDL equips students with the skills necessary to continue learning beyond formal education. Taylor (1995)^[11] observed that self-directed learners are motivated, persistent, independent, disciplined, confident, and goal-oriented—traits that are essential for lifelong learning and adapting to new situations in both personal and professional contexts.

▪ **Adaptability to diverse learning environments**

The modern educational landscape includes various learning modalities, such as online courses, hybrid classes, and traditional face-to-face instruction. Students proficient in SDL can navigate these diverse environments effectively. A study by Broadbent and Poon (2015)^[3] highlighted that self-regulated learning strategies, which are integral to self-study, are positively associated with academic performance in both face-to-face and online learning environments.

▪ **Challenges and considerations**

While the benefits of SDL are substantial, it is important to acknowledge potential challenges. Not all students may possess the inherent skills required for effective SDL. Therefore, educational institutions should provide support mechanisms, such as training in time management, goal setting, and self-assessment techniques, to help students develop these competencies. Additionally, fostering a learning environment that encourages reflection and self-evaluation can further enhance students' SDL abilities.

The importance of SDL for university students cannot be overstated. It promotes autonomy, enhances academic performance, develops critical thinking skills, and prepares students for lifelong learning. By cultivating SDL abilities, students are better equipped to meet the demands of their academic pursuits and future professional endeavors.

2.3. The Current situation of english SDL skills outside the classroom among advanced program students at the University of Finance and Marketing (UFM)

Through direct discussions with advanced program students regarding their English SDL outside the classroom, the findings indicate that the majority of students show little interest in seeking additional learning materials beyond the homework assigned by their teachers. A small number of students spend approximately two hours daily learning English by watching movies or reading stories in English, while others study every other day or only dedicate time to the subject shortly before exams. Many students admitted that they do not take notes or document any information during their SDL process. Most study sessions take place at their residences, and they have not formed study groups for mutual learning and exchange of knowledge.

Students who perform well in English reported having a passion for learning the language, finding joy and positive emotions in the process. They also unanimously agreed that English is a vital tool for exploring the world and serving their future careers, emphasizing that this is why they strive to improve their English proficiency.

On the other hand, students with less enthusiasm for English exhibited a less positive attitude. They expressed that English is difficult to grasp and challenging to self-study, and with such skepticism, they prefer attending classes with instructors rather than studying independently.

Another significant factor influencing proactive English learning attitudes is the richness and solidity of students' foundational English knowledge. The majority of high-performing students (over 90%) agreed that their love for English stems in part from a strong foundation of basic knowledge they had accumulated. In contrast, average and low-performing students lack such foundational knowledge. A well-established understanding of English and its cultural context helps students grasp new concepts, connect them to existing knowledge, and organize information systematically and effectively.

In addition, proactive attitudes toward English learning must be tailored to each student's "individual learning style." Kinsella (1995)^[10] defines this as "the natural, habitual, and preferred way in which an individual absorbs, processes, and retains new skills and information." Specifically, an English learning style reflects how students approach their studies: whether they are extroverted or introverted, prefer working individually or in pairs/groups, and, most importantly,

whether they can adapt or adjust SDL strategies to align with their personal learning style and situational context.

This also explains why a significant number of advanced program students at the University of Finance and Marketing face greater challenges with SDL. They have become accustomed to traditional classroom environments and a passive learning style, where language acquisition is primarily delivered by instructors. In contrast, self-study requires a much stronger and more comprehensive sense of autonomy from learners.

Furthermore, during the SDL process, many students fail to leverage the benefits of technology to enhance their English proficiency. Instead, they often divide their attention between studying and engaging in activities such as accessing social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Viber and Zalo, playing games, or chatting with friends. As a result, despite dedicating time to SDL, the effectiveness of their learning is significantly diminished due to a lack of focus and wasted time.

Many students reported spending an entire morning (approximately three hours) on English study, only to end up browsing Facebook, viewing photos, replying to comments, or watching music videos rather than using English videos to practice listening and speaking skills. This pattern is frequently repeated, leading to multiple semesters passing without notable improvement in self-learning skills or English proficiency as expected.

It is evident that, despite English being identified as a critical subject that enables students to access specialized knowledge in the future, and despite being allocated a substantial duration of six consecutive semesters (1 period = 50 minutes; 45 periods per semester; 45 periods x 6 semesters = 270 periods; 270 periods x 50 minutes = 13,500 minutes = 225 hours), students have not recognized and utilized their potential and their time outside of class effectively yet to further enhance their English proficiency.

2.4. Recommendations for developing and enhancing English SDL skills for students

Based on the aforementioned findings and discussions, to develop and enhance students' self-learning skills, thereby contributing to the improvement of English training quality in the high-quality program at the University of Finance and Marketing, we propose the following solutions:

It is essential to redefine and clarify the roles of teachers and students in the context of modern teaching methodologies. Lecturers must adopt a more active approach to teaching, setting clear objectives for learners. Thus, teachers should not only act as knowledge transmitters but also as guides, facilitators, and advisors, assisting students in selecting and processing information effectively. As the central focus of the teaching and learning process, students should be given opportunities and support to develop their self-learning abilities and independent thinking skills in all situations.

Before delivering the first lecture, instructors should help students clearly understand the importance of the subject in relation to their future specialized courses. Additionally, they should emphasize that English is the key to unlocking the vast knowledge of humanity, enabling students to achieve their personal goals in the future. This approach aims to foster motivation and inspire a passion for exploring the subject.

Teaching students effective SDL strategies to avoid wasting time. Most students, when encountering a learning resource, tend to skim through or read it once without thoroughly

studying or taking notes for future reference. To help students retain and apply the knowledge they have learned, instructors should provide detailed and specific guidance on suitable learning methods for English, utilizing a cyclical approach. Additionally, appropriate assessment and evaluation methods should be implemented to measure and reinforce students' independent learning capabilities.

Each student should establish a detailed self-study schedule that outlines the workload to be completed, including exercises from textbooks and workbooks, group assignments, and independent tasks. The creation of this schedule and the allocation of exercises and skills should be guided by the instructor, tailored to each student's proficiency level. This helps students experience a sense of achievement and maintain enthusiasm for language learning.

Students should also actively communicate with instructors or peers about difficulties encountered during SDL. Dormitories, shared accommodations, libraries, or self-study rooms outside regular class hours can serve as venues for organizing study sessions and discussions. These activities not only reinforce knowledge and language skills but also allow students to explore alternative study methods when they find the routine of logging in, completing exercises, checking results, and logging out with technology monotonous.

Students, with the guidance and support of their instructors, must develop an awareness of the importance of the subject in relation to their personal benefits. This awareness helps foster intrinsic motivation, enabling them to sustain a long-term passion and interest in the subject. Additionally, students should take the initiative and actively seek opportunities to participate in programs aimed at developing SDL skills and equipping themselves with independent learning strategies. They can utilize readily available resources such as books, newspapers, and television to enhance their learning.

Students' interest in the subject is a crucial factor, acting as a driving force for high-achieving students while posing a significant challenge for those with weaker English skills. These students often express negative emotions and frustration when asked about the curriculum, their learning motivation, or self-study efforts. Due to their inability to understand lessons and the lack of timely support from instructors or peers, they gradually lose confidence and interest in self-learning English. Interest in learning plays a key role in motivating students to engage in self-study and believe in their ability to overcome the barriers of language acquisition. Confidence is an essential tool for every student on their academic journey, especially in self-directed language learning. They need to believe in their capability to succeed in self-learning English by persisting with a disciplined and systematic approach.

In this process, instructors should actively foster students' confidence through specific teaching activities, such as providing clear self-learning strategies, monitoring their extracurricular study efforts, offering regular individual support in class, providing online feedback, and encouraging them both mentally and materially. In addition to classroom activities, instructors can motivate students to participate in group activities, regularly scheduled sessions of the university's English Club, or weekend interactions with native speakers. These activities can help transform theoretical knowledge into practical skills and real-life experiences. Alongside sharpening both hard and soft skills,

such initiatives will enable students to maintain a positive interest in and motivation for learning English effectively. On the other hand, during the SDL process, students need to develop effective note-taking strategies for studying English vocabulary. When engaging with English materials (reading, listening, or watching videos), it is crucial for learners to take notes. These notes could include important structures, phrases, usage patterns, and expressions, as well as frequently recurring words and phrases.

After this note-taking process, learners can apply the structures and frequently used phrases observed in native speakers' expressions to their own communication. Additionally, these notes can serve as a resource for reviewing frequently encountered vocabulary, verifying meanings and usage through dictionaries, and exploring word types and contextual examples. This practice not only enhances vocabulary but also improves memory retention, enabling more effective language usage and response.

Furthermore, note-taking allows learners to document ideas, presentation content, and topics discussed by speakers or writers, thereby expanding vocabulary and deepening knowledge of subjects of interest. Students should also establish a personal system for recording and storing vocabulary searched in dictionaries. This system can be used for revisiting words during free time or finding precise, context-appropriate vocabulary when needed. Such a method not only fosters better retention and application of words but also positively motivates learners to actively remember and use their vocabulary effectively.

Finally, it is essential to establish a comprehensive program to closely manage students' self-learning activities, treating self-study outside of class hours as a mandatory task and a criterion for student evaluation. To implement this effectively, the university should establish a learning resource center equipped with state-of-the-art audiovisual equipment, reference materials, and books. This center would provide students with the opportunity to practice language skills, engage in group discussions, or complete assignments with the support and supervision of dedicated staff.

3. Conclusion

To further strengthen the effectiveness of higher education and address the challenges of improving English proficiency, it is imperative to recognize the transformative role of technology and innovation in education. Universities should integrate digital learning platforms and resources, such as language apps, online courses, and virtual exchange programs, to create a dynamic and accessible environment for students to practice and enhance their language skills. Additionally, fostering a culture of lifelong learning and curiosity among students is essential, encouraging them to view English proficiency not merely as an academic goal but as a critical life skill for global engagement and professional advancement. Instructors must also be empowered with modern pedagogical tools and training to provide personalized guidance and foster an inclusive and supportive learning atmosphere. Institutions should prioritize experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, study-abroad programs, and cross-cultural collaborations, to enable students to apply their English skills in real-world contexts. By emphasizing the long-term benefits of English proficiency—such as increased employability, access to global opportunities, and the ability to navigate an interconnected world—students can be inspired to take

ownership of their learning journey. Ultimately, a synergistic effort among universities, educators, and students, combined with innovative strategies and a shared commitment to excellence, will not only elevate the quality of education but also prepare a globally competitive and adaptable workforce capable of thriving in an ever-changing world.

4. References

1. Association Press Ministry of Education and Training. The National Foreign Language Project 2020. 2008.
2. Bolhuis S. Towards active and self-directed learning: preparing for lifelong learning with reference to Dutch secondary education. 1996.
3. Broadbent J, Poon WL. Self-regulated learning strategies and academic achievement in online higher education learning environments: a systematic review. *The Internet and Higher Education*. 2015;27:1-13.
4. California Learning Resource Network (CLRN). What is self-directed learning? [Internet]. 2024 [cited 2024 Jan 31]. Available from: <https://www.cln.org>
5. Communist Party of Vietnam. Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW on fundamental and comprehensive educational reform. 2013.
6. Garrison DR. Self-directed learning: toward a comprehensive model. *Adult Education Quarterly*. 1997;48(1):18-33.
7. Gray P. Editorial: What is self-directed education and why is now the time for it? *On the Horizon*. 2024;32(4):1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1108/OTH-10-2024-128>.
8. Guthrie JT, Wigfield A, Barbosa P, Perencevich KC, Taboada A, Davis MH, *et al*. Growth of literacy engagement: changes in motivations and strategies during concept-oriented reading instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*. 1996;31(3):306-32.
9. Khodaei S, Maphalala MC, Roberson C. Post-COVID, learning redefined: self-directed learning in higher education. In: *Innovations in Higher Education Teaching and Learning*. Springer; 2022. p. 123-40. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36632-1_9.
10. Kinsella K. Understanding and empowering diverse learners. In: Reid JM, editor. *Learning Styles in the ESL/EFL Classroom*. Boston, MA: Heinle; 1995. p. 170-94.
11. Taylor B. Self-directed learning: revisiting an idea most appropriate for middle school students. *Middle School Journal*. 1995;26(3):44-8.
12. Tekkol İA, Demirel M. An investigation of self-directed learning skills of undergraduate students. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2018;9:2324.
13. Uus Ö, Mettis K, Väljataga T, Ley T. Differences in self-directed learning: middle-school students' autonomous outdoor studying. *Frontiers in Education*. 2021;6:718295. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.718295>.
14. World Economic Forum. Defining education 4.0: a taxonomy for the future of learning [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2024 Jan 31]. Available from: <https://www.weforum.org>