


## Students' Perceptions of the Effect of Blended Learning on their Learning Autonomy

Phan Thi Ngoc Le<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

\* Corresponding author's email: lehang6778@gmail.com

\*  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2337-9135>

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### ABSTRACT

**Keywords:** Blended learning, Learning autonomy, Perceptions, Vietnamese students.

Learning autonomy is a critical skill that significantly impacts students' success or failure in the classroom and their pursuit of lifelong learning. Today, learning autonomy is simpler than ever due to the rapid advancement of information technology. From these perspectives, this study investigates students' perceptions of the effect of blended learning (combining traditional teaching and online teaching) on their learning autonomy. With the participation of 120 students, the study combined both quantitative and qualitative methods through questionnaires and interviews. The results show that blended learning had the largest impact on learners' motivation, self-assessment, and acquiring teachers' requirements. Besides, the research also revealed some elements of blended learning that have not really enhanced learner autonomy, such as establishing study goals and implementing a learning strategy. I hope this study can provide teachers with an overview of the blended learning model and offer some suggestions to improve the effectiveness of this model when applied to teaching in Vietnam universities.

### Introduction

The capacity for autonomous learning is a crucial skill that significantly impacts students' success or failure in the classroom and throughout their learning endeavors. Learner autonomy is considered an essential theme in teaching (Smith et al., 2017). According to Holec (1981), learner autonomy is a term that refers to the ability of learners to take responsibility for their own learning by being able to make and be responsible for decisions. These decisions involve determining learning goals, determining content and progress, choosing learning methods and techniques, and monitoring learning processes/procedures. Regarding this term, Victori and Lockhart (1995) assert that autonomous learning plays an

important role in learning and enables learners to achieve better results by making the learning process more personal and focused.

The rapid advancement of information technology has made autonomous learning more accessible than before. By the end of 2020, blended learning was applied in the classroom at numerous Vietnamese universities in an effort to stop the COVID-19 pandemic from spreading. Blended learning is offered as a combination of traditional teaching and E-learning (Pham, 2021), and it combines the best features of the two previously described teaching approaches. Numerous studies on blended learning approaches are being conducted worldwide, including those by Powell et al. (2015), Ribbe and Bezanilla (2013), and Bath and Bourke (2010). These studies have validated the efficacy of the blended learning approach by applying it to all educational levels, from primary school to university.

This approach was created based on the use of digital learning environments in the classroom to support students in developing self-study awareness and being proactive in selecting their study locations and times. Furthermore, it mitigates some of the drawbacks of the conventional model of teaching and learning, which requires instructors and students to meet in person at a specified time and place. Currently, applying the Blended-learning model in university teaching is a reasonable choice. Apart from endorsing the benefits of youth involvement in education, the approach also supports educators' adaptability and versatility. more varied instructional strategies to draw students' attention (Pham, 2021).

It is evident that the blended learning approach necessitates greater learning autonomy from students or more initiative and responsibility in their education. However, many Vietnamese researchers have not addressed the open topic of whether blended learning may improve student autonomy. Given that blended learning is beginning to saturate EFL classrooms and integrating technology takes into account students' perceptions, this study was conducted to investigate how students at Vietnam National University (VNU) perceive the effects of blended learning on their learning autonomy in English classes.

## Literature review

### *Learner Autonomy in Blended Learning Environment*

Many studies investigated learner autonomy from the viewpoints and attitudes of teachers in relation to research on language learner autonomy in traditional learning (Nguyen et al., 2024; Tran & Vu, 2024; Benson, 2016). Another trend in recent studies by Dixon et al. (2011) and Nguyen and Habók (2021) is the development of tools to quantify learner autonomy. Besides, studies on learner autonomy in blended learning indicate certain topical overlaps with learner autonomy in in-person instruction. Specifically, researchers tend to conduct research aimed at investigating learners' attitudes toward language learner autonomy (Tran & Duong, 2021; Adianingrum, 2017) or investigate learner autonomy from learner beliefs and learner perceptions (Do et al., 2024; Surabaya, 2021; Serdyukova & Serdyukov, 2013). There is a

distinction between the research subjects studying learner autonomy in blended learning and face-to-face learning since some studies look into elements that influence learner autonomy (Goulão & Menedez, 2015). Ghufron and Nurdianingsih (2019) presented how the flipped teaching method with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) functions to teach EFL writing in the Indonesian setting. The study investigated in further detail how the teaching model impacts learner autonomy and suggested 5 main aspects of learner autonomy including Evaluation of the English teacher's aims and requirements, Evaluation of establishing studying goals and plans, Evaluation of the learning strategy's implementation, Evaluation of the ability to monitor the usage of learning strategies, Evaluation of EFL writing process.

#### *The Effects of Blended Learning on Students' Learning Autonomy in International Settings*

In recent years, research on the effects of blended learning on autonomy from the perspective of learners has attracted the attention of many researchers. McHone (2020) states a close relationship exists between students' autonomy and blended learning implementation. Besides, Mrajca and Polok (2021) stated that blended learning activities positively affected the development of learners' autonomy. Chen (2022) created a blended translation course to ascertain if blended learning enhances student autonomy and administered a survey. The findings indicate that most students believe blended learning to be a successful strategy for fostering learner autonomy. Wang and Zhang (2022) also emphasized that an educational approach that can enhance students' awareness and behavior of autonomous learning is necessary, given the importance of developing students' capacity for autonomous learning. The findings suggested that an optimal blended learning environment would foster the motivation of foreign language learners to learn and develop their capacity for independent learning, ultimately leading to the development and enhancement of their autonomous learning behaviors (Wang & Zhang, 2022). In addition, Heriyawati et al. (2023) investigated how EFL students feel about blended learning implementation to support learning autonomy in English language instruction, especially in writing classes. The findings show that students were strongly encouraged to do more on their own through blended learning. Additionally, blended learning outlines the learner's aims and goals, which aids in their success as they acquire knowledge (Heriyawati et al., 2023). Similarly, in the study of Mohammed et al. (2023), the participants had more positive attitudes toward blended learning implementation and may possibly have thought of it as the new norm. Most of them have shown signs of being thoughtful, self-aware, driven, and independent—qualities associated with autonomous learners (Mohammed et al., 2023).

#### *The Effects of Blended Learning on Students' Learning Autonomy in Vietnam*

Several studies in Vietnam also highlighted the effectiveness of applying blended learning in enhancing learner autonomy. Bui and Vu (2020) applied blended learning in a university writing course, in which the students participated in a range of autonomous and interactive learning activities. The results showed that this blended learning approach improved students' writing proficiency, gave them useful abilities for the twenty-first century, and generated learning autonomy (Bui & Vu, 2020). Similarly, Nguyen and Le (2021) conducted a study on

the impact of a learning management system on learner autonomy at a university in Central Vietnam. The authors claimed that the EFL students in this study appear to be aware of how the LMS enhances their independent learning by the fact that they can initiate, monitor, and evaluate their learning process. The potential of online learning was investigated by Nguyen and Phuong (2022), including the following skills: (1) organizing learning activities, (2) assessing performance, (3) setting goals, (4) managing the learning process independently, and (5) accepting accountability for learning choices. Pham (2023) also investigated teachers' strategies to support learner autonomy in a blended learning environment. The results of this study show that teachers used a range of techniques, such as procedural, cognitive, and organizational support for learner autonomy, to foster that autonomy (Pham, 2023). According to Nguyen (2023), students' perceptions toward using blended learning (Google Docs) for group writing were positive. Furthermore, learners, particularly those at lower levels, have advanced their technological and social abilities (Nguyen, 2023). In addition, the study of Cao (2023) also mentioned many advantages available to EFL students through LMS, such as improved engagement and autonomy, adaptable learning and activities, and efficient course administration.

### *Research Gap and Research Questions*

Through the review of the above studies, the influence of blended learning on learner autonomy attracted moderate interest from authors around the world and in Vietnam. However, it can be realized that besides the positive effects, are there any elements of blended learning that have not really enhanced learner autonomy? Both sides of the issue need to be considered more carefully, especially in the context of teaching at Vietnam National University (VNU), where no research addresses this issue. Therefore, it is important to study the perceptions of students about the effect of blended learning on their learning autonomy. The purpose of the study could be achieved by answering two research questions:

1. What are the positive effects of blended learning on students' learning autonomy?
2. Are there any blended learning elements that have not enhanced learner autonomy?

## **Methods**

### *Pedagogical Setting & Participants*

This study involved 120 students from four General English classes that I was assigned to teach directly in the 2023–2024 academic year at VNU. The learning aim for these English classes is the B1 level, or Level 3 in the 6-level Foreign Language Competency Framework.

In the English learning program, in addition to face-to-face lessons in class, students were also provided with a system of self-study lessons, an integrated system through the LMS support tool of the Faculty of English, referred to as an "online program." This program includes five lessons, each of which has four parts: listening, reading, speaking, and writing corresponding to the topic, vocabulary, and structures learned in class.

The purpose of the online program is to give learners the opportunity to interact more with the content they have been learning in class through additional language practice exercises, with the desired level being B1. Besides, learners are enabled to be more familiar with learning English according to the 4 sub-skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing and have access to the final exam format. The online program focuses heavily on individual exercises, emphasizing learner autonomy.

### *Data collection & analysis*

To investigate students' perceptions of the effect of blended learning on their learning autonomy, I used questionnaires as the main research tool. A questionnaire is a research tool made up of a set of questions meant to elicit information from respondents (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). Compared to other survey formats, questionnaires are less expensive and require less work from the researcher. In this study, I adapted the questionnaire on the effects of blended learning on learner autonomy of Ghufon and Nurdianingsih (2019), including five factors related to teachers' aims and requirements, learners' motivation, establishing studying goals and plans, implementing learning strategy, and EFL learning process. The questionnaire contains 15 statements adopting a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree) to elicit the participants' opinions.

Besides, the interview method was used to learn more deeply about the reasons for the participants' choices and clarify some points that were not shown in the questionnaire. The interview includes 10 questions based on emerging issues from the research questions. In addition, to help the students understand the subject and express their opinions more clearly, I offered them the option to speak in Vietnamese during the interviews.

## **Results/Findings and Discussion**

### *Research Question 1: What are the positive effects of blended learning on students' learning autonomy?*

Based on data obtained from the questionnaire, blended learning positively influences learner autonomy in three main aspects related to teachers' aims and requirements, learners' motivation, and the EFL learning process. The results of the questionnaires related to these three factors are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1.

Positive effects of blended learning (BL) on students' learning autonomy

<b>Factors related to teacher's aims and requirements</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
BL helps learners be fully aware of the objectives that teachers have set.	4.22	0.57
BL enables learners to incorporate the teacher's objectives into their own.	4.31	0.53
BL increases the learners' ability to follow the teachers' pace.	4.05	0.65
<b>Factors related to learners' motivation</b>		
BL increases learners' interest in EFL learning.	4.53	0.55
BL enables learners a safe, uninterrupted learning environment.	4.48	0.56
BL helps learners to become accustomed to using technology.	4.53	0.52
<b>Factors related to the EFL learning process</b>		
BL assists learners with a variety of means to practice English skills.	4.31	0.81
BL provides learners with self-assessment to realize their own mistakes	4.39	0.51
BL allows learners to receive timely feedback from teachers.	4.13	0.60

Table 1 shows that students have positive attitudes about all three aspects ( $M > 4$ ). Besides, every factor had a small standard deviation ( $SD < 0.9$ ), indicating that the data were closely dispersed around the mean. It can be seen that blended learning has the greatest impact on learners' motivation ( $M = 4.48-4.53$ ). This was confirmed and further explained by the students in the interview. One student said:

The online exercise system on LMS helps me understand the topics learned in class more deeply and access many Mock tests to review for the final exam. The exercises are designed in a variety of ways, making us feel very excited. (S1)

Another student said that because the LMS exercises focus a lot on individual exercises and have weekly deadlines, they can train students to be highly self-disciplined in learning (S2). Sharing the same views, in Wang and Zhang's (2022) study, the authors also highlighted how learners' motivation and capacity for independent learning would be enhanced in a perfect blended learning environment. This would ultimately lead to learners' autonomous learning practices through blended learning. Similarly, Heriyawati et al. (2023) stated that blended learning highly motivates students to work more independently.

Besides, many students agreed that blended learning enabled students to be familiar with utilizing technology ( $M = 4.53$ ). In the interview, one student shared that:

This is the first time I have done an assignment on LMS. But the system is quite easy to use and user-friendly, so I was able to get used to it quickly. Doing homework on the system makes me more advanced in using technology. (S3)

This view aligns with the results of Nguyen (2023) who claimed that students improved their social and technological skills, especially those at lower levels. Just like Nguyen's (2023) study, the students participating in my study were also students with quite low levels of technology and had not previously been exposed to much online learning. Therefore,

exposure to the LMS system in blended learning made students very excited. One student also affirmed that: *“Doing exercises on LMS helps me feel more confident when taking online tests. We were introduced to how to do assignments directly on the system, submit assignments, attach files, and record speeches”* (S4).

Besides, blended learning can provide learners with self-assessment to realize their own mistakes (M= 4.39). In the interview, one student expressed her satisfaction when doing homework on the LMS system. She said:

On the LMS, after we complete all the questions of skill, the answer icon will appear, accompanied by the answer and explanations automatically given by the computer. This helps me self-evaluate my work and know my own mistakes in the exercises. (S5)

With skills such as writing and speaking, students also expressed satisfaction when receiving feedback from teachers. One student shared that, *“Following a brief amount of time, the teacher would grade each assignment submitted through the LMS and update the score with any comments or suggestions. This has been incredibly helpful in identifying my areas of strength and improvement”* (S6). The learners’ self-assessment enhancement was also reported by Nguyen and Le (2021) when the authors claimed that learners can monitor and assess their own learning through blended learning. The authors also revealed that as the scores on LMS were private to students, they would not feel ashamed in front of their peers if they had a low score. Another student also said, *“If there are still unfinished questions, the answers will not appear. Therefore, we will have to be more responsible and conscious of completing all exercises”* (S7). Similarly, Mohammed et al. (2023) also stated that blended learning could make students exhibit traits linked with autonomous learners, such as thoughtfulness, self-awareness, and independence.

In addition, it can be seen that blended learning can also enhance learner autonomy in terms of acquiring teachers' aims and requirements. All participants agreed that through blended learning, students can integrate the teacher's goals into their own (M= 4.31). One student explained this more clearly:

The focus exercises of each week are different sub-skills to give students the opportunity to practice many skills and be assessed more comprehensively. Through that, we understand the objectives that teachers set in class and apply them to practical exercises on LMS. (S8)

This finding was mentioned in the study of Heriyawati et al. (2023), which showed that blended learning helps learners succeed as they acquire the objectives from the teachers. Similarly, Nguyen and Phuong (2022) also claimed that blended learning enables students to define short- and long-term goals. Furthermore, it is consistent with studies that show that an online learning environment might promote students' awareness of their learning objectives (Ribbe & Bezanilla, 2013).

The above results show that participants have a positive attitude about the influence of blended learning on enhancing aspects of learning autonomy. Despite the high consensus on the above aspects, some factors remain that students do not agree with or express neutral opinions about. These aspects are presented in the next section.

*Research Question 2: Are there any elements of blended learning that have not really enhanced learner autonomy?*

The survey results show that no factor does not really positively affect learners' autonomy. Besides the factors that 100% of students agree with, some aspects still have neutral or disagreeable opinions. Two factors related to goal setting and strategy implementation are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2.

Factors related to goal establishing and strategy implementation

<b>Factors related to establishing studying goals and plans</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
7. BL makes it easier for learners to organize autonomous study time.	3.32	0.56
8. BL helps adjust learners' studying plans based on their progress.	3.41	0.70
9. BL assists learners in setting realistic objectives for themselves.	3.43	0.68
<b>Factors related to implementing a learning strategy</b>		
10. BL allows learners to completely understand the learning strategy.	3.68	0.76
11. BL lets learners deliberately use techniques to enhance English proficiency.	3.91	0.79
12. BL enables learners to identify and address issues with learning strategy.	3.79	0.93

Table 2 shows that in the blended learning process, not all students were able to set their own study goals and plans ( $M < 3.5$ ). Although blended learning allows students to plan their assignments according to their own schedule, some students did not have the ability to manage time, leading to a situation where weekly assignments on the LMS were not completed on time. One student shared that,

During the semester, there were times when I had to study for many subjects, so I couldn't complete my assignments on LMS. This caused my assignments to be overdue. I have to ask my teacher for permission to make up work at the end of the semester. (S9)

This opinion was also reported in the study of Nguyen and Le (2021) when students acknowledged that they only utilize the LMS three or four times a week on average, mostly because most of the courses required them to complete assignments or group projects.

Besides, I observed that while blended learning encouraged students to participate in the learning process, their attitude toward learning also played a role. Students who engaged in the LMS with enthusiasm and a positive outlook frequently accessed it more frequently than



those who did not use it for academic purposes. One student admitted, *“I feel a bit lazy in completing lessons on LMS. Even though I thought the LMS' s exercise system was helpful, I still signed on to complete the assignment when the teacher reminded me that it was almost due”* (S10). This subjective difficulty on the part of the learner has been reported by Pham (2021). The majority of students are accustomed to the conventional high school learning model, which involves passively learning while having a teacher close by to provide guidance (Pham, 2021). As a result, when using the blended learning approach in the classroom, students will experience anxiety, despair, and lower learning results since they will not be able to select an appropriate learning strategy.

Although the factors related to implementing the learning process achieved mean scores that were not too low ( $M > 3.5$ ), the results showed that some students still expressed a neutral opinion. As indicated by their responses in the interviews, most participants logged into the LMS almost daily. They did this for the same reason: knowing that completing assignments on the LMS counted toward the course assessment. One student said *“I frequently checked the system to make sure I didn't miss any latest information or assignments from teachers and classmates”* (S11). However, some other students stated that the regularity with which they checked their learning progress on the LMS was contingent upon the course requirements. One student shared his ideas:

Although the exercises on the LMS are very close to the program and are a useful source for me to review, I think they only account for a small part of the total score, so sometimes I am quite lazy to complete the assigned assignments there. (S12)

They would not check-in or update information too frequently if the course was unimportant. This demonstrated that each student's level of learning consciousness affected the monitoring of the learning process on the LMS. This finding was similar to the opinions of participants in Nguyen and Le (2021) who also showed that students had to complete a significant number of assignments on LMS. In addition, this factor causes students to feel bored and lazy. This demonstrates that in order to enhance learning autonomy within the context of blended learning, students must be proactive, responsible, and aware of their central role in the process. As a result, it is crucial that instructors create a good number of interesting and pertinent assignments for the learners on the LMS, as this will greatly encourage their independent study.

## Conclusion

This research was conducted with the participation of 120 students from four General English classes that I was assigned to teach directly in the 2023–2024 academic year at VNU. With the purpose of investigating students' perceptions of the effect of blended learning on their learning autonomy, I combined quantitative and qualitative methods through questionnaires and interviews. Among five factors related to learning autonomy based on the classification of Ghufon and Nurdianingsih (2019), the results show that blended learning has enhanced

learners' autonomy in all aspects. That is a positive result, showing that the trend of teaching and learning according to the blended learning model is an inevitable trend in the future.

Among the factors investigated, blended learning had the largest impact on learners' motivation. Blended learning, with its varied fitness program and flexible study schedule, can make students more interested in studying English as a foreign language. It also gives them the chance to learn in a secure, distraction-free environment and get used to utilizing technology. Besides, participants concurred that the blended learning exercises provided them with a great chance to assess them and get prompt feedback from educators. From there, students can actively participate in their EFL education and understand the objectives and demands of their teachers. However, besides some factors that receive agreement from all students, there are also aspects where blended learning has not really enhanced learner autonomy. It is interesting to see that these aspects are mainly subjective factors related to the learning attitude of the learners. Some students are still lazy and do not have the time management skills to complete assignments autonomously on LMS. Therefore, not all students can set their own study goals and plans or identify and address learning strategy issues.

This study hopes to provide teachers with an overview of the effectiveness of applying blended learning in the classroom. Teachers must create and offer various learning resources that are appropriate for students' skill levels to implement the blended learning approach in the classroom and grab students' attention. In order to accomplish this, educators must devote more time to research, information technology applications, software support for lesson design, and pedagogical modifications. Besides, teachers need to plan in detail the teaching schedule and clearly state the combination ratio used in the Blended learning model (what percentage is used for the traditional learning model, what percentage is used for the online learning model) so that learners can proactively arrange their study time accordingly. Additionally, teachers must provide clear instructions and Internet communication channels so that students can readily access self-study materials. This will allow them to provide their students with help, feedback, and encouragement. Most importantly, in my opinion, to successfully apply the blended learning model in teaching, in addition to investment and changes from the school and teacher, the main factor is still the learner himself. Learners need to change their own perceptions and find appropriate self-study methods to maximize the effectiveness of the blended learning model.

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## Appendix 1 – Questionnaire

### *Students' Perceptions of the Effect of Blended Learning on their Learning Autonomy*

*Hi, everybody. I would like your help with this questionnaire, which is the major source of data for my paper. Thank you very much!*

**Circle the number that best describes your choice.**

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

Factors related to teacher's aims and requirements	Likert Scale
1. BL helps learners fully aware of teachers' objectives.	1 2 3 4 5
2. BL enables learners to incorporate the teacher's objectives into their own.	1 2 3 4 5
3. BL increases the learners' ability to follow the teachers' pace.	1 2 3 4 5
<b>Factors related to learners' motivation</b>	
4. BL increases learners' interest in EFL learning.	1 2 3 4 5

5. BL enables learners a safe, uninterrupted learning environment.	1	2	3	4	5
6. BL helps learners to become accustomed to using technology.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Factors related to establishing studying goals and plans</b>					
7. BL makes it easier for learners to organize autonomous study time.	1	2	3	4	5
8. BL helps adjusting learners' studying plans based on their progress.	1	2	3	4	5
9. BL assists learners in setting realistic objectives for themselves.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Factors related to implementing learning strategy</b>					
10. BL allows learners to completely understand the learning strategy.	1	2	3	4	5
11. BL lets learners deliberately use techniques to enhance English proficiency.	1	2	3	4	5
12. BL enables learners to identify and address issues with learning strategy.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Factors related to EFL learning process</b>					
13. BL assists learners with a variety of means to practice English skills.	1	2	3	4	5
14. BL provides learners with self-assessment to realize their own mistakes.	1	2	3	4	5
15. BL allows learners to receive timely feedback from teachers.	1	2	3	4	5

## Appendix 2 – Suggested Reflection Questions

1. Please briefly describe the characteristics of an autonomous language learner.
2. What do you think of the blended learning model? Have you ever learned this model in other subjects?
3. To what extent do you think blended learning can improve learner autonomy?
4. What are some activities of blended learning that promote learner autonomy? How?
5. Which is the best aspect that blended learning can affect learning autonomy in your opinion?
6. Are there any blended learning elements that have not enhanced learner autonomy?
7. What is the most challenging thing of learner autonomy you encountered in a blended learning environment?
8. Do you think you are more affected by objective or subjective difficulties? Why?
9. How did you solve those difficulties?
10. What would you suggest to apply blended learning to enhance learner autonomy effectively?

### Biodata

*Dr. Phan Thị Ngọc Lê is currently an English lecturer at VNU University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. Her research interests include English Linguistics, World Englishes, L1 transfer to L2, Language and Technology, English for specific purposes, Peer assessment, and Academic writing.*