



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCE RESEARCH, IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS IN TECHNOLOGY

ISSN: 2454-132X

Impact Factor: 6.078

(Volume 7, Issue 3 - V7I3-1381)

Available online at: <https://www.ijariit.com>

Employing project work to enhance aspects of learner autonomy for tertiary EFL learners

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to explore the enhancement of learner autonomy through the integration of the project work in the existing syllabus. The study was conducted with thirty-four first-year non-English majors in a university in the north of Vietnam. In the study, learner autonomy is conceptualized as a multi-faced concept with four aspects: technical, psychological, political-critical, and socio-cultural. Learner autonomy was researched based on the empirical evidence of its benefits to learners in language learning. Meanwhile, project work was argued to be potential to promote learner autonomy. As a result, eight different projects created by the students were implemented in the learning process. The study employed action research approach with three different data collection tools (questionnaires, interviews, and the teacher's diary). Content analysis was applied for the data in the study. The findings reveal that the enhancement of learner autonomy was evident in all the four aspects. Technically, the students were found to have more access to the learning resources and used more learning strategies. Psychologically, the students were identified to exhibit highly positive attitudes and to be motivated in learning. Political-critically, the students reported that they had more choices in learning contents and methods. Socio-culturally, the students demonstrated more interaction and collaboration.

Keywords— Learner autonomy, aspects of learner autonomy, promoting learning autonomy, project work, action research, non-English majors, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

1. INTRODUCTION

The rationale for this study is based on different grounds. First, learner autonomy has become an educational goal worldwide, and has gained a lot of attention from both researchers and practitioners. In Vietnam, learner autonomy is currently a buzz word in the nationwide effort to improve the quality of the English language teaching in general and of tertiary education in particular. Developing the capacity for a greater autonomy for students by policy makers and educationalists to be one of the targets of the educational reforms (National Assembly for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2005).

Second, learner autonomy is believed to be beneficial for learners in their learning. Autonomous learners possess valued qualities such as critical thinking, independent working, collaboration, responsibility, high motivation, self-assessment, control over the leaning process and content, setting learning goals, and decision-making, active participation in classroom activities, and therefore, they learn more effectively (Benson, 2001; Benson, 2013; Candy, 1991; Dam, 1995; Dickinson, 1995; Kalabzova, 2015; Naiman, Froanlich, Stern, and Toedesco, 1978; and Natri, 2007). These qualities are also desired by the management board of the university, where this research is conducted, in innovating the training system and teaching methodology to produce workforce that can meet the needs of the modern society. Working as an English teacher teaching English for students in a university, the researcher is aware of the importance and benefits of learner autonomy in the teaching practice; and bears the responsibility to participate in that innovation process by applying new teaching methods to help the students to become more autonomous possessing the mentioned qualities.

Third, project work is claimed to have features that can be potential to promote learner autonomy (Alan and Stoller, 2005; Fried-Booth, 2002; Haines, 1989; Sheppard and Stoller, 1995; and Stoller, 2002). These features include working individually and cooperatively with others to complete set tasks, employing diverse skills for planning, management, and evaluations, and at different stages of projects, searching out the real world, and making the most of the available resources to conduct projects. Besides, Benson (2001) proposes that project work can serve as a tool in the existing syllabus to develop learner autonomy for students. The scholar

specifies that during project work students determine the content, methods of inquiry, and outcomes of the real-world research in collaboration with each other and with their teachers. Learners exercise control over the content of projects and the forms of input and output.

The ultimate aim of the study is to explore how the implementation of projects enhances the students' autonomy in four aspects: technical, psychological, political-critical, and socio-cultural. To achieve the aim, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- (a) Technically, how do the projects enhance the students' access to learning resources and their use of learning skills/strategies?
- (b) Psychologically, how do the projects promote the students' attitudes towards learning English and motivation in learning English?
- (c) Political-critically, how do the projects stimulate the students' choices of learning contents and choices of learning methods?
- (d) Socio-culturally, how does the project work foster the students' interaction and collaboration?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Defining learner autonomy

Learner autonomy is indisputably a multi-layered concept that is possible to see from different perspectives. This resulted in countless attempts to theorize it. The definitions proposed by Benson (1997), Benson (2001), Benson and Voller (1997), Dam (1995), Holec (1981), Little (1991), Littlewood (1999), Oxford (2003), and Scharle and Szabo (2000) gain more attention in the literature. And it is found that there are two ways the scholars employ to conceptualize learner autonomy. Some scholars hypothesize autonomy in definitions including Benson (2001), Dam (1995), Holec (1981), Little (1991), and Scharle and Szabo (2000). The others describe learner autonomy in frameworks including Benson (1997), Benson and Voller (1997), Littlewood (1999), and Oxford (2003).

It is obvious that four aspects have been identified in the proposed configurations of learner autonomy which are the technical, the psychological, the political-critical, and the socio-cultural. It is also found that three most mentioned aspects are the technical, the psychological, and the political-critical; and the socio-cultural is the least discussed one. Also, drawing on these definitions, it can be also found that there are four groups of elements lying in the center of the definitions of learner autonomy. These are cognitive/metacognitive elements (abilities or capacities to set learning goals, choose learning materials, plan learning activities, monitor and self-evaluate progress), affective elements (willingness), political-critical elements (freedom/control/choices) and social elements (cooperating with others). The cognitive and metacognitive elements seem to be the most predominant in the definitions.

2.2 Four Aspects of Learner Autonomy

As synthesized above, the technical aspect is the most often recognized aspect in the configuration of learner autonomy. In the literature, access to learning resources and use of learning skills or strategies are believed to be directly connected to learner autonomy and promotion of learner autonomy (Agustina, 2017; Benson, 1997; Benson, 2013; Benson and Voller, 1997; Bull & Ma, 2001; Ceylan, 2015; Cotterall, 1995; Figura & Jarvis, 2007; Littlewood, 1996; Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014; Mistar, 2015; Murase, 2011; Oxford, 1999; Oxford, 2003; Oxford, 2008; Reinders and White, 2011; Wang, 2015; and White, 2008). Benson (1997) refers the technical autonomy to "the act of learning a language without the intervention of a teacher" and as 'situations' within which "learners are obliged to take charge of their own learning" (Benson, 1997, p.19). According to Murase (2011), in the technical version of autonomy there are two elements: situational and behavioral. The former refers to the situational conditions, learning settings or environments such as self-access centers, or the learning resources in which learners have to manage the learning process independently of the teacher, thus stressing the skills they require to this purpose (Benson, 1997; Oxford, 2003). And the latter is related to the use or development of learning strategies or skills (Littlewood, 1996).

The psychological aspect is among the four aspects identified in the conceptualizations of learner autonomy by the well-known proponents in the literature. And because of its multi-facedness, this aspect draws lots of attention of scholars. In this aspect, learner autonomy is often discussed and related to various terms such as attitudes, motivation, willingness, readiness, responsibility, self-confidence (Trinh, 2005). And attitudes and motivation attract most discussions which could be found in a wide range of works of Benson (1997), Dam (1995), Dickinson (1995), Little (1996), Little (2007), Murase (2011), Oroujlou & Vahedi (2011), Oxford (2003), and Ushioda (1996).

Among the four aspects of identified to be present in the configurations of learner autonomy, the political-critical perspective also attracts lots of discussions. This aspect is believed to take into account the concepts of freedom, rights or choice of learners of their contents and methods in their own learning (Benson, 1997; Benson, 2012; Cotterall, 1995; Crabbe, 1993; Deci, 1996; Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981; Huang and Benson, 2013; Littlejohn, 1985; Littlewood, 1996; and Oxford, 2003, and Parker et al., 2017).

The Socio-cultural Aspect, Scholars in the literature also shared that learner autonomy is recognizably configured with four aspects. And the socio-cultural aspect is believed to be present in the configuration of learner autonomy. Among the proponents of the socio-cultural dimension of learner autonomy, the frequently found ones in the literature include Benson (2001), Boud (1988), Dam (1995), Donato (2004), Higgs (1988), Little (1996), Oxford (2003), Palfreyman (2003), and Smith and Ushioda (2009). In this aspect, two components: interaction and collaboration are considered to be two key components attracting lots of discussions.

2.3 The Conceptual Framework of Learner Autonomy

With regard to the previous discussions of theoretical and practical aspects of learner autonomy in the context of foreign language education, in this study, learner autonomy is conceptualized as a multi-layered construct comprising four aspects: the technical, the

psychological, the political-critical, and the socio-cultural. Correspondingly, technical autonomy is related to learners' access to learning resources and their use of the learning skills; psychological autonomy features attitude and motivation; political-critical autonomy highlights learner's choices of learning contents and methods; and socio-cultural autonomy features interaction and collaboration.

2.4 Promoting Learner Autonomy

It is found that Benson' (2001) six approaches to foster learner autonomy are the most frequently discussed ones. These approaches are resource-based, technology-based, learner-based, classroom-based, teacher-based, and curriculum-based.

Resource-based approach stresses the independent learning with learning resources provided to learners (Benson, 2001; Gardner & Miller, 1999; and Morrison, 2008). Learners exercise autonomy through individual interaction with the materials. Benson (2013) points out that language learning resources can be physical, human or digital. Learner autonomy can be developed either by the resources the learners reached by themselves or by the ones the teachers provide them. Therefore, learners can learn through experimentation and discovery in this approach. Technology-based approach focuses on the use of technology to support learner autonomy development. Egel (2009) defines this approach as "learning language in any context with, and around computer technologies" (p.4). Classroom-based approach assumes that learners can be made feel responsible for their learning by working with their peers or teachers through supportive and cooperative learning in classroom contexts (Nunan, 1997; Benson, 2001). Teacher-based approach focuses on teacher autonomy in teaching practice and in professional development, as well as on teacher's role in supporting learner autonomy (Benson, 2001; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; and Feryok, 2013). This approach assumes that changing teachers' beliefs about autonomy, building their commitment to autonomy, and encouraging practices to support learner autonomy will result in classroom changes, which are in favor of learner autonomy. Learner-based approach emphasizes providing learners with opportunities to participate in and control over their own learning in order that learner autonomy and language learning will improve (Benson, 2001). Research within the learner-based approach stress the importance of teaching learners to develop their learning skills and strategies. Therefore, learner training is the main form of this approach.

As for the curriculum-based approach, the core principle is learner control over the management of learning to the curriculum as a whole. Learner autonomy is promoted by involving learners in making decisions on learning content, activities, tasks, and evaluating learning in collaboration with the teachers (Benson, 2001). Nunan (1997) notes that in design of curriculum to foster learner autonomy, there should be mutual understanding between learners and teachers. Learners should be given choices to decide the learning content and the learning method at the level of the institutional curriculum. Elaborating on curriculum-based approach, Benson (2001) states that it takes two forms: the weak form and the strong form of the process syllabus. The weak version involves learners' project work in which learners determine the content, methods of inquiry, and outcomes of the real-world research in collaboration with their teachers. Learners exercise control over the content of projects and the forms of input and output. And collaboration and communication among learners and between learners and teachers are considered to be important.

Considering the objectives of promoting learner autonomy for non-English majors in the context of this study, project work is chosen to apply in this study for three following reasons. First, it aligns with the expectations of fostering the quality in teaching and learning of English language at tertiary level in Vietnam (Phan, 2015). More specifically, this approach enriches the ways teachers approach their students by providing a solution for teachers to innovate their teaching methodology. As a result, students are expected to be the beneficiaries. Second, project work, in its nature; encourages learners to make decisions about their language learning process (of the content, methods of inquiry, and outcomes) (Cotterall, 2000; Crabbe, 1993); and develops cognitive and affective perspectives of learners in their learning (Shekhan, 1998). And third, project work features practicability and flexibility in application. Teachers and learners can together negotiate and work through the actual curriculum in the classroom (Shekhan, 1998). The process syllabus is not planned before the course commences, and the elements of the course and the sequence of those elements are jointly negotiated with the learners as the course progresses.

2.5 Project Work

There are many other definitions of project work proposed by various authors. Beckett (2002) defines project work as a long-term (several weeks) activity that involves a variety of individual or cooperative tasks such as developing a research plan and questions and implementing the plan through empirical or document research that includes collecting, analyzing, and reporting data orally and/or in writing. Emphasizing the importance of project work in language learning, Stoller (2002, p.109) discusses that "project-based learning should be viewed as a versatile vehicle for fully integrated language and content learning, making it a viable option for language educators working in a variety of instructional settings including general English, English for academic purposes (EAP), English for specific purposes (ESP), and English for occupational/vocational/professional purposes, in addition to pre-service and in-service teacher training."

To serve the research purpose of this study, project work is conceptualized as an integrated mode of teaching and learning into the ongoing syllabus in which teachers and learners collaborate with each other in building projects, realizing project activities, presenting project final outcomes, and evaluating projects.

Project work features final outcomes which are tangible products. There are two common types of project outcomes: written and oral. This classification can be found in Alan and Stoller (2005) and Stoller (2012). The outcomes can be any products that come from the real-life world surrounding learners. Related to writing, learners can make small books such as brochures, handbooks, guidebooks, or scrapbooks. The outcomes can also be reports or any papers such as class newspapers or research papers. As for projects related to speaking, the outcomes can be oral presentations or multimedia presentations. Learners can also make videos or films or clips or plays.

2.6 The Working Model of Project Work

Based on the ten-step model proposed by Stoller (2002), the researcher employs a four-phase model which serves as the working model of project work in this study. The phases are preparation, realization, presentation, and evaluation. The first phase – preparation, students form their groups, then they work together with their instructor to: agree on a topic for their projects, determine the final outcome of the projects, and structure the project (drafting the main tasks, assigning the responsibilities, and scheduling the activities).

In the second phase - realization, students realize the projects' activities that they sketch out in the previous steps. Students start the processes of gathering information and analyzing information. The instructor plays the supporting role the project activities. The third phase – presentation involves students finalizing their project outcome and presenting it. In this phase, the teacher helps the students prepare for the language demands before presentations. In the last phase – evaluation, students reflect on what they have done and give what they have learned in terms of the language mastered during projects.

2.7 Previous Studies Using Project Work to Promote Learner Autonomy

In order to inform the epistemological and ontological aspects of the study, in this section the previous studies using project work to promote learner autonomy in English language learning were reviewed. It is found that project work is employed for learner autonomy development in different contexts which can be for future teacher university students (Villa and Armstrong, 2004), or ESP university students (Ramires, 2014), or school students (Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin, 2017), or university English-majored students (Chong, 2003; and Nguyen, 2017).

With a purpose to find support for the view that project work is an effective approach to developing future teachers' autonomy, twenty-three students who had participated in project work were interviewed and the responses were analyzed using Benson's contribution 1997, 2001 on autonomous learning, and Legutke and Thomas (1991) six stages of project work as a framework. The study was conducted in an undergraduate foreign language teaching program at a public university in Columbia through three semesters. In the study, three perspectives of learner autonomy were examined, which were the technical, the psychological, and the political. The technical emphasizes learning to learn in order to promote independent life-long learning. The psychological stresses the inner transformation of the individual regarding attitudes, behaviors, and personality in order to take charge of their own learning. The political stresses the learners' control of process and content of learning. The results of the study showed that project work enhanced learner autonomy in language learning and that all the features of learner autonomy are evidenced in the authors' and participants' experience with project work. The authors came to a conclusion that project work can be worthwhile to adopt it as a pedagogical strategy to develop language learner autonomy.

In the context of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Ramires' (2014) conducted research on developing learner autonomy through project work for 16 students at a Colombian regional and public university with a class. The students majored in environmental engineering and were at level A1. The students decided to create a magazine according to the preferences about environmental issues as a final product for their project. The study was conducted over an academic semester taking into account eight stages in project work proposed by Sheppard and Stoller (1995). The instruments for data collection were field notes, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, students' artifacts, and video recordings. The results of this study showed that learner autonomy could be developed by means of project work. The students displayed self-regulation. The students also demonstrated their commitment to fulfill the goal.

In the EFL context of Thailand, Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin (2017) did action research in which they used project-based learning to enhance learner autonomy for ten school sixth graders. The study focused on four categories of learner autonomy: (1) awareness and readiness, (2) willingness and motivation, (3) cognitive and metacognitive abilities, and (4) social dimensions and interdependence. Within 13 weeks of a semester, the participants completed 3 projects (1) Aesop's Fables Role Play, (2) The Survey Project, and (3) The Cooking Project. The researchers used field notes, interviews, focused group conversations, diaries, observations, and assignment analysis as data collection tools. The findings reveal that the learners were willing and motivated in learning, but cognitive and metacognitive abilities are the most lacking.

At the tertiary English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) contexts, two different studies were found to be conducted with university students majoring in English: one in Korea by Chong (2003) and the other in Vietnam by Nguyen (2017). Chong (2003) used computer – assisted – language – learning (CALL) projects to promote autonomy for thirty-two sophomore students majoring in English as a foreign language at a Korean university. The projects lasted for four months with 5 stages each. The study focused on three component of learner autonomy which were learner choice, supporting environment, and self-assessment. The purpose of the study was to measure the effects of the projects on those elements of learner autonomy. To collect data for the study, a survey and interviews were employed. The results showed that learners enjoyed a large range of choices and took responsibility for most aspects of learning. Besides, learners worked in a more supportive atmosphere, and they were involved in assessment in the CALL projects. The scholar also concluded that the CALL projects prove to be a promising approach for autonomous learning.

In the context of Vietnam tertiary level, Nguyen (2017) conducted research to understand the impact of project work in teaching English language skills on learner autonomy of students in an English Language Teacher Education program in a university in the south of Vietnam. Fifty English majors participated in the study. And the study lasted for two semesters. The study emphasizes five components of learner autonomy: (1) self-confidence, (2) self-regulated learning behaviors, (3) self-determination and decisions about learning, (4) attitude towards self-responsibility, and (5) attitude towards social interaction. Two instruments used to assess students' autonomy were self-assessment questionnaire and two group interviews. The results demonstrated that students gained a higher degree of learner autonomy after participating in project work. However, the gain was largely due to increased self-decisions

on learning. The other aspects of learner autonomy such as self-regulated learning actions, self-responsibility, and attitudes to social interaction remained unchanged.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design: Action Research

To serve the purposes and answer the research questions above, an action research design is believed to be appropriate for this study. This study employed the action research model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) which involves four broad phases (plan, act, observe, and reflect) in a cycle of research. The first phase – plan, in the working model of action research involves identifying the students' autonomy in four aspects before projects. The second phase – act, is the process of implementing projects into the syllabus. The third phase – reflect, involves administering the data collection tools and collecting the data. The fourth phase – reflect, is for analyzing the collected data, presenting and discussing the results.

3.2 Research Context

The university, where the study was conducted, is a provincial university located in the north of Vietnam. It used to be a teacher-training college offering three-year training programs. It was upgraded to full university status in 2007. The research university is province-funded with missions to train workforce for the sake of the social and economic development needs of the province, the surrounding areas, and the whole country.

3.3 Research Participants

The participants of this action research are 34 students in a GE2 class at the university. They are first year students majoring in Kindergarten Teacher Education and Primary Teacher Education. Among them, there are 27 female and 7 male students, and 9 majored in Kindergarten Teacher Education, 25 – in Primary Teacher Education. They all have passed GE1 in the previous terms.

3.4 Data Collection Methods and Administration

To serve the purpose of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in this study, different data collection methods were employed. These are two questionnaires (Pre-project work Questionnaire and Post Project Work Questionnaire), interviews, and teacher's diary.

Two questionnaires were employed: Pre-Project Work Questionnaire (Appendix A) and Post-Project Work Questionnaire (Appendix B). Both of the questionnaires focus on collecting data for the learner autonomy of the participants in two different phases: before and after the implementation of the project work. Pre-Project Work Questionnaire was administered in Week 4 before the application of projects. Post-Project Work Questionnaire was sent to the students in Week 12 after their presentation of project products in class.

In this study, 8 semi-structured interviews with 8 groups of students were conducted after they presented the final project products in the numeral order of the groups from Group 1 to Group 8. The interviews were carried out in Week 13 within two last periods of the process syllabus in the lounge room of the university library on the third floor of the learning building, which is right above the students' regular classroom. This setting-up aimed to create convenience for interviewing the students. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and were audio recorded. Five prepared guide questions were used in the interviews (Appendix C). During this whole research, a teacher's diary was kept. Its entries were written down on the weekly basis in English. Totally, there were twenty-nine entries written throughout the research. The first writing was made in Week 1 and the last entry was in Week 13 after the interviews were conducted. The diary reflected regularly dated accounts of teaching/learning activities and events, including personal feelings, reactions, and explanations which were related directly to the implementation of project work in the process syllabus.

3.5 Data Analysis

To analyze the collected data for this study, three approaches were employed: (1) SPSS descriptive analysis, (2) Google Forms automatic response analysis, and (3) content analysis by Ezzy (2002). For the quantitative data collected from three scale question items (Q6, Q7, and Q8), SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software version 20 was used for descriptive analysis. The responses in the Excel file were uploaded into the analysis system and the results of the mean score of the responses were produced. These mean scores of Pre-project Work Questionnaire and Post-Project Work Questionnaire were used to compare and analyzed to see the enhancement of students' motivation.

Google Forms automatic response analysis was also used to analyze the collected data from the question item Q5 to shed light on the attitude change in learning English between the two periods: before and after the application of project work. After the responses were all collected, Google Forms automatically produced basic charts, bars, or columns to support analysis of quantitative data. For close-ended question 5 in this study, Pie charts were used to compare and analyze the percentage of the responses. For qualitative data collected from questionnaire items (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12), interviews, and teacher's diary, content analysis was employed.

3.6 Identifying Problems

Functioning as the starting point of research process, this sub-section will look at the teaching context and identify the problems emerged from it. Learner autonomy is put in direct connection with the found problems. The investigation looks at four perspectives of learner autonomy: technological, psychological, political-critical, and socio-cultural. The data resource was examined to diagnose the problems with students' autonomy was from the results of the Pre-project work questionnaire.

Pre-Project Work Questionnaire with 12 items was conducted in the fourth week. Before the delivery of the questionnaire, the informed consent was sent to the students. The questionnaire aimed to explore the level of learner autonomy in four perspectives of learner autonomy: technical, psychological, political-critical and socio-cultural. The survey results shows that the students' autonomy seems to vary in all four perspectives: technical, psychological, political-critical, and socio-cultural. With the technical aspect, students appeared not to have exploited the learning resources available within the learning context, they seemed not to use up the learning facilities in the university, and they seemed to employ a narrow range of learning skills in their learning. As for the psychological aspect, the students seemed to have a neutral attitude towards learning English (neither favorable nor unfavorable), they appeared not to have much fun in their learning and their motivation in learning seemed to be a little low. In terms of political-critical aspect, the students shared that there were not many choices for learning contents and learning methods in learning. And for the socio-cultural perspective, the students appeared to have limited interaction and collaboration in learning.

3.7 Implementation of Project Work

This chapter describes the implementation of projects which serves as "act" phase of the working action research model. In the previous section, the learner autonomy status of the students is determined. And in this section project work is chosen as an intervention to improve the students' autonomy. More specifically, the application of project work is described in four phases: preparation, realization, presentation, and evaluation. As the result of the application, there were totally 8 projects established. 4 projects were about describing places (Project 1 - Introduction about Bai Dinh pagoda; Project 3 - Introduction about five craft villages in Ninh Binh; Project 4- Introduction about a local bakery; and Project 7 – Introduction about a clothes store); other 3 projects were related to the topic of practical English (Project 2- Dubbing the short fairy tale cartoon Cinderella; Project 6- Dubbing a short part of the horror movie – Annabelle; Project 8- Ordering a meal in a restaurant; and the remaining project was about describing people (Project 5- Talking about the friendship of close friends).

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Technical Aspect

The technical aspect of learner autonomy has two categories to be examined in this study: (1) access to learning resources and (2) use of learning strategies.

The findings generally propose that greater autonomy in the technical aspect seems to be attributed to the implementation of projects. The learners appeared to manifest positive changes in their access to learning resources and use of learning strategies during projects. The results seem to reflect a shared opinion in the literature that access to learning resources contribute to the development of learner autonomy (Augustina, 2017; Benson, 2013). Both Benson (2013) and Augustina (2017) share the points that learning resources play important roles in the development of learner autonomy. And it is indicated that the more learners access learning resources, the more autonomous they become. Meanwhile, Reinders and White (2011) and Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, (2014) stress the potential of the use of technological resources to the enhancement of learner autonomy. The researchers elaborate that online resources and technological tools are contributors of stimulation of learner autonomy. And learning environment where learners can socialize with each other and interact and collaborate on learning activities was also supposed to support autonomy (Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014). It is identified in this study that through project work the students were exposed to opportunities to make the most of the learning resources. And by approaching more learning resources, the students' autonomy was recognizably facilitated.

The findings revealed above resonate with a range of studies on the links of learner autonomy and learning strategies (e.g., Ceylan, 2015; Cotterall, 1995; Figura & Jarvis, 2007; Oxford, 1999; Wang, 2015; and Wenden, 1991;). These studies share an important point of views that the manifestation of learning strategies during the learning process represents the extent of how autonomous the learners are. In a more detailed interpretation, Cotterall (1995) specifies that the demonstration of more learning strategies employment among learners is indicative of a fully realized autonomy. Similarly, according to Ceylan (2015), the more strategies the students apply, the higher their autonomy is developed. The results seemed to be different from Nguyen (2017) in which it is identified that cognitive and metacognitive abilities are the most lacking. However, the enhancement of the technical autonomy seemed to be echoed by Villa and Armstrong (2004). According to Villa and Armstrong (2004), the features of the technical aspect is evident in their study as follows: the learners take control of their own learning; they learn how to learn and can thus apply the knowledge acquired in this experience to life-long learning; they decide jointly what they want to learn, set their own goals and plan actions to reach those goals, and they evaluate the process and the results of the experience in order to learn from it.

4.2 Psychological Aspect

The second sub-research question in this study focuses on the second aspect of learner autonomy – the psychological aspect which covers attitude and motivation. The results showed that with the implementation of projects, the students seemed to display highly positive attitudes towards learning English, and they appeared to be motivated to learn and engaged in the learning activities with the satisfaction and inherent pleasure of the projects with strong desire to achieve the commonly shared goals with others. It seems that the implementation of projects helped the students feel like learning the subject and activated the love for the subject that they used to have. In learning, they appeared to find joy, comfort and effectiveness, and forget about the difficulty.

The findings showed that psychologically, the application of projects seemed to enhance the students' attitudes towards learning English. The students exhibited highly positive feelings in learning English during projects. The results appeared to reflect the link between attitudes and autonomy which is recognized by many authors (Knapper & Croppley, 1991; Wenden, 1991; Dickinson, 1995; Benson, 1997; Scharle & Szabo, 2000; Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011; Zarei & Elakaei, 2012).

It can also be seen that through the implementation of projects students' motivation seemed to be enhanced in terms of desire to achieve learning goals, efforts, and satisfaction with the tasks. More specifically, the students appeared to be ambitious with the

targets they set. They wished to complete the tasks with a better result. They made lots of efforts in that direction at the same time. And when they finished the projects, they seemed to be happy and proud with the jobs done. All of these can be identified that the project work application affected the psychological aspect of students' autonomy in both attitude and motivation in a highly positive way. The students seemed to have a better attitude towards learning English, and they appeared to be more motivated in learning the subject throughout the project application.

The results appeared to support the arguments in the literature that learner autonomy and motivation are in close connections (Benson, 2007; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dam, 1995, Dickinson, 1995; Little, 1995, and Ushioda, 1996). The scholars agree on the association between autonomy and motivation. The findings also confirmed what was claimed in previous studies (Nguyen, 2017; Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin, 2017; and Villa & Armstrong, 2004) that the students became motivated in learning the subject while doing projects.

4.3 Political-critical Aspect

The third aspect of learner autonomy investigated in this study is the political-critical. In the conceptual framework, this perspective of autonomy is configured with choices of learning contents and choices of learning methods. The results indicated that with the implementation of projects, the students enjoyed a larger range of choices of learning contents and learning methods.

Obviously, in its nature, projects supply more choices of the learning contents and learning activities for learners. And this is in accordance with what Hutchinson (1991) describes about project work stating that the choices of learning contents and activities in projects are not limited and provides learners with adaptation and creativity. The findings also prove Thomas's (2000) argument that projects embrace learners' choices rather than traditional instruction where only teachers decide the learning contents and methods.

It can also be concluded that the integration of projects into the process syllabus brought about more choices for students in both the learning contents and the learning methods. At the same times, the students seemed to believe that the choices possessed good qualities making them enjoyed the learning.

The findings from the political-critical aspect of autonomy supports arguments in the literature that when given choices learners become more independent (Cotterall, 1995), more responsible (Assor et al., 2002), and more engaged (Ramires, 2014; and Parker, et al., 2017) in learning. The results also echo Chong's (2003) and Villa & Armstrong's (2004) findings. Chong (2003) concluded that CALL projects provided learners more choices in learning, and Villa & Armstrong (2004) stated that the students became more responsible when they made various decisions jointly.

4.4 Socio-cultural Aspect

The results showed that doing projects appeared to stimulate the students' interaction and collaboration in their learning activities. The stimulation seemed to be evident in all of the subcategories. In terms of interaction, the students interacted with people in higher frequency and in a larger environment. As for collaboration, the collaboration was observed in more learning activities.

The findings are found to be consistent with the arguments in the literature proposed by many scholars that the socio-cultural perspective is an important element in autonomy configuration which highlights interaction and collaboration in the learning process (Oxford, 2003). Through interaction and collaboration with other peers, learners can learn effectively (Little, 2007). The demonstration of more interaction and collaboration among the students during projects in this study also seems to prove the proposal by Palfreyman (2003) that collaboration and interactions are central to a successful capacity for autonomy. Besides, autonomy is identified in interdependence rather than entire independence (Little, 1996). And this can be seen in the collaborative participation in the project activities manifested among the students.

To sum up, the findings about the enhancement of the students' autonomy in learning through the integration of projects have been presented four aspects of learner autonomy in accordance with answering four major research questions. Concerning the first aspect of learner autonomy – the technical, the findings showed that after the projects were applied into the learning process, the students accessed the learning resources more than they did before the projects. The students employed more learning skills/strategies to achieve the learning targets. Besides the common learning activities such as repetition or reviewing the learning contents before going to class, the students used a more diverse range of skills which included time-management, teamwork, problem-solving, decisions-making, or overcoming difficulty. As for the psychological aspect of learner autonomy, the results of the questionnaires demonstrated that there was a significant change among the students in terms of their attitude and motivation towards learning English. The students found that there was lots of fun in their learning, and they felt stimulated in performing their learning tasks during projects. Regarding the political-critical aspect of learner autonomy, the findings showed that most students found more choices of the learning contents and learning methods when doing projects. And, for the socio-cultural aspect, it was revealed that the integration of projects brought the students opportunities to interact and collaborate with their teacher and their friends more in doing the shared learning tasks. The findings demonstrated that the students became more active in contacting their teammates and their teacher, and more frequent collaboration in learning was also evident.

5. SUGGESTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study focused on investigating the enhancement of eight components of learner autonomy through the implementation of projects which were access to learning resources, use of learning skills/strategies, attitudes towards learning English, motivation in learning English, choices of learning contents, choices of learning methods, interaction and collaboration. However, the interrelationship of the components was not examined closely. How the components connect to each other and how they affect each other in the process of applying projects should also be investigated.

The subjects of this study were non-English majors. A different research project would be applied to participants from other backgrounds would be interesting. Such focus would help further identify the effectiveness of the project work in developing learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy is identified as a multi-faced concept. There are still many missing components in the conceptual framework of learner autonomy in this study: awareness, willingness, confidence, control, responsibility, engagement, etc. There should be more research on how project work promotes these ignored autonomy components.

The study employed the project work as an intervention tool to promote learner autonomy, hence, the implications and recommendations are presented in two main areas: researching learning autonomy and implementing project work.

Learner autonomy is recognized as a multiple-perspective concept. Therefore, in terms of researching learner autonomy, first, it is suggested that defining autonomy and pinning it down into smaller components is necessary. This helps to establish a theoretical framework throughout the study. And by doing so the assessment of learner autonomy can be easier. Second, using multiple data sets and employing different data collection tools in a study is essential. This is because students' autonomous learning behaviors can be shaped and demonstrated in different learning situations and environments. Therefore, the mixed methods design and the employment of data collection and analysis in this study should be a useful reference for other studies.

The results in this study prove that projects can make students be more motivated in learning, have a better attitude towards the learning, use more skills to do the learning tasks, and take advantage of the learning resources, and interact more and collaborate in more learning activities. Therefore, project work can possibly be a fruitful approach in not just learning English as a foreign language but also in other subjects. And application of project work can be feasible not just in the context of the research institution of this study but also in other EFL contexts.

The enhancement of learner autonomy identified above among the students gave more evidence for the effectiveness of project work implementation in this study. Based on this, there are some implications for applying projects into the learning process. First, the purpose of using projects should be taken into consideration before the implementation. In this study, projects were employed to stimulate learner autonomy. However, with different purposes in other studies, the focus in projects can be changed. Next, it is recommended to choose an appropriate model of projects to serve the established purpose. Finally, the application of projects in this study stressed the teacher's supporting roles during the whole process. Hence, it is suggested that teachers should specify clearly the all the activities and the responsibilities of both teacher and students in those activities. By doing so, teachers can give better assistance to their students.

During project work, it is noticed that most of the students uses online resources, mobile phones, and mobile applications for video recording or for looking for meanings of new words. This implies the indispensable role of technology in the students' learning. Therefore, for application of more compiled projects which involve using more advanced technology, there are three recommendations. First, teachers should seek experienced peers for better support. Second, there should be training of technological skills for students. And last, but not best, teachers should familiarize themselves with technological tools in various contexts in which learners can be expected to use.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Pre-Project Work Questionnaire

1. Apart from the weekly study time in class, where do you usually learn English?
2. In addition to the textbooks, what other materials do you use for learning English?
3. What tools/learning aids do you use in learning English?
4. What skills/strategies do you often use in learning English?
5. What do you think about learning English?
6. "I desire to achieve goals in learning English".
(Totally DISAGREE – 1, Totally AGREE – 5)
7. "I make lots of efforts in learning English".
(Totally DISAGREE – 1, Totally AGREE – 5)
8. "I am satisfied with learning English now".
(Totally DISAGREE – 1, Totally AGREE – 5)
9. What do you think about the choices of the learning contents now?
10. What do you think about the choices of learning methods now?
11. In your current English learning, how do you interact with people (teachers / friends)?
12. How do you collaborate with others in studying English now?

Appendix B: Post-Project Work Questionnaire

1. Where did the learning activities in your project take place?
2. What source of materials did you use during projects?
3. What tools/learning aids do you use during projects?
4. What skills/strategies did you use during projects?
5. How did you feel about learning English during projects?
6. "I desired to achieve goals during projects".
(Totally DISAGREE – 1, Totally AGREE – 5)
7. "I made lots of efforts in learning English in projects".
(Totally DISAGREE – 1, Totally AGREE – 5)
8. "I was satisfied with English learning activities during projects".
(Totally DISAGREE – 1, Totally AGREE – 5)
9. What do you think about the choices of the learning contents during projects?
10. What do you think about the choices of learning methods during projects?
11. In projects, how did you interact with people (teachers / friends)?
12. How did you collaborate with others during projects?

Appendix C: Semi-structured Interview Questions

- 1 Project work ended, what do you want to share right now?
- 2 Could you tell me a memory when working on the project?
- 3 Among the tasks you did in the project, which one do you find most interesting?
- 4 What do you still regret?
- 5 When working on the project, how do you feel about learning English?