Using the Internet to Promote Business Learners' Autonomy in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

In Vietnam, despite the widespread use of computers and the Internet in the educational settings, little attention has been paid to the role of the Internet in promoting students' autonomy. Particularly, in the author's real teaching context at Thuong Mai University (TMU), there exists a serious problem relating to students' lack of independency in language learning. The study, therefore, was implemented to investigate the effectiveness of the Internet use in promoting business learners' autonomy and improving their learning skill. To fulfill the study, questionnaires and interviews were conducted to 200 third-year students and 10 teachers of English at TMU respectively. The qualitative approach was adopted to reveal the significant findings of the descriptive case study on the learners' positive attitudes and awareness of their learning autonomy through the popularity yet ineffective use of the Internet use but the ineffective use of the Internet in improving English study and motivation, what and how teachers and learners do to promote learners' autonomy in language learning. The study, consequently, came up with some effective pedagogical implications that may help teachers recognize the significant role of the Internet in enhancing learners' autonomy inside and outside the class.

Key words: Internet, Autonomy, Autonomous Learning, Teaching Innovations

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has been spreading its power into all sectors of society such as online education, advertising, marketing and sales across the world (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000). It is such an attractive tool that a number of teachers have become interested in using the Internet in learning/teaching methods - known as Internet-assisted language learning/teaching (IALL/IALT) and multimedia materials that can be useful for language learners. There, in fact, is a worldwide increase in the number of studies about the effectiveness of the Internet and computer use in promoting language learning, namely Warschauer, Turbee and Roberts (1996), Warschauer, Shetzer and Meloni (2000), etc. In the mean time, in the global trend of ELT with the shift from teacher-centred instruction to learner-centred instruction, the core of English learning has emphasized on how to develop the ability of autonomy anytime and anywhere. With that trend, the application of Internet technology has developed a new field for autonomy English learning which becomes more and more popular. Moreover, this application is very crucial for the context of education in Vietnam generally where students are often described to be passive and familiar with rote learning, the number of class hours of English learning and teaching is limited in the curriculum, and the number of students per class of around 40 is so huge.

With the boom of computer technology and Internet, almost all students possessing their own laptops, mobile phones, the school installing wireless network connection at every corner makes the access to the Internet very convenient. However, there are still a number of students who are unable to take full advantage of the numerous and powerful online learning resources. Based on such situated facts, the study is carried out to investigate students' Internet use in promoting their autonomy in language learning and find out teachers' roles. Furthermore, suggestions are proposed to foster students' capability of autonomous English learning.

Objectives and Research Questions

From the context and initial problems, this article would investigate how learners use the Internet in promoting their own autonomy, and address the following detailed research questions:

1. How do business students perceive themselves as autonomous English language learners through the use of Internet?
2. How efficiently do they use the Internet for autonomous learning activities?
3. How can teachers help students to be more autonomous in learning the foreign language through using Internet?

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Concepts of Language Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy in language learning is a complicated concept which has been identified and understood in various ways in practice for more than 40 years in the development of educational ideology and philosophy. Benson (2001) reviewed clearly the literature on autonomy in language teaching and learning from the 1970s up to the end of the 20th century. With the preliminary work of Henry Holec, the term was defined as "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (1981, p. 3), and that ability "is not inborn but must be acquired either by "natural" means or by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way". According to Holec (1981), the autonomous learner is able to determine goals, select appropriate tools and methods and follow and evaluate his/her own progress and that these skills are learnt gradually. The key element in definition of this kind is the idea that autonomy is an attribute of learners, rather than learning situations. Another scholar, Dickinson (1987:11) described autonomy as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions". Many advocates of autonomy argue that some degree of freedom in learning is required if learners are to develop their autonomy. But most accept that freedom in learning is not the same thing as autonomy and this freedom will always be constrained, a view express most cogently by Little (1996).

Little (1991) emphasized the psychology at the heart of learner autonomy. In order to explain clearly what autonomous learners are able to do and how they are able to do it, Little (2000, p. 69) combined Holec's definition with his own, Little (1991), as follows:

> *Autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action (Little, 1991:4); autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes. (Holec, 1981:3).*

Both definitions emphasize the transfer of responsibility for learning from teacher to the learner. With such responsibility, the learner gains a greater degree of active involvement and better learning.

Features of Autonomous Learners

With the change of definition and the tendency in ELT, language learners certainly have new characteristics. According to Dickinson (1993) autonomous learners can be characterized in four points. First, they can identify what is going on, or what is been taught in their classes. Second, she added that autonomous learners are capable of formulating their own learning objectives along with their teachers'. Most autonomous language learners make great efforts to improve their language skills outside the classroom. Third, autonomous learners are able to select and implement appropriate learning strategies. Fourth, autonomous learners can monitor the effectiveness of their use of strategies and make necessary

changes for them. With these four basic characteristics, it is inevitable for autonomous learners to engage actively in the learning process and to take control of their own learning.

Mentioned in Nunan (1997), the term "autonomy levels" are used to describe an autonomous learner with five stages for students to develop autonomy ranging from making students aware of the learning goals and materials, to making links between the content of class learning and the outside world.

With the basic theory of autonomous learners, the research has a clearer base for implementation and identification of students' autonomy.

Teachers' Role in Promoting Learner Autonomy

From the development of ELT and the term "learner autonomy", teacher's role has shifted from tradition modes of teaching which is as the supplier of knowledge, setting up activities, motivating the students and providing authoritative feedback on students' performance; to a mode of a counselor/facilitator who helps learners to take significant responsibility by setting their own goals, planning practice opportunities or assessing their progress (Tudor, 1993). There are quite a few studies exploiting the roles of teachers in fostering learner autonomy, particularly with the technology assistance.

Little (1995) pointed out that it is difficult for learners in formal education contexts to accept responsibility immediately for their learning so the teachers have roles to help them do those by equipping them with sufficient materials and with chances to practice them. According to Gremmo and Riley (1995), a teacher can take the role of counseling in two ways. Firstly, he/she is supposed to assist learners to establish set of values, ideas and techniques in the language learning process. In other words, the teacher as counselor is able to raise the awareness of his/her language learning. Secondly, the teacher can establish and manage the resource center or self-access center, which can be described as the role of staff in self-access centers. The task here involves providing information and answers about the available materials in the self-access center.

Roles of Internet in Promoting Learner's Autonomy

For learning, Internet provides many chances for improving modes of learning and providing valuable sources for many kinds of knowledge. Teeler and Gray (2000) stated that Internet has been always an effective tool for enhancing modes of teaching and learning processes. In classroom, students are confined with limited materials used by the teacher. For outside classroom learning, Internet can offer a wide range of audio and visual materials in addition to various documents and e-books. As Pasch and Norsworthy (2001), Internet provides a far richer learning environment than secondary source language textbooks and limited collections of audio material. As a wide spread technology, internet provides certain programs to exchange materials and information, the most known application programs for the use of internet are email and world wide web (Teeler & Gray, 2000). Website is

a multimedia and communication tool which offers a range of opportunities to develop four skills in a playful and enjoyable context, namely songs, videos, audio books and digital stories. Consequently, we will set light on these different materials to give learners an overview on how these learning materials should be used and how they can be effective for language learning learners.

In term of learner autonomy, Benson (2001) stated there are 5 ways of supporting learner autonomy including resource – based, technology – based, classroom – based, curriculum – based, teacher-based, learner-based. Of those, computer technology is considered the fundamental factors contributing to the autonomy in institutionalized and non-institutionalized language learning. Particularly, Internet is a powerful pedagogic concept, adding value to materials. It occupies an important position in the ELT classroom. Several recent contributions to the vast literature in this area have emphasized opportunities for learner autonomy in the development and use of CALL technologies. Schemenk (2005, p. 107) found out that the popularity of learner autonomy may be at least partially related to the rise of computer technology and the growing importance of computers in language learning environments worldwide. Therefore, Godwin-Jones (2011) emphasizes that students should be encouraged to develop and use meta-cognitive strategies which help to improve learner autonomy thorough the use of computer technology. Moreover, according to Godwin-Jones (2011) teachers may provide guidance for students in terms of using web-based materials effectively so as to stimulate learners to use those materials critically knowing both their benefits and limitations.

METHODS

A qualitative approach was applied in this descriptive case study, which can describe a phenomenon, its characteristics (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). For the current study methods available, the approach is considered to be suitable to investigate the problems in naturally occurring setting and involve naturalistic data. Also, according to many articles, one of the most common qualitative and descriptive research tools is the survey, which is often used to gather data qualitatively but it is often analyzed quantitatively, using frequencies, percentages, averages or statistical analyses to determine later phase of deeper qualitative analysis. Interviews are used to elicit narrative data that allows investigating teachers and students' views in greater depth. Questionnaire and interview were used as data collection methods. Data analysis is a description of the collected data which provide a general picture about the current situation of the students' use of Internet in promoting their autonomous English learning.

Setting

Currently, fostering learner autonomy has been a primary task for English teaching at universities in Vietnam, especially in business universities. With a continuous expansion of enrolment, English teachers at universities always face the big class size problem (around 40-50 students per class). In addition, English learning hours for non – English majors are limited and are not compulsory. Universities have adapted "University Exit Standard" in English for all students which requires students' appropriate English level when they graduate from the universities. Consequently, students have to learn English on their own and take more responsibility for their own learning. Under the circumstances, the study aims to carry out research to help students promote their English learning process. The setting for the study was at TMU which shares the same problems above.

The study was done during the first semester of the students' third year school from August 2017 to October 2017 at certain departments, namely Marketing and Ecommerce. This period is very important for third-year students who are supposed to be ready for English tests to meet the University Exit Standard. The study was carried out with the following procedure. First, students were chosen randomly from the two departments and asked to complete the online questionnaires in Google Form within one day, then some students randomly chosen were interviewed online through Facebook Messenger Ap. After this survey, 10 teachers at Faculty of English were selected randomly to conduct the interviews in private office for 10 minutes.

Participants

The participants in this study included 200 third-year non-English major students who are major in Marketing, E-commerce at TMU. Their English level was measured with average TOEIC score of 300. The third-year students were chosen to participate the study because they have spent 3 years in university. They are supposed to be more aware of the importance of being independent in learning, and will have more experience in using the Internet in their study. Among 200 students, 98% completed the questionnaires. The sample consisted of 58 males and 138 females. Then 10 teachers were selected to involve in the interview to clarify deeper understanding of students' autonomy in language learning with the Internet assistance.

Instruments

The data was retrieved from questionnaire and interview.

A questionnaire was also adapted from Shuping Yao (2016). When adapting the questionnaire, the literature on learner autonomy, especially, features of autonomous learners, Internet and teachers' roles in learners' autonomy, was used as reference. The questionnaire was designed for third year students to collect data about their habit of using the Internet, and their awareness of learners' autonomy, their opinions and habits on using the Internet to promote their autonomous English learning. The questionnaires were translated into Vietnamese and checked by 2 professors in ELT to ensure an accurate understanding of the items. Then they were distributed online using Google Forms. The participants were given one day to complete the questionnaires.
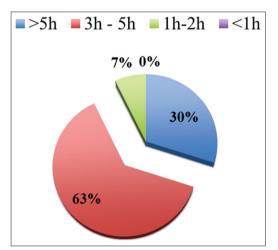
The questionnaire has 3 sections:

Section 1 includes four items including personal information, ownership of computers or mobile phone with Internet connection, duration of time participants spending on the Internet per day and their purposes of learning English.

Section 2 consists of items related to the investigate students' awareness of their autonomous English learning including participants' interest and motivations of learning English, their self-assessment of their own autonomy in English learning.

Section 3 includes their behaviours of online English study and self-assessment of the Internet use in promoting their autonomous learning, their problems which hinder their autonomous language learning with the tools of Internet and roles of teachers in guiding their study online.

After achieving students' survey results, 10 teachers of English at TMU were interviewed in private office for roughly 10 minutes and the interviews were recorded. A qualitative one-to-one interview was designed on the literature of Internet and teachers' roles in promoting language learners' autonomy in order to reveal some data about the teachers' awareness of learner autonomy and tactics they did to encourage students to learn English through the aid of Internet.

Figure 1. Students' Average Time accessing the Internet (hours/day)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Students' Questionnaire

The results of the participants' questionnaire are divided in three sections and illustrated in details through the researcher's interpretation.

Students and internet

Findings from the first section of the survey showed that 100% of the participants own computers or mobile phones which is connected to the Internet. Of those, 92.8% spending from 3 hours to more than 5 hours accessing the Internet, only 7.2% for 1 to 2 hours, and no one spends less than 1 hour per day (Figure 1). This explained the significance of Internet to students' life and they spend much time on the Internet.

To clarify more about their use of Internet, the participants were asked to state their purposes of using the Internet.

The results were illustrated in Figure 2 as follows. Social networking (81.1%), entertainment (78.06%), English study (65.8%) and new information (62.7%) with the popular websites listed after each purpose are Facebook, Youtube, Wechat, Instagram, Saigontimes, BBC news. The purposes are various owning to the multi-task tool of the Internet. Among those, English study ranks the third place in four reasons to access the Internet. For the purpose of English study, they pointed out that 68.8% study English to prepare for their future jobs, 15.8 % want to get high scores and 15.4% like English. The data shows that the participants have certain motivation for learning English autonomously through the Internet. However, the time spent the most is on social networking and entertainment that may be considered the distractors in autonomous learning. In general, it is crucial to motivate business students to make full use of the Internet in enhancing English learning.

Students and language autonomy

For participants' self-assessment of their autonomy, 53.5 % think that they are autonomous English learners while 31.1% are not sure about their autonomy and 15.4% think that they are not autonomous learners (Figure 3).
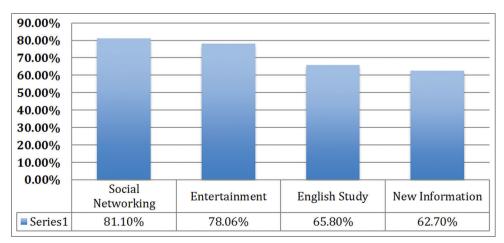

Figure 2. Students' purposes of using the Internet

To make sure they evaluate themselves correctly, more questions based on features of autonomous learners were used in the survey. Surprisingly, 84.7 % set goals for their English study, 15.3% set no goals, while 61.7% have plans to learn English and of these 69.4% strictly follow their plan. For the question items of the participants' behaviours in the class, 64.3 % prepare the lesson before English class. 85.7% rarely autonomously initiate exchanges in English with their friends and teachers, 64.3 % participate in English class activities, 30.1% students partially depend on their teacher in learning English, 41.8% totally depend on their teachers.

These numbers confirm that more than half of the participants are not autonomous learners. They seem know how to set their goals, make plan and participate in the class, however, they are not patient enough to implement their plan and not independent enough to manage their study outside the class even they have motivation mentally.
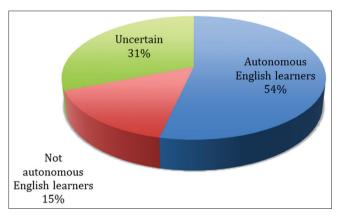

Figure 3. Students' self – assessment of autonomy

Students' language autonomy and the use of internet in studying English

For the last section in the survey, the study investigated how the participants use the Internet in and what they do to promote their English study.

Nearly 59.9% of the participants answered that they are in neutral when asking about the interest in learning English through the Internet, 34.2% do not like, and 5.9 % like studying English through the Internet (Figure 4).

However, regarding the habit in the online study, 52.5% of the participants study English online from 2 to 3 times a week, 31.6% study every day, and only 15.9% study once a week (Figure 5). From the results, it can be seen that majority of the students do not have much interest in the use of Internet in English study, however, they still have a usual habit to study online.

To have a particular understanding on what the participants study English on the Internet, a number of questions were about their detail behaviours and attitudes to their study and the role of the Internet.

For their popular websites or tools to study English online, YouTube website is the most popular source, then Google Translation tool is the second popular one. 53.1% of participants use downloading programs but they mostly download music (80.1%), movies (20.9%), e-books (15.8%) which are mostly TOEIC test materials.

For the questions of the activities the participants take up to study on the Internet in term of English, the answer was illustrated in Figure 6 as follows: Listening skill (50%), Vocabulary (25%), Pronunciation (18.9%), Reading skill (12.7%), Speaking skill (9.6%), Writing (6.1%) and Gram-
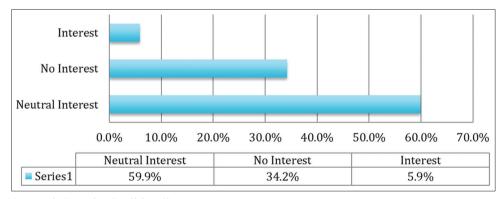

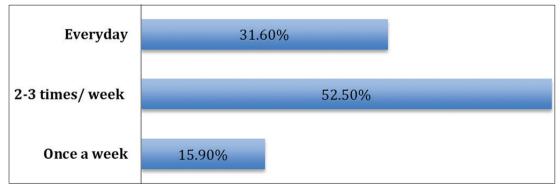**Figure 4.** Students' Interest in Learning English online

Figure 5. Students' Habit in Online Study

mar (0%). For clearer understanding, the researcher asked more about their websites/tools or the content of their study. The answer mostly was focused on the popular website namely, YouTube, BBC News, E-books, Dictionary, VOA learning English. For the listening skill which is the most popular one in online study, the participants showed that they watched films and study English through the channels on YouTube.

Based on the results, 70.9% of the participants assessed that listening skill is the most effective to be improved when they study English online, the vocabulary and pronunciation are in the second (17.3%) and the third (11.7%) place whereas writing and speaking are the least effective skills (6.1%) (Figure 7).

On the whole, 70.4% participants agreed that Internet helps them study English better but 43.8% think the Internet hasn't motivated them in study online. These results were explained by their difficulties hindering their motivation which are illustrated Table 1:

The findings explained a contradiction that a large number of the participants do not have much interest in learning English online, however they still keep usual habit to learn. Further interviews with the students show that teachers' guidance is not enough and some teachers even ignore this necessary phase in promoting them to use the Internet independently and purposely. The students reported have already practised mainly listening, pronunciation and vocabulary

Table 1. Difficulties hindering students' motivation

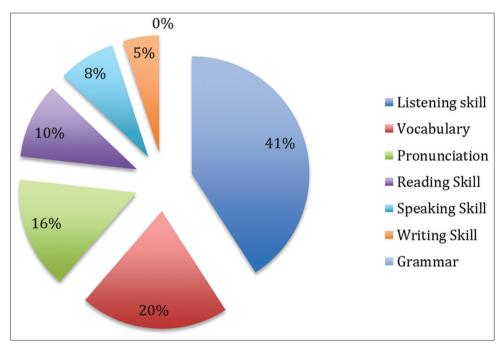| Difficulties hindering students' motivation	
Distraction	62.7%
No clear guide	50%
Low interaction	47.9%
Low motivation	33.1%
Lack of understanding	28.1%
Weak internet connection	12.2%

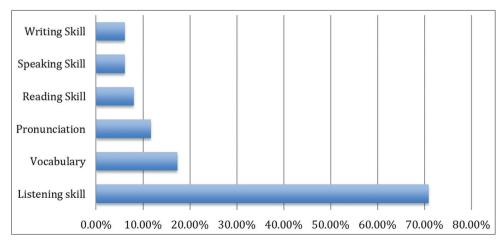**Figure 6.** Students' Study English Online

Figure 7. The effectiveness of studying English online

through the Internet. Of those, listening skill has got much improvement. Thus, it confirms that the students believe in the effectiveness of using the Internet in promoting language learners' improvement. Consequently, it would enhance their language autonomy.

Teachers' Interview

The interview was conducted with 10 teachers at English Faculty – TMU to find down what and how they do to help students' language autonomy through the use of Internet.

For the questions about whether their students are autonomous, the majority of teachers (90%) showed that their students are not autonomous in class while 10% found that to some extent or in some cases, their students are autonomous and take responsibility. Most of the teachers (60%) stated that they mainly develop the class into learners' centred approach, students are quite independent in the class activities, however; owing to students' low level of English, the students are partially dependent and need the help or explanation of the teachers. When asked about the promoting students' language autonomy outside the class, 100% teachers think that students need to be guided, motivated and raised their awareness to self-study outside the class. All the teachers agreed that Internet is now the very effective and convenient for learners to improve there English learning. Additionally, 70% teachers said that they often suggest students how to use Internet outside the classroom such as downloading English materials, watching movies, using social network to chat with native speakers or exchanging emails. For those teachers, they mentioned a common problem that their guidance may not efficient enough to motivate their students to make any changes. Students showed their willingness at the class time but they are not sure students can follow or implement seriously. For the rest 30% of the teachers said that because of limited class time and the students' low level of English, they cannot suggest students the way of using Internet to study English for themselves.

Further interview with some teachers added a clearer explanation, most of the teacher noted that fostering learner autonomy turns to be a rather intricate process requiring commitment and seriousness from both teachers and students. That explains why there are many challenges that make the teacher hesitate to promote learner autonomy. They stated that the main cause comes from freedom where students are free to choose to study but in fact not responsible enough. The teachers affirmed that students should consciously monitor their own progress and make an effort to use available opportunities to their benefit. Besides, with the teaching and learning style in Vietnam, students were familiar with the presence of teachers who facilitate the process of learning so they found difficult to take their own control on their study without the teachers. At the same time, teachers found little connection with or control over their students in this case. Therefore, most of the teachers assessed that their guidance was not effective enough and students had not taken many benefits from the use of the Internet in promoting their autonomy.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

With the results and descriptive analysis conducted, the conclusion was summarised and discussed as follows: Firstly, business students have much Internet access (3-5hours/day) with various purposes, especially for social networking and entertainment which are considered the distractors from their study. Their Internet surfing time needs changing to balance their students' life. Secondly, based on Dickinson (1993) and collected data, majority of students are not autonomous learners. They know their goals (84.6%), their plans (61.5%) but in practice they (57.1%) cannot follow and implement them. Moreover, they rarely use English autonomously outside the class and (41.9%) totally depend on their teachers. Thirdly, from the data of Internet access and learner autonomy, it is reasonable to find out their English study on the Internet, they have awareness and positive attitudes to the effectiveness of the Internet tools to English improvement. The participants could see the improvement in their English skills. However, owing to a number of hindrances, they have not found much motivation and autonomy in learning. Their autonomy level is just at the second level where their awareness of autonomous learning is available but they have not made much effort and implemented appropriate learning strategies (Nunan, 1997). For the further teachers' interview analysis afterwards, the study revealed that students have already got suggestions on how to use the Internet to promote their autonomy, however, the way of guidance is still ineffective or has little influence on students' autonomy.

The results were also appropriate to the ideas from Little (1995) which pointed that learners find difficult to accept responsibility immediately for their learning, and the teachers have great roles to assist them much in formal education contexts which seem quite similar to the educational context in Vietnam where English has just been considered an optional subject and not taught in formal education for a couple of years. Students have not got familiar to and worked well on the new teaching and learning trend which requires their high level of autonomy.

Regarding to the definition of learners' autonomy (Little, 1991), no one has an inborn ability to learn autonomously, however, people can develop autonomy through experience with teachers' help as adviser. Thus, teachers should not only take into consideration to various factors such as an individual learner's traits, affinity for a particular learning style and cultural attitudes or behaviours to give them the most appropriate learning strategies (Williams & Burden, 1997) but also encourage learners to develop/use meta-cognitive strategies to assist them to improve learner autonomy through the use of Internet (Godwin – Jones, 2011). From the discussion, the interview results did not show the sufficient role of the teachers in the present situation, compared to the previous studies.

Despite the findings showing the present problematic context, the study indicated that promoting autonomy can be potentially and effectively applied through the use of the Internet.

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of present study revealed that students are aware of the Internet use in promoting autonomous English

learning but they are still not actually autonomous because of their inefficient learning strategies, low motivation and many distractors from the Internet. To deal with these problems, some recommendation are proposed as follows:

First, the school needs a training program of learning strategies. With the aim at promoting the students to become more autonomous and more independent, it is necessary to launch some courses such as computer skills, time management to facilitate English learning and improvement of English skills, especially by using the Internet.

Secondly, it is significant to create a language-learning environment among students. For the non-English major students, they are not confident to communicate with their friends or teachers in or out of the class. Therefore, it needs more interaction and cooperation. Teachers can guide them some tools and establish an effective learning environment like group or team to complete certain tasks which require them work or online chat groups to interact more with each other under the assistance of the Internet. Moreover, the traditional role of teacher in the class should be gradually changed, which can make students more independent and autonomous in their own learning.

Thirdly, motivation and interest are the factors affecting learner autonomy. The results reveal that most business students have low motivation and interest in learning English online due to the distractors and limited resources. Thus, to stimulate their interest or motivation, teachers can adapt more authentic materials into their teaching content such as newspapers, movies, music, etc.

In conclusion, basing on the investigation about the use of Internet to promote learners' autonomy, we can assure that integrating the Internet in teaching and learning language is an effective way which not only assists students in improving their English but stimulates learners' autonomy as well as long as we can overcome all the hindrances, have a clear instruction and appropriate learning strategies.

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