

FROM FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO SECOND LANGUAGE: STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING LEARNER AGENCY AT TAN TRAO UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, as Vietnam integrates into the global economy and knowledge, English has become a core skill, essential for the competitiveness of the modern workforce. However, our educational system traditionally approached English as a "Foreign Language" (EFL), where teaching and learning were often passive, focusing mainly on memorizing vocabulary and complex grammar rules to pass exams. For regional higher education institutions like Tan Trao University, navigating this transition brings unique challenges. For non-English majors, English is often seen as an insurmountable academic hurdle rather than a useful professional tool. The crucial missing element in facilitating a successful shift from an EFL to an ESL mindset is learner agency—the student's conscious, proactive ability to take charge of their own learning journey. This paper aims to investigate the current state of learner agency and proposes practical, technology-based pedagogical interventions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The distinction between EFL and ESL reflects a core shift in psychological reception and teaching methodologies. While the EFL curriculum heavily emphasizes grammatical accuracy, the ESL model champions practical application and flexible communicative competence. In educational research, "learner agency" carries a deep connotation, encompassing both internal intentions and practical actions taken by learners. From the perspective of social cognitive theory, learner agency is built on four core features: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. Highly autonomous learners proactively outline personalized language goals and actively immerse themselves in learning environments.

KEY FINDINGS

The empirical findings demonstrate that while students acknowledge the importance of English, their actual learner agency remains constrained by interconnected psychological, strategic, and environmental factors.

Current State of Learning Strategies: Passive Learning Strategies

The quantitative data highlights a predominantly passive approach to language acquisition.

- A staggering 78% of participants rely heavily on rote memorization—the mechanical repetition of vocabulary without context.
- 72% reported a lack of proactive engagement in seeking English materials related to their major outside of class.
- * This indicates a severe deficit in self-directed learning; students perceive English acquisition as a process strictly managed by the lecturer.

B. Psychological Barriers: The Fear of "Losing Face"

One of the most profound barriers to learner agency is the intense psychological burden carried by students.

- 85% of students feel nervous or anxious when speaking English in front of classmates.
- 68% admit to remaining silent despite knowing the correct answer due to an overwhelming fear of making grammatical errors.

* *Qualitative insight:* One sophomore student shared, "I know the vocabulary, and I can do the grammar exercises on paper. But when the teacher asks me to speak, my mind goes blank. I am so afraid my friends will laugh at my pronunciation because I come from a rural school...". This fear fundamentally paralyzes agency.

C. Environmental Factors & The Academic Disconnect

- While 80% believe English will be a crucial tool for accessing materials in their specific academic major, a paradoxical mismatch exists between the general English taught in class and their future career needs.

* An Agriculture major noted: "We learn about daily routines and hobbies... but what I really need is to understand instructions for new farming technologies...". This perceived irrelevance severely diminishes intrinsic motivation.

CONCLUSION

Transitioning the educational paradigm from EFL to ESL demands a fundamental transformation in both pedagogical approach and learner mindset. Fostering learner agency is the definitive solution to these challenges. By integrating accessible Information Technology and intentionally aligning English instruction with students' specific academic disciplines, English transforms from a mandatory requirement into an indispensable tool for professional empowerment.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to answer the following core questions:

1. What are the current learning strategies and the state of learner agency among non-English major students?
2. What psychological barriers and environmental factors constrain their ability to autonomously use English?
3. How can technology-based pedagogical interventions be implemented to foster learner agency and bridge the gap between English instruction and students' academic majors?

METHODOLOGY

Convenience sample of non-English major undergraduate students at Tan Trao University.

Academic Year	Field of Study	Quantitative Phase	Qualitative Phase
1st to 3rd-year	Various majors	N=250 (Survey respondents)	N=15 (Follow-up interviews)

Design

Explanatory sequential mixed-methods design

Questionnaire	(1). Current learning strategies & self-direction (2). Psychological barriers & anxiety (3). Environmental factors & perceived relevance to major
Interview	(1). Personal anxieties and fear of "losing face" (2). Daily English learning habits and rote memorization (3). Perceptions of English relevance to future careers

IMPLICATIONS

A. Fostering Agency Through Mindset Reorientation

Transitioning the Teacher's Role from "Knowledge Transmitter" to "Learning Facilitator". Instead of lecturing continuously, teachers act as learning space designers. For example, pre-lesson tasks require students to look up vocabulary for their future careers, and in-class time is transformed into a "Job Fair" for active interviewing, handing the "steering wheel" back to the students.

B. Leveraging AI as a Non-Judgmental Conversation Partner

To mitigate the paralyzing fear of negative evaluation, educators should integrate AI chatbots (like ChatGPT or Gemini) into assignments. Students hold a 10-minute conversation with the AI about a topic directly related to their field of study. AI offers immediate, objective feedback without human judgment, allowing students to build conversational confidence prior to classroom peer-to-peer activities.

C. Personalized Learning via Interactive LMS

Institutions must transform Learning Management Systems (Moodle, Teams) into dynamic hubs for a Flipped Classroom model. Instructors upload instructional videos and reading materials to the LMS for students to review independently. Classroom time is then strictly reserved for communicative practice, collaborative problem-solving, and addressing specific inquiries.

D. Content-Based Instruction (CBI) & Gamification

To resolve the academic disconnect, language learning must be contextualized. Instructors should source authentic materials (e.g., hospital admission scenarios for Nursing students) and customize gamification tools (Quizlet, Kahoot) to include niche vocabulary tailored to specific majors.

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