

## How can learners study at their own pace and improve their autonomy?

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**ABSTRACT:** With the freedom of choosing and compiling materials for in-house course books, lecturers of English at Thai Nguyen School of Foreign Languages (TSFL) have made their own sets of teaching materials for their students; one problem of this act is students don't have a chance to be involved in and let their teachers know what their favorite topic areas are. Most of the time teachers pick a content of their interest which has nothing to do with students' concerns. Being aware of this, the author has conducted a survey research on the use of students' personal learning plans (PLPs) in managing their learning autonomy for an interpreting course. Every week, students make one plan on what they will listen to, how many new words they will learn and how many interpretations they will practice; in class, teachers then check what they do and give supports and feedbacks if necessary. The results from 100 students have revealed that making PLPs are significant in three ways: first, students are motivated to learn when they can study at their own pace; second, it helps build up their listening practice habits which are important in learning interpreting; and third, teachers have better information of what subject matters to choose for their teaching.

**KEYWORDS:** Personal learning plans, autonomy, motivation, managing time.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training released the decision for universities in Vietnam to shift from academic yearly training system to a credit-based structure in 2007. In this new system, for each in-class contact hour, students need to spend two hours for self-studying, which emphasizes the importance of learners' learning autonomy in order to get success in mastering the subject. However, with the booming of technology and social media forms, students now are easily distracted while learning. There is a negative relationship between students' grade point average (GPA) and the use of social sites. According to Stollack et al. (2011), students who spend less time on social media sites have a higher GPA than those who usually use them. Studies done by Reynol Junco (2011), Jacobsen and Forste (2011) and Walsh et al. (2013) also have a similar finding. Jacobsen and Forste state that "For every hour of electronic media exposure reported by students on average, GPA was reduced between 0.05 and 0.07 points" (2011). From this we see the importance of diminishing the unfavorable effect of social media in students' learning progress while preserving its plus points as a powerful source for knowledge and skills, which are essential for their learning too. In other words, if students well manage their time for study and use of the media sites, the problem will be resolved. To achieve this goal, they need to follow a learning plan which keeps them on track and not be directed to social media use while studying. The fact is students rarely have this kind of plan for themselves.

Another characteristic of the credit training system is it allows teachers to compose their own teaching materials. For lecturers at Thai Nguyen School of Foreign Languages (TSFL), they often work in their specialized groups; share the resources they have to compile what they want to teach based on the aims of the courses. This act is done every three to four years with modification and adaptation along the way depending on their actual teaching contexts. There is one issue with it which is the lack of students' involvement in the process of creating those materials. The teachers only rely on their personal evaluation after the course to decide what content to omit, add in, or renew. For subjects like translation, interpretation or oral proficiency in particular, they often choose topics for in-class and after-class practice built upon their own interests without considering whether they match their students' concerns or not. The consequence of this is the unstable level of motivation maintained in their classes. Some lessons might attract learners' attention, some might not.

From these observations, the author finds it necessary to investigate the problem by proposing a change in the way students learn. In the academic school year of 2015-2016, students of interpreting classes were asked to make personal learning plans for themselves with the belief that after class time, they could study what they were into; and by analyzing their plans, teachers would be better informed of what students care about to choose for their teaching materials.

## **2 WHAT ARE PERSONAL LEARNING PLANS?**

### **2.1 DEFINITIONS**

Personal learning plans can take many forms depending on particular teaching contexts, but they share common features: first, students describe their collegiate/subject goals; second, students are able to analyze their own strengths and weaknesses, or reflect on what they have achieved academically; third, they need to identify the gaps in terms of knowledge and skills that need to be addressed in their learning; and fourth, they document what actions they need to take so as to meet their goals. Helen (2008) briefly summarizes a personal learning plan should include learning goals, life goals and strategies for achieving goals. Due to its flexibility in carrying out the personal learning plan, teachers and educational institutions may have different definitions for the same term.

According to edglossary.org, a personal learning plan (PLP) is developed by students – typically in collaboration with teachers, counselors, and parents – as a way to help them achieve short- and long-term learning goals. Personal learning plans are generally based on the belief that students will be more motivated to learn, will achieve more in school, and will feel a stronger sense of ownership over their education if they decide what they want to learn, how they are going to learn it, and why they need to learn it to achieve their personal goals.

Manchester Metropolitan University defines a PLP as a document which outlines the reasonable adjustments required to meet students' support needs and also includes a list of their responsibilities.

Anne Fowler (1997) says that a PLP (or an independent learning) took the form of an individual contract where teachers and students discuss ways of extending English learning beyond the classroom at the beginning of the term, then students compose a contract with themselves to implement it.

Another definition coming from the School district of Philadelphia is that a PLP is a personalized document that students develop with their counselors and other supportive adults to chart their progress toward their goals during each school year, to ensure they are on the path to graduation, and to determine what resources and tools they need to be prepared for a successful pathway in life after graduation.

As stated in "Next Gen Tools", PLPs "create the path for the individual learner. They consist of student "daily actionable" goals, action steps, competencies, and sometimes pacing recommendations. These plans guide students in their learning journey and ensure they accomplish what they need academically and social-emotionally in a way that works best for them."

The teachers at TSFL also use the term PLP with most of the features described in definitions above, i.e. a document written by students themselves after having their weaknesses and strong points analyzed to set up their goals and decide forms of actions they need to take to accomplish the goals for a better learning result.

### **2.2 RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PLPS**

The author's review found that there are few researches on the influence of PLPs in students' academic scores; however, the number of works done to show the effectiveness of PLPs on other learning-related aspects is humongous. The benefits include motivating students to complete their high school diploma and engage in post-secondary study; provide students with a skill set necessary for planning their academic, professional, and personal lives; helping students to recognize the relevance of their academic work; engaging parents in students' academic activities; and providing information to improve the rigor and overall quality of the programs provided for students (Bloom & Kissane, 2011; Bullock & Wikely, 1999; Morgan & Stone, 2002; Phelps et al., 2011, RIDE, 2010; Wilkerson, 2010). By participating in PLPs, a student can develop greater responsibility for their own learning; improved confidence and self-esteem; a greater sense of involvement in planning for their own future.

## **3 WHAT IS LEARNER AUTONOMY?**

As what Reinders (2010) stated in his paper, "starting from the 1950s, and influenced by the work of George Kelly (c.f. Kelly, 1955) and others in psychology, there emerged an increased recognition of the importance of the learner as an active individual who brings previous experiences, beliefs and preferences to the classroom. Rather than seeing the learner as a passive

container to be filled with the teacher's ideas, these humanist approaches considered the learner as someone who actively shapes his or her learning experiences with the purpose of self-development and fulfillment (Stevick 1980, Atkinson 1993) ". The term "learner autonomy" has appeared in the field of language learning and teaching for several decades with its role being emphasized as a factor of success for learners. Camilleri Grima (2007), Cotterall (1995), Palfreyman (2003) report that learner autonomy plays a key part in upgrading learning quality, preparing learners for life-long learning, and helping them make the most use of opportunities in and out of their classrooms. Researchers have reported the essence of involving students in making decisions for their own learning as, in so doing, they are believed to be more enthusiastic about learning (Littlejohn, 1985, p. 258) because they will find the learning more focused and more purposeful for them (Little, 1991; Dam, 1995; Camilleri, 1997; Chan, 2001). Chan (2001) says that increasing the level of learner control will increase the level of self-determination, thereby increasing overall motivation in the development of learner autonomy.

Sinclair (2000) suggests 13 aspects of learner autonomy which 'appear to have been recognized and broadly accepted by the language teaching profession' (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Defining learning autonomy (Sinclair, 2000)**

1.	Autonomy is a construct of capacity.
2.	Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning.
3.	Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal.
4.	There are degrees of autonomy.
5.	The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable.
6.	Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent.
7.	Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process – i.e. conscious reflection and decision-making.
8.	Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies.
9.	Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies.
10.	Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom.
11.	Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension.
12.	The promotion of autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension.
13.	Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures.

From the aforementioned presentation, it is undeniable that in order for learners to master their own learning progress and to academically grow, they need to be involved in making decisions and being responsible for their own learning. One way of making this happen is exploiting the use of PLPs – a tool for students to control their learning activities and for teachers to be informed of where their learners are.

#### **4 THE TEACHING CONTEXT AT TSFL**

Located in the northern midland area, TSFL is one member of a regional university. Its graduates can work in the field of either teaching or interpreting/translating. Students at TSFL are mainly from mountainous areas in North Vietnam, where learning conditions are harsh and where English learning and teaching meet innumerable obstacles. Examples for these are English is not an important subject and schools; chances to communicate with foreigners are limited; and most of their English teachers have not been qualified according to the decision about language proficiency by the Vietnam's Ministry of Education. Another matter is, as a consequence of their not very successful English learning at high schools, they enter TSFL with minimum scores and with poor abilities in pronouncing English words correctly as well as writing sentences with grammar-free errors. When having the same standard for graduation as other universities in all over Vietnam and the same amount of time for being trained at the school, many of those students are unable to graduate, which creates a burden for not only their families but also the institution when they cannot apply for a job they are trained to do.

Being aware of those challenges, lecturers of English at TSFL have been trying different ways to make the impossible possible even though in this small city, chances for students to interact with foreigners who speak English are also rare. Nevertheless, students are able to access a big resource of books and other learning materials and to use Internet for their learning. Every semester, there are meetings by lecturers to share their evaluation of the training program and contents; they also discuss innovative changes in the way they teach and manage their students for better learning; one of which for the

school year of 2015-2016 is the implementation of PLPs as students' commitment to better learning autonomy as they believe that when students find their own motivation in being responsible for what they do and how they grow up academically, they will perform more efficiently.

## 5 THE STUDY

### 5.1 THE PARTICIPANTS AND THE CONTEXT

This study was carried out among 100 learners whose major is English language. For those students, there are two terms to study interpretation as a compulsory subject. In the second academic semester of fifteen weeks in school year 2020-2021, the students of this major were in their third year and had finished their Interpreting course 1 together with other proficiency subjects to develop their four language skills; now they would head for the second course of this subject. At the beginning of the term, students and teachers in interpreting classes did a number of tasks. Firstly, they spent the first day for students to reflect on what they had achieved so far in learning and identify what their strengths and areas that need work were. Their focus was on the test results of Interpreting 1 and they wrote down what they did not do well on the test and why. The common answer that the teachers received was their listening ability was deficient – they could not comprehend the input so as to convey its meaning as required. In fact, listening comprehension is the number one key factor in interpreting; without understanding the talk, students will not be able to interpret. The second thing they did then was to determine students would have to practice listening to English input at home more to train their ears, to expand their vocabulary range and to improve their pronunciation. After everyone agreed that they had to be really hard-working in this term to perform better in this difficult subject, they made their own PLPs basing on a format given by their teachers. This was a weekly plan with guiding points for students to cover (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Format of a PLP**

Name: .....			
Week: .....			
Group: .....			
Things/skills I want to learn/improve this week.	Tools/strategies that I use.	Evidence for my goal completion	Support(s) that I need

Student could either write this plan every week or type it and post in Moodle system for learning, which is currently used by teachers of interpreting courses at TSFL. In class, teachers randomly chose several students to show them what they did in one week and see if they completed what they had planned. Because these were the interpreting classes, teachers also asked them to either summarize what they listened to or translate it into Vietnamese. Below is an example of a student's PLP (see table 3).

**Table 3. Example of a PLP**

Name: Nguyen Thi B Week: 01 Group: 05			
Things/skills I want to learn/improve this week.	Tools/strategies that I use.	Evidence for my goal completion	Support(s) that I need
Listen to two pieces of news about Ebola	breakingnewsEnglish.com newsinlevels.com	My notes and new words for the listening	Suggestions of good sites for practicing listening
Dictate one listening about the X-planet	Myeslvideo.com	My notes in my notebook.	- Guidance on the use of abbreviations and symbols - Computer room

For the ease of selecting what materials to listen to, the teachers responsible for this subject create a list of useful websites that students can consult for their practice; but their choices are not limited in those options; they can look up for their own favorites. Table 4 below shows the websites list recommended for students in this term:

**Table 4. List of websites**

<a href="http://www.voanews.com">www.voanews.com</a>	<a href="http://www.onestopenglish.com">www.onestopenglish.com</a>
<a href="http://www.jokesinlevels.com">www.jokesinlevels.com</a>	<a href="http://www.eslvideo.com">www.eslvideo.com</a>
<a href="http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com">www.breakingnewsenglish.com</a>	<a href="http://www.spotlightenglish.com">www.spotlightenglish.com</a>
<a href="http://www.newsinlevels.com">www.newsinlevels.com</a>	<a href="http://www.podcastsinenglish.com">www.podcastsinenglish.com</a>
<a href="http://www.simpleenglishnews.com">www.simpleenglishnews.com</a>	<a href="http://alllearnersenglish.com/">http://alllearnersenglish.com/</a>
<a href="http://www.uefap.com/listen/listfram.htm">http://www.uefap.com/listen/listfram.htm</a>	<a href="http://eslradioandtv.com/">http://eslradioandtv.com/</a>
<a href="http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en">http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en</a>	<a href="https://www.englishlistening.com/">https://www.englishlistening.com/</a>
<a href="http://www.pbs.org/video/">http://www.pbs.org/video/</a>	<a href="http://www.voscreen.com/">http://www.voscreen.com/</a>

**5.2 HOW THE TEACHERS COMPILE THEIR TEACHING MATERIALS**

If we Google search course books for Interpreting, the results will show only several names. This fact means that there are not many books on theories and practice for this subject. Most of the interpreting teachers rely on their own experience in this field to choose or design their teaching contents. The author has conducted an interview with the two teachers at TSFL to find out their ways of compiling the materials. The answer received was they used talks and lectures from different sources based on their own interest and on what they think is right. Some of these sources are online sites like Tedtalks or talks on Youtube; part 4 of the IELTS listening test, listening audio from some language proficiency course books like English File, English Today, etc. Most of the topics they chose, as they said, fell in to the category of academic issues like how the brain works, the relationship of siblings, the use of chemicals in farming, the design of space, etc. After one term, they will renew their resources by choosing different sources. From this we see that the teaching content mainly comes from teachers’ concerns and subjective collection. One teacher gave an example of including a report on the event of Super Tuesday – a story about the presidential race in the U.S – in one of her classes; she was surprised to find out that ninety percent of her students were not at all interested in who the next leader of the United States would be.

**5.3 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study aimed at answering the following questions:

- How effective is making PLPs in improving learner autonomy?
- How do students’ PLPs help teachers in preparing materials for their teaching?

## 5.4 THE PROCEDURE

A questionnaire was designed by the author using Google docs and shared with one hundred students of Interpreting 2 in week fifteen of the school year 2020-2021. They were under no pressure in answering the questions as they left no signatures or trace of where they were. The questionnaire contains eight items; two of which ask about students' act of making PLPs: what is the frequency and how much time it takes them to do it; the other four questions focus on the effectiveness of having PLPs and what information teachers can learn from students' PLPs. The last two asks students about the possibility of continuing this requirement for the next term and for other subjects.

Because the students of this course used computer rooms during the semester, it did not take too much time to complete the questionnaire; hence, the response rate is quite high with one hundred percent of them accomplishing all their answers.

The data was then automatically collected and presented in the form of pie-charts and tables by Google docs.

The author also interviewed the two teachers of this subject some questions about the frequency of their students' making PLPs and what they learn from the plans when checking them in class.

## 5.5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data revealed from the questions of how many PLPs the students wrote, how much time it took them and whether students of other courses should also be put in the same act of making PLPs or not shows their very positive attitudes towards this change. For a 15-week course, 85% of the respondents reported they had made more than thirteen PLPs, which means they had one PLP almost every week. Additionally, 90% of them stated that it did not take too much of their time to write PLPs. More importantly, 100% of them claimed that writing PLPs should be compulsory for other English subjects including Oral and Written Proficiency at TSFL. These pieces of information bring out a clear-cut confirmation that the change of requiring students to decide their own PLPs is a good thing to do.

In terms of the question what advantages/benefits the students find in making PLPs for themselves, they mentioned all of the plus-point features such as it improves their vocabulary, it improves their listening skills, it helps them practice English with motivation as they can choose what they listen to, they can learn at their own pace and level, it helps them know more sources for English learning. However, the most significant number with the most votes (40%) from the students is making PLPs develops their learner autonomy. The author believes that this response from them proves the most beneficial aspect of students' writing PLPs for their learning. As what was discussed in the previous parts, when students find their responsibility in both creating and accomplishing their own plan, they will become independent learners who can learn fast and efficiently in the long run.

Questions about if the topics in class satisfy students' interests and what suggestions they have for topic areas to be chosen by their teachers shows important information for lecturers in charge of this subject. 50% of the respondents claimed that they were attracted by the topics they practice in class; the rest of them did not. This figure raises the issue teachers have long taken for granted, which is they do not have any students' need analysis before they start teaching; moreover, the materials selection comes from their own preference, from what they think will be of interests, but the fact is it addresses only half of them. The other important half is missing; hence, students' level of motivation during class time is not stable. There will be cases when students do the tasks just because they are asked to do so, not because they feel the need to investigate and complete it. When answering the question of what topics their teachers should include in their teaching, a long list of suggestions was recommended ranging from films, music, entertainment, education, environment, health, sports, to politics, economy, and medicine – the category which require both the language skills and the knowledge of the field. This shows that even though learning is about something academic, teachers should prepare a variety of listening inputs of different topic areas to better satisfy their students' needs. Especially, one notable point in the students' recommendation is having films in class for them to practice. It will be a wonderful method if teachers can choose good films, which include attractive and meaningful plots, as the language there is authentic; it is something the native speakers use in their everyday life. Opportunities to minimize "bookish" language and learn with high motivation are of great importance for the beneficiaries.

All in all, the two questions proposed at the beginning of the study were well addressed. The study results offered positive answers to them. Specifically, by having students make PLPs, learning autonomy was significantly promoted. They are more independent and active in completing their learning tasks and study with motivation. Additionally, teachers have a better information channel about what else to include in their teaching.

## 6 CONCLUSION

In short, as the importance of enhancing students' learning autonomy is obvious, they should be encouraged and required to make PLPs as one of their weekly learning activities. When teachers well control this, students will perform better as they know what they have to do and what support they need. It will also be easier for teachers to follow their students' progress thanks to the evidence shown in their results. For a wider influence, PLPs should not be used for one subject only; instead, teachers can group subjects that are close to each other like the ones in productive and perceptive skills to help them select tasks in which the language they learn is recycled for longer remembrance and application.

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