

# HOW MALL HELPS MAJORED STUDENTS PROMOTE THEIR LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH OUT-OF CLASS ACTIVITIES AT VĂN LANG UNIVERSITY

<sup>1</sup>Trần Thị Ngọc Linh , <sup>2</sup>Trương Bạch Lê , <sup>3</sup> Đặng Tấn Tín

**ABSTRACT**--The rapid development of high technologies has brought EFL/ ESL teachers all over the world a lot of opportunities to experience new devices and applications which help educators or trainers improve their old existing teaching methodologies (Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method, Audio-Lingual or Total Physical Response) and construct suitable ways such as using MALL because “The future is increasingly mobile, and it behoves us to reflect this in our teaching practice” as noted by Hockly (2013), known as a move approach to help both EFL/ ESL teachers and learners achieve benefits with positive reactions in their language practices that have been largely recorded for ages. This research paper, therefore, aims at presenting how MALL can help students to develop their learner autonomy at Van Lang University in Vietnam. The study was conducted within ten weeks with the participation of ninety-seven English majors in two academic classes at the pre-intermediate level. The data was collected with means of questionnaire, observation, interviews, and students’ learning diaries. The findings indicated that the assistance of mobile devices associated with the platform “Google-classroom” known as a social networking learning management system engaged both social interaction and collaboration of students closely for outside class activities, and also depicted that their learner autonomy was significantly improved with amazing results including the awareness of students towards English practices outside the class increasingly, students’ readiness towards giving their feedback or reflection to the work of their classmates after class positively, the development of EFL learners’ confidence clearly, and so on. Nevertheless, some external and internal issues need to be examined carefully for better future research such as the lack of students’ technical expertise, learners’ different language learning styles, the lack of learners’ motivation, limited internet connection, costs for internet use, and the limitation of students’ communicative or collaborative skills. Tran Thi Ngoc Linh has been teaching English for tertiary students with more than 15 years. Her lectures include English for Tourism, English for Hospitality, English for Translation and Interpretation, English for Business Administration, English for Marketing, English for Teaching Methodology, Academic Skills, and Basic Skills in English. She has mostly worked for universities in the South of Vietnam such as School of Hospitality Management (VATC), HUTECH University, BinhDuong University, HCMC University of Pedagogy, HongBang International University, and VanLang University. She has already graduated her MA degree in TESOL from Victoria University of Australia and an MBA degree from Open University of Malaysia. She has also been conducting her PhD study in TESOL at Hue University of Foreign Languages, Hue University, Vietnam. Her current research interests include areas of MALL, Learner autonomy, and ELT.

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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D Student- Văn Lang University, tranthingoclinh@vanlanguni.edu.vn

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D- University of Foreign Languages, Hue University

<sup>3</sup> Ph.D - HCMC University of Technology and Education

**KEY WORDS--** *MALL, learner autonomy, out-of class activities*

## **I. INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY**

A lot of research studies have shown that Vietnamese learners have been gotten familiar with learning linguistic forms and structures rather than English communication for many decades in which students are often asked to repeat and translate these rules into Vietnamese (known as L1) that can prevent them from being critical language learners independently. Furthermore, the qualified teachers at tertiary levels play important roles to EFL learners in foreign language acquisition which can be a challenging problem to them because most lecturers at higher educational institutions have to teach more extra hours with big classes and this may limit the quality of their English teaching methodologies in Vietnam. As a result, these foreign language learners have less time to practise English in class and they also have fewer chances to interact with their partners outside the classroom. And as Hoang (2008a) stated that a good language learning environment for communication in English can be rarely found at tertiary levels in Vietnam. However, there is a close link between learner autonomy and technology in language learning in which technology is proved as a tool to promote language learners towards reaching their educational goals. According to Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler (2005), technology not only provides its huge benefits to learners' language learning activities such as getting immediate support by accessing online resources, but it also brings learners greater opportunities for interaction and cooperation which can happen in both formal and informal situations. The technology in this study is the application of Googleclassroom, known as a social networking learning management system to engage both social interaction and collaboration of students closely for out-of class activities which can help learners develop their learner autonomy in the process of foreign language acquisition. And good language learners have been found to be autonomous and willing to take responsibility for their own language learning; therefore most Vietnamese teachers in recent years have tried to instruct and promote the communicative competence of students in language learning exercises outside the classroom positively. Benson (2011) revealed that much richer appreciation of learning roles outside the classroom will occur which is seen as learners' spending and managing time on studying, learners' practice of using the language in and out-of-school contexts, teachers' guidance and assessment, and also their reflection which may help students become more autonomous in the community of practice by engaging their responsibility for their own learning. MALL is the most suitable way in this case to increase much-needed outside class practice opportunities and offers various learning resources which can connect learners closer to their community of English learning practice and for their future that is closer to the world.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***MALL***

Thanks to the quick advance of modern technology and internet connection, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) in education is known as an effective language learning and teaching approach in which mobile devices (including smart phones or mobile phones), iPods, tablet PCs, hand-held computers, PDAs, MP3 players) are applied into supporting and integarting language skills. According to Pachler, Bachmair & Cook (2010, p. 6),

they defined MALL as “the process of coming to know and being able to operate successfully in, and across, new and ever changing contexts and learning spaces with an emphasis on understanding and knowing how to utilize our everyday life-worlds as learning spaces.” Ogata & Yano (2005) also illustrated five features of MALL that need to be carefully considered as accessibility, interactivity, immediacy, permanency, situating of instructional activities. As Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) pointed out that what has made MALL (Mobile-Assisted Language Learning) different from CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) is its use of personal and portable devices which can create new language learning methods to emphasize the spontaneity of access and interaction for different using contexts. And it is obviously necessary for educators and language trainers to understand how to use mobile technology for developing effective language teaching methods, stated by Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008). Ally (2009) also said that MALL allows learners to get access to numerous desired learning materials from both the internet and their teachers easily which can help their communication and interaction better, specifically the application of MALL in education can facilitate learners in collaborating with other people at anytime and anywhere which was demonstrated by Huang, Hwang, & Chang (2010).

***Learner autonomy***

In terms of language learning and teaching activities, most learners’ goals aim at achieving their language proficiency; hence, they should be responsive to the class tasks and take more control over their own learning. According to Holec (1981), he defined that the essence of learner autonomy is known as the ability to take charge of one’s own learning by natural means or formal learning like in a systematic or deliberate way. In order to take charge of a person’s own language learning, there are some aspects which need to be examined such as the selection of suitable learning method, learning objectives, learning contents or techniques. In terms of autonomous language learning activity in education, there are four modalities as location, formality, pedagogy, and locus of control that were mentioned and summarized by Benson (2011) as follows:

**Table 1:** Learner autonomy

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Opposition</b>	<b>Details</b>
Location	In and out-of class	Physical settings for learning/ the context that the learning occurs
Formality	Formal and informal	The degree in which the learning is organized and leaded to educational qualifications
Pedagogy	Instructed-and non-instructed guidance	The type of instruction
Locus of control	Self-directed or other directed	Who makes decisions about the learning (autonomous/ independent/ self-regulated)

These four dimensions provide clear understandings of the contexts that language learning activities will take place, including how learners will carry out their learning activities that can happen in or out of the class with/without aided help, who will manage and make learning decisions to be independent or autonomous in the class tasks. In addition, with the help of technology development, it also creates more interactive and collaborative

learning environments. The impact of technology in learner autonomy has changed our understandings more broadly as the roles of learners and teachers with higher levels of their engagement. As Benson (2007) noted, in order to foster learner autonomy in language education, teachers should play their roles as counsellors or facilitators associated with the technical help to create greater autonomous learning contexts where learners will be supported to become more active in their learning activities.

### ***MALL and LearnerAutonomy***

In the study of Wankel & Blessinger (2013, p. 103), it showed that students recognize their mobile devices as integral to their lives which encourage them to bring in and use those devices in novel ways that can increase motivation". It also indicated that the use of mobile technology can give students voice which enables a sense of community, increases their participation and motivation. This leads to the development of learning and its improvement for students involved (2013, p. 104). Kolbuszewska (2015) also mentioned that the portability of mobile devices can help to enable learners to carry materials around with them on their mobile phones and there is a large number of publishers increasingly that can provide large portions of their materials online rather than printed ones and a new learning world through MALL will obviously occur. With the widespread ownership of mobile devices like handheld ones such as smart phones or iPads, it can allow learners to get their involvement in language learning activities or language learning skills which they are interested in and for what they need (personal demands). However, Trinder (2017) stated that there has been a lack of attention given in language research studies to know how learners choose to use mobile devices for their language learning, how useful MALL is in doing writing activities with a small screen. Ardi (2017) noted that one among studies depicted that interaction, communication, and participation were improved through the way that people used with the assistance of mobile devices. In addition, Viberg & Gronlund (2012) also confirmed that language learners found learning through MALL to have more fun and be highly motivated. In addition, many other studies have clearly mentioned that there have been much more attention to the use of MALL done for out-of the class exercises. As Pereira (2015) stated, MALL is predominately used in four ways in which it is used to deliver immediate content through videos from YouTube, to help learners revise old language lessons through playing games such as Kahoot, to help language students create their own favorite learning contents, to share and collaborate for their classwork language learning activities. It can clearly be understood that MALL has been potentially used to help and provide a huge essential input, and to enhance the motivation of language learners with higher levels of their involvement, to create more active learning opportunities for their language acquisition with the movement from teacher led instruction to learner-centred methodology. Also, Kukulska-Hulme & Shield (2008) stated that MALL can help to break the walls of classroom and allow language learners to move between formal and informal contexts, inside class and out-of class at anytime or anywhere which can satisfy their learning needs to be more autonomous learners.

### ***Out-of class learning activities***

Naismith, Sharples, Vavoula, & Lonsdale (2004) depicted that the great impact of MALL on learning can lead language learning activities to move more and more outside of the classroom and into learner's real and virtual environments. As Kukulska-Hulme (2009) depicted, mobile learning technology is more useful for doing activities outside the classroom and such activities enable learning to be more directly connected with the real world

experiments. Moreover, learning through mobile phones outside the classroom has the advantage of better exploiting the learner's free time; even the students on the move can improve their learning skills. A numerous research about learner autonomy and the benefits of applying technology with new tools and choice that are available in the hands of learners, conducted by researchers and educators around the world for years, that has brought significant improvements in language education and in the contexts of their lives, namely learner's psychology as their attitudes or behaviors towards language learning autonomy. And one of the most important targets of language educators is to raise learners' awareness to enable them to be more interested in their language learning activities outside the classroom that can guarantee learners with greater accomplishments and which can lead or contribute to gain further development of their autonomy. For promoting language learning and teaching activities, especially for informal contexts or out-of-class activities, not only topics such as the lives or experiences of learners in choosing materials to study and how learners design their own language learning process, but also helping students to be aware of being responsible for their own decisions in terms of their language learning objectives, contents, and methodologies, stated by Benson (2013). It is clearly that the term 'out-of-class learning' has recently been used in the literature of autonomy and known as a new area and somewhat narrow, which refers to the efforts of learners taking classroom-based language courses to find chances for learning and using the language outside the classroom that were mentioned by Hyland, M. Lamb, and Pearson (2004). In some language research studies, findings have revealed that students tend to have more their engagement in out-of-class learning activities more frequently than their teachers have known before and also pointed out that considerable creativity in situations in which out-of-class learning activities seem to be limited.

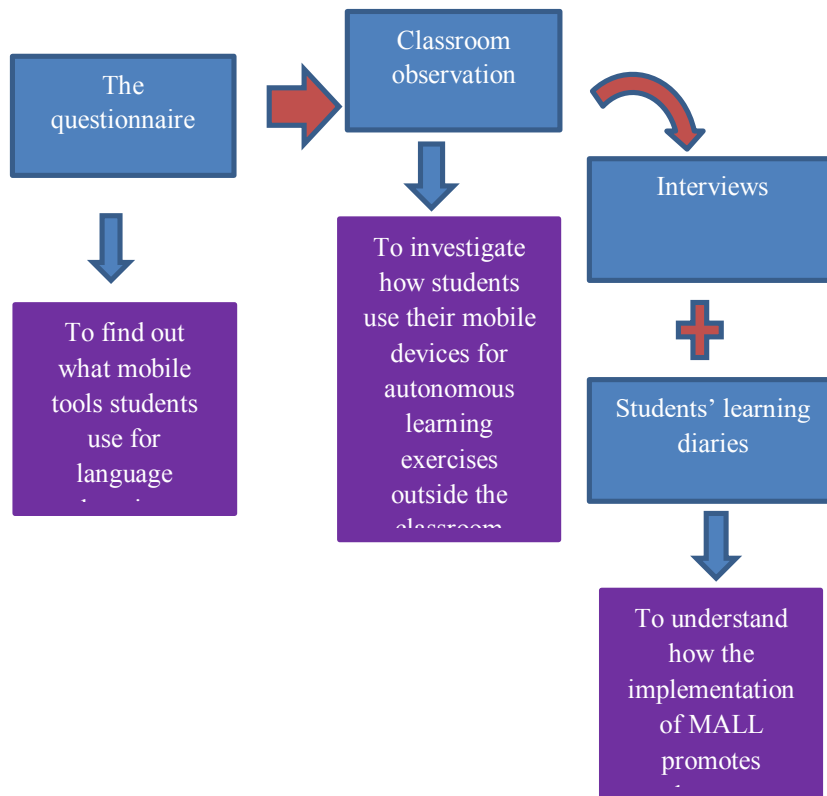
### **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Research setting and participants:***

The research study set on its locus of the natural language learning context at the faculty of foreign languages at Văn Lang University in district 1, HCMC, in Vietnam. The study was carried out in ten weeks in which each majored student ought to take part in their classes from 3 to 4 periods weekly depending on the subjects that they have registered before, namely basic skills as listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills at the pre-intermediate levels for the first two years of their study at Van Lang university. The participants involved in this research were ninety-seven English majors in two academic reading classes with both genders (male and female) at the pre-intermediate level. Their age ranged between 19 and 22 or more. Most of participants varied in their background knowledge in learning English as a foreign language because they are from distinguished provinces such as Long An, Tien Giang, Vung Tau, Bac Lieu, Ca Mau, Daklak, etc., in Vietnam. In regarding to the involvement of students in out-of class activities, they had to develop their learner autonomy as a community of English learning practice through interacting and collaborating with their partners/classmates associated with the careful guidance of the teacher at the beginning of the first week of their semester to make everything done as scheduled. The participants were also announced that they would answer the questionnaire as requested and some of them would be randomly interviewed to help the researcher get deeper understandings about their autonomous learning experiences through the social networking learning management system, known as Googleclassroom. All of these participants were firstly asked to download this platform back to their mobile devices and then use their personal

emails to get access on the platform “Googleclassroom” as the role of learners or students with a secret pass-code given to every single class by the teacher.

### *Data collection instruments*



**Figure 1:** The research methodology process

### *Mixed methods*

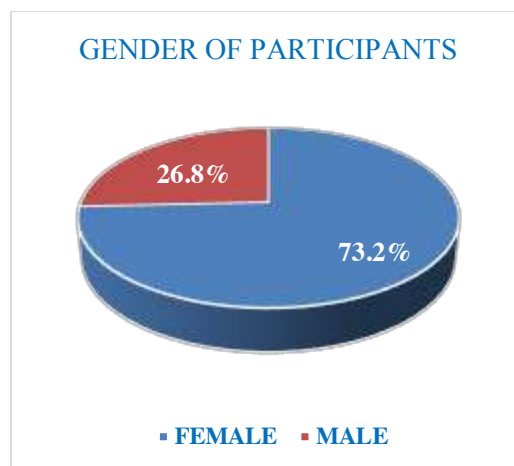
Mixed-method research is the combination of using both quantitative and qualitative methods in the same study, especially it has been a popular research method for ages in some various fields such as sociology, psychology, education and health sciences. For overall purpose, this mixed method aims at providing a better understanding of research problems and complex phenomena than either approach alone, stated by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007). They also revealed that mixed- methods help to answer some different research questions which cannot be done by quantitative or qualitative method and this can also lead to satisfy the study objectives as well. Therefore, the researcher decided to apply this mixed method approach in this study to balance the inherent weaknesses of a single method with the other ones’ strengths so as to enable the analysis of complex issues which can lead to acceptable findings by a large number of readers in this research (see Figure 1 above), including the questionnaire delivered to students in the first week of the school’s semester to get learners’ answers about what their mobile devices are used for language learning activities, in which there were 82 of 97 questionnaire responses approved. In addition, the researcher’s colleague was invited to observe these two academic reading classes to ensure the reliability and validity for the research findings about how these majored students accomplish their

autonomous learning exercises outside the classroom through their use of such devices while interacting and collaborating with partners on Googleclassroom as requested. For the next step of collecting the data, 5 of 82 students were randomly invited to the in-depth interview on the tenth week in the same semester in order to help the researcher understand more about how the interviewees reflect their views on out-of class learning experiences, mainly focused on how students carry out their autonomous learning exercises after their classes, what outside classroom activities engage and promote their learner autonomy positively, and what limits the development of learner autonomy when students collaborate with their classmates in the community of English practice on the Googleclassroom platform with plentiful English learning resources such as uploaded lessons in terms of power point slides associated with a lot of extra exercises or sample reading tests that have been carefully designed to help majored students take their ownership of their own learning so as to be autonomous learners.

#### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

##### *Stage 1: The questionnaire*

There were 5 of 27 questions mainly used and analysed for this research paper. The first two questions collected to get the demographic data such as students' age and gender as mentioned in the below chart (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Percentage of male and female participants' involvement in the research

As shown in Figure 2, there were 60 female and 22 male students' participation (82/97 accepted responses), accounted for 73.2% and 26.8% with their ages ranged from nineteen to twenty two years old or above, that would be promising as young and potential subjects for this research, and it also aimed at finding out whether different genders influence students' frequent use of MALL for out-of class activities for their learner autonomy development.

The next two surveyed questions focused on details such as what their goals for learning English language in Figure 3 and what their English language learning tools are for doing autonomous learning activities in Figure 4. Undoubtedly, all of these majors said they learn English because it is a compulsory subject at their schools, took 100% (N82) and only 7.3% (N6) answered that they learn it because of their likes whereas 79.2% (N65) revealed that learning English is one of their goals for finding better jobs in the future (depicted in Figure 3). This could be a promising information for further research due to their completely grown awareness. And as they all are majors

in English with such mature thoughts, this could motivate the teacher find more suitable solutions like promoting various autonomous English learning activities after the class through their phones due to the fact that 86.5% (N71) said they often use their phones for their learner autonomy while 37.8% (N31) was done on laptops/computers and 8.5% (N7) on Ipads respectively (mentioned in Figure 4).

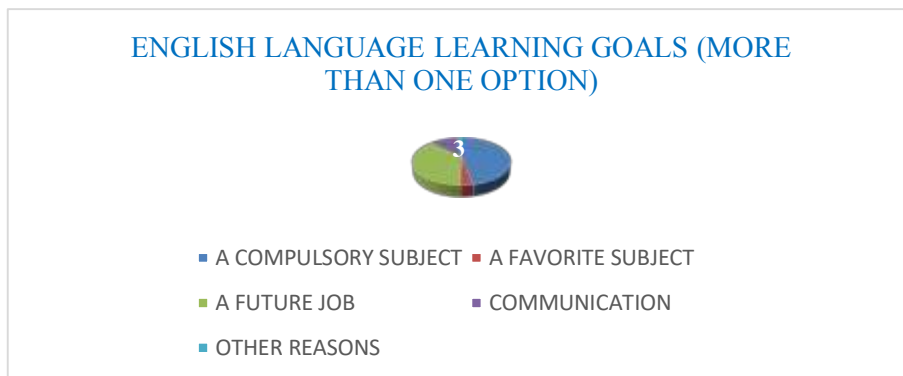


Figure 3: Students' English learning goals

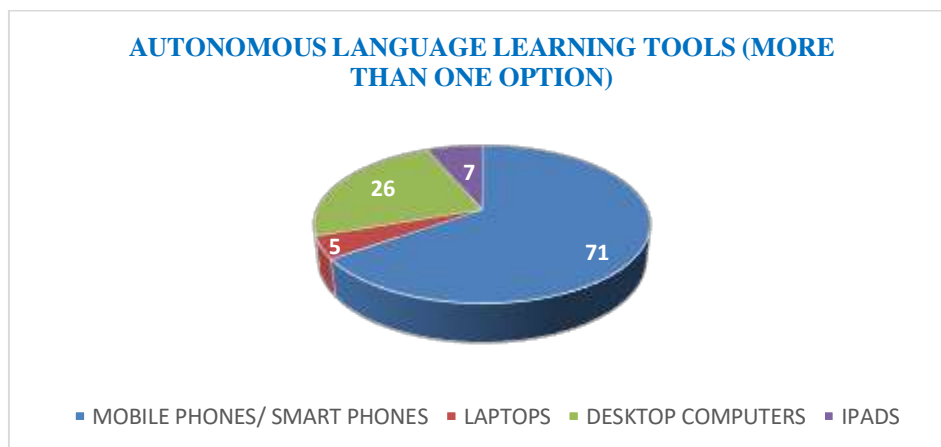
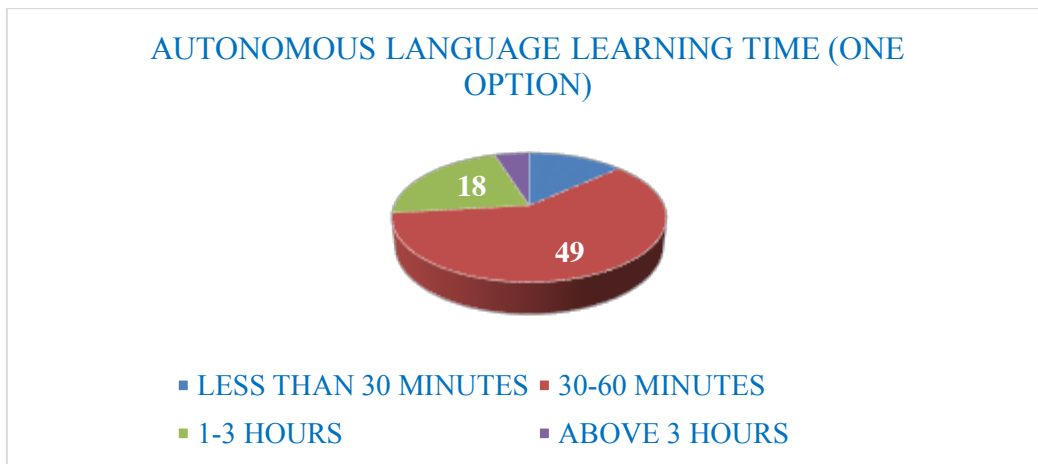


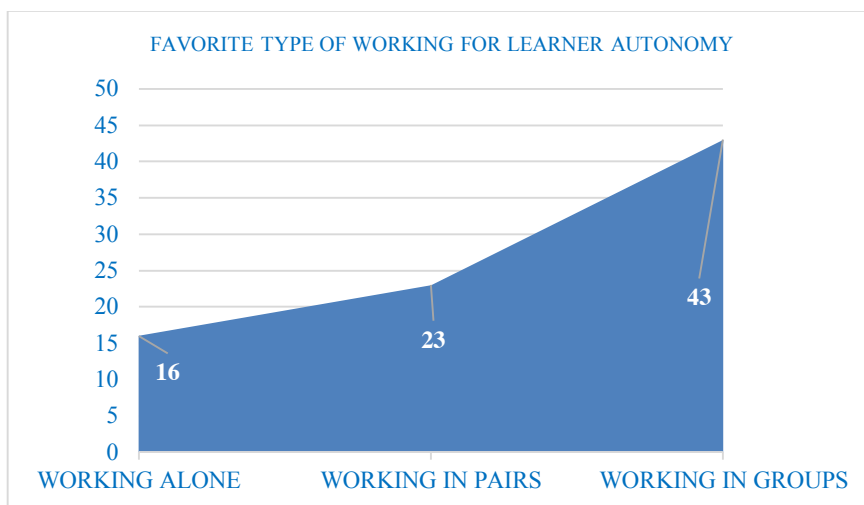
Figure 4: Autonomous language learning tools (more than one option can be chosen)

It is clearly seen in Figure 5 that the majority of students who consume their autonomous learning time occupied 59.7% (N49) from 30 to 60 minutes and 21.9% (N18) from 1 to 3 hours respectively whereas 4.87% (N4) for above 3 hours and 13.4% (N11) for less than 30 minutes daily. Also when looking at the Figure 6 below, it can be understood that the large population prefers working with partners in groups for English majors' language learning autonomy. Hence, this could be an extra interesting and potential information for the researcher to develop their learner autonomy through group-work activities after the class in the next step of the study.





**Figure 5:** Daily autonomous language learning time (one option)



**Figure 6:** Favorite type of working for learner autonomy(one option)

In conclusion, basing on the beyond amazing surveyed results of the first stage, it is highly important to help majored students reach their English language learning goals in the journey of rising their awareness of learner autonomy by giving them appropriate advice when necessary, asking them to manage their time suitably, guiding them detailedly on how to use their mobile phones for the continuous weeks of the semester to complete the class tasks or other autonomous English language learning exercises when working with their classmates outside the class on the Googleclassroom platform.

***Stage 2: Classroom observation from the researcher’s colleague on how students use their phones for accomplishing out-of class exercises on Googleclassroom***

The teacher played her role as the researcher, so she asked her colleague for the class observation. And as usual in the first week of the school’s semester, she would normally upload all lessons on Google classroom to help majored students who are absent, to be more active and autonomous in their English language learning progress. She also divided these students into groups and delivered some more new reading exercises or sample reading tests with deadlines to them which aimed at checking their knowledge and creating learners more opportunities to practice and develop their learner autonomy outside the classroom. In case of forgetting their mission (class/ group tasks), automatic messages would be sent to their personal emails.



The screenshot displays a chat interface with a header containing the text "Hướng dẫn" and "Bài tập của học viên". The chat is organized into three columns. The left column shows messages from "linh tran" and "Vân Trương" regarding homework instructions and a list of names (Bảo Trân, Hồng Phấn, Bích Vân, Minh Quân). The middle column shows messages from "Vân Trương" and "Bảo Trân" providing answers and details for various questions. The right column shows messages from "Vân Trương" and "Bảo Trân" providing detailed feedback on student responses, including main ideas and keywords. The chat messages include dates and specific details about the questions and answers.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, these majored students might feel annoyed of being reminded by automatic emails if they forget accomplishing their mission or handling their exercises done to the teacher as mentioned in the below image.



**Stage 3: Interviews**

There were 5 of 82 students randomly invited to the in-depth interview on the tenth week of the school’s semester so as to help the researcher get more understandings about how the interviewees reflect their feedback on or give their views to each individual’s out-of class learning experiences, mainly focused on how students carry out such autonomous learning exercises after their classes, what outside classroom activities engage and promote their learner autonomy positively, and what limits the development of their learner autonomy.

When looking at the first interview question about students’ evaluation towards the teacher’s guidance, it is clearly that most of respondents could identify the important role of giving the detailed instruction by the teacher towards their outside autonomous language learning activities, which took up 100 % of the total feedback while 40 % of the participants could not if they did not receive any guidance from the teacher.

**Table 2:** receive any guidance from the teacher.

	RESPONDENT	PERCENTAGE
<b>Students’ evaluation towards the teacher’s guidance for autonomous language learning exercises outside the class on Googleclassroom through mobile phones</b>		
1. Identifying the importance of autonomous language learning activities outside the class through mobile phones with the teacher’s guidance	5	100%
2. identifying the importance of autonomous language learning activities outside the class through mobile phones without the teacher’s guidance	2	40%

For the second interview question “How Googleclassroom is useful for students’ learner autonomy development”, the majority of majored students (N5) said that they felt satisfied with the reading skill results they gained through collaborating and working with their classmates whereas 60% (N3) answered this platform associated with their mobile phones in this research study helps to create a better interactive English learning environment, especially to those who often feel shy or unconfident. In addition, with the same percentage (60%) the data showed that students could experience/learn new things from friends with highly promoted teamwork spirits such as their positive attitudes, conscious awareneses, and good behaviors whereas 80% (N4) of the population revealed that their autonomous English learning time management was also better compared to that they could not before, which were depicted below.

**Table 3:** platform Googleclassroom for finishing autonomous language

<b>Students’ reflection towards using mobile phones for the development of learner autonomy through the platform Googleclassroom for finishing autonomous language learning activities outside the classroom</b>		
<b>Potentials</b>		
1. Googleclassroom is a good platform where learners can interact and collaborate with classmates/ partners so as to complete various autonomous learning activities outside the classroom because students are highly motivated by the teacher/ group members.	5	100%
2. Googleclassroom can help to create a better interaction and collaboration between learners and learners for the development of their learner autonomy when trying to complete outside class exercises as requested.	3	60%
3. Experience and learn new or meaningful things from their classmates while collaborating/ interacting	3	60%
4. Manage autonomous English learning time outside the classroom better through Googleclassroom (highly self-determined)	4	80 %

**Students’ reflection towards using mobile phones for the development of learner autonomy on Googleclassroom for finishing autonomous language learning activities outside the classroom**

<b>Challenges</b>		
1. Being bored due to the lack of technical expertise (typing skills or document editing capabilities).	2	40 %
2. Being unconfident/ uncomfortable while interacting and collaborating online with friends in English because they just wanted to interact with their old friends or their favorite friends.	4	80 %
3. Feeling annoyed because of automatic messages from the platform system if they forget completing the exercises as transferred.	2	40%
4. An internal conflict may happen among learners while interacting and collaborating because of learners' different background and knowledge.	4	80%
5. Finding hard to manage their time for autonomous learning activities on mobile phones after the class because of playing games, chatting, and other things.	2	40%
6. Feeling bored because of limited internet connection.	2	40%

However, during the process of applying mobile phones for developing majored students' learner autonomy outside their classes, there have been some challenges that could not be denied. There was 40% of the total said they were bored due to their lack of technical expertise like typing skills or document editing capabilities whereas 80% revealed that they felt unconfident or uncomfortable while interacting and collaborating online with friends in English because they just wanted to interact with their old friends or their favorite friends, and also internal conflicts might happen among learners while working together because of learner' different background and knowledge, which were surprising research findings to the researcher. Undoubtedly, being annoyed by the automatic messages from the platform system, limited internet connection, and hardly managing their time for autonomous learning activities on mobile phones after the class because of playing games, chatting, and other things which shared the same percentage of 40% in the total (N2).

## **V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY**

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning has its own benefits and drawbacks conclusively. In this research study, the findings revealed that majored-students' English proficiency was related to their learner autonomy in which the more autonomous students become, the more likely they achieve higher language proficiency when giving

them more responsibilities such as their reflection to the work of their classmates with positive attitudes, the awareness of students towards English practices outside the class increasingly, the readiness of students' in and out-of class participation positively with the development of EFL learners' confidence clearly. Also with the support of the platform Googleclassroom, it provides new learning experiences and opportunities to majored students such as engaging learners in interacting and collaborating with group members for the community of English learning practice. In other words, it is social participation while learning because they can construct their knowing or understanding of language knowledge in which learners express their views on how their learning changes who they are at anytime and anywhere. However, this research study cannot avoid some challenges and limitations occurred from several factors of their phones such as limited storage, small keyboard, and limited screen size which can cause learners' viewing difficultites or eyestrain. In addition, other factors from the learners may hinder the implementation of MALL to promote their learner autonomy as the lack of confidence, lack of background knowledge, limitation of technical expertise, or time management for autonomous learning activities outside the classroom beacuse of playing games or chatting with friends.

Hence, learners need to be instructed or trained to use their mobile devices effectively for autonomous language learning exercises, especially for outside class activities. For the future research, language teachers and educators should consider learners' different language learning styles with various features of MALL such as connectivity, social interactivity, individuality, and the compatibility of the required applications carefully to ensure that MALL can be used as effective learning and teaching tools in order to promote learner autonomy for positive outcomes in language practice.

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