



The Relationship between Teacher Support and First-Year EFL Students' Attitudes toward Autonomous Learning: Evidence from a Vietnamese University

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ABSTRACT: Learner autonomy is widely regarded as a central goal of foreign language education, yet first-year students in Vietnamese higher education frequently enter university with strong habits of teacher dependency formed during exam-oriented secondary schooling. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory, this article examined the relationship between perceived teacher support and attitudes toward autonomous learning among first-year English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City (IUH). Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from 202 first-year students through a questionnaire measuring three dimensions of attitude (cognitive, affective, behavioral) and three dimensions of teacher support (autonomy support, structure, involvement), followed by semi-structured interviews with 10 participants. Results indicated that students held moderately positive attitudes toward autonomous learning and perceived moderate levels of teacher support, with a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between the two constructs ($r = .766$, $p < .001$). Teacher support correlated most strongly with behavioral attitudes ($r = .598$), followed by affective ($r = .565$) and cognitive attitudes ($r = .546$). Qualitative findings converged with the quantitative results, showing that students associated supportive teaching with guided self-discovery rather than direct answers, while consistently identifying the need for more explicit instruction in learning strategies. The findings suggest that teacher support and learner autonomy are complementary rather than opposing forces, and that first-year EFL programs would benefit from embedding explicit strategy instruction within teacher-supportive pedagogy. Implications for EFL pedagogy, teacher training, and future research in non-English-major contexts are discussed.

KEYWORDS: EFL, learner autonomy, self-determination theory, teacher support, Vietnamese higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

Autonomous learning has become an essential component of successful language acquisition in higher education, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context (Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Benson, 2001; Duong & Seepho, 2013; Duong, 2015; Tran & Vo, 2019). Since Holec's (1981) foundational definition of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3), the construct has been theorized from complementary perspectives that together depict autonomy as both a practical ability and a psychological disposition (Littlewood, 1996; Benson, 2001). A recurring insight across this literature is that autonomy does not require the absence of teachers; rather, it develops within, not against, the classroom environment, supported by appropriate instructional scaffolding (Benson, 1997; Tilfarlioglu & Ciftci, 2011; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

This insight is consistent with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which proposes that learners' motivation and self-directed behavior depend on the extent to which their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are satisfied within the learning environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). From an SDT perspective, teacher support comprising autonomy-supportive practice, structural guidance and emotional involvement is not antithetical to learner autonomy but is instead a condition that enables it (Skinner et al., 2008; Reeve, 2006; Reeve & Jang, 2006). Nevertheless, in Vietnam and other EFL contexts where teacher-centered instruction still dominates, learner autonomy remains comparatively under-emphasized in classroom practice (Duong, 2015; Tran & Nguyen, 2017; Roe & Perkins, 2020).

The tension between teacher-centered secondary schooling and the autonomy-oriented expectations of university study is especially acute for first-year students. Many Vietnamese students enter tertiary education accustomed to a teacher-centered model that presumes passive learning and are more used to being provided with knowledge than to constructing it themselves (Nguyen, 2014; Duong, 2015; Tran & Nguyen, 2017). Because these students rarely practice self-regulation in secondary school, the relationship between the support they perceive from their university teachers and their attitudes toward autonomous learning



becomes a decisive factor in their transition to independent study. This transition is not merely logistical but psychological. As Self-Determination Theory suggests that students who experience their new learning environment as controlling rather than autonomy-supportive may respond by retreating further into dependency, whereas students who experience it as supportive may be more willing to risk the uncertainty of independent effort (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

At the Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City (IUH), English is a compulsory subject for first-year students across all disciplines, and the curriculum explicitly aims to promote active, learner-centered engagement. However, there is limited empirical evidence on how these students, most of whom are non-English majors, perceive autonomous learning, the extent to which they experience their teachers as autonomy-supportive, and how these two constructs relate to one another. Prior Vietnamese research has tended either to examine learner autonomy and teacher roles separately, or to focus on other influencing variables such as motivation and prior learning experience (Duong & Seepho, 2013; Tran & Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2024; Tran & Vuong, 2022), leaving the direct relationship between perceived teacher support and autonomous learning attitudes comparatively unexplored, particularly among non-English-major populations who constitute the majority of English learners in Vietnamese technical universities but who have received far less research attention than English majors (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022).

This article addresses that gap by investigating the relationship between perceived teacher support and first-year EFL students' attitudes toward autonomous learning at IUH. Specifically, the article pursues three objectives: (a) to identify first-year EFL students' attitudes toward autonomous learning; (b) to examine their perceptions of teacher support for autonomous learning; and (c) to determine the relationship between the two constructs. These objectives are addressed through three research questions: (1) What are first-year EFL students' attitudes toward autonomous learning? (2) How do first-year EFL students perceive teacher support for autonomous learning? (3) Is there a relationship between perceived teacher support and students' attitudes toward autonomous learning?

Addressing these questions is timely for at least two reasons. First, Vietnamese higher education policy has, over the past decade, increasingly emphasized learner-centered pedagogy and lifelong-learning competencies as explicit curricular goals, yet the day-to-day reality of English instruction at many institutions, including technical universities where English functions as a compulsory general-education subject rather than a specialized major, often continues to rely on teacher-centered delivery shaped by large class sizes, standardized testing and limited class contact hours. Understanding how students in this specific institutional environment perceive teacher support and how that perception relates to their attitudes toward autonomy offers a concrete empirical basis for evaluating whether policy aspirations toward learner-centeredness are being realized in practice. Second, because first-year students are, by definition, at the earliest and most formative stage of their university language learning trajectory, their attitudes at this stage may disproportionately shape their subsequent engagement with self-directed learning throughout their degree program. A clearer understanding of what kind of teacher support is associated with positive autonomous-learning attitudes at this stage therefore has outsized practical value for EFL curriculum design.

The article contributes to the literature in three ways. Theoretically, it extends the application of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to a population of first-year, non-English-major students at IUH that has received comparatively little attention relative to English-major populations. Methodologically, it combines a validated questionnaire with semi-structured interviews in an explanatory sequential design, allowing the quantitative relationship between teacher support and attitudes to be interpreted in light of students' own accounts of their classroom experience. Practically, the findings are intended to inform EFL instructors, curriculum designers and teacher-training programs seeking to balance guidance with the gradual cultivation of learner independence during a formative transition period. The remainder of this article reviews the relevant theoretical and empirical literature, describes the study's mixed-methods design, reports the quantitative and qualitative findings in relation to each research question and discusses their implications for EFL pedagogy and future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy has long been recognized as a central goal of language education (Benson, 2001; Waterhouse, 1990). Despite broad agreement on its importance, scholars have approached the concept from different angles that are complementary rather than contradictory. Holec's (1981) widely cited definition frames autonomy as a practical ability that enables learners to set goals, select strategies and evaluate their own progress. Littlewood (1996) extended this view by emphasizing a psychological



dimension, “learners’ ability and willingness to make choices independently” (p. 427), highlighting that autonomy requires not only skill but also dispositional readiness. Benson (2001), whose work has most systematically theorized autonomy in language education, further conceptualized it as control over three interconnected dimensions such as cognitive learning processes, management of the learning experience and the content of learning itself. Together, these perspectives suggest that autonomous learners are not simply self-organized but also self-directed in terms of both what and how they learn.

A recurring clarification in this literature concerns what autonomy is not. Benson (1997) cautions against equating autonomy with learning in isolation or without institutional support. Autonomy is a psychological capacity exercised within, and supported by, a social or classroom context. Tilfarlioglu and Ciftci (2011) similarly define autonomous learners as those able to organize, regulate and sustain their own learning without requiring the withdrawal of institutional support. This distinction is particularly salient in EFL contexts, where learner autonomy must develop within, rather than against, the classroom environment, supported by appropriate instructional scaffolding and teacher guidance (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). For the purposes of the present study, learner autonomy is defined as the capacity and willingness of EFL students to take responsibility for planning, monitoring and evaluating their own language learning, encompassing both independent decision-making and self-regulated engagement with the learning process.

This conception of autonomy as a socially situated, gradually developed capacity is particularly relevant to the population examined in the article. First-year Vietnamese university students typically arrive from a secondary-school system that emphasizes examination preparation, memorization and teacher-directed instruction, with comparatively few structured opportunities to practice independent goal-setting or self-assessment. Rather than treating this prior conditioning as an obstacle to be overcome by simply removing teacher guidance, the theoretical position adopted in this study consistent with Benson (1997) and Richards and Rodgers (2014) treats the teacher-supported classroom as the very environment in which autonomy is most plausibly cultivated during this transitional period, making the relationship between teacher support and student attitudes toward autonomy not merely of theoretical interest but of direct pedagogical consequence.

2.2. Attitudes toward autonomous learning

Attitude is a well-established predictor of learning behavior and academic performance (Bohner & Wänke, 2002; Latchanna & Dagnew, 2009). Eagly and Chaiken (1993) defined attitude as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (p. 1), operationalized through a multicomponent model comprising cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions. The cognitive component reflects learners’ beliefs about the value and effectiveness of autonomous learning. The affective component captures emotional responses such as confidence, interest or anxiety toward self-directed study and the behavioral component reflects learners’ actual willingness to engage in autonomous actions such as goal-setting, resource-seeking, and self-evaluation (Oxford, 2003). These three components are interrelated and jointly determine the overall orientation a learner adopts toward autonomous learning.

Prior research demonstrates that these three dimensions meaningfully shape learning outcomes. Learners’ attitudes influence engagement, effort and achievement (Brown, 2001; Kara, 2009), and attitudes and beliefs are understood as part of the broader mental structures that guide individual action (Richardson, 1996). Motivation, closely intertwined with attitude, functions as one of the central organizing dimensions of learner characteristics alongside cognition and emotion, with learners’ ultimate success depending substantially on their level of motivation (Dörnyei, 2014). Dörnyei (2001) further argues that, through supportive teaching practices, teachers can cultivate positive attitudes and learner autonomy together, since the two are mutually reinforcing rather than independent outcomes of instruction. Ellis (1994) likewise identifies learner attitude as an important variable influencing learning outcomes, and Wenden (1991) notes that learners who doubt their own abilities tend to avoid effort and responsibility, undermining autonomous development. The relationship between attitude and self-belief is particularly salient here because self-esteem and self-confidence have long been recognized as central to sustaining positive learning orientations (Coopersmith, 1967; Leaver et al., 2005). These perspectives suggest that learners who possess stronger self-belief are more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward learning and to approach learning tasks with greater confidence. These findings collectively suggest that positive attitudes toward autonomous learning constitute a necessary psychological foundation for autonomous behavior. Students must believe in the value and feasibility of self-directed learning before they are willing to act on it. In the present study, attitudes toward autonomous learning are operationalized as first-year EFL students’ cognitive evaluations of, affective responses to, and behavioral willingness to engage in self-directed language learning activities.

2.3. Teacher Support

Teacher support refers to students' perceptions of the emotional, cognitive and behavioral care, guidance, and assistance provided by teachers throughout the learning process (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Within learner-centered and autonomy-oriented pedagogy, teacher support is not viewed as contradictory to learner autonomy, but as a foundational condition that enables learners to gradually assume responsibility for their own learning (Little, 1995; Benson, 2011).

Two complementary theoretical traditions inform this construct. From the perspective of SDT, teacher support is conceptualized as the extent to which teachers satisfy students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Skinner et al. (2008) operationalize this into three dimensions such as autonomy support, defined as the teacher's provision of choice, relevance and respect; structure, defined as the clarity of expectations and contingencies; and involvement, defined as warmth, dedication of resources and understanding of the student. Each dimension has been shown to influence students' emotional and motivational outcomes including anxiety, hope and other affective states (Reddy et al., 2003; Skinner et al., 2008; Van Ryzin et al., 2009). This need-based framing is theoretically important because it explains why teacher support and learner autonomy need not be in tension. If learners' sense of autonomy is itself one of the needs that supportive teaching satisfies, then a teacher who is experienced as controlling regardless of how much guidance is objectively provided would be expected to undermine rather than support the development of autonomous attitudes, whereas a teacher who provides an equivalent amount of guidance in an autonomy-supportive manner would be expected to have the opposite effect. From a social-support perspective, teacher support is characterized more broadly as informational, instrumental, emotional, or appraisal support given by a teacher in any environment (Tardy, 1985; Malecki & Demaray, 2002), where informational support concerns advice in a content area, instrumental support concerns resources such as time, emotional support concerns trust and empathy, and appraisal support concerns evaluative feedback (Malecki & Elliott, 1999). A narrower, classroom-specific perspective instead emphasizes help, trust, teacher interest and positive teacher-student relationships as the defining features of support (Fraser, 1998; Aldridge et al., 1999).

Teacher support is further associated with the quality of the teacher-student relationship. Students who perceive care and concern from their teachers tend to reciprocate by adhering to classroom norms and exhibiting more cooperative behavior (Chiu & Chow, 2011; Longobardi et al., 2016), whereas harsh or controlling teacher behavior shouting, blaming, or aggressive discipline is associated with reduced student concern for the teacher and fewer cooperative classroom behaviors (Miller et al., 2000, as cited in Lei et al., 2018). Perceived teacher acknowledgment and understanding are, in turn, linked to students' sense of competence, personal value and sustained motivation (Stroet et al., 2013), consistent with Self-Regulated Learning Theory's emphasis on the environmental scaffolding of proactive engagement, in which teachers support self-regulation by guiding learners in goal-setting, self-monitoring and evaluation of outcomes (Zimmerman, 2002; Trautner & Schwinger, 2020; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Within EFL contexts specifically, teacher support is understood as a key catalyst for autonomy development. Autonomy-supportive teaching, as emphasized by Ryan and Deci (2000), involves nurturing learners' internal motivational resources rather than relying on external control. Autonomy-supportive teachers provide meaningful rationales for tasks, minimize controlling language and encourage initiative, thereby allowing learners to internalize responsibility for their own learning (Reeve, 2006; Reeve & Jang, 2006). Benson (2011) similarly stresses that supporting autonomy requires a gradual transfer of control, whereby teachers progressively allow learners to make independent decisions rather than withdrawing support altogether, a process closely related to Vygotskian scaffolding, in which support is deliberately and gradually withdrawn as learner competence increases (Vygotsky, 1978; van de Pol et al., 2010). Tseng et al. (2006) further categorize teacher support into technical, informational and emotional support, showing that learners who perceive higher levels of such support are more likely to engage in autonomous learning behaviors, a view echoed by Masouleh and Jooneghani (2012), who argue that autonomy is not an inborn capacity but a natural tendency that must be cultivated through expert guidance.

It is worth emphasizing that the SDT and social-support traditions reviewed above, although developed largely independently, converge on a common implication. That is teacher support is multidimensional rather than unitary, and different sub-dimensions of support affective warmth, structural clarity and autonomy-granting behavior may relate differently to different learner outcomes. This multidimensionality motivates the present study's decision to measure teacher support and autonomous-learning attitudes as multicomponent constructs, and to examine the relationship between them not only at the aggregate level but also at the level of theoretically distinct sub-dimensions, since a single overall correlation coefficient could otherwise obscure meaningful differences in how specific facets of teacher support relate to specific facets of student attitude.



2.4. Prior empirical research in the Vietnamese context

Several Vietnamese studies substantiate the persistence of teacher-dependent attitudes among university students despite the growing rhetorical emphasis on learner autonomy. Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) examined learner autonomy readiness among 180 English-major freshmen at IUH using an adapted version of the Learner Autonomy Perception Questionnaire (Nguyen & Habók, 2021) and found generally strong self-awareness and motivation, but also persistent dependency on teachers as explainers and correctors ($M = 4.13$ on the dependency scale). Because their study relied solely on a quantitative approach with English majors, it did not capture the nuanced attitudes, teacher-support perceptions or interrelating factors relevant to the broader, non-English-major student population that is the focus of the article.

Other Vietnamese research corroborates the central role of teacher guidance in shaping autonomous behavior. Phan (2021, 2022) found that self-assessment and project-based work fostered greater autonomy only when supported by explicit teacher guidance, while Pham (2023) similarly found that EFL teachers' practices in a blended learning environment played a decisive role in whether learner autonomy was successfully fostered. Tran and Tran (2024) showed that without pedagogical innovations such as flipped-classroom design, students' autonomous behaviors remained limited, and Tran and Vuong (2022) identified a range of contextual and motivational factors affecting learner autonomy among tertiary EFL learners, underscoring that autonomy development in Vietnam is shaped by an interaction of institutional, teacher and learner factors rather than by any single variable in isolation. Le et al. (2024) similarly found that although students were psychologically ready for autonomous learning, limited strategic knowledge constrained their engagement in out-of-class autonomous study.

2.5. Research gap

Taken together, this literature establishes that (a) learner autonomy develops within, rather than in opposition to, a supportive classroom environment; (b) teacher support can be theorized through both SDT and social-support frameworks, each identifying multiple sub-dimensions of support; and (c) Vietnamese university students, including those who are not English majors, continue to exhibit teacher-dependent tendencies that appear closely tied to the nature of the support they receive. However, prior Vietnamese studies have generally examined learner autonomy or teacher roles in isolation, or have focused on other variables such as motivation and prior learning experience (Duong & Seepho, 2013; Tran & Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2024), leaving the direct relationship between perceived teacher support and autonomous-learning attitudes and its underlying cognitive, affective and behavioral structure comparatively unexamined, particularly among first-year, non-English-major students. The article addresses this gap using a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative measurement of the relationship with qualitative insight into how students themselves experience teacher support.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which a quantitative questionnaire survey served as the primary data-collection method, followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews intended to explain and enrich the statistical results. This design was selected because it allows the strength and direction of the relationship between teacher support and autonomous-learning attitudes to be established quantitatively, while the subsequent qualitative phase provides insight into the mechanisms and lived experiences underlying that relationship, an insight that a purely quantitative design would not be able to provide. In particular, because correlational statistics alone cannot reveal why particular items receive comparatively high or low scores, or through what classroom experiences a given statistical relationship is produced, the qualitative interviews were deliberately designed to probe the same constructs measured by the questionnaire, responsibility for learning, choice in learning activities, teachers' responses to mistakes and confusion, and the experience of independent study both in and outside class so that the two strands of data could be integrated at the level of specific findings rather than merely juxtaposed as separate analyses.

3.2. Research context and participants

The article was conducted at the Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City (IUH), a public university in Southern Vietnam offering undergraduate programs in engineering, technology, business, and social sciences. English is a compulsory subject for first-year students across disciplines, and although the curriculum aims to promote active, learner-centered engagement, English



instruction at IUH, as in many Vietnamese universities, remains substantially teacher-centered in practice, with opportunities for autonomous learning depending considerably on individual teachers' classroom decisions. First-year students in particular enter this environment directly from an exam-oriented secondary education that emphasizes memorization and teacher control, making IUH an appropriate context for examining how teacher support relates to students' developing attitudes toward autonomous learning.

Participants were first-year, predominantly non-English-major students enrolled in compulsory English courses, a population selected because the first year represents a critical transitional period from the teacher-dependent learning habits of high school toward the greater independence expected at university. Using convenience sampling, 202 students were invited to complete the questionnaire (108 female, 53.5%; 94 male, 46.5%), drawn from 18 different majors across engineering, technology and business-related faculties including automotive engineering and international business (7.4% each), tourism management (6.9%), and smaller cohorts from fields such as accounting, marketing and logistics with English-major students constituting only 1.5% of the sample. Students' prior English-learning experience was fairly evenly distributed, with roughly a quarter of the sample reporting less than five years, five to seven years, eight to ten years, and more than ten years of English study, respectively. Self-rated proficiency was concentrated at the intermediate level (46.0%) and elementary level (27.7%), with smaller proportions at the beginner, upper-intermediate and advanced levels, and out-of-class study frequency varied widely, from 15.3% of students reporting that they never studied English outside class to 19.3% reporting that they always did so. This demographic profile confirms a sample that is gender-balanced, academically diverse, and broadly representative of the non-English-major population at IUH. From this larger sample, 10 students were subsequently selected for semi-structured interviews to provide a range of perspectives for the qualitative phase.

3.3. Research Instruments

Perceived teacher support and attitudes toward autonomous learning were measured using a structured questionnaire employing a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), developed by adapting and integrating items from established instruments to ensure theoretical grounding and contextual relevance. The Attitudes toward Autonomous Learning scale comprised sixteen items adapted from established sources on attitude and autonomy (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Wenden, 1991; Oxford, 2003; Richards & Rodgers, 2014), organized into cognitive (five items), affective (five items) and behavioral (six items, one reverse-coded) subscales measuring respectively, students' beliefs about the value and effectiveness of autonomous learning, their emotional comfort and confidence in studying independently and their actual willingness to engage in autonomous actions such as goal-setting and independent problem-solving. The Perceived Teacher Support scale comprised fifteen items drawing on the Learning Climate Questionnaire (Williams & Deci, 1996) to capture the instructional and emotional dimensions of autonomy-supportive teaching, organized into three theoretical sub-dimensions consistent with Skinner et al.'s (2008) framework such as autonomy support, teacher involvement and structural support.

The qualitative phase employed a semi-structured interview guide consisting of ten open-ended questions exploring students' personal experiences of teacher support including perceived responsibility for learning success, opportunities for choice in learning activities, teachers' responses to mistakes and confusion and experiences of guided self-discovery and how these experiences shaped their willingness to take responsibility for their own learning, both within and beyond the classroom.

3.4. Validity and reliability

Content validity was established by adapting instruments from established sources and theoretical frameworks. The questionnaire was reviewed by an academic supervisor to ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness for first-year IUH students including checking that the Vietnamese translations of item stems preserved the intended meaning of the original English-language source instruments. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of .70 or higher considered acceptable (Nunnally, 1978), and both the attitude and teacher-support scales met this threshold in the pilot analysis, supporting their use in the main study. The Attitudes toward Autonomous Learning scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .840$), while the Teacher Support scale showed excellent reliability ($\alpha = .956$), indicating that both instruments were suitable for the study.

3.5. Procedures and data analysis

The questionnaire was developed, reviewed, translated and piloted before being distributed via an online platform following permission from the university and course instructors. Interview participants were subsequently selected once questionnaire responses had been collected and analyzed, and semi-structured interviews were scheduled at times convenient for participants. Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. In particular, participation was entirely voluntary because



students were informed that their responses would not affect their academic standing, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, interview recordings were made only with participants' explicit permission, and all data were anonymized and securely stored to protect participant confidentiality.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and frequencies) characterized students' attitudes and perceptions of teacher support, and Pearson correlation analysis examined the relationship between teacher support and overall attitudes, as well as between teacher support and each attitude sub-dimension, allowing the study to test not only whether a relationship existed but also whether its strength varied across the cognitive, affective and behavioral facets of attitude. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically. In particular, transcripts were coded inductively, recurring patterns were identified across the ten interviews and codes were grouped into themes corresponding to each research question. Consistent with the logic of an explanatory sequential design, the qualitative themes were then used specifically to explain and enrich the quantitative results, for example, by identifying plausible reasons for particular items' comparatively high or low mean scores rather than to test a separate, independent set of hypotheses.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Students' attitudes toward autonomous learning (RQ1)

Overall, first-year EFL students at IUH reported moderately positive attitudes toward autonomous learning across all three dimensions with mean scores of 3.26 (cognitive), 3.29 (affective), and 3.20 (behavioral) on the 5-point scale.

Within the cognitive dimension, the highest-rated item concerned students' self-monitoring of comprehension while learning English ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.239$), followed by the belief that autonomous learning fosters responsibility ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.224$) and confidence in learning without constant teacher supervision ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.291$). The two lowest-rated cognitive items concerned the perceived effectiveness of autonomous learning ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.226$) and confidence in self-evaluating one's own progress ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.300$), suggesting that although students recognize the general value of autonomy, many remain uncertain about their own capacity for self-assessment. Interview responses illuminated this pattern directly. When asked who was responsible for learning success, six of ten participants described responsibility as shared between teacher and student, while four placed primary responsibility on the student, one explaining that "student effort is the most important factor in learning success," while another emphasized that "teachers guide us, but students must actively participate in learning." When asked what autonomous learning meant to them, most participants defined it in terms of independent study and resource-finding, for instance, "learning by myself, planning my study schedule, and finding resources without depending completely on the teacher," but none spontaneously mentioned self-assessment as part of this definition, which helps explain why the self-evaluation item received the lowest cognitive score.

Within the affective dimension, scores ranged narrowly from 3.25 to 3.33. The highest-rated item concerned comfort studying without constant teacher guidance ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.227$), followed by the absence of anxiety when completing tasks independently ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.197$) and confidence in independent study ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.252$). Lower scores were recorded for enjoyment of taking responsibility for one's own learning ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.276$) and, notably, for the item capturing interest and excitement in discovering new ways to learn English independently ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.221$), the single lowest-scoring item across the entire sixteen-item attitude scale. This finding suggests that while students do not fear independent study, they have not yet developed strong intrinsic enthusiasm for it. Interview responses regarding teacher understanding and support largely reinforced the quantitative pattern, with several participants describing how encouragement, feedback and gradual guidance from teachers helped them feel more capable of studying independently, consistent with Dörnyei's (2001) emphasis on the role of supportive teaching in building learner confidence. Few participants, however, spontaneously expressed curiosity about discovering new learning methods on their own, suggesting that intrinsic motivation for self-directed discovery may still be emerging at this early stage of language study.

Within the behavioral dimension, the lowest-scoring of the three, the highest-rated items concerned readiness to evaluate one's own strengths and weaknesses ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.178$) and preference for seeking learning materials beyond the assigned textbook ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.306$), followed by trying to solve language problems independently before asking the teacher ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.299$), willingness to set personal learning goals ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.268$), and preference for choosing one's own study methods ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.192$). The reverse-coded item measuring preference for relying on the teacher rather than learning independently



scored below the scale midpoint ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.172$), the lowest mean of any item in the study, indicating that a degree of teacher reliance persists even among students who report generally positive autonomous-learning beliefs and feelings. Interview data illuminated two converging themes relevant to this dimension. First, all ten participants described specific episodes of guided self-discovery, in which teachers withheld direct answers in favor of hints, peer discussion or independent research, for example, one participant recalled being asked to “research grammar rules on my own before discussing them in class,” noting that although “at first, I felt unsure,” the process ultimately proved instructive. This consistent pattern across all interviewees offers a plausible explanation for why the item on independent problem-solving scored only moderately rather than low. Students appeared to be developing this behavior largely in response to teacher prompting, consistent with Maruoka's (2013) distinction between reactive and proactive forms of autonomy, rather than through fully self-initiated engagement. Second, and more unambiguously, all ten participants reported that supportive classroom experiences directly increased their motivation to continue studying outside class, a theme that helps explain why the item on seeking materials beyond the textbook received one of the higher behavioral scores.

Comparing the three dimensions overall, the differences among the mean scores were modest, indicating that students' beliefs, feelings and behavioral tendencies toward autonomous learning are broadly consistent with one another. Nonetheless, the slightly lower behavioral mean suggests that translating positive cognitive and affective orientations into consistent autonomous behavior remains comparatively more difficult, a pattern that aligns closely with Le et al.'s (2024) finding that Vietnamese EFL students may be psychologically ready for autonomous learning while lacking the concrete strategic knowledge needed to act on that readiness, and with Nguyen and Nguyen's (2022) finding of persistent teacher-dependent tendencies among IUH English majors, which the present findings suggest extend across the broader first-year student population rather than being confined to English majors.

It is also notable that this pattern held across a demographically and academically diverse sample spanning eighteen different majors and a wide range of prior English-learning experience and self-rated proficiency. Because the sample was not restricted to English majors or to students with particularly strong or weak English backgrounds, the moderately positive but behaviorally constrained attitude profile identified here is unlikely to be an artifact of any single sub-group, and instead appears to characterize the broader population of first-year non-English-major students at this institution, precisely the population that, as noted in the literature review, has received comparatively little prior research attention relative to English majors (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022).

4.2. Students' perceptions of teacher support (RQ2)

Students perceived a moderate overall level of teacher support with item means ranging from 3.26 to 3.47 across the fifteen-item scale. The two highest-scoring items concerned teachers' understanding of students' feelings about English learning ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.258$) and teachers' responsiveness when students were confused about a task ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.294$), both reflecting relational and structural responsiveness. By contrast, the two comparatively weaker items concerned the consistency of respectful treatment in class ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.313$), which also displayed the highest variability of any item in the scale, and the extent to which teachers explicitly taught students how to study independently ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.308$), which recorded the lowest mean score on the entire teacher-support scale.

Within the autonomy-support sub-dimension, the highest-rated item concerned teachers listening to students' opinions about how they learn ($M = 3.41$), while items concerning opportunities for choice and decision-making scored somewhat lower (both $M = 3.31$). Interview responses regarding choice in learning activities were consistent with this pattern. Participants reported that opportunities to choose project topics or activities increased their engagement, but frequently qualified these accounts with hedges such as “sometimes we can choose presentation topics,” suggesting that such opportunities may not occur consistently across all classes, a plausible explanation for why these items scored only moderately rather than highly. Within the involvement sub-dimension, the same item that recorded the scale's highest mean (teacher understanding of student feelings) also recorded, alongside the lowest-scoring item (respectful treatment), the widest range of any sub-dimension, indicating that while students generally feel understood by their teachers, their sense of being consistently treated with respect varies more widely from student to student. Interview responses regarding teachers' reactions to mistakes and to confusion reinforced the high scores on relational items, with nine of ten participants describing their teachers as patient, understanding and supportive. Comments specifically about respect, however, were less consistent across participants, echoing the high variability observed in the corresponding survey item.

Across both the quantitative and qualitative data, the clearest area of relative weakness in perceived teacher support was explicit strategy instruction. Not only did the corresponding survey item record the lowest mean of the entire scale, but all ten interview participants, without exception, identified more explicit guidance on how to study independently as their primary suggestion for



improving their learning experience. This convergence across independent data sources represents one of the most robust findings of the present study.

4.3. The relationship between teacher support and autonomous learning attitudes (RQ3)

A strong, statistically significant positive correlation was found between perceived teacher support and overall attitudes toward autonomous learning ($r = .766, p < .001$), indicating that students who perceived greater teacher support tended to hold more positive attitudes toward autonomous learning. At the sub-dimensional level, teacher support correlated most strongly with behavioral attitudes ($r = .598$), followed by affective attitudes ($r = .565$), and, more modestly though still significantly, cognitive attitudes ($r = .546$). This gradient suggests that teacher support may be particularly consequential for translating positive beliefs and feelings into actual autonomous behavior, whereas students' cognitive beliefs about autonomous learning may be additionally shaped by factors such as prior educational experience and broader cultural views of education that lie partly outside the immediate influence of any individual teacher. Correlations among the three attitude sub-dimensions themselves were comparatively modest (cognitive-affective $r = .293$; cognitive-behavioral $r = .331$; affective-behavioral $r = .352$), indicating that the three dimensions represent related but distinct facets of students' overall orientation toward autonomous learning, such that positive beliefs do not automatically translate into positive feelings or autonomous behavior, and vice versa.

The qualitative data provide a plausible explanatory mechanism for the particularly strong relationship between teacher support and behavioral attitudes. All ten interviewees reported that supportive classroom experiences motivated them to continue studying independently outside class, suggesting that teacher support shapes not only how students feel about autonomous learning but also whether they act on those feelings. This finding is consistent with the view of teacher support as a facilitator of self-determined behavior (Reeve, 2009; Noels et al., 2000) and with the theoretical proposition that satisfying learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness translates into more sustained self-directed engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

4.4. Summary of findings in relation to the research questions

Before turning to a broader discussion of these results, it is useful to summarize how the findings address each of the three research questions in turn. In response to RQ1, first-year EFL students at IUH were found to hold moderately positive attitudes toward autonomous learning across all three dimensions, with the affective dimension scoring marginally highest, the cognitive dimension close behind, and the behavioral dimension, particularly items related to independent problem-solving and reduced teacher reliance, scoring marginally lowest, indicating a modest but consistent gap between students' beliefs and feelings about autonomy and their actual autonomous behavior. In response to RQ2, students perceived a moderate level of teacher support overall, with particular strength in teachers' emotional responsiveness and understanding, but comparatively less consistency in respectful treatment and, especially, in explicit instruction on how to study independently, the single weakest area identified across the entire teacher-support scale and the most consistently mentioned area for improvement in the interviews. In response to RQ3, a strong and statistically significant positive relationship was found between teacher support and autonomous-learning attitudes overall, with the relationship consistently stronger for behavioral attitudes than for cognitive attitudes, suggesting that teacher support may function somewhat differently across the belief, feeling, and action components of student attitude. Taken as a whole, these three sets of findings converge on a single overarching picture that students at IUH are neither strongly autonomous nor strongly dependent, but are positioned at a transitional stage in which the support they receive from teachers appears closely bound up with whether, and how quickly, they move toward greater self-direction.

4.5. Discussion

Taken together, these findings support four broader conclusions. First, teacher support is not merely one contributing factor among many in the development of autonomous-learning attitudes, but a substantively important one. The strength of the observed correlation ($r = .766$) is consistent with Self-Determination Theory's proposition that supportive learning environments rather than the mere absence of teacher involvement, foster the development of learner autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When teachers are perceived as supportive, responsive and understanding, students appear more likely to develop positive beliefs, feelings and behavioral tendencies toward autonomous learning. This finding is consequential for how the relationship between teachers and learner autonomy is conceptualized in Vietnamese higher education specifically. Rather than treating learner autonomy and teacher-centered instruction as a binary choice, the present results suggest that the more productive question for EFL programs



to ask is not whether teachers should be involved, but what kind of involvement autonomy-supportive rather than controlling is associated with the attitudes the curriculum aims to cultivate.

Second, the findings reinforce the view that teacher support and learner autonomy are complementary rather than opposing constructs (Little, 1995; Benson, 2011). Interview participants consistently described autonomous learning not as learning without teachers, but as a developmental process mediated by teachers' guidance through hints rather than answers, through opportunities to make choices and through encouragement that renders independent effort safe rather than risky. This is consistent with the broader literature positioning the teacher as a facilitator of autonomy rather than a mere transmitter of knowledge (Reeve, 2006; Benson, 2011), and it echoes Masouleh and Jooneghani's (2012) argument that autonomy is a natural tendency requiring expert cultivation rather than a capacity that emerges from teacher withdrawal alone.

Third, the differential strength of the relationship across attitude dimensions, strongest for behavioral attitudes, followed by affective and cognitive attitudes, suggests that teacher support may be particularly important for encouraging autonomous learning behaviors specifically, while students' cognitive beliefs about autonomy may be shaped by a wider range of factors including prior educational experience, cultural views of education and individual self-efficacy beliefs, that lie partly outside the immediate classroom environment (Coopersmith, 1967; Leaver et al., 2005).

Fourth, and most practically significant, the findings reveal a clear gap between the support students currently receive and the support they say they need. While students generally perceived their teachers as supportive and responsive, both the survey and interview findings converge on the need for more explicit instruction in learning strategies such as goal-setting, time management, self-monitoring, self-evaluation and resource selection. Because this finding is corroborated by both quantitative and qualitative evidence, it represents a particularly robust implication for pedagogical practice. Consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) view that explicit scaffolding supports the development of independent competence, and with van de Pol et al.'s (2010) synthesis of scaffolding research showing that the gradual, deliberate withdrawal of support builds learner self-regulation, these strategy-instruction needs could be addressed through relatively simple metacognitive activities embedded in existing lessons, for instance, having students set and later evaluate a specific learning goal within a single class session, or explicitly discussing how to evaluate online learning resources before assigning independent research tasks.

The comparatively high variability observed for the item measuring respectful treatment in class similarly suggests that students' experience of relational support may not be uniform across teachers and classrooms, a pattern echoed in the interview data. This points to a role for institutional-level intervention that professional development programs that promote autonomy-supportive teaching practices consistently across the first-year EFL curriculum, along the lines suggested by Reeve and Jang (2006) for training teachers in autonomy-supportive behaviors, may help ensure that supportive teacher-student relationships do not depend primarily on individual teachers.

Beyond these four conclusions, the findings also carry more specific implications for how explicit strategy instruction might be integrated into existing first-year EFL courses without requiring a wholesale redesign of the curriculum. Because the gap identified in this article concerns not the presence of teacher support in general, but the comparative absence of explicit guidance on how to study independently, relatively small-scale pedagogical adjustments may be disproportionately effective. For example, teachers might begin a lesson by asking students to articulate a specific, achievable learning goal for that session and close the lesson by asking students to briefly assess whether that goal was met. Such micro-scaffolding routines are consistent with the metacognitive strategy instruction long advocated in the second-language strategy literature (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) and require little additional class time. Likewise, before assigning independent research or self-study tasks, teachers could model how to evaluate the credibility and usefulness of online learning resources, a skill that the present findings suggest students do not yet reliably possess on their own. Embedding such practices within existing lessons, rather than treating strategy instruction as a separate unit, is consistent with the view that autonomy-supportive teaching and explicit skill-building are complementary rather than competing uses of limited class time (Reeve, 2006; Tseng et al., 2006).

The present findings also carry implications for teacher-training programs more broadly. If, as the interview data suggest, students already experience guided self-discovery as a hallmark of good teaching, teacher-training curricula may benefit from explicitly naming and reinforcing this practice, for instance, by training novice teachers to recognize the difference between withholding help unhelpfully and scaffolding help productively rather than assuming that autonomy-supportive behaviors will emerge spontaneously from experience alone.



5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between perceived teacher support and first-year EFL students' attitudes toward autonomous learning at IUH, using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design combining a 202-student questionnaire survey with ten semi-structured interviews. The results demonstrate a strong, statistically significant positive relationship between teacher support and autonomous-learning attitudes overall ($r = .766$, $p < .001$), with the relationship strongest for behavioral attitudes and comparatively weaker, though still significant, for cognitive attitudes. Qualitative findings converged with and enriched these quantitative results indicating that students experience teacher support primarily as guided self-discovery, and that the most consistently identified area for improvement across both quantitative items and interview responses is more explicit instruction in learning strategies.

These findings carry three main implications. Theoretically, they extend Self-Determination Theory to a first-year, non-English-major population in a Vietnamese technical university context that has received comparatively limited research attention relative to English-major populations, while also demonstrating the value of examining autonomous-learning attitudes as a multidimensional rather than unitary construct. Pedagogically, they suggest that fostering learner autonomy does not require teachers to withdraw support, but rather to provide guidance, encouragement, opportunities for choice, and explicit strategy instruction in tandem. Institutionally, they point toward a need for professional development that helps ensure autonomy-supportive practices, and consistent experiences of respect and relational support, are not confined to individual teachers but become a shared feature of the first-year EFL curriculum.

This article is not without limitations. Data were collected at a single institution using a convenience sample of first-year, non-English-major students which may limit generalizability to other institutional or academic contexts. The cross-sectional design captures attitudes and perceptions at a single point in time rather than as they develop. The qualitative sample, while reaching thematic saturation, comprised only ten of the 202 survey respondents and the study relied entirely on self-report data from students rather than classroom observation or teacher-side perspectives. In addition, because teacher support and autonomous-learning attitudes were both measured through a single cross-sectional questionnaire, the study can establish the strength and direction of association between the two constructs but cannot determine causality. It remains possible, for instance, that students who are already more autonomously inclined perceive and elicit more supportive behavior from their teachers, in addition to the more commonly assumed direction of influence.

Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal designs tracking students across multiple semesters to examine how the relationship between teacher support and autonomous-learning attitudes evolves as students gain more university experience, as well as intervention studies that introduce explicit strategy instruction into first-year EFL classrooms and measure its effect on cognitive attitudes and teacher-support perceptions, thereby providing evidence on causal direction. Replication across multiple Vietnamese institutions and student populations, including direct comparison between English majors and non-English majors, would help determine whether the relationships identified here generalize beyond a single technical university, and designs that complement students' self-report data with classroom observation or teacher-side perspectives would offer a more complete and potentially more objective picture of the teacher support that students are perceived to receive.

Despite these limitations, the present findings offer empirically grounded guidance for EFL teaching practice. Promoting learner autonomy among first-year students is best achieved not by reducing teacher involvement, but by combining supportive, responsive teaching with explicit instruction in the strategies that allow students to act on the positive attitudes they already hold. For IUH context in which English functions as a compulsory general-education subject rather than a specialized major, and in which first-year students arrive with strong habits of teacher dependency formed during secondary school, this combination of relational support and explicit strategic guidance may represent the most practical and immediately actionable pathway toward cultivating a more autonomous generation of English learners.

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Cite this Article: Tuyet Nhi, D., Hong, N.X. (2026). The Relationship between Teacher Support and First-Year EFL Students' Attitudes toward Autonomous Learning: Evidence from a Vietnamese University. International Journal of Current Science Research and Review, 9(7), pp. 3926-3939. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijcsrr/V9-i7-33>
