

English-majored Students' Self-directed Learning Strategies for Taking English Certificates in the Fulfillment of Program Outcome Standards

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study investigates English-majored students' perceptions of self-directed learning (SDL) strategies used to prepare for English certification exams within Vietnam's credit-based higher education system, which requires increased learner autonomy. It aims to determine the extent of SDL engagement and identify factors influencing the effectiveness of these strategies.

Methodology – A mixed-method design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to English-major students (sample size not specified), followed by qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with selected participants. The instruments examined SDL behaviors, frequency of strategy use, motivation, and challenges. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for survey responses and thematic analysis for interview data.

Findings – Results indicate varied levels of SDL engagement. Approximately half of the students reported actively applying SDL strategies, while many used them only occasionally, reflecting uneven commitment to certification preparation inside and outside the classroom. Key factors affecting effectiveness include motivation, use of appropriate learning strategies, and procrastination. Interview findings highlight the need for improved self-regulation skills, stronger student-teacher and peer interactions, and greater institutional and external support. These findings suggest that enhancing structured guidance and support systems can improve SDL outcomes and certification success.

Novelty – The study contributes empirical evidence on SDL practices specific to English certification preparation within Vietnam's credit-based system, integrating both quantitative trends and qualitative insights.

Significance – The findings benefit language educators, curriculum designers, university administrators, and students by informing policies and pedagogical approaches that foster effective autonomous learning.

Keywords: Certification; Language; Perceptions; Self-directed; Strategies; Students.

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1. Introduction

In higher education, English certificates have become an essential requirement for Vietnamese students majoring in English. Achieving a high level of English competence is not only necessary for fulfilling graduation requirements but also crucial for enhancing career opportunities and professional growth in the future. Despite having access to a wealth of English content and vast resources thanks to modern technology, many English language students in Vietnam still face many challenges in learning the language and obtaining the required English certificates for graduation (Prime Minister, 2007).

One of the promising approaches to address these challenges is the promotion of self-directed learning (SDL), where students take an active role in managing their learning process. SDL strategies enable students to identify their learning needs, set goals, and seek out resources independently, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility toward their educational journey. Self-directed learning is defined as the process by which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying resources, and evaluating learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975).

In recent years, the Vietnamese educational system has placed a growing emphasis on enhancing SDL. National policies on tertiary education reform have underscored the importance of fostering SDL among learners (Prime Minister, 2007). However, despite these policy directives, practical implementation remains a challenge. There is a lack of formal training on SDL within educational institutions, and both teachers and students often have a limited understanding of its concepts and practices (Nguyen et al., 2014). Studies have shown that students exhibit low levels of proactive SDL (Dang, 2012; Le, 2018), making it difficult to effectively promote SDL.

For English-majored students, the situation is particularly critical. They must achieve a certain level of proficiency in English, often evidenced by international certificates, to meet graduation requirements. The process of preparing for and obtaining these certificates demands remarkable effort, time, and financial resources.

However, research indicates that English-majored students in Vietnam are not well-acquainted with the concept of SDL and often rely heavily on their instructors to guide their learning (Nguyen, 2020). This dependency highlights the need for a deeper understanding of their current level of SDL, the obstacles they face, and their perspectives on overcoming these challenges. Investigating these aspects is essential for developing pedagogical strategies that can better support English-majored students in becoming more self-directed and successful learners.

This study aims to explore the self-directed learning strategies employed by English-majored students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology, Vietnam, as they prepare for the English certification exams required for graduation. By examining their experiences, challenges, and attitudes toward SDL, the research seeks to provide insights and

recommendations for educators and policymakers to enhance the students' SDL strategies, ultimately contributing to their academic success and career readiness.

The aims of the study are as follows: (1) explore the perceptions of English-majored students regarding their self-directed learning strategies for obtaining English certificates required for graduation; (2) identify the key factors that influence the self-directed learning strategies of English majors during their English learning process; and (3) propose potential solutions for promoting self-directed learning strategies among English majors in their English language learning journey.

2. Literature Review

This part comprehensively reviews the literature related to self-directed learning (SDL) and its application among English-majored students. It focuses on SDL strategies for English learning, examining attitudes towards SDL and factors that influence students' self-directed learning. The review covers the definition and theoretical frameworks of SDL, previous research findings, specific strategies utilized in language learning, challenges faced, and the benefits of SDL.

2.1 What is Self-Directed Learning?

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is a process in which individuals take the initiative to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes. This concept was popularized by Malcolm Knowles, who defined SDL as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (Knowles, 1975). Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is described in various ways in the literature. Smith (1982) defines SDL as "the capacity of a person to manage his or her learning plan or schedule, as well as other learning-related factors" (as cited in Suc & Duo, 2010, in Gharti, 2019). This definition emphasizes the learner's ability to independently organize and oversee their learning processes.

Additionally, Merriam (2001) elaborates on SDL by stating it involves "the development of a learner's capacity for self-direction and the promotion of transformational learning, the promotion of emancipatory learning, and the promotion of social action" (as cited in Suc & Duo, 2010, in Gharti, 2019). This definition underscores SDL's role in fostering significant personal and social development. SDL is characterized by several key elements:

- a. **Learner Initiative:** SDL emphasizes that learners take full responsibility for their learning. This includes setting personal goals, choosing methods and resources, and evaluating their progress. According to Garrison (1997), "self-directed learning requires learners to be proactive in managing their learning process and outcomes" (p. 18).
- b. **Self-Regulation:** Learners must be able to manage their own cognitive processes effectively. This involves goal-setting, self-monitoring, and adjusting strategies as needed. Zimmerman (2002) highlights that "effective self-regulation involves goal-setting, self-monitoring, and self-reflection, which are critical for successful learning outcomes" (p. 171).

- c. Motivation: Intrinsic motivation is crucial in SDL, as it drives learners to engage in and persist with their learning activities. Deci and Ryan (1985) note that "intrinsic motivation is a key factor in SDL, as it drives learners to engage deeply and persistently in their learning activities" (p. 54).
- d. Self-Direction: SDL requires learners to guide their learning by identifying their needs, seeking out resources, and determining effective strategies. Candy (1991) states that "self-direction in learning involves learners taking charge of their learning activities and making independent decisions regarding their educational experiences" (p. 18).
- e. Self-Directedness and External Influences: Self-directedness, or learner self-direction, encompasses both the internal growth process and the external influences experienced through instruction. The role of the teacher in SDL is often that of a facilitator who uses engaging techniques to harness the learner's creativity (Guglielmino et al., 2008).

In the context of language learning, SDL enables students to tailor their learning activities to their specific needs, preferences, and goals. This approach fosters a more personalized and effective learning experience, as students are able to focus on areas where they need the most improvement and use methods that work best for them. By taking charge of their learning, students develop essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-assessment, which are valuable in both academic and real-world contexts (Holec, 1981).

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Self-Directed Learning

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is a key concept in educational theory, especially in the context of language learning. It involves learners taking charge of their own educational experiences, managing their learning activities and strategies independently of traditional instructional methods. This section delves into SDL's theoretical foundations and models, focusing on how these theories inform the practice and understanding of SDL across various educational contexts.

2.2.1 Foundations of Self-Directed Learning

The theoretical foundation of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is primarily rooted in Malcolm Knowles' concept of andragogy. Knowles (1975) introduced andragogy as a theory that focuses on adult learning and self-direction. According to Knowles, SDL involves learners taking responsibility for their own learning by diagnosing their needs, setting goals, seeking resources, selecting learning strategies, and evaluating their outcomes. This approach contrasts sharply with traditional educational models where the teacher is the central authority and primary source of knowledge.

Knowles' theory highlights several key aspects of SDL. First, it emphasizes that learners are not passive recipients of information but active participants in their educational journey. This shift challenges the conventional teacher-centered approach and advocates for a learner-centered model where individuals are empowered to control their learning experiences. Knowles (1980) further explains that self-direction in learning aligns with the needs of adult learners who often bring a wealth of experience and motivation to the learning process. In addition to Knowles, other theorists have contributed to the understanding of SDL. For

example, Garrison (1997) expands on Knowles' work by introducing a model of SDL that incorporates cognitive, metacognitive, and motivational components. Garrison's (1997) model suggests that effective SDL requires not only the ability to manage one's learning activities but also the development of critical thinking skills and self-regulation.

Another significant theoretical contribution is the work of Candy (1991), who explores the concept of SDL from a philosophical perspective. Candy argues that SDL involves both a cognitive and an epistemological dimension, where learners not only manage their learning processes but also critically engage with the knowledge they acquire. This perspective adds depth to our understanding of SDL by emphasizing the intellectual and reflective aspects of self-direction.

2.2.2 Theoretical Models of Self-Directed Learning

Several theoretical models offer structured frameworks for understanding and implementing Self-Directed Learning. One prominent model is Grow's Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model. Grow (1991) proposed that learners progress through distinct stages of self-direction, from dependent learners who require significant guidance to more independent learners who can manage their learning autonomously. The model comprises four stages: dependent, interested, involved, and self-directed. Each stage reflects a varying degree of self-regulation and independent learning in the educational process.

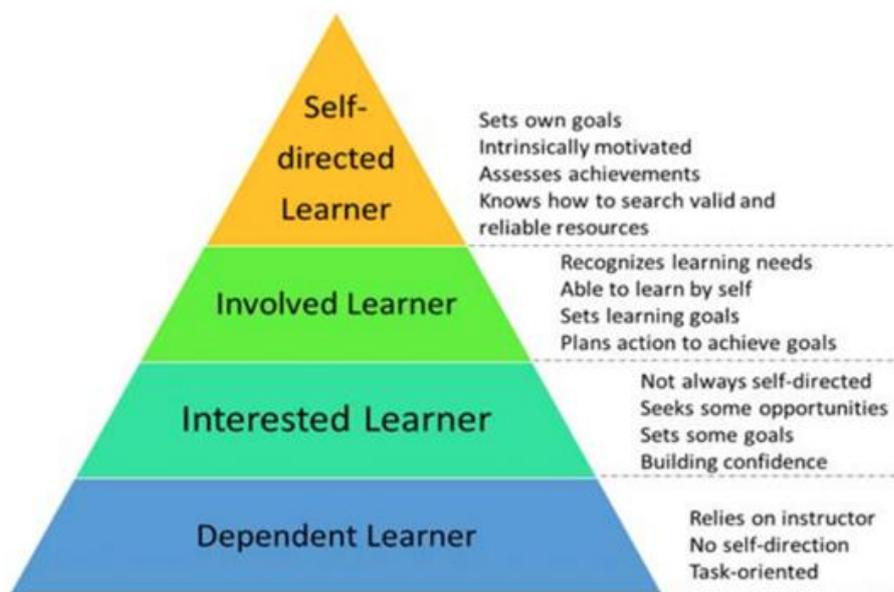


Figure 1. Grow's model of 4 Levels of Independent Learner Development

Grow's model provides practical insights into how educators can support learners at various stages of development. For instance, learners in the dependent stage may need more structured guidance and support, while those in the self-directed stage can benefit from opportunities to make independent decisions and take ownership of their learning. This staged approach helps educators tailor their interventions to meet the needs of learners at different levels of self-direction.

Another influential model is the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) developed by Fisher, King, and Tague (2001). The SDLRS is a comprehensive tool designed to assess learners' readiness for SDL by evaluating their motivation, self-management skills, and ability to set goals. This scale helps identify learners' strengths and areas for improvement, providing a basis for developing targeted support strategies. The SDLRS is especially beneficial in educational environments aimed at improving learners' self-guided learning and independence. The SDLRS includes several dimensions, such as self-management, motivation, and goal-setting, each of which plays a crucial role in successful SDL. For example, self-management refers to the ability to plan, organize, and execute learning activities, while motivation involves the drive and commitment to engage in self-directed learning tasks. By assessing these dimensions, educators can gain valuable insights into learners' readiness for SDL and implement strategies to foster their development.

Theoretical models of SDL provide valuable frameworks for understanding and promoting self-direction in learners. These models highlight the importance of developmental stages, readiness, and individual differences in SDL. By applying these theories and models, educators can better support learners in becoming more self-directed and effective in managing their learning processes.

2.2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Self-Directed Learning

Research on Self-Directed Learning (SDL) in language learning has demonstrated that SDL plays a crucial role in enhancing language acquisition and achieving learning goals. SDL involves not only managing one's learning process but also deeply impacting learners' confidence, motivation, and overall academic performance (Guglielmino, 1978; Karatas & Zeybek, 2020).

Studies have shown that SDL significantly influences language learning outcomes. Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) highlighted the importance of SDL strategies in successful language learning. Rubin (1975) identified characteristics of successful language learners, while Stern (1975) emphasized the role of personal learning plans and self-evaluation. These findings are corroborated by Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004), who compared successful and unsuccessful EFL students. Their research revealed that successful language learners are often driven by strong internal motivation, such as personal interest, learning progress, enhanced self-confidence, and self-efficacy. These learners tend to be optimistic and effectively utilize resources, including teachers.

Several SDL models provide insights into how language learners can use self-directed strategies to improve their learning outcomes. For example, Garrison's (1997) SDL model emphasizes three dimensions: self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. This model highlights the importance of learners taking personal responsibility, collaborating, and engaging in self-monitoring to enhance their learning experience. A study by Alghamdi (2021) found that self-directed distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic improved academic performance, self-reliance, and commitment among Saudi postgraduate students. This indicates that SDL strategies are effective in enhancing learners' abilities to manage their learning independently and reflect on their progress.

SDL is closely related to the development of 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, digital literacy, and lifelong learning. Karatas and Zeybek (2020) found a significant correlation between SDL skills and 21st-century competencies. Their research highlights that SDL not only improves learners' language proficiency but also equips them with essential skills for the modern world. The integration of technology has further enhanced SDL in language learning. Al Fadda (2020) examined the impact of mobile applications like Instagram and Snapchat on EFL learning, finding that these tools increased students' motivation to engage with English materials. Similarly, studies by Al Fadda and Mahdi (2021) and Murniati, Hartono, and Nugroho (2022) demonstrated that technology supports SDL readiness and improves learners' engagement with language learning through digital platforms.

Despite the benefits, SDL in language learning faces several challenges. Research by Alrabai (2017) indicates that Saudi EFL learners exhibit low levels of responsibility in their learning process. This highlights the need for targeted interventions to enhance SDL readiness among learners. On the other hand, studies like those by Adnan and Sayadi (2021) suggest that a student-centered approach to language learning can significantly improve SDL readiness and effectiveness. In summary, SDL in language learning is a multifaceted process that involves the development of autonomy, strategic use of resources, and engagement with technology. Effective SDL strategies can lead to improved language proficiency and better preparedness for the demands of the 21st century.

Self-directed learning (SDL) in language learning involves internal and external motivations, planning, and managing learning tasks. Significant efforts have been made to distinguish SDL from similar concepts like self-regulated learning. According to Saks and Leijen (2014), self-regulated learning is broader, emphasizing the interaction between a learner's behavioral and affective regulation and their environment. In contrast, SDL focuses more on self-management and control over one's learning behavior. Self-directed learning (SDL) in the context of language learning has garnered significant attention as researchers seek to understand how learners manage their educational processes and apply SDL strategies to meet language learning goals. SDL, characterized by learners' initiative and autonomy in managing their own learning, plays a crucial role in language acquisition, particularly for English-majored students aiming for English certificates as part of their graduation requirements.

Research into SDL in language learning often explores various dimensions, including learners' self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. Garrison's (1997) model of SDL, which emphasizes self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation, has been instrumental in shaping studies in this area. According to Garrison, self-management involves learners' ability to plan and control their own learning processes, while self-monitoring relates to learners' capacity to evaluate and adjust their learning strategies (Garrison, 1997). Motivation, a key component, includes learners' perceptions of their capabilities and attitudes towards learning tasks.

Several studies have applied Garrison's framework to language learning contexts. For example, Benson and Lor (1999) investigated language learners' beliefs and self-perceptions

related to SDL. Their study highlighted that while learners recognized the importance of SDL, there was variability in how effectively they applied SDL strategies to their language learning (Benson & Lor, 1999). This variability underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how SDL strategies are implemented and their impact on language proficiency.

Further research by Xuan, Razali, and Samad (2018) focused on the extent of SDL among English language students. Their study utilized a Likert-type questionnaire to measure SDL dimensions, revealing that learners' self-directedness was influenced by their demographic profiles and socio-economic status. This research highlighted significant differences in SDL levels among students, emphasizing the role of personal and contextual factors in shaping SDL practices (Xuan, Razali, & Samad, 2018).

Alegado, Navarro, Roxas, and Monteza (2023) conducted a study on self-directed learning among secondary education students specializing in English. Their research aimed to assess the extent of SDL and its correlation with students' demographic characteristics. They found that SDL was positively associated with students' academic performance and their ability to manage their learning independently. The study also noted that students who actively engaged in SDL strategies were more likely to achieve higher levels of language proficiency (Alegado et al., 2023).

These studies collectively underscore the importance of SDL in language learning and its impact on achieving educational outcomes. The research highlights that while SDL strategies are crucial for language acquisition, their effectiveness can vary based on individual and contextual factors. This suggests that a deeper exploration of SDL strategies tailored to English-majored students' needs and contexts is essential for improving language learning outcomes and fulfilling graduation requirements.

Garrison's (1997) model is particularly relevant for understanding SDL in language learning. It includes three key constructs:

1. **Self-Management:** Refers to the learner's control over their planning and learning behaviors. This involves managing practices perceived as useful for learning.
2. **Self-Monitoring:** Involves control over cognitive and behavioral processes and readiness to take responsibility for the learning task.
3. **Motivation:** Includes the learner's perception of their ability and attitude towards learning. Motivation is crucial for initiating and sustaining learning activities, termed as "entering motivation" and "task motivation" respectively.

Garrison's model is used to develop questionnaires that measure SDL dimensions, with constructs derived from earlier work by Guglielmino (1978) and Garrison himself. Guglielmino's (1978) scale identifies eight factors of SDL readiness such as initiative, independence, and self-concept, but has been criticized for its focus on general attitudes rather than specific metacognitive skills (Benson, 2013).

2.2.4 Enhancing Self-Directed Learning Strategies: Addressing Research Gaps in English Language Certification

Self-directed learning (SDL) has become a focal point in education because of its crucial role in fostering learner independence and supporting lifelong learning. However, while SDL is

widely recognized for its effectiveness in various educational contexts, there remains a notable research gap when it comes to its application in English language certification processes. This section aims to highlight the need for further research on SDL strategies specifically tailored for English language certification, addressing the limitations identified in previous studies.

Previous research has extensively explored SDL within general educational settings and various fields, such as healthcare and business (Guglielmino, 1978; Benson, 2013). For example, studies have investigated SDL in the context of language learning with a focus on autonomous learning (Najeeb, 2012), learner engagement (Holec, 1981), and the development of learning strategies (Thanasoulas, 2000). However, there is a significant lack of research explicitly examining SDL strategies for achieving English language certification, which is a critical aspect for English-majored students.

One of the main limitations of existing research is the lack of focus on specific SDL strategies relevant to the certification process. While general SDL frameworks and models, such as those proposed by Garrison (1997) and Holec (1981), provide valuable insights into self-directed learning, they do not address the unique challenges and requirements associated with language certification exams. For instance, SDL strategies that support general language learning may not fully align with the structured and formal nature of certification tests, which require targeted preparation and adherence to specific guidelines (Benson & Voller, 1997). Moreover, previous studies have often overlooked the specific needs of English-majored students preparing for certification. Research has shown that while SDL is beneficial for general language acquisition, the demands of certification exams necessitate tailored strategies that address both the content and the format of the exams (Wenden, 1998; Saks & Leijen, 2014). This gap underscores the need for research that explores how SDL can be effectively adapted to meet the requirements of English language certification.

The current study aims to bridge these gaps by focusing on the development and enhancement of SDL strategies specifically designed for English language certification. By addressing the limitations identified in previous research, this study will provide a more nuanced understanding of how SDL can be applied to certification contexts. It will explore specific SDL strategies that align with the demands of certification exams, such as goal setting, self-monitoring, and task management (Garrison, 1997). Additionally, the study will assess how these strategies impact students' performance and readiness for certification, providing valuable insights for both educators and students. Furthermore, this research will contribute to the body of knowledge by offering practical recommendations for enhancing SDL strategies in the context of English language certification. It will address the need for context-specific SDL frameworks and tools that can support students in navigating the complexities of certification exams, ultimately improving their chances of success.

3. Methods

3.1. Context of the Study

English proficiency is a critical component of academic success for English-majored students at universities in Vietnam. Specifically, students are required to obtain English language

certificates, such as IELTS or TOEIC, to meet program outcome standards (POS) and fulfill graduation requirements. At Thai Nguyen University of Technology, the emphasis on developing strong language skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar—is paramount.

However, transitioning from teacher-centered instruction to self-directed learning (SDL) approaches presents significant challenges. Vietnamese educational policies increasingly stress the importance of 21st-century skills, including autonomous learning, but many students still struggle to adopt SDL effectively. The primary objective of this study is to evaluate how English-majored students employ SDL strategies in preparing for English certification exams, identify the key factors influencing these strategies, and explore possible improvements suggested by the students themselves. The research focuses on the following questions:

1. How self-directed are English-majored students during their preparation for English certification exams required for graduation?
2. What factors influence English-majored students' self-directed learning strategies in English exam preparation?
3. What solutions do English-majored students propose to enhance self-directed learning strategies?

3.2. Participants of the Study

This study was conducted with 40 English-majored students from the K56, K57, K58, and K59 cohorts at Thai Nguyen University of Technology. The participants, aged 18 to 22, had varying levels of English learning experience but shared a common educational background shaped by the predominantly teacher-centered high school curriculum in Vietnam. This research aims to understand how these students, now required to meet specific program outcome standards through obtaining English certificates, manage the challenges associated with self-directed learning during their exam preparation process.

3.3. Research Method

This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods to gather comprehensive data. Specifically, the research utilized survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to explore English-majored students' self-directed learning strategies at Thai Nguyen University of Technology.

Quantitative data were collected through a survey questionnaire designed to capture the students' self-directed learning strategies, their perceived effectiveness, and the challenges they faced during their preparation for English certification exams. The survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the findings were presented in tables and charts for clarity.

To gain deeper insights into the factors affecting the students' self-directed learning strategies and their proposed solutions for improvement, a semi-structured interview were conducted with a selected group of participants. These interviews allowed for a more detailed exploration of the student's experiences and perspectives, providing valuable qualitative data to complement the quantitative findings.

3.4. Data Collection

The data collection process involved two key components: the survey questionnaire and the interviews. The survey questionnaire was carefully developed based on existing literature on self-directed learning and learning strategies, including frameworks from Nguyen (2020) and Long (2007). Nguyen (2020) highlights the significance of self-directed learning in Vietnamese higher education, while Long (2007) explores its role in language acquisition. The questionnaire was distributed online through Google Forms to a group of 40 English-majored students from the K56, K57, K58, and K59 cohorts at Thai Nguyen University of Technology. The survey contained 16 questions, with 13 questions designed to assess the students' self-directed learning strategies and their effectiveness. The remaining 3 questions aimed to identify the primary factors influencing the students' self-directed learning during their preparation for English certification exams. The survey was conducted on August 10, 2024, and participants were given 15 minutes to complete it.

In addition to the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants, specifically five students from each cohort K56-K59. The interviews were designed with three open-ended questions to delve deeper into the students' experiences and suggestions for improving self-directed learning strategies. Each interview lasted between 15 to 20 minutes, and the conversations were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1 Self-Directed Learning Strategies among English-Majored Students Students' Understanding of Self-Directed Learning

The survey was conducted using Google Forms, featuring 16 focused questions designed to gather data from participants. This section of the study presents a comprehensive analysis of the collected data, utilizing graphical representations to effectively illustrate participants' responses to the survey questions. It is important to highlight that the initial survey offers valuable insights into English-majored students' perspectives on self-directed learning. These insights can be applied to enhance practical strategies, ultimately aiming to improve students' performance in preparing for English certification exams. It is significant to mention that a substantial majority of the survey participants (80%) have been studying English for between 5 to 10 years, while 15% have engaged in English education for more than 10 years. Only 5% of the respondents reported having studied English for a duration of one to five years. This extensive exposure, which typically starts early in their educational journey and continues through various stages of their schooling, underscores the students' deep familiarity with the language. This rich background equips them well for implementing self-directed learning strategies in preparation for English certification exams.

Additionally, the survey results also reflect the diverse English proficiency levels among students majoring in English, ranging from A2 to B2. Notably, approximately 57.5% of respondents reported their proficiency at the B1 level, indicating an intermediate command of the language, while more than one-third of survey participants assessed their proficiency as

B2, which corresponds to an upper-intermediate level. In contrast, only 7.5% of learners reported having a B2 level, and no students were classified at A1, C1, or C2 levels. This absence of A1-level students underscores that all participants have moved beyond the elementary stage of English proficiency. However, the lack of students at the advanced C1 and C2 levels highlights a notable gap between the intermediate and advanced proficiency stages. Although a significant portion of students have achieved a solid intermediate level, the data indicates a need for further development to reach higher proficiency levels. This gap suggests that while the majority of students have a strong intermediate foundation, there remains a considerable opportunity for targeted learning strategies to advance their proficiency towards more advanced qualifications.

Furthermore, the survey data reveal that goal-setting for English language learning varies widely among English-major students, suggesting it is not a consistent or habitual practice. A small percentage, 2.5%, always set specific goals, while 40% frequently engage in goal-setting. In contrast, half of the students only occasionally set goals, indicating an irregular approach to self-directed learning. Additionally, 7.5% of students rarely establish goals, and none of the students reported never setting any goals at all. These results suggest that although many students recognize the importance of goal-setting in their language studies, it has not become a regular part of their routine. This inconsistency may indicate a lack of motivation or a clear strategy for effective goal-setting. Therefore, these findings highlight the need for further support and strategies to promote more structured goal-setting habits, which could enhance their preparation for English certification exams.

In brief, the survey results indicate that English-majored students have a broad range of experiences and proficiency levels in English, spanning from intermediate to upper-intermediate. However, there is a significant opportunity to assist these students in progressing beyond the intermediate level toward more advanced stages of language proficiency. The data also suggest that while many students understand the importance of setting goals for their language learning, this practice is not yet a regular part of their study habits. To address these issues, it is essential to provide specific strategies and resources that encourage consistent goal-setting and support students at various proficiency levels. This targeted approach will help enhance their learning outcomes and better prepare them for success in English certification exams.

4.1.2 The Significance of Self-Directed Learning in English Language Acquisition

Acknowledging the crucial role of self-directed English language learning is essential for all students. The following diagram presents relevant information on this topic:

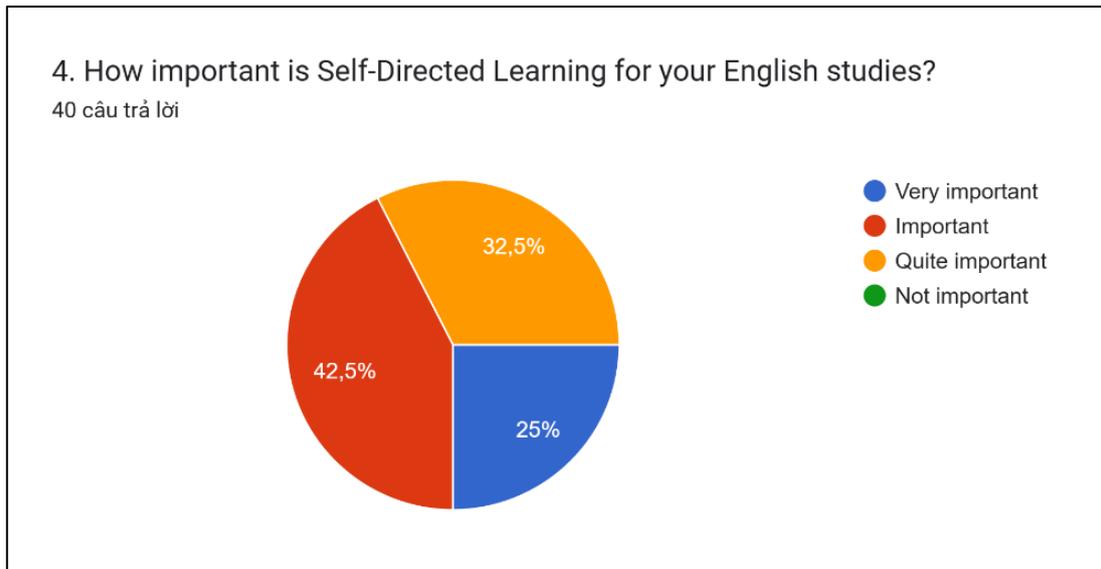


Figure 2. Students' Understanding of the Importance of Self-Directed Learning in English

As illustrated in Figure 2, 42.5% of students strongly believe in the importance of self-directed learning for acquiring English language skills, underscoring its crucial role. Additionally, approximately 25% of students acknowledge its significance. In contrast, a smaller proportion of 32.5% view it as moderately important. Notably, no students regard it as lacking significance.

The visual representation in Figure 3 below underscores the prevailing perspective among English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Technology. Their collective viewpoint highlights the essential role of self-directed learning in their English education and aligns with the broader recognition that such an approach significantly enhances their English proficiency.

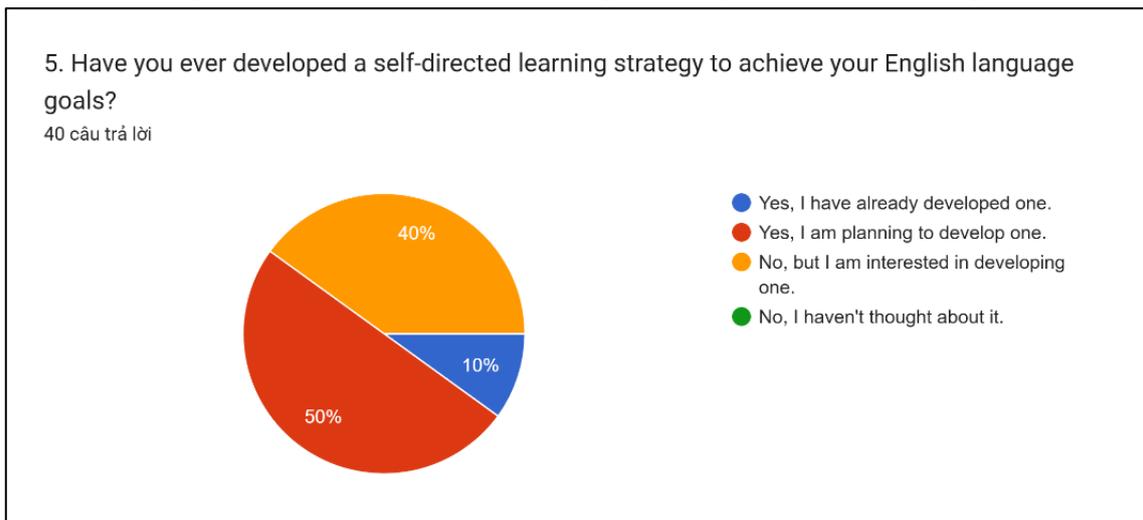


Figure 3. Prevalence of Self-Directed Learning Strategies Among English Learners

The pie chart illustrates responses regarding the development of self-directed learning strategies for achieving English language goals. Of the respondents, 10% have already developed a self-directed learning strategy, reflecting its role in their language learning efforts. Additionally, half of the participants plan to develop such a strategy in the future, demonstrating a strong interest in this approach. Meanwhile, nearly half of the students are

interested in developing a strategy but have not yet done so, and none of them have dismissed the idea entirely. These results suggest that self-directed learning strategies are increasingly recognized as valuable for achieving English language objectives, with a notable proportion of students either having implemented or intending to implement these strategies.

4.1.3 Analysis of Students' Approaches and Support Systems for Self-Directed English Certification Preparation

To assess students' involvement in self-directed learning for English certification, we start by examining their personal study plans. The following questions investigate whether students have developed a plan to meet the English certification requirements for graduation. This analysis will provide insights into the extent of students' proactive planning and the effectiveness of their strategies in their preparation efforts. To evaluate students' engagement with self-directed learning strategies for English certification, we first examine the data presented in Figure 4.

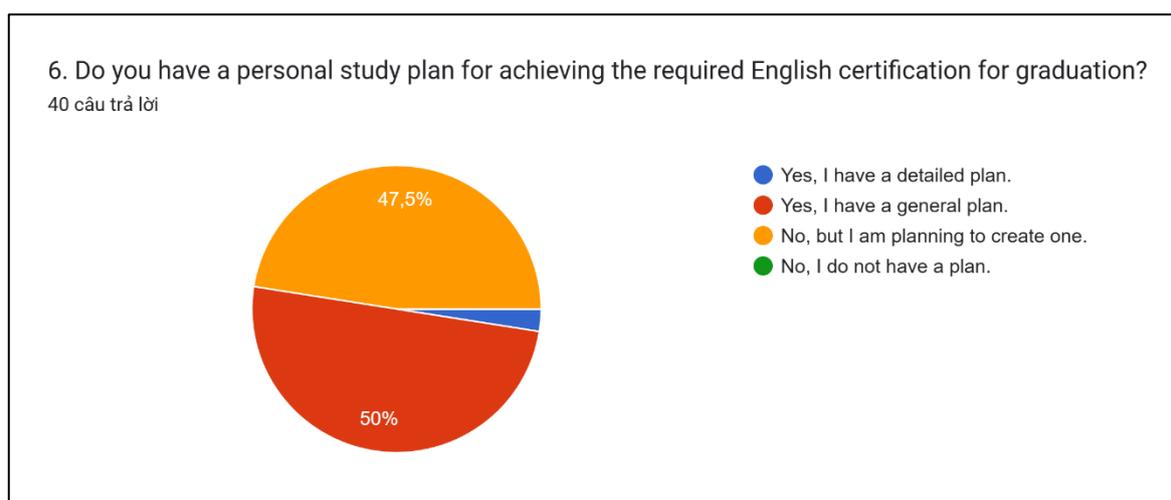


Figure 4. Attitudes Towards English Certification Preparation

The result shows that 2.5% of students have a detailed study plan for achieving their English certification, indicating a highly focused approach among a small subset. In contrast, half of the students have developed a general plan, suggesting a broad but structured approach to their preparation. Additionally, 47.5% of students do not yet have a plan but intend to create one, reflecting significant interest in organizing their study efforts in the future. These findings highlight that while a considerable number of students are actively planning or intending to plan their study efforts, there is a need for more detailed planning to enhance their preparation for English certification. This data underscores the importance of fostering comprehensive study plans to support students in achieving their language goals.

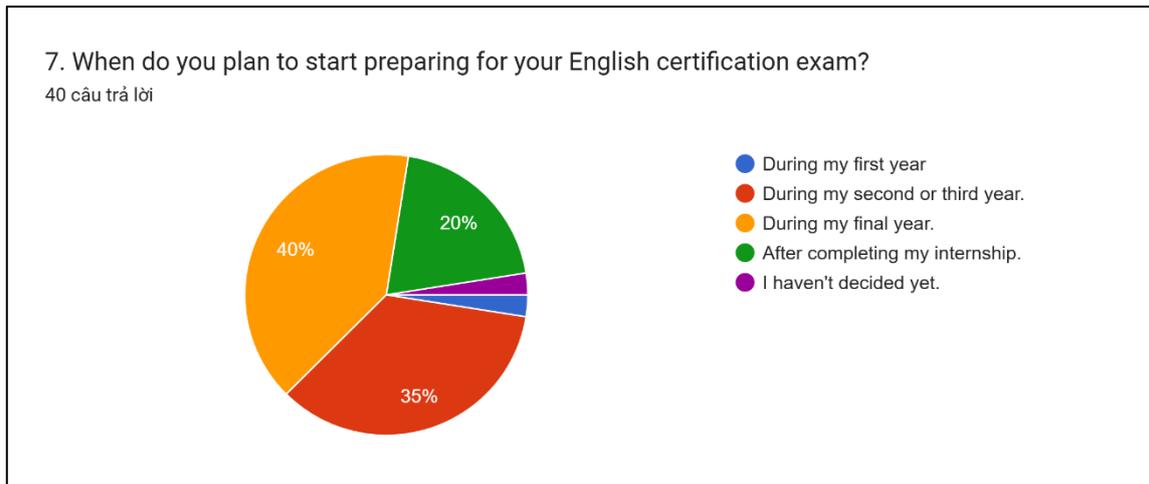


Figure 5. Timing of Students' Preparation for English Certification Exams

Figure 5 illustrates the timing of students' preparation plans for their English certification exams. According to the data, 40% of students intend to begin their preparation during their final year, indicating a trend toward starting their study efforts closer to the exam date. In contrast, 35% plan to start preparing during their second or third year, reflecting a more proactive approach in the intermediate stages of their studies. A smaller portion, 20%, intends to begin their preparation after completing their internship, suggesting that practical experience may be a priority before focusing on certification. Only 2.5% of students plan to start their preparation during their first year, and an equal percentage have not yet decided when to begin. These findings reveal a general inclination among students to prioritize their preparation in the later stages of their academic journey, with a notable number planning to start earlier. This data highlights the varying strategies students employ in planning their certification preparation and underscores the need for tailored support to address different preparation timelines.

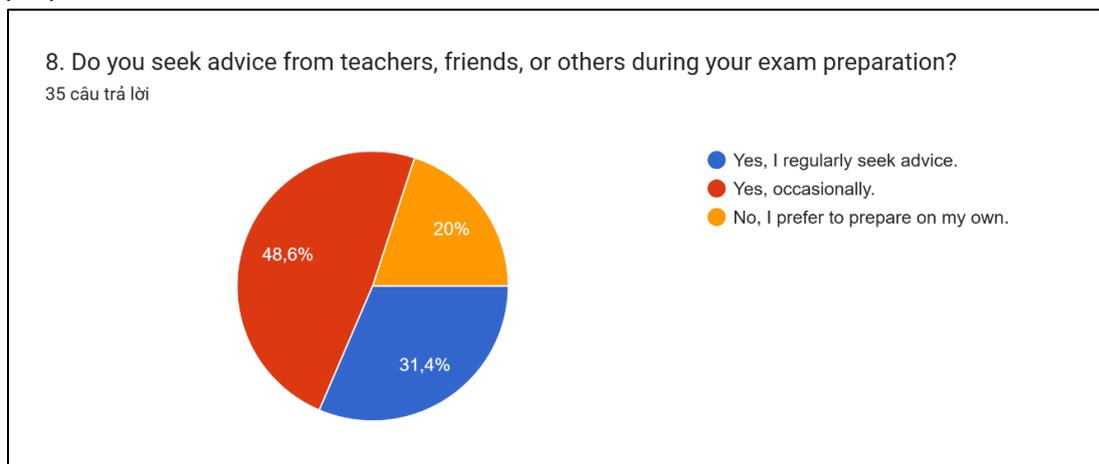


Figure 6. Frequency of Seeking Advice for Exam Preparation

Figure 6 illustrates students' tendencies to seek advice from teachers, friends, or others during their exam preparation. The data shows that 48.6% of students occasionally seek advice, suggesting they find external input helpful but do not depend on it regularly. In addition, 31.4% of students frequently seek guidance, indicating a more collaborative approach to their

exam preparation. Conversely, 20% of respondents prefer to study independently, without seeking external advice, highlighting a preference for self-reliance. These results indicate that while most students appreciate the benefits of seeking guidance during their exam preparation, a significant portion still favors independent study. This diversity in approaches underscores the importance of accommodating both collaborative and independent preparation methods when providing support for exam preparation.

Before analyzing the data in detail, it's important to recognize the varying levels of interest in different English language certifications among the respondents. Figure 6 highlights students' preferences for these certifications, aligning with their individual goals and plans. Understanding these choices provides insight into which certifications are prioritized by students and the factors influencing their decisions. This overview sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the motivations behind these preferences and their impact on language learning and career planning.

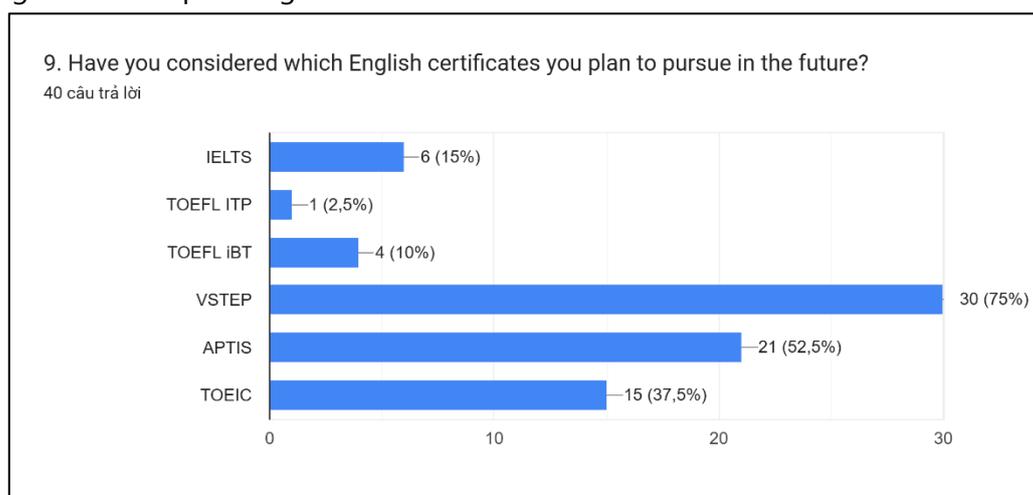


Figure 7. Comparative Popularity of English Language Certifications Among Survey Respondents

Figure 7 highlights the variety of English certifications that students are contemplating for their future goals. The data reveals that the VSTEP certification stands out as the most preferred, with 75% of respondents expressing their intention to pursue it. This preference suggests that students may view VSTEP as a practical and accessible certification option, likely due to its alignment with local educational and professional contexts. Following VSTEP, the APTIS certification is the second most popular choice, selected by 52.5% of students. This indicates a significant interest in a certification that is often recognized for its flexibility and comprehensive skill assessment, appealing to those who aim for a broad evaluation of their English proficiency.

TOEIC comes next, chosen by 37.5% of the respondents. The popularity of TOEIC likely reflects its widespread acceptance in the job market, especially in contexts where English proficiency is a valuable asset for career advancement. IELTS and TOEFL iBT were selected by 15% and 10% of respondents, respectively. These certifications, while less popular than VSTEP or APTIS, are often associated with students aiming for opportunities abroad or in academic settings where higher levels of English proficiency are required. TOEFL ITP is the least

considered option, with only 2.5% of students planning to pursue it. This lower interest could indicate that students perceive this certification as more challenging or less relevant to their immediate goals compared to other options.

These findings indicate a strategic selection of English certifications among students, influenced by their personal goals, perceived value, and relevance to their academic or professional contexts. The strong preference for VSTEP and APTIS among English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Technology suggests that these students may be heeding advice from their seniors. It appears they are opting for certifications that are deemed sufficient for graduation requirements without the necessity for higher-level English qualifications. This trend highlights a pragmatic approach, where students balance their aspirations with practical considerations, selecting certifications that align well with their immediate needs and the advice they have received.

4.1.4 Students' Perceptions of Their Role in Self-Directed English Learning in Different Contexts

Students' views on their responsibilities in self-directed English learning are reflected in their participation in various out-of-class activities. The survey explored how frequently students engage in activities such as using online resources or language apps for vocabulary and grammar practice, conversing in English with peers or native speakers, participating in group activities like English clubs and events, preparing for language proficiency exams such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and VSTEP, reading English texts like books, newspapers, and web articles, attending university-sponsored English courses and workshops, and performing regular self-assessments to improve their skills. This analysis sheds light on how students incorporate these practices into their learning routines and how they perceive their role in independently managing their education.

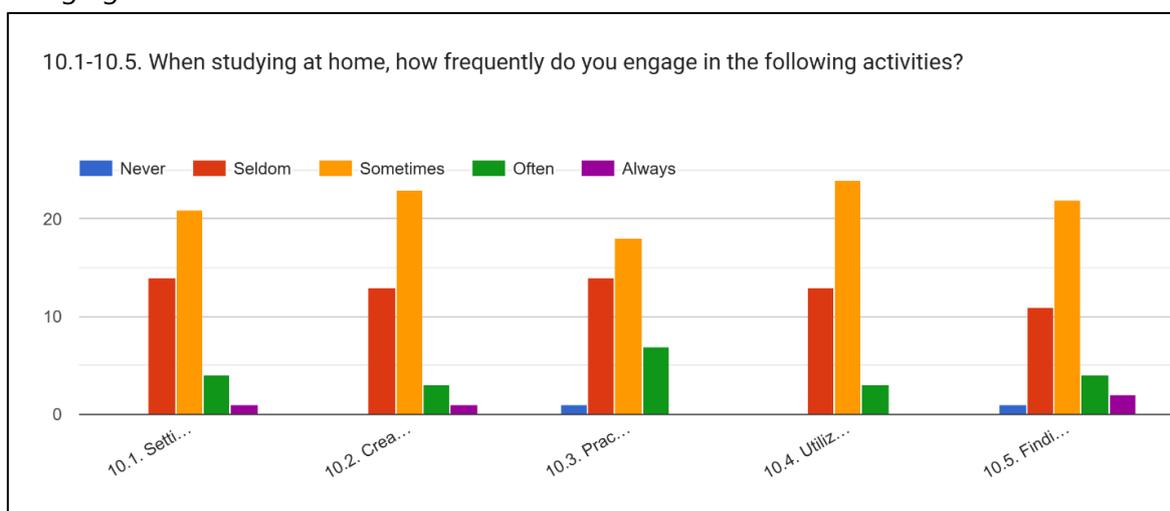


Figure 8. Frequency of Home Study Activities Reported by Survey Respondents

The data from Figure 8 highlights various aspects of students' engagement in home study activities related to their English learning. The survey data indicates that half of the students only occasionally set specific goals for their English learning, while 37.5% seldom do so. Only 2.5% of students always set goals, highlighting a significant gap in consistent planning

among the respondents. This sporadic engagement in goal-setting suggests that, although students are aware of its importance, they may lack the discipline or knowledge to implement it regularly. This trend among Vietnamese students reflects broader challenges in learning additional languages. Many Vietnamese students may not have been exposed to or trained in effective goal-setting practices, especially in language learning contexts. As a result, they might not fully appreciate how clearly defined goals can foster motivation and provide a structured pathway to achieving language proficiency. In comparison, students from educational systems where goal-setting is heavily emphasized might show higher rates of engagement in such activities, leading to more focused and effective learning outcomes.

The data shows that 55% of students occasionally create a study schedule or plan, and 35% do so rarely. Only a small percentage, 2.5%, consistently develop study plans. This indicates a tendency towards sporadic planning, which might lead to inconsistencies in study routines. Regular and well-structured study plans are crucial for effective time management and achievement of learning objectives, suggesting that more consistent planning could benefit student performance. For Vietnamese students, this tendency towards irregular planning could lead to inconsistencies in their study routines, potentially hindering their progress. A well-structured study plan is essential for effective time management, allowing students to allocate specific time slots for different learning activities, which can enhance their overall efficiency and retention. The lack of consistent planning among these students may reflect a broader cultural or educational context where independent learning strategies are not emphasized or developed early on.

The data indicates that 40% of students often practice English skills independently, like writing essays and speaking, while 35% do so sometimes. This suggests a relatively high engagement in independent practice, beneficial for skill development. However, 12.5% of students only occasionally engage in these activities, and another 12.5% rarely practice on their own. Encouraging more consistent independent practice is crucial, as it could significantly boost language proficiency and build self-reliance. This pattern is not unique to English learners; it aligns with a broader trend observed among Vietnamese students studying other languages. They often show enthusiasm but lack the habit of consistent practice outside structured settings, likely due to a preference for teacher-led learning. By fostering a culture of regular, self-directed practice, TNUT students learning different languages could achieve better outcomes and become more active learners.

The use of online forums or communities is another area of interest. Here, 40% of students use these resources sometimes, and 32.5% do so often. Although 17.5% rarely utilize such platforms, and 10% engage regularly, this indicates a generally positive trend toward leveraging online resources. Increased use of these platforms could provide additional support and exposure to varied English language contexts, fostering better language acquisition. The survey reveals that 55% of students occasionally seek out additional learning resources, and 30% do so frequently. However, only 7.5% consistently utilize these resources, while another 7.5% seldom engage with them. This indicates a missed opportunity, as more frequent and varied use of additional resources could significantly enhance the learning process. By

diversifying the types of resources they use—such as online materials, language apps, or English media—students can gain a deeper understanding and more rounded skills in English. This pattern mirrors a broader trend among Vietnamese students learning foreign languages, where the reliance on standard materials provided by instructors is often preferred over exploring supplementary resources. Encouraging a more proactive approach in seeking diverse learning tools could lead to more effective and engaging language acquisition, fostering a more comprehensive and self-directed learning culture among students.

The data reveals a mix of consistent and sporadic engagement in various home study activities. To enhance their English learning outcomes, students might benefit from adopting more regular and structured approaches to goal-setting, planning, and resource utilization. Encouraging greater consistency in these practices could significantly improve their learning experiences and outcomes.

4.1.5 Students' Engagement in Self-Directed Learning Activities During English Classes

This section evaluates how frequently students engage in various self-directed learning activities since starting university. It covers their involvement in activities like asking questions, speaking English in class, reflecting on feedback, setting personal goals, completing additional assignments, participating in discussions, and collaborating with peers. This analysis aims to shed light on students' perceptions of their responsibilities in self-directed learning and how actively they apply themselves to enhance their English skills. Specific results are shown in the following table:

Table 1 - Frequency of Student Engagement in various Classroom Activities

Attributes	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
Asking the teacher questions when you don't understand	0%	27.5 %	52.5 %	20 %	0%
Taking opportunities to speak in English inside the classroom	0%	40 %	52.5 %	7.5%	0%
Reflecting on feedback given by the teacher and peers to improve your learning	0%	17.5%	62.5%	12.5%	7.5%
Setting personal goals for each lesson	0%	35%	50%	10%	5%
Completing additional English assignments that are not required	2.5%	27.5%	62.5%	7.5%	0%
Actively participating in class discussions and sharing your opinions	2.5%	32.5%	42.5%	22.5%	0%
Collaborating with classmates in group projects or study sessions	0%	22.5%	60%	12.5%	5%

When examining students' engagement in asking the teacher questions when they don't understand, the data reveals a notable trend. A majority of students, precisely 52.5%, ask questions sometimes, indicating a moderate level of interaction with their teachers. This is complemented by 20% who frequently seek clarification. The absence of students who always ask questions may suggest some reluctance or barriers to full engagement in seeking help.

This hesitation could potentially hinder the learning process, emphasizing the need for creating a more open and encouraging environment for students to voice their difficulties.

Regarding opportunities to speak in English inside the classroom, the findings show that 52.5% of students seize these chances occasionally, while only 7.5% do so frequently. This uneven distribution suggests that while students are generally willing to participate, there might be limited opportunities or encouragement for regular speaking practice. The lack of students who always engage in speaking activities highlights a need for increased focus on creating a more interactive and supportive classroom atmosphere that fosters consistent verbal practice. Reflecting on feedback from teachers and peers is another critical aspect of the learning process. The data shows that 62.5% of students engage in this reflective practice sometimes. This is a positive indicator of responsiveness to feedback, although the smaller percentages of students who frequently (12.5%) or always (7.5%) reflect on feedback suggest that this practice could be more deeply ingrained in students' learning routines. Enhancing the emphasis on feedback integration could support more effective learning and improvement. The practice of setting personal goals for each lesson is moderately embraced by students. Half of the participants set goals sometimes, and a smaller segment, 10%, do so frequently. The small percentage of students who always set goals (5%) points to an area where more consistent application could benefit overall learning strategies. Goal-setting is a fundamental component of effective learning, and increasing its regular use could help students maintain focus and track their progress more effectively.

Completing additional English assignments that are not required reveals a varied approach among students. While 62.5% complete these assignments occasionally, only 7.5% engage in this practice frequently. The absence of students who always take on additional assignments might suggest a potential area for growth in encouraging students to extend their learning beyond the standard curriculum. Promoting the value of supplementary tasks could further enhance students' language proficiency and commitment to their studies. Active participation in class discussions is another key activity, with 42.5% of students engaging sometimes and 22.5% doing so frequently. This level of involvement is crucial for developing communication skills and enriching the classroom experience. However, the fact that only 2.5% of students always participate in discussions indicates an opportunity to foster a more engaging and interactive classroom environment. Encouraging more consistent participation could improve both individual and collective learning outcomes.

Collaboration with classmates in group projects or study sessions shows that 60% of students engage sometimes, and 12.5% do so frequently. This reflects a positive inclination towards teamwork and collective learning. However, the smaller percentage of students who consistently participate in group activities (5%) highlights a potential area for enhancing collaborative opportunities. Increasing the emphasis on group work could strengthen peer relationships and provide additional avenues for learning.

4.1.6 Students' Engagement in Voluntary English Learning Activities since University Entrance

Table 2 - Frequency of Voluntary Engagement in English Learning Activities Since Entering University

Attributes	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
Learning English vocabulary and grammar using the Internet or English learning apps	2.5%	22.5 %	60 %	10 %	5%
Actively practicing English speaking with friends or foreigners	0%	32.5 %	60 %	5%	2.5%
Joining collective activities and programs such as English clubs, English festivals	0%	30%	52.5%	7.5%	5%
Preparing for proficiency tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and VSTEP	0%	32.5%	55%	5%	7.5%
Reading English materials (books, newspapers, web pages, magazines)	0%	25%	55%	17.5%	2.5%
Attending courses and seminars in English provided by the university	0%	27.5%	62.5%	7.5%	2.5%
Conducting self-assessments periodically to improve skills	2.5%	32.5%	60%	2.5%	2.5%

For learning English vocabulary and grammar using the Internet or learning apps, the data from Table 2 shows that 60% of students engage in this activity occasionally, while 22.5% do so seldom. A smaller percentage, 10%, use these tools often, and 5% consistently integrate them into their learning routines. This widespread use of digital tools highlights their role in facilitating language learning, offering students the flexibility to enhance their vocabulary and grammar skills at their own pace. Despite the broad engagement, increasing the frequency of usage could further enrich the learning experience.

When it comes to actively practicing English speaking with friends or foreigners, 60% of students participate sometimes, and 32.5% do so seldom. Only a small proportion, 5%, engage frequently in this practice, and 2.5% always do so. This pattern indicates that while a significant number of students recognize the importance of speaking practice, it is not always a regular part of their routine. The occasional practice reflects an understanding of the benefits of interacting with proficient speakers, which is crucial for improving fluency and pronunciation. Encouraging more consistent engagement could lead to better language proficiency.

Joining collective activities and programs, such as English clubs and festivals, sees a mixed level of involvement. Here, 52.5% of students join these activities sometimes, while 30% do so seldom. Only 7.5% participate often, and 5% are consistently involved. This suggests that collective activities are valued by many students for their immersive learning opportunities and cultural experiences, though regular participation might be limited. The lower levels of frequent engagement may point to barriers such as time constraints or lack of awareness about the benefits of these activities.

In terms of preparing for proficiency tests like TOEIC, TOEFL, and VSTEP, 55% of students engage in preparation sometimes, and 32.5% do so seldom. A small fraction, 7.5%, prepare frequently, and 5% always do so. This data underscores that preparation for proficiency tests is a significant aspect of students' learning activities, reflecting their awareness of the importance of these assessments. However, increasing the consistency of preparation could improve their performance and readiness for these tests. Reading English materials, including books, newspapers, and magazines, is a moderately popular activity. Approximately 55% of students read these materials sometimes, while 25% do so seldom. Only 17.5% engage in this activity often, and 2.5% read consistently. This engagement shows an appreciation for diverse reading sources as part of language development, though more regular reading could offer greater benefits in vocabulary expansion and comprehension skills.

Attending courses and seminars in English provided by the university is another area of interest. 62.5% of students participate in these sessions sometimes, and 27.5% do so seldom. A small percentage, 7.5%, attend frequently, and 2.5% are consistently involved. This suggests that while students value formal educational opportunities, regular attendance might be influenced by factors such as scheduling conflicts or competing commitments. Increased participation could enhance their learning and integration of formal English instruction. Conducting self-assessments periodically to improve skills is an activity that 60% of students engage in sometimes, with 32.5% doing so seldom. Only a small fraction, 2.5%, consistently performs self-assessments. This indicates a general awareness of the importance of self-evaluation in tracking progress and identifying areas for improvement. More frequent self-assessment could foster a more proactive approach to personal development and skill enhancement. The data reflects a strong engagement with various voluntary English learning activities among students, with opportunities for improvement in consistency and frequency. Enhancing regular participation in these activities could contribute significantly to their overall language proficiency and academic success.

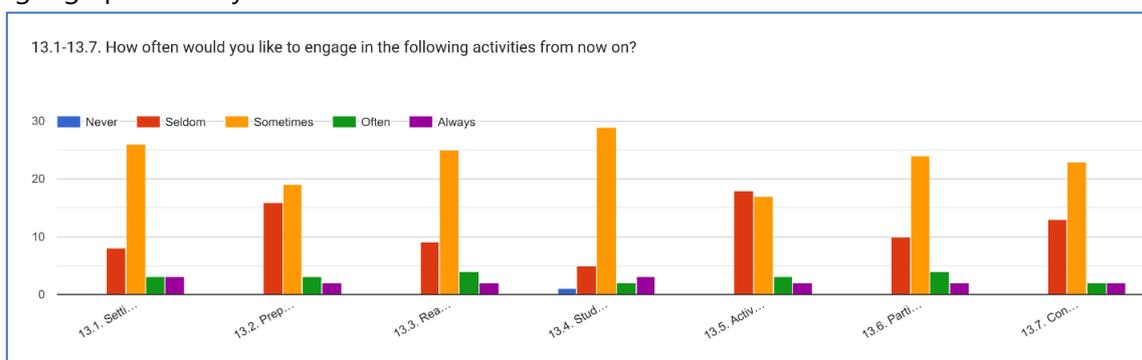


Figure 9. Frequency of Participation in Activities

This section explores participants' future engagement preferences in various English learning activities. Seven distinct activities were examined to understand how often students would like to engage in them going forward. These activities include setting personal learning goals, preparing for proficiency tests, reading English materials, studying vocabulary and grammar using online resources, practicing speaking English, participating in group activities, and conducting self-assessments. As can be seen from Figure 9, the responses provide insight

into students' anticipated levels of involvement in these areas, reflecting their priorities and interests in enhancing their English skills. Setting personal learning goals and monitoring your progress in English learning: When considering future engagement in setting personal learning goals and tracking progress, a notable trend emerges. More than half of the participants (62.5%) expressed a desire to engage in this activity sometimes, while 15% indicated they would like to do this often or always. This reflects a strong inclination towards structured self-monitoring, which can significantly enhance learning outcomes by providing clear objectives and measurable progress.

Nearly half (47.5%) of the participants would like to engage in this activity sometimes. Only a small fraction (12.5%) expressed a desire to prepare for these tests often or always. This suggests that while there is a substantial interest in test preparation, it may not be a primary focus for all students, possibly due to varying levels of urgency or personal goals. The desire to read English materials also shows a preference for occasional engagement, with 62.5% of participants indicating they would like to read these materials sometimes. This indicates that while there is interest in expanding reading habits, a significant portion prefers a moderate approach, likely balancing reading with other learning activities. A substantial majority (72.5%) would like to engage in this activity sometimes. This preference underscores the appeal of digital tools for language learning, likely due to their convenience and accessibility. However, a smaller portion of participants (12.5%) would engage in this activity often or always, suggesting a need for a more balanced approach to utilizing online resources. When it comes to actively practicing speaking English, 42.5% of participants prefer to do this sometimes. This indicates a preference for conversational practice but shows that consistent engagement (often or always) is less common. The data suggests a potential area for increasing opportunities for speaking practice, which is crucial for developing fluency.

Participation in group activities and events is favored by 60% of participants, who would like to engage in this activity sometimes. This shows a strong interest in social and immersive learning experiences, although only a smaller segment (15%) would participate often or always. Group activities provide valuable practice and cultural exchange, which can enhance language skills. Conducting periodic self-assessments to improve skills is desired by 57.5% of participants sometimes. This indicates an understanding of the value of self-reflection in language learning. However, fewer participants (10%) wish to engage in this activity often or always, which might suggest that while self-assessment is recognized as important, it may not always be integrated into regular learning routines.

4.1.7 Factors Affecting Self-Directed Learning Strategies in English

In this section, we examine the factors that influence and support self-directed learning in English, based on responses from the survey. Specifically, we analyze insights from three key questions: the main factors affecting students' self-directed learning, the most important factors supporting it, and suggestions for improving self-directed learning strategies. The responses provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and supports related to self-directed learning, offering a detailed view of students' perspectives on what impedes and enhances their ability to manage their learning effectively. This analysis aims to identify critical

areas that require attention and improvement to foster a more effective self-directed learning environment.

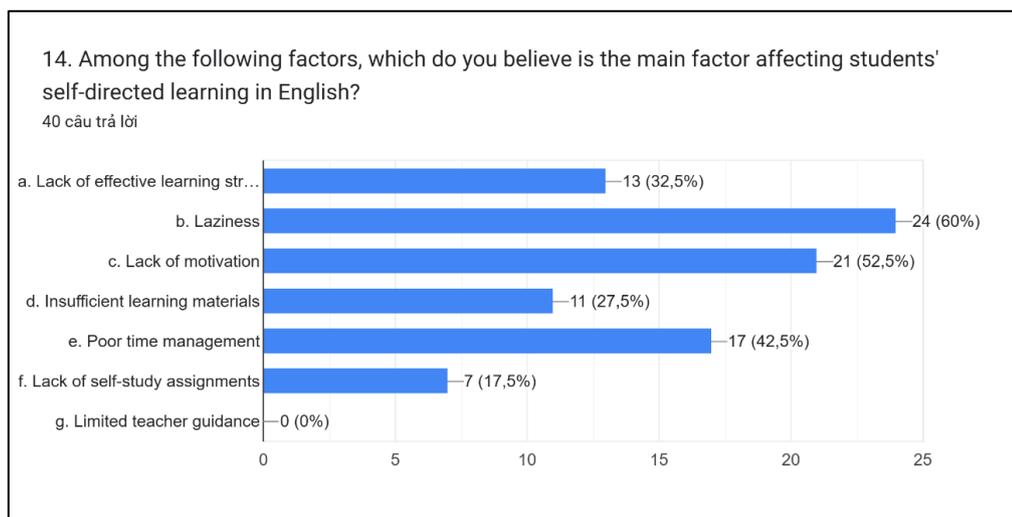


Figure 10. Barriers to Self-Directed Learning Among English Students

Data from Figure 10 reveal some negative factors affecting self-directed learning among English-major students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology. Laziness emerges as the most significant barrier, with 60% of respondents identifying it as a primary issue. This suggests a prevalent challenge in maintaining personal discipline and motivation among students. Following closely is the lack of motivation, noted by 52.5% of participants, which underscores its crucial role in effective self-directed learning. Poor time management, mentioned by 42.5% of respondents, is also highlighted as a critical factor, emphasizing the importance of efficient time use for successful learning. Insufficient learning materials and lack of self-study assignments are less frequently cited, at 27.5% and 17.5%, respectively. Remarkably, no respondents viewed limited teacher guidance as a significant issue, which may indicate that students are relying more on self-directed approaches or finding alternative forms of support.

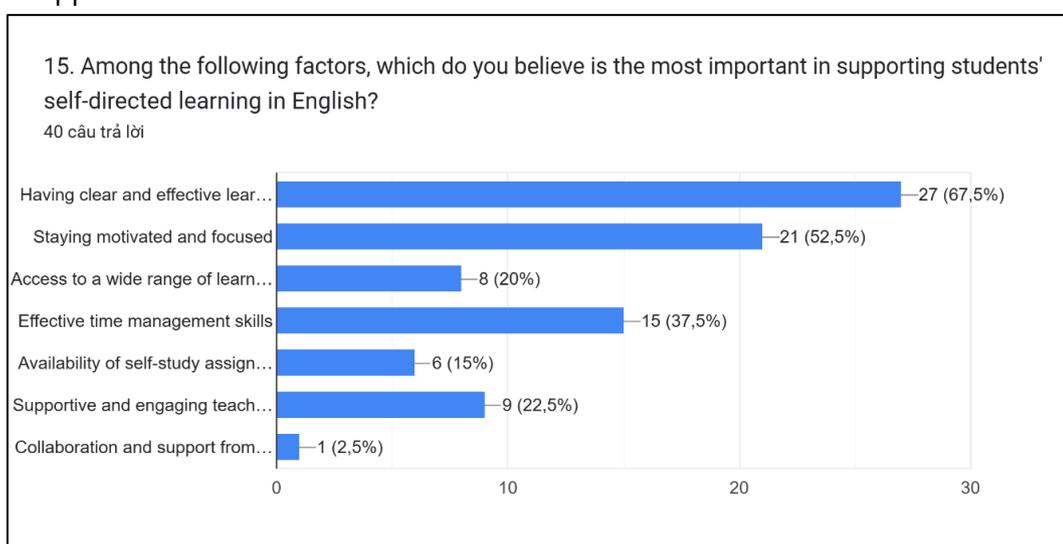


Figure 11. Factors Supporting Self-Directed Learning in English

As shown in Figure 11, regarding factors that support self-directed learning, personal motivation is highlighted as the most crucial element, reflecting its central role in fostering effective learning experiences. Effective learning strategies and sufficient learning materials are also deemed essential, indicating that having the right tools and methods is vital for success in self-directed learning. To enhance self-directed learning strategies, respondents suggest focusing on increasing motivation and providing better learning resources. Emphasizing the development of effective learning strategies and creating environments conducive to self-assessment and continuous improvement could address some of the identified challenges. Additionally, ensuring access to adequate resources and tools for self-study may further support students in their self-directed learning efforts.

The analysis of supporting factors for self-directed learning reveals a clear emphasis on certain elements. The most significant factor identified by 67.5% of participants is having clear and effective learning strategies. This highlights the critical role that well-defined and structured approaches play in facilitating successful self-directed learning. Another important factor, chosen by 52.5% of respondents, is staying motivated and focused. This indicates that personal motivation is essential for maintaining momentum in self-directed learning endeavors. Effective time management skills were also noted by 37.5% of participants, underlining the importance of organizing and managing time efficiently to support learning activities. In contrast, collaboration and support from peers received minimal attention, with only 2.5% of participants considering it a major support factor. This suggests that while peer support can be beneficial, it is not seen as a primary factor compared to individual strategies and motivation.

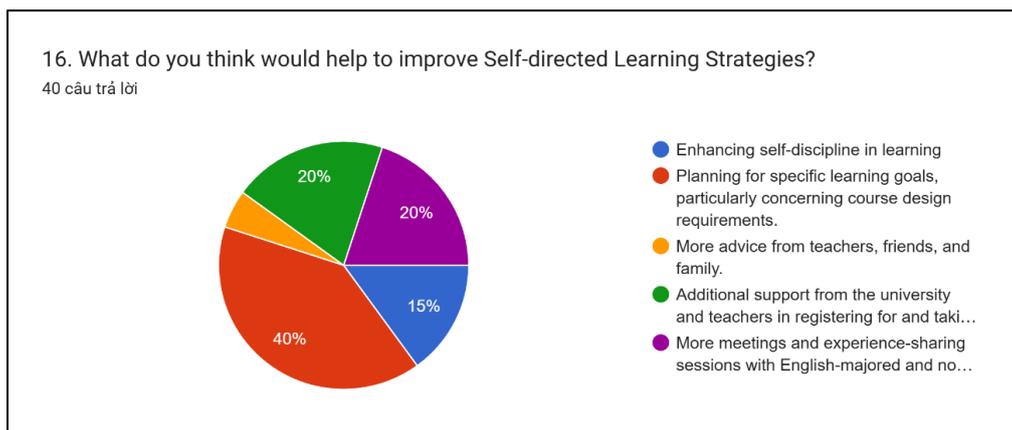


Figure 12. Students' Suggestions for Enhancing Self-Directed Learning

Figure 12 illustrates the responses regarding what would help to improve self-directed learning strategies. The analysis reveals several key areas of focus. Planning for specific learning goals, particularly concerning course design requirements, stands out as the most frequently cited improvement, with 40% of participants highlighting this factor. This suggests that students see a clear, structured approach to goal-setting as crucial for effective self-directed learning. Enhancing self-discipline in learning is noted by 15% of respondents, indicating that personal discipline is seen as a critical component for maintaining focus and motivation, which can significantly impact the effectiveness of self-directed learning.

Additional support from the university and teachers for English certification exams was mentioned by 20% of participants, reflecting a need for more structured assistance and guidance in navigating the certification process effectively. Similarly, 20% of respondents would benefit from more meetings and experience-sharing sessions with both English-majored and non-English-majored students. This suggests that peer interaction and sharing experiences are valued for gaining insights and support in preparation for certification exams. A smaller proportion, 5%, emphasized the need for more advice from teachers, friends, and family, indicating that while this is helpful, it is not considered as critical as the other factors. Interestingly, no respondents selected "Other," suggesting that the provided options comprehensively covered the main areas of concern for improving self-directed learning strategies.

4.2. Discussions

The comprehensive analysis of the survey results provides a nuanced understanding of factors affecting and supporting self-directed learning among students. Laziness emerged as the most significant barrier, followed by a lack of motivation and poor time management. This highlights critical areas where students struggle with self-discipline and maintaining focus.

In terms of supportive factors, clear and effective learning strategies and personal motivation were identified as the most crucial elements for successful self-directed learning. This underscores the importance of structured approaches and maintaining personal drive. To enhance self-directed learning strategies, students emphasized the need for better planning and goal-setting, greater self-discipline, additional support for certification exams, and more peer interaction. These insights suggest that while students recognize the importance of personal responsibility and structured strategies, they also value external support and collaborative learning environments. The survey results point to a strong inclination among students toward developing effective strategies and improving motivation. Addressing these areas, alongside providing additional support and opportunities for collaboration, could significantly enhance the effectiveness of self-directed learning among students.

4.2.1 Findings from the semi-structured interview

To obtain detailed insights into students' perceptions of self-directed learning in preparing for English certification exams, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with five students from four different classes (K55-K58). The interview guide included three core questions:

1. How important do you believe self-directed learning is for preparing for English certification exams? Please explain your reasons.
2. Which factors (such as personal habits, teacher support, or available resources) impact your ability to independently study for English certification exams? Can you describe their effects on your learning?
3. What recommendations would you give to enhance self-directed learning for students who are preparing for English certification exams?

During the interviews, the participants showed strong enthusiasm for the essential role of self-directed learning and its impact on their ability to study English independently. They also shared valuable suggestions for promoting self-directed learning, highlighting factors such as support from family and teachers, personal motivation, and other influences. From these discussions, three main themes emerged: the importance of self-directed learning in preparing for English certification exams, its effect on independent study skills, and practical recommendations for enhancing self-directed learning among students.

4.2.2 Importance of preparation for English Certification Exams

In examining the opinions of students regarding self-directed learning, it is clear that there is a strong consensus on its significance for preparing for English certification exams. The following responses reflect a broad agreement on the importance of this approach in achieving effective exam preparation. The feedback underscores how self-directed learning is perceived as a critical component in successfully meeting certification requirements. The subsequent section will delve into the specific opinions shared by students on the importance of self-directed learning:

- 1) Yes, I do think self-directed learning is important for preparing for English certification exams.
- 2) Yes, I believe self-directed learning is crucial for preparing for English certification exams.
- 3) I think self-directed learning is very important for preparing for English certification exams.

All respondents agree on the significance of self-directed learning in preparing for English certification exams. They highlight that it is a key element in achieving effective exam preparation, demonstrating a consensus on its importance.

The consensus on the importance of self-directed learning is not just a reflection of general agreement, but also supported by specific reasons provided by students. The following insights delve into the key factors that underscore why self-directed learning is highly valued in the context of preparing for English certification exams:

- 1) It helps me to take control of my study schedule and focus on the areas where I need the most improvement. I can choose the resources that work best for me and pace myself according to my own understanding. This flexibility is crucial, especially when balancing study with other commitments.
- 2) Because it allows me to set my own pace and focus on specific areas where I feel less confident. With self-directed learning, I can tailor my study sessions to fit my needs and adjust my strategies based on what works best for me. It also helps me become more independent and accountable for my progress.
- 3) It allows me to tailor my study approach to my own learning style and needs. Being able to choose what to focus on and when to study helps me stay motivated and makes my preparation more effective. Without it, I might struggle to keep up with a rigid schedule that doesn't fit my personal pace.

- 4) It gives me the freedom to focus on areas where I feel I need more practice and allows me to work at my own pace. It also helps me build the discipline to manage my own study time and resources, which is crucial for achieving my certification goals.
- 5) It allows me to customize my study plan according to what I need to improve. By managing my own schedule and choosing the materials I want to use, I can focus more on areas where I need the most help. This approach also helps me stay motivated and take ownership of my learning process.

Suffice it to say, these student responses reveal a clear and consistent recognition of the importance of self-directed learning for preparing for English certification exams. The feedback demonstrates that students view self-directed learning as essential for effective exam preparation, emphasizing its role in offering flexibility, personalization, and motivation. By managing their study schedules, selecting relevant resources, and focusing on individual needs, students feel better equipped to achieve their certification goals. This strong consensus underlines how self-directed learning not only enhances their preparation process but also aligns with their personal learning preferences and goals. The overall response indicates that students understand and appreciate the value of self-directed learning in achieving successful certification outcomes.

4.2.3 Factors affecting students' Self-Directed Learning for English certifications

Understanding the factors that influence students' ability to study independently is crucial for improving their self-directed learning experiences. Based on the survey responses, four main categories emerged: personal motivation, self-discipline, time management, quality of resources, and role of teachers. The following sections detail each factor with specific student responses, offering insights into how these elements impact independent study efforts.

Table 3 - Personal and External Factors Influencing Independent Study Effectiveness

Motivation, Self-discipline and Time management	Quality of Resources	Role of Teachers
Several factors influence my ability to study on my own. For example, my motivation and discipline are key—if I'm not motivated, it's hard to stick to a study plan.	The availability of resources, like practice tests and study guides, also affects my preparation. If I have good materials, it makes the self-study process smoother and more effective.	Teachers also play a role; their guidance can help me identify what to focus on, but ultimately, I have to apply that advice independently.
The main factors influencing my ability to study independently are my personal motivation and the quality of resources available.	Good resources, such as practice tests and study materials, are essential—they help me focus on the right areas and practice effectively.	While teachers can provide helpful feedback, I often have to rely on my own initiative to find and use the right resources effectively.
My personal motivation and time management are significant factors. If I'm not organized or	Having good resources, like practice exams and study guides, is also crucial because they help me understand the	While teachers provide valuable support, I often need to find and use these resources independently,

<p>motivated, it's hard to make progress.</p> <p>Several factors affect my ability to study independently. My personal motivation is crucial; if I'm not motivated, it's challenging to stay consistent with my study plan.</p> <p>My own time management skills and access to study resources are key factors.</p> <p>If I don't manage my time well, it's hard to keep up with my study plan.</p>	<p>exam format and practice effectively.</p> <p>Access to high-quality resources, such as practice exams and study guides, also plays a big role. These resources help me understand the exam format and practice effectively.</p>	<p>which can sometimes be challenging.</p>
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In brief, the responses highlight that personal motivation, self-discipline, time management, quality of resources, and the role of teachers are significant factors influencing students' ability to study independently. Personal motivation and discipline emerge as central to maintaining a consistent study routine and achieving progress. Quality resources, such as practice tests and study guides, are deemed crucial for effective preparation and understanding of the exam format. Teachers are recognized for their supportive role, but students often need to take the initiative in utilizing resources. Time management is also identified as a critical factor in maintaining an effective study schedule. This comprehensive analysis underscores that improving these factors can enhance students' self-directed learning experiences and contribute to their success in English certification exams.

4.2.4 Recommendations for improving Self-Directed English Learning

Based on the feedback from students, several insightful recommendations have emerged for enhancing self-directed learning in preparation for English certification exams. The suggestions address various aspects of the learning process, including strategies for improving self-direction, resources, and support systems. The following sections outline these recommendations and provide a summary of their potential impact on self-directed learning.

Enhancing motivation and accountability

- 1) Incorporating goal-setting strategies and regular self-assessments can help in maintaining motivation and tracking progress.
- 2) Providing incentives or rewards for achieving study milestones could boost motivation and commitment.
- 3) Encouraging self-reflection and journaling about study experiences could help in identifying strengths and areas for improvement.

Improving time management

- 1) I would benefit from learning more effective time management techniques to balance study with other commitments.
- 2) Workshops or tutorials on time management could help students organize their study plans more effectively.

- 3) Creating a structured study plan with clear milestones and deadlines would help in maintaining focus and progress.

Providing study resources

- 1) Access to a variety of quality study materials, such as practice tests and comprehensive study guides, would significantly improve my self-directed learning experience
- 2) Providing more interactive resources like online practice exams and mobile apps could help in keeping study sessions engaging and effective
- 3) Having more access to updated and diverse study materials would help in preparing better and staying motivated.

Support from teachers and peers

- 1) Teachers could provide more targeted feedback and suggestions for improvement to guide self-directed study efforts.
- 2) Forming study groups or having peer support systems can be very beneficial for sharing resources and motivation.
- 3) More regular check-ins or progress reviews with teachers could help in staying on track and addressing challenges.

The recommendations gathered from students provide valuable insights into enhancing self-directed English learning. First, students emphasized the need for incorporating goal-setting strategies and regular self-assessments to maintain motivation and track progress. Providing incentives or rewards for achieving study milestones could also boost motivation and commitment, while encouraging self-reflection and journaling could help identify strengths and areas for improvement. Additionally, students highlighted the importance of better guidance on time management, suggesting structured advice through workshops or tutorials to balance study with other commitments. Creating a structured study plan with clear milestones and deadlines would help students stay focused and maintain progress. Students also stressed the importance of improving access to diverse and high-quality resources, including interactive tools like online practice exams and mobile apps, which would cater to different learning styles and keep materials updated. Lastly, personalized feedback from instructors and opportunities for collaborative learning with peers were seen as crucial for offering additional support and motivation during self-directed learning.

These recommendations are aimed at contributing Thai Nguyen University of Technology in better supporting students in their English certification preparations. By addressing these needs, the university can help students achieve their certification goals more effectively, providing valuable insights for both educators and learners to foster a more supportive learning environment.

5. Conclusion

The research aimed to understand self-directed learning (SDL) strategies among English-major students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology and how these strategies impact their preparation for English certification exams. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative survey results with qualitative interview data to provide a

comprehensive analysis of SDL practices and their effectiveness. The analysis reveals that students largely acknowledge the value of self-directed learning in preparing for English certification exams. Most students agree that SDL is essential for effective preparation, as it enables them to customize their study methods, manage their own schedules, and concentrate on areas needing improvement.

However, the practical application of SDL among students shows a mixed picture. While nearly half of the students incorporate SDL strategies to some degree, the extent of their use varies. For example, about 60% of students occasionally use digital tools for learning English, but fewer students do so regularly. Likewise, involvement in activities such as speaking practice with peers or participating in English-related events is inconsistent, with most students engaging only occasionally. While students generally understand the importance of SDL, its implementation in practice is uneven. Roughly half of the students apply SDL techniques in specific activities, yet there is a demand for increasing the frequency and consistency of these practices. Enhancing the application of SDL could improve students' preparation for certification exams and their overall language skills, suggesting a need for more support and motivation to integrate SDL strategies more effectively into their study routines.

The findings indicate that personal motivation and self-discipline are crucial for successful SDL. Consistent with Moradi (2018), who emphasizes that "self-directed learning requires significant internal drive and organizational skills" (p. 59), the study found that students with high levels of motivation and self-discipline were more effective in managing their study routines and achieving their certification goals. This internal drive is essential for maintaining consistent study habits and overcoming obstacles in SDL. Access to quality resources also played a significant role in students' SDL experiences. Alghamdi (2016) notes that "effective learning materials are essential for enhancing self-directed learning" (p. 61). The study revealed that students who had access to comprehensive study materials and practice tests reported better preparation and performance. This highlights the importance of providing high-quality resources to support SDL.

Time management emerged as a critical factor influencing SDL. Hawkins (2018) points out that "self-regulation and effective time management are vital components of self-directed learning" (p. 447). Students who struggled with balancing their study time with other commitments often found it challenging to adhere to their study plans. This underscores the need for students to develop better time management strategies to enhance their SDL effectiveness. The role of teachers, although supportive, was often secondary to students' own initiatives. As Grover et al. (2014) suggest, "while teacher guidance is valuable, students must take proactive steps in utilizing resources and managing their own learning" (p. 14). The data indicated that while students appreciated teacher support, their SDL outcomes were largely influenced by their own efforts and initiatives.

The study highlights the importance of personal interest and motivation in cultivating self-directed learning (SDL) in English language learning. Through the semi-structured interviews, it became evident that students who are deeply engaged and passionate about their studies tend to be more effective in their SDL efforts. These interviews provided a

nanced understanding of how intrinsic motivation fuels students' commitment to their learning objectives. Participants revealed that integrating English learning with personal interests, such as hobbies and extracurricular activities, significantly enhanced their motivation and engagement. Furthermore, students expressed a desire for more individualized support from educators, suggesting that tailored resources and encouragement could further bolster their SDL practices. The semi-structured interviews also highlighted that while teacher guidance is appreciated, the most impactful SDL strategies are those driven by the student's own initiative and enthusiasm. This reinforces the view that motivation and personal interest are central to effective self-directed learning (Fahim, Bagherzadeh, & Hosseini, 2014; Hawkins, 2018). The study highlights the importance of Self-directed learning strategies in English language learning and how students apply them during their learning process. From such a vantage point, the researcher also appeals to fostering personal motivation, providing quality learning resources, and developing effective time management strategies to support SDL. The results from data analysis shed light on how students can improve their SDL practices and better achieve their certification goals. Hence, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of SDL in the context of English certification exams and offers valuable insights for both educators and students.

Implications for Enhancing Self-Directed Learning in English

The insights gained from this research have several significant implications for enhancing self-directed learning (SDL) among English-majored students. These implications are crucial for both educators and learners to consider as they work towards improving English language acquisition and certification outcomes. One of the primary implications is the need to cultivate intrinsic motivation among students. As noted by Alizadeh (2016), "motivation is a key determinant of successful language learning and directly impacts students' ability to engage in self-directed activities" (p. 2). To address this, educational strategies should aim to connect learning activities with students' personal interests and long-term goals. This could involve integrating more student-centered approaches that align coursework with real-world applications and students' future career aspirations.

Additionally, providing diverse and high-quality learning resources is essential for supporting SDL. According to Fahim, Bagherzadeh, and Hosseini (2014), "access to a variety of educational resources can significantly enhance learners' self-directed study practices" (p. 60). This means that institutions should invest in a range of resources, including digital tools, interactive platforms, and comprehensive study materials. Such resources not only support the learning process but also enable students to tailor their study approaches to their individual needs. Effective time management is another crucial factor that influences SDL. Grover, Miller, Swearingen, and Wood (2014) highlight that "the ability to manage time efficiently is a fundamental component of successful self-directed learning" (p. 15). Educators can assist students by offering guidance on developing time management skills, such as creating structured study plans and setting achievable goals. This support can help students better balance their academic responsibilities with other aspects of their lives.

Moreover, the role of teacher support should be seen as supplementary rather than central. Henter (2014) points out that "while teacher guidance is valuable, students must actively engage in their learning process to develop effective self-directed learning habits" (p. 375). This means that teachers should focus on facilitating rather than directing learning, providing resources and feedback while encouraging students to take initiative and responsibility for their own learning.

The integration of technology can further enhance SDL practices. Jeong (2022) suggests that "mobile-assisted language learning tools can provide flexible and accessible opportunities for self-directed study" (p. 2896). By leveraging technology, students can access learning materials anytime and anywhere, which supports continuous and personalized learning experiences. In summary, improving SDL in English learning involves fostering intrinsic motivation, providing diverse resources, developing time management skills, and leveraging technology. By addressing these areas, educators and students can enhance self-directed learning practices, leading to higher language proficiency and better preparation for English certification exams in the fulfillment of program outcome standards.

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Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest between the authors.

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