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Cultural Influences on Learner Autonomy from the Perspectives of Vietnamese EFL Learners

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By investigating Vietnamese English learners' perspectives on influential cultural factors and barriers these factors bring to the development of learner autonomy, this study seeks to draw attention to proper consideration of the host cultural values in importing and implementing Western educational theories. A phenomenological approach was employed, and qualitative data were collected from in-depth interviews with 15 English majored students from a public university in the Mekong Delta. Using Hofstede et al.'s (2010) six-dimensional model of cultural differences as a theoretical framework, the study reveals that all the six dimensions, at different levels, hinder the development of learner autonomy. The study also uncovers cultural assimilation - a state in which individuals perceive a certain cultural characteristic as their personality traits without any adjustment, corresponding to the Restraint factor. These results emphasize the significance of cultural analysis and imply the need for constructing a culturally appropriate pedagogy to promote learner autonomy. The paper concludes by discussing some possible directions for further research in the field.

Keywords: Assimilation, Cultural factors, EFL learner, Learner autonomy, Phenomenology.

Initiated by Holec in 1981 within the scope of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, the multifaceted concept of learner autonomy has increasingly attracted the academic circle from multiple perspectives over the past decades (Benson, 2007; Nunan, 2014; Reinders & Benson, 2021; Saeed, 2021). Primarily described as a democratic concept, learner autonomy refers to the "ability to take charge of one's learning," meaning that learners should have and hold "the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e., determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and

techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure [...]; evaluating what has been acquired" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Later, researchers like Little (1991) and Benson (2011) reached a consensus that learner autonomy indicates "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (Benson, 2011, p. 58). They agree that autonomy is not innate; it is obtained, naturally or intentionally, through purposeful and systematic ways of learning (Holec, 1981). Thus, it should be considered a goal of education rather than a method or procedure (Benson, 2011; Dickinson, 1994).

The concept was then argued to entail learner attitudes towards learning beyond the physical setting (Dickinson, 1994). Like learner ability, autonomy as a learner attitude is not an easily described concept given its multidimensionality (Little, 1991). Several dispositions have been mentioned typically self-confidence (Wenden, 1987), independence (Little, 1991), readiness (Dam, 1995), willingness, self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 2000), etc. Not all attitudes are indeed observable, and autonomy does not always entail exteriorized attitudes. However, learner autonomy involves learners' perceptions of their ability and freedom to learn and "beliefs and confidence - which are likely to both support and be supported by success in learning." (Palfreyman & Benson, 2019, p. 666).

Although Holec (1985) restated that autonomy should be considered as a capacity, other researchers started looking out of the classroom and describing autonomy as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions" (Dickinson, 1987, p. 11). This out-of-class-learning dimension of autonomy remains a current research trend (Reinders & Benson, 2021). Given that personal decisions must be made, considering social and moral norms, traditions, and expectations (Kohonen, 1992, p. 19), the freedom negotiated by autonomy is conditional and constrained by the socio-culture context (Little, 1991). This perspective has become one of the most challenging developments in the theory of learner autonomy since the 1990s - autonomy entails learner interdependence (Benson, 2011). Autonomy, in this view, is described as laden with cultural values that change over time, depending on context, and is socially mediated.

Like autonomy, the umbrella term 'culture' challenges an exact definition. It was described as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 2011, p. 1). Culture contains shared implicit assumptions, values, and beliefs influencing individuals' behavior and their interpretations of others' behavior (Spencer-Oatey, 2012). Although culture may not be the only incentive behind individuals' perceptions and behaviors, its massive impact on almost every aspect of human life is undeniable. Learner autonomy in language learning specifically is not exceptional.

Concerning cultural influences on autonomous learning, Riley (1988, p. 17) notes that learner autonomy with its characteristics seems to be more favored by certain cultures than others. The author, therefore, raises the issue of whether the cultural background of learners predisposes them to support or reject autonomous learning. This question was then extensively discussed in numerous studies in non-Western cultures (Barsi, 2023; Chan, 2001; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Palfreyman, 2003; Shebani, 2018; Trinh, 2005; Yasmin et al., 2018). Sharing specific traits with other Asian countries, the Vietnamese culture deserves to be scrutinized in terms of its influences on learner autonomy. Research in Vietnam has uncovered evidence of the lack of learner autonomy among many EFL learners (Duong, 2021; Le, 2013; Loi, 2016), which may be due to its inherent socio-cultural features. Furthermore, although several studies have taken

culture into account (Dang, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2006; Trinh, 2005), there has yet to be research that purely examines the influence of specific cultural features and their corresponding constraints on the development of learner autonomy. Regarding the central position of teachers in the context, studies on learner autonomy mainly focused on exploring teachers' perceptions and practices more than learners' voices (Roe & Perkins, 2020). To fill the gap in previous studies, this research aimed to explore the impact of Vietnamese cultural factors on the practicing of learner autonomy from the perspectives of English-majored learners. Specifically, two main research questions were addressed:

1. What cultural factors are perceived to influence the practicing of learner autonomy among English-majored students?

2. How do these cultural factors hinder learner autonomy among English-majored students?

Literature Review

In this section, we present Hofstede et al.'s (2010) Six-dimensional Model as the framework for identifying cultural influences on learner autonomy. The Vietnamese cultural features will be described along with each dimension. Then, we review related studies that examined how culture influences the practice of autonomous learning.

Hofstede et al.'s (2010) six-dimensional model and classification of Vietnamese culture

Hofstede et al.'s (2010) six-dimensional model of cultural differences is grounded in a strong research database. Based on cross-cultural research on more than 100,000 International Business Machine (IBM) Corporation employees in over 50 countries, the model was first introduced with four dimensions namely Individualism/Collectivism, Large/Small Power Distance, Strong/Weak Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity/Femininity (Hofstede, 1980). Later, replications of the IBM research were extended to 76 countries to strengthen evidence. In 1988, combined with the Chinese Value Survey in 23 countries, Hofstede and Bond (1988) added the fifth dimension called Confucian Dynamism. This dimension was later renamed Long-term/Short-term Orientation and published in *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (Hofstede, 1991). The sixth dimension, Indulgence/Restraint, was identified in cooperation with Minkov's World Values Survey of 93 representative national populations, leading to the six-dimensional model (Hofstede et al., 2010). In other words, the expanded model is extensively verified by a wide range of populations and cultures. Thus, despite its origination in business organizations, the framework has been considered relevant to other domains including language teaching and learning (Brown, 2000). In addition, by ranking and categorizing countries according to the obtained index in each cultural dimension, the framework provides a noticeable distinction between Western and Eastern ones, which contributes to clarifying the research problem in this study – Vietnamese cultural influences on learner autonomy. Following is the description of each dimension in which the key features of Vietnamese culture will be highlighted.

Large/small power distance. This dimension indicates the power distance between members of a community in which those with less power tend to tolerate and accept an unequal power distribution. In this dimension, the Vietnamese culture pertains to Large Power Distance (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 58). Vietnamese societal stability "is based on unequal relationships between people" (Nguyen et al., 2006, p. 5). In the educational realm, this feature is mirrored in the teacher-student relationships where teachers are highly respected both inside and outside

school, and learners are supposed to avoid any verbal or nonverbal misbehavior toward teachers (Trinh, 2005, p. 14).

Individualism/collectivism. This dimension refers to the degree to which individuals are supposed to be detached from or integrated into groups. Collectivism is a characteristic of Vietnamese culture, which signifies individuals' strong need for belonging to a community, loyalty, and emotional dependence on it (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 97). Accordingly, Vietnamese learners are traditionally depicted as passive learners (Dang, 2010, p. 3), being "the good listeners and good imitators of their teacher" (Trinh, 2005, p. 14) in "a class with little noise" (Nguyen et al., 2006, p. 7).

Strong/weak uncertainty avoidance. This feature indicates the extent to which individuals feel threatened by unstructured, ambiguous circumstances. According to Hofstede et al. (2010), Vietnam falls into Weak Uncertainty Avoidance, meaning that the Vietnamese are flexible, more likely to adapt to changed conditions, and easily tolerate deviance from the norm. However, related literature in education reveals some discrepancies. Specifically, Vietnamese learners are deemed to be "shy, reticent, lacking initiative" (Nguyen et al., 2006, p. 9), "precision-oriented, with a low tolerance of ambiguity" (Bui, 2017, p. 46), and "prefer structured tasks and are familiar with rote learning" (Trinh, 2005, p. 15). These coincide with Nguyen and Truong's (2016) description that Vietnamese employees prefer establishing formal rules and detailed operation plans to avoid possible problems at work.

Masculinity/femininity. This cultural facet indicates how a society views gender roles. Categorized as Femininity (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 143), the Vietnamese are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. This feature makes face saving extremely vital in society. At school, for the sake of group harmony, students appreciate a one-for-all mindset and prioritize indirect communication styles, showing greater concern for others' interests and feelings, and avoiding direct confrontations or conflicts (Nguyen et al., 2006).

Long-term/short-term orientation. This dimension represents how a culture addresses the challenges of the present and future, while maintaining connections with the past. Appreciating values oriented to future rewards, long-term-orientated cultures like Vietnam endorse "perseverance and thrift in achieving results" and pragmatic purposes (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 243). Vietnamese students generally view a university degree as a 'ticket' to ensure success in life (Bui, 2017). For them, time is limitless and adjustable, serving to meet their goals. Therefore, in daily life, most people are well-known for lacking formal planning, and endorsing "rubber time" (Nguyen et al., 2006, p. 12).

Indulgence/restraint. This aspect represents the degree to which people practice controlling basic human desires associated with enjoying life. Vietnam is classified as a Restraint culture (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 284), which indicates individuals' predisposition to curb and regulate their gratifications under the strict social norms. Consequently, in a group, Vietnamese learners tend to suppress their personal desires, avoid challenging or arguing with each other, and strive for mutual benefits (Nguyen et al., 2006, p. 7).

Related Studies

Attempting to answer the question of whether learner autonomy is ethnocentric, studies in this field go in two main directions: Exploring teachers' and learners' perceptions of Eastern

cultural barriers and examining the feasibility of implementing learner autonomy in non-Western settings.

Concerning teachers' perceptions, Yasmin et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study with 16 English teachers from four universities in Pakistan to explore some socio-cultural impediments in promoting learner autonomy. With in-depth interviews, the study revealed that power distance hindered learner autonomy, manifested in teachers' authority, bias towards learners, less tolerance for students' opinions, preference for traditional teacher-centered teaching style, and in learners' dependence on teachers. Likewise, a larger-scale qualitative study was conducted in Iran with 298 English teachers by Salehi and Farajnezhad (2021) using semi-structured interviews. This research reported the same hindrances and added shyness to work with peers of different sex as a cultural barrier. In Vietnam, Bui (2017) made room in her mixed-methods research on investigating 262 university lecturers' attitudes toward learner autonomy and influential cultural factors. Using Hofstede and Hofstede's (2005) five-dimensional model to assess the cultural influences, she found four of them namely Large Power Distance, Collectivism, Strong Uncertainty Avoidance, and Long-term Orientation accounted for teachers' authority, learners' dependency, learners' expectation of detailed instructions, and traditional teaching approaches. Teachers' authority and teacher-centered teaching were also believed by teachers to account for inactive learners' attitudes, which hinder the practice of learner autonomy (Loi, 2016).

Regarding learners' perceptions towards learner autonomy, a mixed-methods study with a survey questionnaire and follow-up interviews on 20 second-year English majors were conducted in Hong Kong by Chan (2001). The findings revealed that the authoritative backgrounds, examination-oriented education, the assessment system, and teacher-centered classrooms created obstacles to learner autonomy development. Under the influence of these factors, Hong Kong learners were characterized as dependent, shy, and passive. They had certain expectations of the teachers' roles, preferred detailed instructions, valued rote learning over creative ones, and lacked intellectual initiative. Sharing this concern, a quantitative study was conducted by Haque et al. (2023) in Saudi Arabia with 350 students in the English center of a public university. They explored cultural hindrances on learner autonomy such as learners' overreliance on teachers and lack of opportunities to express opinions or discuss their learning tasks. The researchers interpreted these barriers as the result of curricula, assessment systems, and the Islamic religion that led to gender-segregated training.

In Oman, Shebani (2018) employed Hofstede's (1980) four-dimensional model to examine cultural differences between 20 Omani learners and 10 Western teachers. The findings uncovered significant differentiations in all four dimensions that raised a concern for whether these cultural variations might contribute to difficulties in promoting autonomy among Omani learners. In North Cyprus, Barsi (2023) conducted a case study, using semi-structured interviews, retrospective self-reporting diaries, and group meetings to delve into perceptions of 15 instructors and 27 students regarding autonomy support and factors influencing learner autonomy. The study revealed five main influential factors including teacher and learner backgrounds, incompatibility between teacher and learner expectations, spoon-feeding instructions, restricted teacher autonomy, and large class sizes.

Empirical research has also been undertaken to examine the feasibility of implementing learner autonomy in Asian contexts. In Hong Kong, where learners were strongly influenced by hierarchy, harmony, and preoccupation with face, Ho and Crookall (1995) launched the

IDEALS project - a computer-mediated simulation that allowed participants to play the role of assigned nations with 21 first-year English students. The positive results allowed the researchers to conclude that although learner autonomy appeared to be hindered by some aspects of Chinese culture, it could be nurtured through participating in personal, meaningful, and real-world contexts. In Vietnam, despite all doubt of the inability to ameliorate learners' passiveness shaped by teacher-centered practices and product-oriented assessments, promoting learner autonomy resulted in positive outcomes in Trinh's (2005) empirical study with 100 university students. In this study, autonomous learning was encouraged through a designated task-based curriculum focusing on stimulating choices and interactions. Sharing the same concern, Dang (2010) adopted a sociocultural perspective to discuss studies on learner autonomy in Vietnam. After analyzing some cultural-specific features, he proposed a harmonious coordination between resources, educational practices, and persons targeted at facilitating learners' interactions and negotiations with the environment.

These studies reflect an intentional consideration of both educational and cultural issues in catering to learner autonomy. However, not all practices of Western educational concepts considered cultural differences. Due to failure to implement cooperative learning in Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) contexts, Nguyen et al. (2006) utilized Hofstede's (2001) five-dimensional model to evaluate its appropriacy and reconsider the problem. Their findings emphasized that ignoring, stereotyping, and underestimating cultural and educational characteristics in CHC countries have led these implementations to end up in suspicion or resistance. The authors, therefore, noted that it was crucial to conduct cultural analysis "to improve compatibility with the host culture" (p. 1) instead of viewing cooperative learning as culturally inappropriate in CHC contexts.

The literature review above uncovers three noteworthy observations. First, the implementation of learner autonomy further afield, especially in non-Western contexts like Asia, can be challenged and hindered by different cultural values. Second, despite the doubtful feasibility of promoting learner autonomy in Asian contexts, it is possible if a relevant cultural analysis is conducted. Finally, previous studies on cultural influences have used Hofstede's models, but no research has employed his six-dimensional framework as this present study did to explore how Vietnamese cultural factors influence the exercise of learner autonomy. This study may thus extend the literature on cultural influences and inform foreign language pedagogy.

Methodology

Drawing on the six-dimensional framework of Hosftede et al. (2010), this qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews as the key data collection method. Being designated to discovering phenomena, contextualizing findings, interpreting behaviors or intentions, and understanding perceptions (Ary et al., 2014), phenomenological research can make "new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied" (Aspers & Corte, 2019, p. 1). Phenomenology was chosen since it helped to determine ways of encountering and relating things in our world within the experience as perceived by the participants (Ary et al., 2014). Participants in the study have experienced over 10 years of learning English in the classroom setting where formal explicit instruction is emphasized. It is thus assumed that they would have sufficient experience about their roles as learners of English, and to some extent might have certain experience and expectations regarding learner autonomy. Finally, the semi-structured interview was selected

since it has the capacity to generate data density (ibid., p. 466). These characteristics highlight the appropriateness of the phenomenological approach to the purpose of this study.

Sampling and participants

English-majored students were chosen to be the target population in this research. In terms of the sampling method, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was employed. To strengthen the internal validity of the research, specific criteria were set to purposively choose participants, including gender, hometown, year, and specialization. Based on these criteria, one to two participants from each cohort were selected. These students would later introduce suitable candidates to take part in the research. This process continued until the saturation of the collected data was reached. As a result, 15 English-majored students, both English Pedagogy and Language Studies majors, volunteered to participate in the interviews. To maximize the variation of data collected, the above samples consisted of 7 males, and 8 females distributed across all 4 levels of the training program (4 freshmen, 4 sophomores, 4 juniors, and 3 seniors). They came from different provinces of the Mekong Delta; eight of them were urban residents while the rest came from the rural areas.

Interviews

The interview consisted of three sections with different functions: (1) Questions about personal information were posed as the warm-up stage; (2) Questions about the participants' perceptions of learner autonomy, including definition, importance, and examples of their autonomous learning were then inquired. Following this was a summary where the researcher restated the notion of learner autonomy to fulfill the samples' view on the issue, and to ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative data; (3) Questions about the participants' perceptions of influential cultural factors and their hindrances to promoting learner autonomy were finally asked. In this part, discussions were created on the participants' perceptions of each cultural factor and its influences on them as well as their autonomous learning. For ethical concerns, the participants were informed of the research purpose, and consent was obtained for participation and interview recordings. They had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. They also signed a written informed consent, which mentioned the possibility of publicizing their responses.

Data analysis

An inductive approach was followed to thematically analyze the collected data (Ary et al., 2014). This process included multiple times of reading the transcriptions, coding the texts, and reducing them into themes. For example, the following texts about the influence of Power Distance on learner autonomy were coded as (1) learners' nervousness or uneasiness and (2) learners' obedience. These two codes were later categorized as 'encouraging teachers' authority'. This theme represents the perceived cultural barrier to learner autonomy originating from the factor of Power Distance. The detailed thematic analysis was enclosed in Appendix 2.

"I have never asked any question in class, I do not know why, there is always a distance between me and the teachers that prevent me from asking" (1)

"Although some of the teachers' tasks or requirements are not very necessary, I am going to obey all of them." (2)

Concerning the researcher's bias, reflexivity was frequently applied in the form of writing down personal biases and reflecting on them at different periods during the research process, including choosing a design, conducting interviews, analyzing data, and writing up the research. Coder consensus was further reached between the authors to ensure the consistency of the coded data.

Results

Regarding validity and reliability, the second section of the interview intentionally explored the participants' perceptions of learner autonomy. The data revealed that they had a certain comprehension of learner autonomy. However, the notion of autonomy caused such a strong impression that no participants linked it to learner interdependence. They interpreted it primarily as learner ability to learn independently and learner attitude towards learning. Although all respondents acknowledged the crucial role of learner autonomy for their college life, they encountered obstacles to exercising it in the classroom.

Influential cultural factors - concept versus reality

Table 1 displays the results of the research question "what cultural factors are perceived to influence the practicing of learner autonomy among English-majored students?". Initially, the responses to the influence of cultural factors on learner autonomy were supposed to fall into two categories: 'yes' or 'no'. However, the findings turned out to be three, with the addition of one latent factor labelled *assimilation*. The significant distinction between these statuses was related to the levels of cultural influence. For determining the cultural influence, assimilation was interpreted as 'yes'. This data interpretation resulted in the perceived order in which cultural factors influencing English students' autonomy ranged from Uncertainty Avoidance (13/15), Restraint (11/15), Collectivism (10/15), Femininity (9/15), Power Distance (8/15) to Long-term Orientation (5/15).

Table 1. Influences of Cultural Factors From Participants' Perspectives.

Cultural factors	**Student responses**														
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15
Power Distance	√	√	no	ass	√	no	no	√	no	ass	no	√	√	no	no
Collectivism	√	√	no	ass	√	√	no	√	no	ass	no	ass	√	no	√
Uncertainty Avoidance	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	no	√	√	√	√	no	√
Femininity	no	√	√	√	√	no	√	√	no	no	√	√	no	no	√
Long-term orientation	no	no	no	√	√	√	√	no	no	no	√	no	no	no	no
Restraint	√	no	√	ass	ass	ass	no	ass	no	ass	no	ass	√	√	√

How do cultural factors hinder learner autonomy among Vietnamese English majors?

Regarding how these cultural factors deter the development of learner autonomy among the English majors in the study, the thematic analysis of interview data highlighted significant impediments consistent with each cultural dimension. They were arranged in the explored sequence as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Cultural Barriers to Learner Autonomy.

Cultural factors	Themes	Times mentioned	Participants
Uncertainty Avoidance	Minimizing chances for learning and development	36	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15
Restraint	Increasing tension and pressure	27	S1, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15
Collectivism	Generating dependence	27	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15
Femininity	Reducing performance and competitiveness	26	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S11, S12, S13, S15
Power Distance	Encouraging teachers' authority	22	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14
	Facilitating teachers' bias	15	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S9, S12, S14
Long-term Orientation	Decreasing intrinsic motivation	24	S1, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15

Minimizing chances for learning and development. Uncertainty surfaced in different forms, generally creating fear that led learners to refuse taking risks and remain in their comfort zone. This was how strong uncertainty avoidance was believed to minimize chances for learning and development. Discussing uncertainty, respondents described their learning experiences as not knowing the answer (S2), failing exams (S4), failing to obtain desired goals (S13), or staying unemployed after graduation (S1).

The results pointed out the three common fears that deterred students from taking risks, namely face loss, failure, and misjudgment. It was understandable when losing face was listed as the first threat since 'face' is always a delicate issue in Confucian cultures like Vietnam. The others were related to their hesitance to try something different or new.

> "Whenever I am in front of a crowd, it feels like every single action of mine is being observed…So if I do something wrong, many people will notice that. I will lose my face. I will not dare to do that." (S5)
>
> "I am afraid of failure, I wanted to study abroad but I was scared. I was afraid of not having enough financial support, the strange environment, fewer chances to find a job with my major, or what I would do when going back to Vietnam…They were all unsure." (S4)
>
> "We do not have many chances to express our ability to teachers. Sometimes, they just call us once, and if we answer incorrectly, we ruin our images." (S3)

These fears urged them to take actions to consolidate their comfort zone, including accepting truth as something absolute, ensuring success before starting, or doing nothing. As evidence, all interviewees concurred that they would opt for silence in class if it was a fifty-fifty unsure answer. At this point, the culprit was thought to be traditional spoon-feeding education.

Increasing tension and pressure. This hindrance was identified as the consequence of a Restraint culture. The data showed that all interviewees had to resort to self-restraint (from 30

to 80 percent) regardless of whether they perceived their autonomy to be affected or not. This factor was perceived to suppress their unique personality to meet social norms, striving for communal standards, and having little empathy. To illustrate, when asked if there was anything they wished they could do but could not, most respondents, except for S2, could immediately make a list, including dyeing hair (S3), wearing makeup to school (S2), singing Karaoke loudly (S15), or growing long hair (S11, male). These desires reflect the common fears of being different, and of negative judgments.

S14 mentioned striving to follow the majority: "It is like we are passively shaped in a certain pattern, really difficult to grow differently". S7 added that Vietnamese society often prioritized business or technology, which made social studies students feel alienated. Highly structured education was another illustration of this problem discussed by S9.

> *"*We only focus on the main subjects, ignoring arts or physical education. Different students have different strengths, and education should create suitable conditions to develop them. It is the only way to help students to express their whole potential, to live as they are."

"To live as they are" was also mentioned by S1. This basic need somehow had turned out to be suppressed by little empathy from others around. According to the interviewees, it could encourage shyness and reduce their need for relatedness. S15 expressed her feeling of a wall separating her from the rest, which "will gradually become communication barriers". "It feels like I am not being heard, it is no use talking, and I can change nothing. Keeping for myself day by day will form a habit: I do not feel like sharing." (S7)

Generating dependence. Collectivism, in the participants' views, was interpreted as living in groups, following their rules, and prioritizing collective rights. These features led the respondents to a consensus that collectivism could generate learner dependence which impeded their learner autonomy by enforcing them to follow the crowd, feeling more comfortable working in a peer group, and expecting guidance or support from others.

Firstly, following the crowd received 13 out of 15 participants' agreement. Dependency, at this point, was believed to originate from the inability to make personal decisions and repeat the collective defeat.

> "Collectivism decides individual thinking. It also shapes students' mindset toward learning. Taking collective standards as ours prevents us from thinking of any learning method of our own." (S1)

> "I will be scared. Then, instead of making my own decision, I will follow others, keeping in mind that many people have done that, so it must be right." (S15)

The second indicator of dependence is the feeling of comfort working in a cohesive peer group. S12 stated, "Eastern cultures see being alone as situations that should be avoided, like a sin. Thus, I have got to have my companions." S3 supposed that everything must be completed by at least two or three people working together while S4 said he could not communicate with strangers, which was a working obstacle. S6 shared her story,

> "Last semester, I had to take a class with all strange classmates. That was really boring, and I could not stop yawning, my score was also low then…I felt so lonely and even lost. I like studying with my peers, they make me feel joyful and safe, I feel like I am supported."

Learners' dependence was also manifest in their expectation of guidance and support from others. S7 said, "Learners are overwhelmed by the feeling that they cannot do anything without teachers. For example, they expect teachers' guidance and support in making all decisions related to learning. In some cases, they even ask how to do that and wait for teachers' instructions." S4 added that whenever there were difficulties, he immediately thought of asking for others' help. To explain this dependency, S6 talked about her safety pursuit, S15 mentioned the lack of personal standards, and S13 mentioned the reciprocal relationship among individuals in the community.

Reducing learner performance and competitiveness. Regarding learner autonomy, participants' stories pointed out that femininity could reduce learner performance and competitiveness due to the urge to maintain collective harmony. Staying humble, affable, and compromising to avoid argument was so common that S1 admitted, "Most students I know have the same feeling: fear of eyes or gazes from others, of standing out, or even of being better than the others. They fear being hated or losing friends." For the participants, it was described as caring for others' feelings and limiting disturbance to the lowest possible level. Discussing this feature, S7 told his story,

> "When I was in high school, I was not afraid of raising my voice. Not very rude but I always spoke up whenever I saw something wrong…Growing up, I think more about hurting or upsetting people and I am trying to limit them, to harmonize to a certain extent…It sometimes makes me uncomfortable, but if it is not unbearable, I will choose it over my discomfort."

Indeed, not only did S7 choose to compromise, but other respondents also stated the same situation: "It is better to avoid arguments while working together. As far as I am concerned, instead of solving the problems, arguments often end up separating or leaving." (S3), or "Whenever it comes to conflict, I will be the first to reach an agreement, even changing my ideas if needed. There will be discomfort since I think I am right, but it is okay concerning collective rights." (S6).

With these characteristics, femininity was depicted as a cause of psychological fear and insecurity (S12) that prevented learners from expressing their whole potential (S2), degrading themselves, and destroying their own motivation (S3).

Encouraging teachers' authority. Concerning Power Distance in education, it was supposed to hinder learner autonomy by encouraging teachers' authoritarianism through generating learner nervousness or uneasiness, obedience, and maintaining a teacher-centered model. S1 compared teachers to the Creator with all kinds of power, whereas S5 shared his persistent sense of teacher-student distance. All ten interviewees shared the fact that they were uncomfortable contacting teachers or inquiring about lessons. They feared interrupting teachers and requesting further clarification (S6). The conventional use of honorifics was also listed as a cause of communication uneasiness (S10).

For the participants, learner obedience resulted from teachers' power enforcement for the purpose of students' compliance with their instructions, and it seemed to be rooted in their schooling experiences. S2 told her story of a seventh-grade Geometry exam in which students were asked to demonstrate a given triangle. Despite having the correct answer, she got a zero point because of deviating from the teacher's problem-solving method. S12 admitted that

obedience was one of the untold regulations in class, while S3 and S5 reported having to do irrelevant activities and exercises unwillingly.

Lastly, four interviewees talked about the established practice of teacher-centered model: "They manage, they operate, they make decisions by themselves," S7 stated. "They impose learning in terms of content and thinking" (S12), "expand the teacher-student distance" (S8), and therefore, "become out-of-date regarding instructional methods" (S11).

Discussing the constraints teachers' authority brought to learner autonomy, S1 stated, "Sticking to the instructions can destroy our critical thinking. Besides, most students fail to connect theory and practice, which will lead to rote learning. And gradually, they will also lose their creativity".

Facilitating teachers' bias. Power Distance further facilitated teachers' bias, which constrains learner autonomy. Back to the story of S2's Geometry exam, after receiving the news, her father was so angry that he intended to complain to that teacher. However, her mother stopped him, listing all the possible drawbacks, and they finally decided to keep silent. According to the respondents, teachers' bias was present in unfair assessments and subjective judgments.

Nine participants showed consensus on the fear of unfair assessments. Among teachers' rights, assessment was considered the most threatening weapon by the participants as it directly affected learners' results, credits, or even the future (S2). Data showed that teachers' assessment bias originated from various causes, namely students' disrespectful behaviors (S5 and S10) or attitudes (S1 and S2), disobedience (S2, S3, S5, and S14), questioning or arguing (S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5), and even pinpointing teachers' mistakes (S1, S2, S4, S6, and S9). Unexpectedly, learners' efforts not to irritate the teachers might result in barriers to the developing of their autonomy.

> "The problem is that we do not dare to speak up, we fear being victimized, of receiving low grades. Remaining silent can gradually constrict our critical thinking." (S1)

Another signal of teachers' bias was teachers' judgments on appearance and qualification. Regarding appearance, some taboos in class were mentioned, typically wearing make-up, untied hair (S2), tattoos (S3), etc. Qualification judgments related to students' lack of competency to complete a certain task. Some interviewees confessed that the threat of being labelled 'foolish' or 'heedless' prevented them from inquiring (S2, S7, and S8). S3 mentioned the impact of teachers' negative judgments on learners as follows.

> "When I was 12 or 13 years old, I attended a piano course. After my second class, the teacher told me that I had pretty short fingers, started learning pretty late and she could see that I was not gifted. Going home, I decided to quit learning." (S3)

This consequence was described by S7 as the Pygmalion effect, according to which high expectations could improve performance in a certain area, and low expectations, in contrast, might lead to the worse. Thus, he noted that inconsiderate judgements on learners' incapability of a task would result in their failure.

Decreasing learners' intrinsic motivation. Long-term orientation was claimed to result in learners' demotivation which hindered learner autonomy. It was interesting to discover the dream jobs the interviewees listed, including fashion designer (S1), chef (S4), artistic work (S5), master of ceremony (S14), and architecture (S15). To explain these career deviations, they cited several reasons that have to do with the Long-term Orientation influence. For

example, they had to follow the predetermined long-term goals of their families, instead of making their own decisions. It was a way to maintain the family tradition (S15), avoid family conflicts (S5 and S11), or even solve their disorientation (S8). The problem of these orientations was defined as being arbitrary, unrealistic, and not diversified (S1 and S5). Sticking to such rigid goals could demotivate learners (S7).

In fact, the students' choices of English were based neither on their interest nor their strengths. Six participants confessed that they were not interested in English, but they chose it for better financial and employment prospects, and five of them except for S1 remained dispassionate after a long period of studying. As S6 said,

> "I was a gifted Literature student, but my teacher said that it could not bring me much money. English would be better. Besides teaching, I would have more chances for work. Many other people share this thought and to some extent, I think so too. So, I chose English as my major. I find this phenomenon popular in our society, not only me."

This unvoluntary choice made her regret seeing her friends studying Literature. S8 admitted that her energetic trait was not suitable for teaching which she labelled as 'a boring job', whereas S5 still lingered for artistic works. These negative emotions kept reducing their intrinsic motivation for the English major.

Consequently, 12 out of 15 participants confessed that they were confused about their long-term direction. At this point, ambiguity came from the unspecified and vague goals, and they had no idea of how to actualize them.

> "My long-term goal is that I have a happy family and that I get a job, earning enough to live and care for my parents. I know that it is too general. It is unclear, too. And I sometimes wonder about its realization." (S6)

> "I aim at earning a lot of money. That is my dream and my objective. But to tell the truth, I find it hard, unsure, and unrealistic now. This fact discourages me. I feel lost." (S4)

In addition, given the fact that a long-term goal meant there was still a long way to go, it was seen to activate the learners' laziness and diminish their determination (S1 and S10).

Assimilation - when culture meets personality. Hofstede et al. (2010) described culture as mental programming comprising three levels. Therein, human nature refers to inherited traits that determine an individual's physical and psychological functioning. These traits will later be modified by culture and finally shape personality.

Based on this description, assimilation is interpreted as the state when individuals perceive certain learned characteristics of a culture as their personality traits without any adjustment. They assimilate cultural factors as truth, take their existences for granted, and comply with their obligations. This process makes assimilation the highest level regarding cultural influence. For example, S4 illustrated this assimilation in Power Distance:

> "With all the power in their hands, teachers have complete authority, but I think it is natural. And I have no problem with that; it is reasonable to put power in teachers' hands. They are more knowledgeable, so it is obvious that we must obey them."

Sharing about her restraint, Student 6 said,

> "I think that I must restrain a lot, in almost everything from my way of talking to behaving or dressing. It started when I was a child, and I am used to it. So, there is nothing wrong with me so that others can judge. My parents will also be happier since I am not so different from the others…Whenever I choose to restrain myself, I do not think about what I can lose, just know that I must control it."

In the data, assimilation appeared 11 times (2 with Power Distance, 3 with Collectivism, and 6 with Restraint) among 6 participants. With such a dominant frequency, restraint was perceived to be an assimilation factor.

Discussion

The results of this study are significant in that all the six cultural dimensions described by Hofstede et al. (2010), at different levels, bring barriers to learner autonomy, with Uncertainty Avoidance in the first place. The finding regarding this dimension, however, reveals noteworthy evidence that does not support the categorization of Vietnam into Weak Uncertainty Avoidance, confirming some previous depictions (Bui, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2006). Possible explanations for this divergence are the research time and participants. The past decades since Hofstede et al.'s investigation have witnessed numerous social, economic and technological changes; culture is not exceptional as it is dynamic and subject to external influences. Also, all participants in this study are university students with different experience from organization employees of the original survey. Perhaps, Vietnamese culture could be better interpreted as moderate uncertainty avoidance (Nguyen & Truong, 2016) because depending on situations, Vietnamese require various levels of certainty and formal planning.

Regarding how Vietnamese cultural factors influence learner autonomy, uncertainty avoidance is believed to minimize learners' chances for learning and development because of their risk avoidance and attempts to consolidate their comfort zone. This finding is aligned with previous studies (Barsi, 2023; Chan, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2006). Considering Hofstede et al. (ibid.), cultural impediments associated with strong uncertainty avoidance involve students' expectation for structured learning situations and teachers' right answers; their belief in the absolute truth and attribution of success to effort. Additionally, the fear of failure leads learners to favor tasks with clear instructions and minimal risks. Eastern cultures are supposed to have more strict social norms which prevent learners from stepping out of their comfort zone.

These social norms have to do with the Restraint factor since they are claimed as reasons for increased tension and pressure among learners, in line with previous studies (Salehi & Farajnezhad, 2021; Yasmin et al., 2018). In these studies, the lack of teachers' tolerance towards learners' different opinions is considered short-sightedness that impedes autonomous learning. As Student 1 reflected, the transition from a full-of-question child to a quieter or even silent adult was "the consequence of self-restraint." This constraint could also be a consequence of collectivism. To prioritize collective rights, individuals must control their egos to comply to certain communal standards without any tolerance for personal differences.

Collectivism generates dependence that impedes learner autonomy, a finding congruent with previous research. Yasmin et al. (2018) conclude that learners' dependency on teachers arises from such familiarity with spoon-feeding instruction that they expect to be told everything. Likewise, for Haque et al. (2023), learners' over-reliance on teachers can possibly hinder all their initiatives to learn autonomously. Collectivism is one of the distinctive characteristics of

Vietnamese culture, so its influences on students' behaviors are undeniable. This dependency is also linked with Femininity and Large Power Distance.

Femininity culture which maintains harmony as part of Confucious values may hamper the promotion of learner autonomy. This study affirms that trying to stay humble, affable, and compromising to avoid debates can cause learners to be shy, passive, and indecisive. These characteristics are considered to decrease learner performance and competitiveness. The finding concurs with the study of Ho and Croockall (1995) which points out that it is difficult for learners with discouraging autonomous backgrounds to develop relevant capacity or resist actively taking responsibility for autonomous learning.

Power distance is also inherent in learner dependency and spoon-feeding education cited as deterrents to the practice and development of learner autonomy, which is strongly supported by previous research (Barsi, 2023; Chan, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2006). Power distance encourages teachers' authoritarianism and bias whose outcomes involve learners' nervousness or anxiety, obedience, lack of initiative, and demotivation. These all reflect the predominant teachers' role which impedes the practice of learner autonomy (Ho & Crookall, 1995). Yasmin et al. (2018) stress that while the teacher-student distance affects effective teaching, teachers' bias may badly demotivate learners. It can be concluded from this discussion that the power inherent in teachers' predominance has a discouraging effect on learner autonomy.

Ranked at the bottom, the long-term orientation factor was perceived to have the least influence on learner autonomy. The research results uncover the influence of pragmatic goals and family traditions on students' career choices in contrast to their own interests. This cultural factor is associated with the negative emotions generated by parents' imposition on career choices, ignoring learners' strengths or interests, and unclear learning goals. These negative feelings are believed to decrease learners' intrinsic motivation. Salehi & Farajnezhad (2021) explain that EFL learners may experience different anxiety or negative emotions during their learning process, and autonomous learners are able to successfully deal with those feelings. Chun et al. (2021) argue that it is time to reexamine Hofstede's model. Considering their study, the clash between students' desires and family decisions possibly reflects a shift in long-term orientation-related values affected by modernization and economic and social changes. Collectivism oriented towards the majority and hierarchy may further enforce learners' unwilling obedience as well (Bui, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2006).

Regarding assimilation, three noteworthy points can be observed. First, concerning its cause, respondents' attribution that it was either what they were taught or their awareness of themselves as part of the community reflects the remarkable characteristic of culture; it is learned, shared, and transmitted from generation to generation. Second, culture contributes to shaping personality (Hofstede et al., 2010), and personality, in turn, has impacts on learner autonomy. When a certain cultural factor and personality are assimilated, it seems impossible for learners to identify its influence. They are no longer outsiders to observe; they represent that cultural factor. Therefore, the "no" responses of participants in terms of cultural influences are in fact a big "yes". Lastly, assimilation, to a certain extent, is like learned helplessness - the phenomenon explored by Seligman & Maier (1967). In his experiment, the animals, after enduring repeated unpleasant experiences beyond their control, discontinued attempts to escape or avoid the above conditions even though they were capable of it. These two phenomena coincide in terms of acceptance of their powerlessness and putting an end to all

escape initiatives. Once assimilation appears, any attempt to remove the assimilated cultural factor's barriers would require more time and effort.

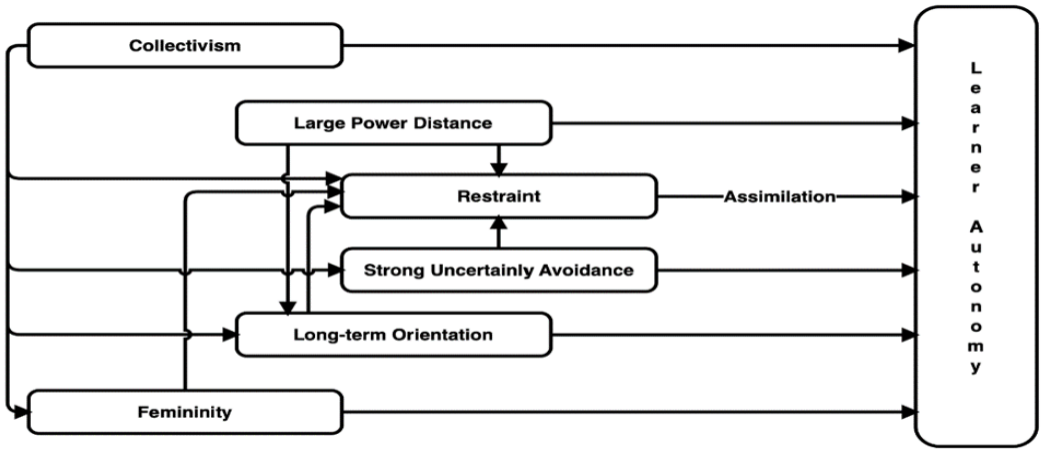

Figure 1. The Conceptual Map of the Influence of Vietnamese Cultural Factors on LA.

In summary, what emerges from this discussion is that, according to English language students' perspectives, Vietnamese culture with its distinctive features has generated some hindrances to the practicing and developing of learner autonomy. For each obstacle, one relevant cultural factor was pointed out as the reason. These cultural factors, in their turn, stay in a reciprocal relationship, complementing and influencing each other. The perceived interdependence of cultural factors and their influence on learner autonomy are illustrated in Figure 1.

Conclusions

By discussing influential cultural factors as well as their constraints, this paper does not claim that promoting learner autonomy is impossible in the Vietnamese context. The current research, on the other hand, is at pains to emphasize the significance of host cultural analysis in implementing educational guest notions, and thereby imply the need for constructing a culturally appropriate pedagogy to foster autonomy among Vietnamese students. The study contributes to the current literature in two ways. First, it proposes a new sequence of influential cultural factors ranking from Uncertainty Avoidance, Restraint, Collectivism, Femininity, Power Distance to Long-term Orientation as well as their interdependence. This finding is significant in terms of generating a need to re-examine Hofstede et al.'s (2010) model in the present time for an updated and reflective view on cultural influences on learner autonomy. This will serve as a firm foundation to adjust and design appropriate curriculum to foster learner autonomy based on the indicated cultural obstacles. Second, assimilation is not a cultural factor; it is the emerging state of learners into that cultural factor. Within that submissive state, it is not the learner who perceives the cultural hindrances, but it is the researcher who observes assimilation as a barrier to promoting learner autonomy. Further exploration of assimilation may provide a more comprehensive understanding of cultural influences.

Despite all attempts to ensure the reliability and internal validity of the study, limitations are unavoidable. The research validity could be enhanced by triangulation. By using only in-depth interviews, the findings of this research are more likely to be transferable rather than generalizable. As a result, although this study introduces a new sequence of influential cultural factors, it is arguable to generalize that Vietnamese culture is characterized as Strong

Uncertainty Avoidance or Short-term Orientation. This study ends up providing further insight, paving the way for subsequent research. Further research on this topic involving quantitative data is highly recommended to triangulate and generalize the findings. In addition, empirical studies are encouraged to examine culturally appropriate pedagogy as a vital step toward promoting learner autonomy.

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Appendix

The interview

Section 1: Greetings

Section 2: Learner autonomy

1. What comes to your mind when you hear the word learner autonomy? Could you give a definition of it?
2. In your opinion, is learner autonomy important? Why?
3. What do you think are the desired qualities of autonomous learning?
4. About your autonomy, are you confident with it? Why? Could you illustrate your autonomy by providing specific examples of your own learning?

Reconfirm the term and state the rationale of the study.

Learner autonomy is the ability to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning, i.e., determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition; and evaluating what has been acquired. This definition reveals that readiness, motivation, competitiveness, independence, self-confidence…are some qualities to promote learner autonomy. In implementing this notion, it has been questioned that Eastern cultures, embedded with Confucianism, created some barriers to learner autonomy. This is the main focus of this study.

Section 3: Vietnamese six cultural factors and their influences on learner autonomy

In this section, each cultural factor was discussed regarding the participants' understanding of the cultural factors, their impacts and the barriers they bring to the practicing of learner autonomy.

Thematic analysis

Theme name	Codes		Times mentioned	Participants
1. Encouraging teachers' authoritarianism	1.1 Nervousness/uneasiness		**10**	S2, S3, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S13
	1.2 Obedience		**8**	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S12, S13, S14
	1.3 Teacher centered model		**4**	S7, S8, S11, S12
2. Facilitating teachers' bias	2.1 Fear of unfair assessments		**9**	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S9, S12, S14
	2.2 Teachers' objective negative judgments		**6**	S2, S3, S4, S7, S8, S12
3. Generating dependence	3.1 Follow the crowd, lack of independent thought and action		**13**	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S10, S12, S13, S14, S15
	3.2 Only comfortable with working in peer group		**6**	S3, S4, S6, S7, S10, S12
	3.3 Expecting guidance and support from the others		**8**	S4, S6, S7, S9, S10, S11, S13, S15
4. Minimizing chances for learning and development	4.1 Refusing taking risk for fear of	4.1.1 Being laughed at/losing face	**11**	S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S10, S11, S12, S15
		4.1.2 Failure	**10**	S1, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S11, S13, S14, S15
		4.1.3 Being misjudged	**5**	S3, S5, S7, S8, S15
	4.2 Trying to consolidating comfort zone		**10**	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S14, S15
5. Reducing performance & competitiveness	5.1 Staying humble		**10**	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S7, S11, S12, S13, S15
	5.2 Stay affable		**7**	S1, S2, S4, S5, S7, S8, S12
	5.3 Compromising to avoid displeasing or argument		**9**	S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S12
6. Decreasing intrinsic motivation	6.1 Getting stuck with a long- term goal which was predetermined by their family		**6**	S1, S4, S5, S7, S8, S11
	6.2 The choice of their long-term goal based on neither their interest nor their strength		**6**	S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S11
	6.3 Being confused about their long-term goal		**12**	S1, S3, S4, S6, S7, S8, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15
7. Increasing tension and pressure	7.1 Limiting personal differences to meet social norms		**13**	S1, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S13, S14, S15
	7.2 Trying to qualify majority's standards		**7**	S1, S3, S4, S7, S9, S12, S14
	7.3 Having little sympathy reduces their need of relatedness		**7**	S1, S3, S4, S7, S13, S14, S15
8. Assimilation	Perceiving cultural factor as personality without adjustment or modification		**11**	S4, S5, S6, S8, S10, S12

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