**INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING ON THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF FOURTH-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT THU DAU MOT UNIVERSITY**

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# Abstract

The study investigates the impact of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) on the academic performance of fourth-year English majors at Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU). Rooted in Knowles’ (1975) SDL theory, the research explores how students engage in various stages of SDL including diagnosing learning needs, setting goals, identifying resources, designing learning plans, and evaluating learning outcomes, and how these stages relate to academic achievement, measured by GPA. A quantitative research design was employed, using a questionnaire distributed to 94 students. The findings reveal that students demonstrate a generally high level of SDL, particularly in areas such as identifying learning resources and designing learning plans. Spearman correlation analysis indicated a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between overall SDL and GPA. Notably, goal setting, diagnosing learning needs, and designing learning plans showed the strongest correlations with academic performance. These findings suggest that fostering strategic SDL skills can enhance learning outcomes. The study concludes with pedagogical recommendations for integrating SDL into language curricula and calls for further research with more diverse samples and mixed methods to deepen understanding of SDL’s role in higher education.

***Keywords****:* self-directed learning (SDL), academic performance, GPA, English majors

## Introduction

## *1.1.  Background to the study*

In today’s globalized world, English language proficiency has become an indispensable skill for academic achievement, international collaboration, and professional success. As globalization drives the demand for multilingual and cross-cultural competencies, English majors in non-native English-speaking countries face increasing pressure to acquire not only linguistic competence but also independent learning skills to keep pace with the demands of the global workforce (Alisoy, 2025). However, traditional teacher-centered instructional approaches often fall short in cultivating the autonomy, problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking skills necessary for effective and sustained language learning, particularly at the tertiary level (Arboleda, Rodríguez, & Iza, 2024).

In response to the growing need for learner autonomy, self-directed learning (SDL) has emerged as a key educational paradigm in higher education. SDL emphasizes the learners’ active role in identifying their own learning needs, setting goals, selecting appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating outcomes. Knowles (1975), a leading figure in adult learning theory, defines SDL as a process whereby learners take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying resources, choosing and implementing strategies, and assessing the results. SDL not only promotes independence and lifelong learning but also equips learners with the metacognitive and motivational strategies needed to manage increasingly complex academic and professional tasks.

In the context of language education, SDL plays a particularly significant role. Language acquisition requires sustained engagement with authentic materials, real-world application, and continual self-evaluation that are difficult to achieve in highly structured, teacher-dependent environments. For English majors, particularly those in their final year of university study, the ability to engage in SDL is not merely beneficial; it is essential. SDL fosters habits of inquiry, reflection, and self-regulation that support both in-class performance and long-term language development. Despite its acknowledged importance, the implementation and impact of SDL among English majors in Vietnamese universities in general and at Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU) in particular especially in the final year of study remain insufficiently investigated in empirical research.

***1.2. Reasons for Choosing the Topic***

While numerous international studies have highlighted the positive relationship between SDL and academic achievement (Yang & Jiang, 2014; Khalid, Bashir, & Amin, 2020; Alotaibi, 2016), most Vietnamese research on SDL has focused on general education or specific fields such as nursing or pedagogy (Dao et al., 2023). The field of English linguistics, particularly at the advanced undergraduate level, has received limited attention. Moreover, there is a lack of research specifically targeting how senior English majors in Vietnam engage with SDL and how such engagement influences their academic performance, measured by GPA or similar indicators. This gap in the literature presents both a theoretical and practical need to investigate SDL within this learner group and educational context.

Fourth-year students are at a critical stage in their academic journey, where they are expected to transition from teacher-guided learning to independent knowledge construction. Understanding how they practice SDL and how it relates to their academic outcomes can provide valuable insights for curriculum designers, educators, and learners themselves. The present study was therefore conceived to fill that empirical gap and to contribute to the development of effective, student-centered pedagogical strategies in English language education in Vietnam.

***1.3. Objectives of the Study***

The present study aims to investigate the extent to which fourth-year English majors at TDMU engage in SDL, as well as to examine the relationship between their SDL behaviors and academic performance, as measured by their Grade Point Average (GPA). Specifically, the research seeks to:

Examine the frequency and manner in which students engage in different components of the SDL process, including diagnosing learning needs, setting goals, identifying resources, designing learning plans, and evaluating learning outcomes.

Analyze the correlation between students’ self-reported SDL behaviors and their academic performance to determine whether higher levels of SDL are associated with better academic outcomes.

***1.4. Research Questions***

*1. To what extent do fourth-year English linguistics students at TDMU engage in SDL processes?*

*2. How does SDL impact the academic performance of these students?*

***1.5. Significance of the Study***

The significance of the study lies in its potential to contribute to both theory and practice in language education and learner autonomy. First, by focusing on senior English majors at a Vietnamese university, the study adds context-specific data to the broader field of SDL research. Second, the findings may provide actionable recommendations for integrating SDL more effectively into the English language curriculum, particularly at advanced levels of instruction. By identifying which components of SDL most strongly correlate with academic success, educators can tailor teaching strategies to emphasize those aspects, ultimately fostering more autonomous, motivated, and high-performing learners.

Furthermore, the study will be beneficial to students themselves, who may gain awareness of how their self-regulated learning behaviors affect their academic outcomes. By understanding which SDL practices are most effective, students can take more responsibility for their learning, enhancing both their current academic performance and their preparation for lifelong learning and professional challenges.

Finally, the findings may serve as a foundation for further research, both within Vietnam and in comparable educational settings, by providing a transferable model for examining SDL in relation to academic performance.

***1.6. Scope and Limitations of the Study***

The present study is confined to a specific group of fourth-year English majors at TDMU, thus limiting the applicability of the findings to other disciplines, year levels, or institutions. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data collected through questionnaires, which may be subject to biases. Academic performance is measured using GPA, which may not capture all dimensions of academic success. Despite these limitations, the study provides a focused and meaningful exploration of the relationship between SDL and academic achievement in a relevant and timely educational context.

1. **Literature Review**

***2.1. Theoretical Framework***

The theoretical foundation of the present study is built upon Knowles’ (1975) theory of SDL, which is rooted in the concept of adult learning theory, an approach that emphasizes the learner’s agency, autonomy, and self-regulation, particularly in adult education. According to Knowles, SDL is a structured process in which individuals take initiative in identifying their learning needs, formulating goals, locating resources, implementing strategies, and evaluating outcomes, with or without external assistance.

This process can be divided into five distinct steps:

**Diagnosing learning needs:** Learners assess their current knowledge and skill levels to identify areas of deficiency. This includes both self-assessment and gathering feedback from peers or instructors.

**Setting learning goals:** Once needs are identified, learners set specific, measurable, and attainable goals aligned with academic or professional requirements.

**Identifying learning resources:** Learners determine the appropriate materials, tools, or human resources (e.g., teachers, peers) that can support their goals. These may include textbooks, academic journals, digital platforms, or collaborative networks.

**Designing learning plans:** Learners create structured plans to guide their learning, considering their unique styles, schedules, and objectives. This stage emphasizes strategic thinking and planning.

**Evaluating learning outcomes:** Learners reflect on their progress by comparing outcomes to initial goals. Evaluation may involve formal assessments, peer feedback, or self-reflection.

Learners often revisit earlier steps based on ongoing reflection and feedback. This emphasis on learner autonomy and self-regulation has made Knowles’ theory a central pillar in adult education and lifelong learning frameworks.

In addition to Knowles, other scholars have contributed to broadening the conceptualization of SDL. Garrison (1997), for example, proposed a comprehensive model that integrates cognitive, metacognitive, and motivational components, thus reinforcing the multidimensional scope of SDL. Similarly, Candy (1991) emphasized the role of intentional and critical reflection in SDL, while Towle and Cottrell (1996) argued for SDL’s role in cultivating lifelong learners, particularly in professions that demand continuous knowledge updates.

From a pedagogical standpoint, SDL is more than a skill set, it is a philosophy of learning that supports personal responsibility, intrinsic motivation, and active engagement. In higher education, this is particularly relevant as students are increasingly expected to take ownership of their academic journeys in preparation for careers that require adaptability and continuous self-improvement.

In the present study, Knowles’ five-step SDL model serves as the guiding framework for the development of the research instrument and the analysis of students’ learning behaviors. It provides a clear, structured lens through which to examine the relationship between students’ SDL engagement and their academic performance.

***2.2. Previous Studies***

Globally, there has been a growing body of research investigating the effectiveness of SDL in various educational contexts. These studies have explored its impact across disciplines such as medicine, nursing, and general education, particularly within higher education institutions.

Visiers-Jiménez et al. (2022) conducted a large-scale cross-national study involving graduating nursing students. The research found that students in multiple countries consistently demonstrated high levels of SDL ability, suggesting that SDL is a universally relevant and achievable goal in tertiary education.

Yang and Jiang (2014), in a study conducted in China, found that SDL readiness was a strong predictor of professional competency in nursing students. Their findings emphasized the importance of integrating SDL into curricula to enhance students’ practical and theoretical skills.

Similarly, Khalid, Bashir, and Amin (2020) compared SDL in online versus traditional learning environments. They found that distance learners exhibited significantly higher SDL scores and academic performance due to the necessity of autonomous engagement in online learning. This aligns with Gabrielle et al. (2006), who reported that students with access to web-based learning platforms showed greater readiness for SDL and higher grades.

In the field of educational theory, Baumgartner (2003) conceptualized SDL as not only a learning strategy but also a personal attribute and a developmental process. He emphasized the need to cultivate SDL to foster empowering learning, especially in adult learners.

Chou and Chen (2008) analyzed six empirical studies from the US and Asia and reported mixed results regarding the correlation between SDL and academic achievement. While some studies supported a strong positive relationship, others highlighted contextual variables such as learning culture and institutional support that moderated SDL’s effectiveness.

Other researchers such as Cazan and Schiopca (2013), Tekkol and Demiral (2018), and Khiat (2017) found that SDL was positively associated with academic performance and lifelong learning attitudes. These studies also suggested that SDL correlated with key personality traits such as conscientiousness and openness, which further contribute to academic success.

Collectively, these international studies establish SDL as a critical element in educational success. However, they also emphasize the importance of context-specific research to explore how SDL manifests across different disciplines, cultural settings, and institutional frameworks.

In Vietnam, research on SDL has gained momentum in recent years, though much of it focuses on general education or specialized fields such as nursing and teacher education.

Nguyen (2021) emphasized the significance of SDL in improving research competencies among university students. Her findings showed that students trained in SDL techniques were better equipped to engage in independent scientific research.

Dao et al. (2023) investigated SDL competence among students at Hanoi Pedagogical University 2. Their study revealed that cognitive and metacognitive elements of SDL had significant correlations with students’ GPA. Students demonstrated a frequent level of SDL engagement, especially in planning and information management.

Nguyen Ngoc Diem et al. (2023) explored SDL readiness among nursing students at two Vietnamese universities. Their study found that while students expressed a strong desire to learn, they often lacked essential self-management skills. The authors highlighted the need for targeted interventions to address these gaps.

Do and Nguyen (2021) conducted a study among 1,132 undergraduate students and found generally positive SDL abilities. However, challenges persisted in selecting appropriate learning strategies, maintaining motivation, and using learning resources effectively.

These studies contribute to the understanding of SDL within the Vietnamese context but also highlight the uneven integration of SDL across disciplines. Notably, there is a lack of empirical research focusing specifically on English majors, especially at the advanced undergraduate level, where SDL becomes most critical.

***2.3. Research gaps***

Although extensive international research has affirmed the value of SDL in improving academic outcomes across diverse disciplines, there remains a notable lack of empirical studies that examine how SDL functions specifically within the field of English linguistics particularly in the context of Vietnamese higher education. While previous Vietnamese studies have explored SDL in general education, pedagogy, and healthcare-related fields; little attention has been paid to how fourth-year English majors engage in SDL processes in their language courses. This gap in the literature underscores the need to investigate to what extent fourth-year English linguistics students engage in SDL.

Moreover, both domestic and international studies have tended to focus on SDL readiness, attitudes, or general competency levels, rather than offering a comprehensive analysis of how specific SDL behaviors influence measurable academic outcomes such as GPA. This is particularly critical for senior students who are transitioning into independent learners and preparing for graduation. The absence of robust, data-driven investigations into the impact of SDL on academic performance among English majors in Vietnam limits our understanding of how autonomous learning behaviors contribute to student success in language education.

Additionally, although international studies have begun to incorporate factors such as self-efficacy, motivation, and resource management into SDL frameworks; these variables remain insufficiently examined in Vietnamese contexts. Few studies have examined how local institutional, cultural, or pedagogical dynamics influence SDL effectiveness among English language learners.

1. **Methodology**

## *3.1. Research site and population*

### The study was conducted at TDMU in Vietnam, focusing on fourth-year English linguistics majors. These students represent a critical group, preparing for graduation and expected to demonstrate high levels of SDL. Their experience offers valuable insight into how SDL influences academic outcomes.

The population of the current research consisted of 94 senior students enrolled in the English Linguistics program during the 2021-2025 academic period, providing a focused and representative data set for the research objectives.

***3.2. Research design***

A **quantitative research design** was adopted in the current research to explore the relationship between SDL and academic performance. This approach enabled the researcher to measure and analyze patterns in SDL behaviors and GPA using statistical methods.

## *3.3. Data collection instruments*

For the present study, the main data collection instrument was a questionnaire survey comprising three main parts namely demographic information, the current state of GPA and the current state of SDL engaged at TDMU.

The first section of the questionnaire consists of demographic information, containing five closed-format questions designed to collect essential data about the respondents.

The second section of the questionnaire containing question about academic performance through self-reported cumulative GPA on a 10-point scale. GPA scores were measured on a 10-point scale divided into 4 categories including < 5.0, 5.5–6.9, 7.0–8.4, and 8.5–10.0. The second section provided an overview of participants academic performance to establish a basis for examining potential relationships between academic performance and other variables.

The third section evaluates the SDL behaviors of students based on Knowles’ (1975) five-step model, which includes diagnosing learning needs, setting learning goals, identifying learning resources, implementing learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. A self-constructed questionnaire was developed with 14 items, 5 sub-scales corresponding with Knowles’ 5 steps in SDL, and utilized a Likert five-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Undecided, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree). The overall SDL score was calculated as the average of 14 items, while sub-scale scores were derived from three items for steps 1, 2, 3, and 5. Step 4 included two items.

## *3.4. Data collection procedures and analysis procedures*

### ***3.4.1. Data collection procedures***

Data was collected through an online survey using Google Forms over four weeks. Participants were invited through a combination of academic communication channels (school’s emails) and social media platforms (Zalo and Messenger), with informed consent obtained prior to participation and all responses collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality.

Before participating, all respondents were provided with detailed information about the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection process.

### ***3.4.2. Analysis procedures***

A total of 94 questionnaires were collected from the research participants. The raw data was screened and processed using Excel software. The responses gathered from Google Forms typically come in a raw format, necessitating further processing before they can be used for statistical analysis. Excel is employed during this stage to standardize data formats including dates, numbers, and text responses, as well as to reclassify categorical variables for consistency. Furthermore, Excel enables researchers to generate basic summaries, such as means, medians, and frequency counts, while organizing the data into relevant categories or groups. The filtered data were then processed and analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were utilized to compute the mean score and standard deviation for each item on the SDL scale, thereby facilitating an assessment of the participants’ SDL levels.

GPA data were utilized to categorize students’ academic performance into specific ranges. To assess the relationship between SDL and learning outcomes, Spearman correlation analysis was employed to identify a simple linear relationship between two variables.

1. **Results**

***4.1. SDL Engagement Among Fourth-Year English Majors***

To address the first research question, descriptive statistics were used to assess students’ engagement with SDL across five key dimensions namely diagnosing learning needs, setting learning goals, identifying learning resources, designing learning plans, and evaluating learning outcomes. The overall mean SDL score among the 94 participants was 4.05 (SD = 0.56) on a five-point Likert scale, indicating a relatively high level of SDL engagement among fourth-year English majors at TDMU *(see Table 1)*.

Among the five SDL components, “Identifying learning resources” had the highest mean score (M = 4.13, SD = 0.63). This finding suggests that students are confident and proactive in seeking out both material such as books, articles and human resources such as peers, lecturers to support their learning. High scores were also observed in “Designing learning plans” (M = 4.05, SD = 0.73) and “Diagnosing learning needs” (M = 4.03, SD = 0.61), which indicates that many students are capable of evaluating their current abilities and formulating appropriate strategies to meet academic goals. The dimension “Setting learning goals” also yielded a high score (M = 4.01, SD = 0.77), showing that students tend to align personal objectives with academic requirements. Lastly, “Evaluating learning outcomes” received the lowest mean among the five components (M = 4.01, SD = 0.71). While still relatively high, this result may reflect some difficulty among students in regularly reflecting on their learning strategies and outcomes or adjusting them as needed.

In summary, fourth-year English linguistics students at TDMU show strong engagement in SDL across all components, with particularly high performance in resource utilization and learning design. However, the comparatively lower scores in the evaluation dimension suggest that some students may lack the reflective habits needed to continually refine their learning approaches. These findings confirm that students at this stage of their education possess generally well-developed SDL skills, positioning them to take increasing responsibility for their academic development.

**Table 1**

Mean scores and standard deviations for the SDL scale

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **NO.** | **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** |
| SDL\_B1 | DIAGNOSE LEARNING NEEDS | 4,03 | 0,61 |
| B1\_Q1 | I am able to identify my own weaknesses during the learning process. | 3,98 | 0,80 |
| B1\_Q2 | I realistically assess my current knowledge and skills before starting a learning task. | 3,99 | 0,796 |
| B1\_Q3 | I seek feedback from peers or teachers to understand my learning gaps. | 4,12 | 0,926 |
| SDL\_B2 | SETTING LEARNING GOALS | 4,01 | 0,77 |
| B2\_Q1 | I set clear and realistic timelines to achieve my learning objectives. | 3,94 | 0,94 |
| B2\_Q2 | I align my personal learning goals with the academic requirements of my courses. | 4,20 | 0,90 |
| B2\_Q3 | I can turn my learning needs into specific, measurable learning goals. | 3,88 | 1,01 |
| SDL\_B3 | IDENTIFY RESOURCES FOR LEARNING | 4,13 | 0,63 |
| B3\_Q1 | I use a variety of resources, such as books, academic articles, and research papers, to achieve my learning goals. | 4,12 | 0,87 |
| B3\_Q2 | I seek guidance and share insights with my peers and teachers to enhance my learning experience | 4,13 | 0,88 |
| B3\_Q3 | I actively use both material and human resources to support my learning process. | 4,16 | 0,71 |
| SDL\_B4 | DESIGN LEARNING PLANS | 4,05 | 0,73 |
| B4\_Q1 | I conduct a self-evaluation to identify the gaps between my current knowledge and the competencies I want to achieve. | 4,05 | 0,85 |
| B4\_Q2 | I select learning resources and strategies that align with my goals and personal learning preferences. | 4,05 | 0,91 |
| SDL\_B5 | EVALUATE LEARNING OUTCOMES | 4,01 | 0,71 |
| B5\_Q1 | I regularly assess my academic progress by comparing my learning outcomes to the goals I set at the beginning. | 4,00 | 0,98 |
| B5\_Q2 | I use multiple methods, such as examination scores and feedback from peers and teachers, to evaluate my learning outcomes. | 4,11 | 0,80 |
| B5\_Q3 | I consistently reflect on my learning strategies and make adjustments to improve my academic performance. | 3,91 | 0,92 |
| **SDL** |  | **4,05** | **0,56** |

***4.2. The impact of SDL on academic performance among students***

To explore the second research question, students’ academic performance was assessed through self-reported GPA scores on a 10-point scale. The results *(see Table 2)* show that the vast majority of students achieved high academic results. Specifically, 76.6% of the sample had a GPA between 7.0 and 8.4, and 19.1% had an excellent GPA of 8.5 to 10. Only 4.3% fell into the average range of 5.5 to 6.9, and no students had a GPA below 5.5. This distribution indicates that the participant group was predominantly composed of high-achieving students, which may be reflective of the academic culture and expectations at TDMU.

**Table 2**

Distribution of participants’ academic performance based on GPA

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| GPA (10-point scale) | N | % |
| < 5.5 | 0 | 0.00 |
| 5.5 – 6.9 | 4 | 4.3 |
| 7.0 – 8.4 | 72 | 76.6 |
| 8.5 - 10 | 18 | 19.1 |
|  | 94 | 100 |

To examine the impact of SDL on academic performance, Spearman correlation analysis was conducted between SDL scores and GPA. The results *(see Table 3)* revealed a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between total SDL scores and GPA (ρ = 0.204, p = 0.049). This finding indicates that students who engage more deeply in SDL tend to perform better academically, although SDL is likely one of several contributing factors to academic success. Notably, three individual SDL components were significantly correlated with GPA. These were “Diagnosing learning needs” (ρ = 0.211, p = 0.041), “Setting learning goals” (ρ = 0.220, p = 0.033), and “Designing learning plans” (ρ = 0.237, p = 0.021). The strongest relationship was found in the planning component among them, suggesting that the ability to develop well-structured, goal-aligned learning plans has the most direct influence on academic outcomes.

In contrast, the two remaining SDL components including “Identifying learning resources” (ρ = 0.183, p = 0.078) and “Evaluating learning outcomes” (ρ = 0.159, p = 0.125) did not show statistically significant correlations with GPA. Although both of the components were positively related to academic performance, their effects may be more indirect. These findings imply that while accessing resources and reflecting on learning are important behaviors, they do not appear to enhance academic outcomes unless integrated with deliberate goal setting and structured planning.

The findings suggest that SDL plays a supportive role in academic performance, particularly when students are able to assess their needs, set clear goals, and create purposeful learning plans. The ability to apply learning strategies tailored to personal academic objectives appears to have the most meaningful impact on GPA. These results highlight the importance of promoting SDL as a structured, goal-driven process rather than a set of isolated behaviors. Developing students’ abilities to plan and monitor their learning effectively may enhance their academic success and better prepare them for lifelong learning and professional challenges.

**Table 3**

Correlation between GPA and SDL

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | GPA | |
| Spearman’s rho | Sig. |
| Total SDL | 0.204\* | 0.049 |
| **SDL\_B1 – *Diagnose learning needs*** | 0,211\* | 0,041 |
| **SDL\_B2 – *Setting learning goals*** | 0,220\* | 0,033 |
| **SDL\_B3 – *Identify resources for learning*** | 0,183 | 0,078 |
| **SDL\_B4 – *Design learning plans*** | 0,237\* | 0,021 |
| **SDL\_B5 – *Evaluate learning outcomes*** | 0,159 | 0,125 |

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

## Discussion

The first key finding of the present study is that fourth-year English linguistics students at TDMU demonstrate a relatively high level of engagement in all five components of SDL, as outlined by Knowles (1975). This finding is consistent with previous research conducted in both international and Vietnamese contexts. For instance, Dao et al. (2023) and Nguyen Ngoc Diem et al. (2023) found that Vietnamese students, especially in teacher education and nursing, tend to report frequent engagement in SDL behaviors. Similarly, Khalid, Bashir, and Amin (2020) noted that university students in online learning environments exhibited strong SDL tendencies, often out of necessity. The high SDL scores in the current study reaffirm the idea that students preparing for graduation are more likely to take ownership of their learning due to the increasing academic and professional demands they face.

Among the five SDL components, *“Identifying learning resources”* was the highest-rated by participants, indicating that students are confident in accessing and utilizing a wide range of materials and support systems. This aligns with the findings of Visier-Jiménez et al. (2022), who reported that university students globally tend to develop strong resource-management skills, especially in digitally connected environments. The widespread availability of online academic materials and peer networks may have contributed to this result, supporting a shift in how learners interact with knowledge sources.

Conversely, *“Evaluating learning outcomes”* received the lowest mean score, although it still indicated moderate engagement. This finding resonates with the work of Do and Nguyen (2021), who observed that many Vietnamese students struggle with reflection and adjustment, particularly in the absence of structured feedback. The implication is that while students are comfortable gathering and applying resources, they may not consistently evaluate their own learning strategies or modify them for better results. This suggests an area where further pedagogical intervention may be needed particularly through activities that promote reflective thinking and self-monitoring.

In terms of academic performance, the study revealed that most participants were high-achieving students, with 95.7% reporting a GPA of 7.0 or above. This sample composition may partly explain the overall high SDL scores, as previous studies such as Lounsbury et al., 2009; Alotaibi, 2016 have noted that students who are more self-directed often attain better academic results. The positive learning environment at TDMU, combined with access to institutional resources, could contribute to both strong SDL engagement and high academic achievement.

The correlation analysis revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between overall SDL and academic performance, confirming findings from earlier research such as Khiat, 2017; Siswanto, 2024. Notably, the current study adds nuance by identifying that three components namely “*Diagnosing learning needs”, “Setting learning goals”,* and especially *“Designing learning plans”* are significantly associated with GPA. Among these, “*Designing learning plans”* had the strongest correlation, emphasizing the importance of strategic planning in academic success. This supports earlier observations by Yang and Jiang (2014) and Jeong and Uhm (2022), who linked structured learning behavior to better academic results. However, the current study offers a more detailed analysis by confirming this relationship specifically within the context of English linguistics students in Vietnam.

Interestingly, while *“Identifying learning resources”* was the most frequently practiced SDL behavior, it did not show a significant correlation with GPA. This diverges from findings by Gabrielle et al. (2006), who reported that effective resource use is directly tied to performance. One possible explanation is that access to resources alone is not sufficient, students must also know how to integrate them purposefully within a well-structured learning plan. Similarly, the lack of significant correlation between *“Evaluating learning outcomes”* and GPA may suggest that reflection only contributes to academic success when it informs concrete adjustments in learning strategies.

A notable new finding of the present study is the relative importance of learning plan design as a predictor of academic performance in this particular learner group. While much of the prior literature emphasizes SDL readiness, motivation, or resource use, the present study highlights planning as the most influential factor. This insight suggests that universities and educators should focus not only on fostering autonomy but also on teaching students how to plan their learning effectively. Curriculum designers may consider incorporating training in goal-setting frameworks, strategic scheduling, and time management into academic support services.

The results of the current study are largely consistent with existing research affirming the role of SDL in promoting academic achievement. However, the study extends prior work by identifying specific SDL components particularly learning plan design as more predictive of performance than others. This refinement has practical implications for improving SDL interventions in English language programs, particularly in Vietnamese higher education. Moreover, by focusing on fourth-year English majors, the research fills a gap in the literature where this learner group has been under-represented, providing a clearer understanding of their SDL behavior at a pivotal stage in their academic journey.

# Conclusion

The present study explored the extent of SDL among fourth-year English linguistics students at TDMU and examined its relationship with academic performance. The findings revealed that students demonstrated a relatively high level of SDL engagement, particularly in identifying learning resources and designing learning plans. A weak but statistically significant positive correlation was found between SDL and GPA, with diagnosing learning needs, setting learning goals, and especially designing learning plans showing meaningful associations with academic success.

These results confirm the importance of SDL in higher education and highlight planning as a key component linked to performance. While resource use and outcome evaluation were widely practiced, they were not significantly associated with GPA unless supported by goal-oriented and structured learning strategies. The study contributes to the existing literature by focusing on English majors in the Vietnamese context and identifying specific SDL components that influence academic outcomes.

In light of these findings, educational programs should integrate training in learning planning and goal setting to better support student achievement and autonomy.

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