Perception and Self-Study Habits of First-Year Students at Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment Before and After Using the English Learning Application "Easy Class"

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Abstract

In the context of globalization and international integration, the development of self-study capacity in general, and foreign language self-study in particular, has received widespread attention from both domestic and international educational researchers. Self-study is considered one of the core competencies for learners in the digital age, helping to foster critical thinking, lifelong learning abilities, and proactive adaptation to future career demands. For foreign language subjects, additional practice outside of classroom hours is a crucial factor that helps learners achieve better outcomes. 'Self-study' is a term frequently used to refer to learning and training that takes place outside of school hours. In today's era of widespread internet access, technology is seen as one of the essential tools that support learners in self-study. Recognizing the importance of self-study activities for learners' academic performance and the overall quality of training, Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment (HCMUNRE) has piloted the implementation of a software application designed to support English self-study. This pilot program has been applied to first-year students at the university, involving 310 students. My research focuses on evaluating students' perceptions and practices related to self-study before and after using this application. This article presents the results of the initial research phase, documenting students' awareness and habits related to self-study prior to being introduced to the software, followed by an assessment of their actual self-

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study practices after a few weeks of familiarization and use. The findings of this study are expected to serve as a basis for the university's leadership to consider whether to expand the implementation of this software to all students in the near future.

Keywords: self-study, the perception of students on self-studying

Introduction

Self-study skills are among the essential competencies for 21st-century citizens. Students not only need to acquire and absorb the knowledge taught in school but also must develop self-study and continuous learning skills to stay updated with new knowledge and technologies.

The questions arise: Have students at HCMUNRE, particularly first-year students, been effectively utilizing their self-study time? How is the English self-study application currently being implemented by the university influencing the students' perceptions and self-study habits? To answer these questions, the research team investigated the awareness and actual self-study practices of first-year students before and after using the Easy Class teaching and learning support software, as a case study. This aims to provide the university with a more comprehensive understanding of the self-study situation among first-year students in particular and students across the university in general. At the same time, the research results are expected to serve as a foundation for the university to make informed investment decisions that help foster students' self-study abilities and enhance the overall quality of education.

Definition of Self-Study and Its Role

Self-study is a learning method in which learners spend time studying outside of the classroom without the guidance or supervision of a teacher. Numerous studies have demonstrated the correlation between self-study ability and academic success, as well as the opportunities for learners to improve their proficiency, professional knowledge, and learning skills [1], [2], [3], [4]. Classroom sessions only provide learners with new knowledge and skills; to gain deep understanding and mastery, learners must independently explore and spend significant time practicing in order to

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achieve good results. In learning English, as well as other foreign languages, practicing and developing skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation or interpretation is truly essential.

Factors Influencing Self-Study

White [5] identified several factors influencing learners' self-study skills and progress, including: learners' beliefs, the level of practice [6], the support provided to learners [7], how learners use learning resources [5], and the content of those materials [8]. Other factors such as computer literacy [1], study planning, clearly defined goals [9], [10], time management, and self-assessment [9] also determine whether self-study becomes more effective or gradually declines in quality.

In reality, most students often create self-study plans that are inaccurate or inappropriate, which results in their self-study skills being less effective [11]. In a recent study by Đỗ Thị Phi Nga [12], she also shared that learners often struggle to allocate their self-study time effectively, largely because they do not truly understand the role of self-study. Most learners consider self-study to simply mean completing all assigned homework before class. However, many learners who do recognize the importance of self-study still fail to manage their time effectively due to a lack of long-term planning skills. Additionally, a study by Nguyễn Thị Bích Thuận [10] revealed that the absence of someone to consult or guide learners during their self-study process significantly affects their ability to study independently, even though they are fully aware of how important this activity is. Most students today find it very difficult to take initiative in self-study outside the classroom because they are too accustomed to traditional learning environments, where teachers play the central role in the teaching and learning process [3].

The Role of Information Technology in Self-Study Activities

Nowadays, technology has become an important factor in the process of foreign language learning [14], contributing to the enhancement of self-study motivation, self-regulation, and the development of proactive learning skills [15].

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Numerous other studies have also demonstrated that the use of technology as an educational tool helps increase learner engagement and improve their self-study capacity [4], [15], [16]. This can be explained by the fact that technology provides learners with a wide range of learning support tools, including extensive and high-quality resources that allow learners to choose and adapt according to their individual needs [14], as well as discussion forums, software, and applications [4] that give learners opportunities to practice, consult, and deepen their acquired knowledge.

Lalasz, Doane, Springer, and Dahir [18] summarized the benefits of using English learning applications on smartphones as follows:

- Flexible access anytime and anywhere;

- Compatibility between phone configurations and apps;

- Reduced need for books, pens, and paper;

- A wide variety of test formats covering multiple skills;

- Practice of multiple skills on a single device;

- Gamified learning experiences;

- No cost;

- Unlimited access.

Previous studies have demonstrated the vital role of self-study activities in improving teaching and learning quality, and information technology plays a significant role in transforming learners' perceptions and self-study habits.

Methodology

Research Subjects

As previously mentioned, the aim of this study is to explore the perceptions and actual self-study practices of first-year students at the university, and to assess

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how their self-study habits change after being introduced to the Easy Class self-study support application. The participants in this study were 350 first-year students from Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment. A total of 310 survey responses were collected and used for analysis in this research. Each participant took approximately ten minutes to complete the survey via a link sent through email.

Data Collection Methods

Since this study is a small part of a larger research project, the author used a quantitative method (questionnaire) as the primary tool for data collection. Lalasz, Doane, Springer, and Dahir [18] emphasized that using questionnaires as a data collection tool offers many advantages in terms of cost and efficiency, especially for large sample sizes. However, this method also has some disadvantages when conducted online, such as participants lacking motivation to complete the survey or not fully understanding the questions presented. Therefore, the questionnaire was piloted before being widely distributed in order to minimize any negative impact on research participants.

The survey was designed in the form of multiple-choice and short-answer questions in Vietnamese using the Google Forms interface, as this platform is familiar and convenient for participants. The survey was distributed and collected automatically through this application.

Data Processing and Analysis Methods

The data from the initial survey responses were processed using basic statistical tools such as Excel or SPSS 20.0 for coding, data entry, and analysis. All personal information of the research participants was anonymized to ensure confidentiality and research ethics. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and frequency analysis through Microsoft Excel to present the current state of self-study. All data are presented in the form of tables, pie charts, and bar graphs.

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Research Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the research findings in relation to the theoretical framework and relevant studies. Specifically, the data collected from the questionnaire are analyzed and synthesized to illustrate students' perceptions of self-study before and after becoming familiar with the Easy Class English self-study support application.

Students' Perceptions of Self-Study Before Becoming Familiar with the Easy Class English Self-Study Support Application

The survey results regarding students' perceptions of the importance of self-study are summarized in Chart 1 below.

Chart 1: Students' Perceptions of Self-Study
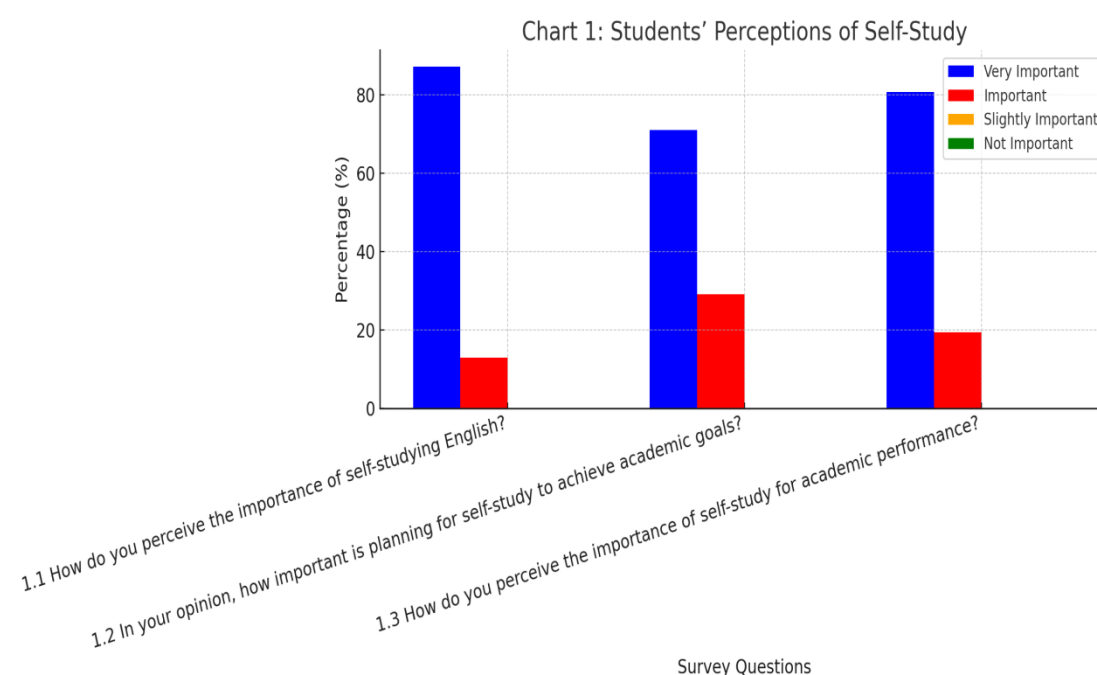
The data from Chart 1 show that the majority of students recognize the importance of self-study: 87.1% considered it to be very important, while the remaining responses rated it as important. There were no answers indicating "slightly important" or "not important." Similarly, in statements regarding the relationship between self-study and academic performance, 80.6% rated it as very important and

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19.4% as important. As for the necessity of planning for self-study to achieve learning goals, 71% responded very important, and 29% important. This indicates that students place a high value on these two factors. Once students are aware of the importance of self-study, institutional and instructional strategies, such as learner-centered teaching methods, encouragement of exploration and deeper learning, and the use of support applications/software for self-study beyond classroom hours, can further enhance students' self-study capabilities and personal development.

Have students at Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment made good use of their self-study time?

According to the credit-based training program structure, self-study hours account for two-thirds of the total time required for one credit—twice the number of hours spent in lectures and classroom practice. However, the question remains whether students are utilizing their self-study time in a meaningful way, and whether it meets the learning outcomes required for each course.

When asked about the frequency of their self-study, the responses were relatively evenly distributed: 51.6% reported studying regularly, 41.9% occasionally, and only 6.5% said they rarely dedicated time to self-study. These findings indicate that students are spending time on self-study, but the number of students who engage in it seriously remains limited.

Regarding the tools commonly used during self-study, the survey results show that most students rely on online materials (71%) and both free and paid English learning applications (77.4%) for extra practice outside of class. Multimedia platforms (64.5%) such as BBC, podcasts, and YouTube were also frequently used, while printed reference materials (41.9%) were less commonly utilized. This suggests that technology has a significant impact on self-study practices and has greatly influenced learners' habits in using learning resources. The survey results regarding the tools used by first-year students for self-study are encouraging, as many have taken the initiative to explore, access, and apply these resources to improve their English skills.

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Challenges That Hinder First-Year Students at HCMUNRE from Effectively Engaging in Self-Study

Self-study is essential and important for the learner's academic process. However, in practice, learners often face many challenges [10]. Based on the theoretical framework of previous studies [9], [10], [11] regarding common difficulties encountered by learners, the research team identified six key factors to investigate. The survey results are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Common Difficulties Faced by First-Year Students During the Self-Study Process

Difficulty	Strongly Agree		Agree		No Opinion		Disagree	
	Number	(%)	Number	(%)	Number	(%)	Number	(%)
Poor English proficiency hinders self-study	120	38.7	150	48.4	20	6.5	20	6.5
Many learning resources are unreliable or not curated/organized	100	32.3	140	45.2	70	22.6	0	0
Lack of support and guidance during self-study	100	32.3	150	48.4	60	19.4	0	0
Distractions affecting self-study (social media, games, etc.)	110	35.5	150	48.4	50	16.1	0	0
Lack of tools to evaluate self-study progress	80	25.8	160	51.6	50	16.1	20	6.5
Lack of motivation to	140	45.2	120	38.7	20	6.5	30	9.7

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self-study								

The data from Table 1 show that poor English proficiency is the most significant barrier to students' self-study, with 48.4% (150 students) agreeing and 38.7% (120 students) strongly agreeing—totaling 270 out of 310 responses. This indicates that most students do not have a strong command of English, which creates considerable difficulties in their self-study process.

Similarly, two of the six listed difficulties received a high level of agreement, with 260 out of 310 respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing: lack of motivation for self-study, and distractions during the self-study process. Student motivation can be understood as both an internal sense of responsibility and the result of positive influences from teachers, curricula, and the institution. Regarding external factors, learners admitted to being distracted by various appealing online elements such as social media (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc.) or games—all of which significantly affect their ability to self-study. These findings are consistent with previous research by Nguyễn Thị Bích Thuận [10], Đinh Thị Huệ, Dương Thị Nhật Lệ, and Huang Meily One [11].

The remaining three difficulties also showed high agreement levels, with 250 and 240 out of 310 respondents respectively agreeing or strongly agreeing: lack of guidance or support during self-study, lack of tools to assess progress, and unreliable or unfiltered learning resources. Although the self-study process is designed to be flexible and autonomous, students still need guidance and tools to evaluate whether their efforts are on the right track. This may be because many students are still accustomed to traditional, teacher-centered learning, where they passively receive knowledge and are not used to independently exploring new ideas or developing their creativity. Furthermore, the overwhelming volume of unvetted and unreliable learning materials can leave students feeling confused and unsure of what sources to use.

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To help minimize these challenges and support students in their self-study efforts, the Easy Class English self-study application was piloted, with the hope that it could help students overcome these obstacles.

How Did the Students' Perceptions and Self-Study Habits Change after Being Introduced to the Easy Class Self-Study Application?

With the aim of promoting students' self-study skills and improving the management of their self-study hours, the Easy Class application, an online English learning support tool, was piloted for first-year students at the university. This paper, as part of a broader research project, presents the evaluation results on changes in students' perceptions and self-study habits after several initial weeks of using the application.

Chart 2. How Does the Easy Class Application Support Your Self-Study?
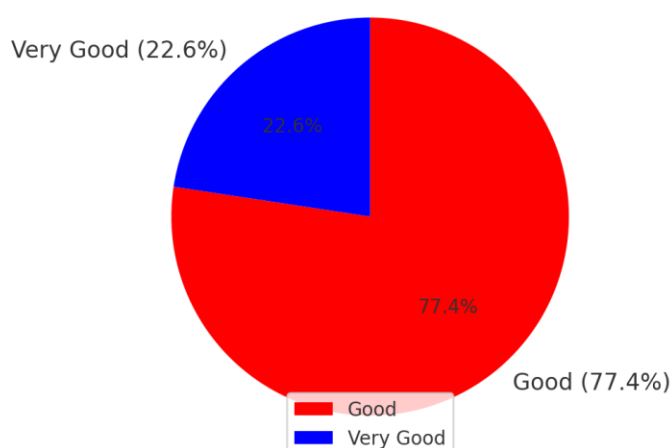
Data from Chart 2 show that a large number of students (77.4%) reported a positive change, while 22.6% experienced a very positive change after being introduced to the Easy Class application. From the instructor's perspective, this improvement can be attributed to positive interventions by the lecturers. Teachers increased the number of assignments given through the Easy Class app, encouraged students to complete them via the platform, and monitored and graded them as part of

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the practice component for each course. This activity aligns with the concept of teacher-guided self-directed learning, where instructors assign tasks, and students take ownership of their learning, motivate themselves, and actively complete additional exercises [19], [20].

In line with the above explanation, students' learning attitudes and self-study time also showed positive changes. The survey results regarding changes in students' perceptions and self-study habits are illustrated in Charts 3 and 4.

Chart 3. Changes in Students' Attitudes When Using the Easy Class Application

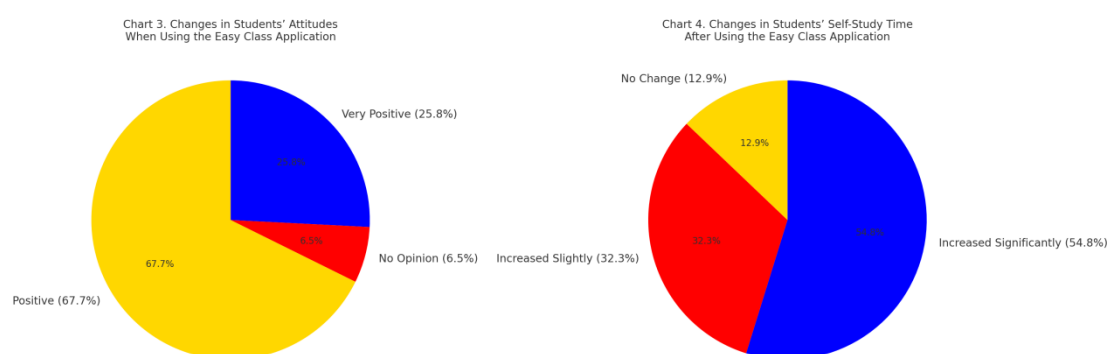Chart 4. Changes in Students' Self-Study Time After Using the Easy Class Application

Chart 3 shows that students experienced a significant change in their learning attitudes: 67.7% reported a positive change, and 25.8% noticed a very positive shift in their attitude toward learning. Data from Chart 4 reveals an increase in self-study time among most students, with 32.3% reporting a slight increase and 54.8% a significant increase. Only a small number of students did not observe noticeable changes in their learning attitudes (6.5%) or in the amount of time spent on self-study (12.9%), and some had no opinion on these statements. The survey results indicate that, with intervention from instructors and institutional support through the Easy Class application, students spent more time on self-study and gradually developed better self-study habits.

Foreign language proficiency is one of the essential skills for students upon graduation. Encouraging students to enhance their self-study and improve their language skills is a crucial step in helping them become more confident in job searching and in improving the overall quality of the university's education. Therefore,

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if this application is implemented on a larger scale and applied to English skill development for students across various majors, it could significantly transform the student abilities and elevate the institution's training quality.

Is the Easy Class application an effective solution to help students enhance their self-study abilities and overcome the challenges of learning English independently?

The research results above have demonstrated the effectiveness of the Easy Class application. Students' awareness and attitudes toward their self-study ability showed significant improvement after just a few weeks of becoming familiar with the app. Specifically, their learning attitudes became more positive, and the amount of time they dedicated to self-study increased notably compared to before.

In addition, Easy Class helps learners address the common challenges of self-studying English, as identified by Nguyễn Thị Bích Thuận [10] in her research. These difficulties were adapted and applied by the present study to align with its evaluation goals. Survey results show that 77.4% of students acknowledged the app as effective and flexible, allowing them to study and complete assignments anytime, anywhere. Moreover, 71% rated the learning materials and exercises on Easy Class as appropriate for learners at various levels, while 61.3% believed the resources were reliable and suited to their proficiency. Notably, 35.5% appreciated the app's mentorship-like feature, where tasks are designed with guidance embedded. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the Easy Class application helps students overcome many of the challenges they face in the self-study process.

Additionally, the Easy Class application helps motivate students by incorporating features such as class- and school-wide performance leaderboards, a user interface that records scores for each assignment, and point accumulation systems that can be redeemed for rewards through learning tasks. Two features of Easy Class that were highly rated by the majority of students include the unlimited number of attempts, which allows students to improve their scores with each try (74.2%), and the visually engaging score-tracking interface (67.7%). These figures demonstrate that Easy Class has an effective impact on students' self-study, helping

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them develop greater self-discipline and overcome challenges in their English learning and practice outside of classroom hours.

Conclusion

Self-study is one of the essential skills that helps learners master knowledge and achieve high academic performance, especially under the current credit-based training system. For language students, consistent practice plays a critical role in academic success. However, classroom time is typically only sufficient for students to grasp theoretical content and basic skills related to each subject, while most practice needs to be done outside of school hours.

In reality, first-year students at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment are highly aware of the importance of self-study and do invest time in it. However, the number of students who dedicate serious effort to self-study remains limited due to several barriers such as poor English proficiency, lack of motivation, unreliable study resources, and distractions from external factors like movies, games, and social media. The Easy Class application can help learners partially overcome these difficulties.

Moreover, students' awareness and self-study habits have shown positive changes after just a few weeks of using the application. In language learning, practice is one of the key determinants of success. It is hoped that with this application, students will become more proactive in their self-study and personal development. Nonetheless, beyond technological support, active involvement from both instructors and the institution is necessary to help students further develop their capacity for independent learning and self-discipline.

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