

Research Article

Exploring Learner Agency and Self-directed Learning in ESP: A Qualitative Study of Vocational Students in Vietnam

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Abstract: In the context of vocational education in Vietnam, the emphasis on learner autonomy and active participation has grown significantly, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. While previous studies have highlighted the importance of self-directed learning in language education, limited qualitative research has explored how vocational students perceive their roles and exercise agency in ESP classrooms. This study aims to investigate the relationship between learner personality and engagement in self-directed ESP learning, focusing on the roles students assume and the personal and contextual factors that shape their agentic behavior. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews to collect data from 15 purposively selected students majoring in hotel management and tourism at several colleges in Vietnam. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings reveal that students enacted three primary roles: participant, initiator, and autonomous learner. These roles were closely linked to personal characteristics such as self-confidence, language proficiency, learning motivation, and communication skills. Additionally, the learning environment, lecturer support, and the practicality of the curriculum played critical roles in fostering or hindering learner agency. However, many students still faced barriers, including language anxiety, lack of authentic materials, and limitations in group interaction. The study recommends that training institutions build flexible learning environments, update curricula to align with real-world professional demands, and explicitly develop students' self-directed learning capacities. By doing so, vocational ESP programs can better promote learner autonomy, improve engagement, and ultimately enhance workplace readiness among graduates.

Keywords: student agency, learner autonomy, learner personality, vocational education, learner engagement, self-directed learning, ESP

Received: June 12, 2026

Accepted: August 20, 2026

Published: September 6, 2026



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1. Introduction

In contemporary language education, increasing attention has been given to learners as active participants who can make decisions, regulate their learning, and take responsibility for their own development. This shift is particularly relevant to English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where language learning is expected to prepare students to communicate effectively in discipline-specific and professional contexts. For vocational students, English is not only an academic subject but also a practical resource that may be required for interacting with customers, colleagues, and international workplaces. Consequently, the ability to identify learning needs, select appropriate resources, regulate learning activities, and apply language knowledge beyond the classroom has become increasingly important. Recent research further suggests that learner agency is closely connected with self-regulated and self-directed learning, enabling students to become more adaptable and independent learners as they move toward professional practice (Gupta et al., 2024). This issue is particularly significant in vocational education, where students are expected to develop learning capacities that can support continuous professional development beyond formal education.

The concepts of learner agency, learner autonomy, self-directed learning, and self-regulated learning (SRL) are closely related but represent different dimensions of learners' active participation in education. Learner agency generally refers to learners' capacity to make

intentional choices, exercise control, and take purposeful action within particular social and educational contexts (Bandura, 2001; Klemenčič, 2015). Learner autonomy, in turn, concerns learners' capacity to take responsibility for and exercise control over aspects of their learning, while self-directed learning emphasizes learners' active involvement in identifying learning needs, setting goals, selecting resources and strategies, implementing learning activities, and evaluating outcomes. SRL highlights the cognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes through which learners monitor and regulate their progress. Rather than viewing these constructs as isolated characteristics, recent scholarship increasingly considers them as interconnected dimensions of active learning. For example, Gupta et al. (2024), in a scoping review, found strong interconnections among intrapersonal, behavioral, and contextual dimensions in shaping learner agency through self-directed and SRL.

Recent research in language education has also demonstrated that learner autonomy remains an active and evolving area of investigation. Chong and Reinders' (2025) scoping review of 61 empirical studies shows that autonomy research has drawn on a range of theoretical perspectives, including self-regulation, learner psychology, learning strategies, and sociocultural approaches. Their findings also point to the need for more attention to language learning beyond the classroom and greater methodological diversity in researching learner autonomy. Similarly, Mazandarani (2024), in a systematic review focusing on the methodological dimensions of SRL research, found that existing research has predominantly focused on higher education, highlighting the continuing need to examine "how learners regulate their learning across different educational contexts". These developments suggest that contemporary research is moving beyond simply asking whether learners are autonomous toward examining how learners exercise agency, what enables or constrains their autonomy, and how these processes operate in particular learning environments.

This emerging perspective is also reflected in recent Vietnamese research. For example, Le (2023) found that foreign language anxiety had a negative impact on students in English-medium instruction classes in central Vietnam, while Tran and Pham (2022) examined teachers' perceptions of factors affecting ESP teaching. Nguyen et al. (2024) investigated Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of factors associated with learner autonomy and found that students' perceptions were related to aspects of the learning environment, including teachers' behavior and instructions. Similarly, Nguyen and Nguyen (2024) reported that motivation and SRL strategies were positively associated with learner autonomy among Vietnamese non-English-major students, while low confidence in real-life English communication remained a challenge. Their study also highlighted the importance of teacher support, educational environments, and access to technology. Other recent research has examined learner autonomy through online and out-of-class learning. For instance, Duc and Hang (2024) found that integrating synchronous and asynchronous online platforms into an EFL reading course was associated with more positive perceptions of learner autonomy among Vietnamese university students. However, the students also identified technical difficulties, limited English proficiency, low motivation, and insufficient online self-study skills as barriers to effective autonomous learning.

Despite these developments, learner autonomy and self-directed learning remain challenging to develop in Vietnamese English language education. Recent Vietnamese studies indicate that students may recognize the importance of autonomous learning while still experiencing difficulties in translating this awareness into sustained autonomous practices. In particular, limited confidence in real-life communication, dependence on teacher guidance, insufficient self-regulation skills, and contextual constraints may restrict students' ability to take greater responsibility for their English learning (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024; Duc & Hang, 2024). These challenges may be particularly important in vocational ESP contexts, where students need to connect classroom learning with authentic professional communication.

For students in vocational programs such as restaurant management, hotel management, bartending, and tourism, ESP learning has a direct relationship with future workplace performance. They may need to use English to communicate with customers, understand professional information, respond to workplace situations, and collaborate with colleagues. However, when students remain highly dependent on teacher-directed instruction or primarily view English as a classroom subject, opportunities to develop initiative, responsibility, and self-directed learning may be limited. Thus, the problem is not simply whether vocational students possess sufficient English proficiency, but also how they perceive their role as learners, how actively they manage their own ESP learning, and what personal and contextual factors enable or constrain their agency.

Although learner autonomy and self-directed learning have received increasing attention

in both international and Vietnamese research, several gaps remain. First, much of the recent Vietnamese literature has focused on university EFL learners rather than students in vocational ESP programs. For example, Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) examined non-language-major students' autonomy in learning English in Vietnam, focusing on how they perceive and exercise autonomy in their learning contexts. Similarly, Nguyen and Nguyen (2024) reported that motivation and SRL strategies were positively associated with learner autonomy among Vietnamese non-English-major students, while low confidence in real-life English communication remained a challenge, their study also identified influential factors, including teacher support, educational environment, and access to technology. These studies provide valuable evidence about learner autonomy in Vietnam, but they do not specifically address the distinctive needs and learning conditions of vocational ESP learners.

Second, recent research has increasingly called for greater methodological diversity and closer attention to learners' experiences beyond measurable levels of autonomy. Chong and Reinders (2025) specifically emphasize the need to diversify research methods and investigate language learning beyond the classroom. Likewise, recent work on learner agency emphasizes that agency emerges through the interaction of individual, behavioral, and contextual dimensions rather than being determined solely by learners' personal characteristics. Therefore, understanding vocational learners' agency requires attention not only to what students report doing but also to how they interpret their roles, make learning decisions, respond to challenges, and connect ESP learning with their academic and professional lives.

Third, although Vietnamese studies have begun to examine learner autonomy through questionnaires, mixed-methods designs, and interviews, there remains limited qualitative evidence specifically exploring "vocational ESP learners' own perceptions and lived experiences of self-directed learning". A qualitative approach is therefore appropriate because it can provide detailed insight into how students understand autonomy, what strategies they use, what personal characteristics they perceive as influential, and how contextual conditions shape their learning behavior. Such evidence can complement existing quantitative research and contribute to a more context-sensitive understanding of learner agency in Vietnamese vocational ESP education.

Against this background, the present study aims to explore how vocational students perceive and exercise learner agency and autonomy in self-directed ESP learning, with particular attention to their learning strategies, personal characteristics, contextual experiences, and application of ESP knowledge in academic and real-life settings. Rather than assuming a direct causal relationship between personality and engagement, the study seeks to understand how students themselves perceive the role of their attitudes, characteristics, and learning behaviors in developing autonomy and engagement in ESP learning.

Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do vocational students perceive their roles and responsibilities in the ESP learning process?
2. What strategies do vocational students use to engage in self-directed ESP learning inside and outside the classroom?
3. What personal characteristics, attitudes, and contextual factors do students perceive as influencing their ability to learn ESP autonomously?
4. How do students apply the ESP knowledge and skills acquired through their learning to academic, workplace, or real-life situations?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of learner agency and self-directed ESP learning among Vietnamese vocational students. The findings may contribute to the growing body of research on learner autonomy by extending the discussion from general EFL and university contexts to vocational ESP education. Practically, the study may also provide implications for ESP teachers and vocational institutions seeking to create learning environments that encourage students to take greater responsibility, make meaningful learning choices, develop self-regulation, and transfer English knowledge from the classroom to authentic professional contexts.

2. Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore in-depth students' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward student agency when learning ESP. The qualitative approach was chosen because of its ability to provide rich, multidimensional data, which helps researchers better understand students' personal experiences, intrinsic motivations, and difficulties in the learning process. In contrast to the quantitative approach, which focuses on

measuring variables, the qualitative approach emphasizes explaining phenomena in a specific practical context. This approach is based on the constructivist epistemology, which holds that knowledge is a product of social interaction and active participation of learners. In the context of ESP teaching in Vietnam, where students not only learn languages but also need to apply them to their professional fields, qualitative methods allow for honest and in-depth recording of learners' voices, thoughts, and learning strategies. As a result, the study not only reflects the manifestations of agency but also explains how agency is formed and maintained through each student's specific learning experience.

The study was conducted in the context of ESP classes at several universities in Vietnam, which offer a wide range of specialized training programs in areas such as tourism, restaurant and hotel management. The participating students had all completed at least two semesters of ESP, ensuring practical experience in learning and using specialized English. Recently, the demand for ESP in Vietnam has increased significantly due to the requirements of international integration and preparation for the professional labor market. This creates pressure but also opens up opportunities for students to develop their autonomous and proactive learning abilities. However, many factors, such as the quality of the curriculum, the qualifications of the lecturers, the support of the school, and the students' self-study ability, all affect the level of agency demonstrated in learning. The research context reflects a diverse picture of students' backgrounds, majors, and learning conditions, from large urban training institutions to provincial and city colleges. Despite their different environments, students face common challenges in accessing ESP, from specialized language barriers to finding appropriate learning materials. Placing the research in this context helps to highlight the relationship between the educational environment and students' ability to take an active role in their learning.

A purposive sampling strategy with maximum variation was employed to select 15 student participants from majors: hotel management and tourism. The inclusion criteria were completion of at least two ESP modules, current enrolment in a service-oriented program, willingness to share learning experiences in a face-to-face interview, and ability to articulate personal reflections in Vietnamese. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation. Previous methodological work suggests that 15 interviews are often sufficient to reach thematic saturation in relatively homogeneous populations (Guest et al., 2006). As analysis progressed concurrently with data collection, saturation was confirmed when no substantially new codes emerged from the final three interviews.

To collect rich and authentic data, the study used semi-structured interviews as the main tool. The interview questions were built on the theoretical foundation of student agency and self-directed learning, including topics such as perception of one's own learning role, active learning strategies, experiences when applying ESP in practice, and challenges in the learning process. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to present their experiences and feelings flexibly while still ensuring the research orientation. For example, some typical questions used include "How do you evaluate your role in learning English for specific purposes?" or "What have you done to improve your ESP outside of class?" These questions help to explore both the behavior and the reasons behind students' learning behavior. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure that participants expressed themselves naturally and fully. We recorded and carefully noted each interview, which lasted approximately from 30 to 45 minutes. The entire content was then transcribed and translated into English for data analysis. The use of a semi-structured interview tool ensured depth and flexibility of the data while accurately reflecting the learner voice in the context of ESP learning in Vietnam.

The data collection process was carried out over four weeks in the second semester of the 2025-2026 academic year. After obtaining institutional approval and informed consent, the first author scheduled individual interviews at mutually convenient times. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, private room on campus to ensure confidentiality and comfort. To build rapport and encourage honest sharing, the interviewer adopted a conversational style, began with general questions about the students' learning backgrounds, and assured them there were no right or wrong answers. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese, and then translated into English for analysis. The translation was cross-checked by a bilingual ESP lecturer to ensure accuracy. Simultaneously with data collection, initial coding was undertaken to monitor data saturation, and recruitment ceased once no new codes emerged from three consecutive interviews.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021). This approach was chosen for its flexibility and compatibility with

the constructivist epistemology underpinning the study. The six phases of analysis were such as familiarization with the data through repeated reading and noting initial impressions, generating initial codes inductively from the entire dataset, searching for themes by collating codes into potential patterns, reviewing themes against both coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure coherence, defining and naming themes to capture their essence, and producing the final report with vivid participant excerpts.

3. Results

The findings are organized according to the four research questions. For each question, the main accumulated findings are summarized and interpreted, with selected participant quotations used as illustrative evidence.

3.1. Students' Perceptions of Their Roles and Responsibilities in ESP Learning

The interview data revealed that most students no longer regarded themselves as passive recipients but as active agents with three interrelated roles such as participant, initiator, and autonomous learner. Each role reflects a different dimension of learner agency and is shaped by personal and contextual factors.

Students consciously engaged with ESP learning beyond the compulsory textbook. They sought additional resources, practiced in their workplaces, and actively connected classroom content to professional needs. For example, S1 stated: *"To keep improving, I spend time exploring extra ESP materials recommended by the lecturer, not just the exercises in the textbook."* This behavior indicates a shift from teacher-dependent learning toward self-directed exploration. Several participants also linked participation to career motivation. S3 explained: *"I am very interested in studying ESP because it will increase my employment opportunities in the present and the future."*

Other students emphasized the role of the instructor and the workplace environment in sustaining their engagement. S2, S4, and S5 all noted that appropriate teacher guidance and daily workplace English use made ESP learning more meaningful and accessible. Overall, students perceived themselves as contributors to their own learning rather than mere listeners.

Beyond participation, many students actively initiated learning content by sharing real-life situations, asking questions, and shaping classroom discussions. S1 described how sharing practical scenarios enriched his learning: *"Despite the fact that the course has not yet concluded, I have acquired a great deal of ESP knowledge after two months of studying, thanks to the specific situations I have shared with the instructor in class as well as the situations posed by other students."*

Similarly, several students reported that when the curriculum lacked updated professional scenarios, they proactively asked the lecturer for clarification and additional examples. This behavior was particularly evident when students encountered outdated content, as S5 noted: *"In my view, the curriculum lacks appeal because many of the scenarios in the course are outdated and not linked to real-world professional situations. Therefore, we are always encouraged by our professors to ask questions about the current ESP in class in order to find a solution and increase our chances of acquiring new information."*

Thus, students not only absorbed knowledge but also contributed to adjusting the learning content to better meet practical needs.

The autonomous dimension was evident in how students planned, monitored, and evaluated their own learning. They rearranged personal schedules, sought additional resources, collaborated with lecturers, and applied knowledge at work. S1 illustrated this by describing how he rearranged his daily schedule to integrate ESP learning into his workplace routine, considering this practical application his most beneficial ESP experience.

Other students also demonstrated autonomy by requesting extra materials, consulting lecturers about learning strategies, and using out-of-class communication channels such as Zalo to extend learning beyond the classroom. These behaviors collectively show that students were not solely dependent on formal instruction but actively managed their own learning process.

3.2. Self-directed Learning Strategies Inside and Outside the Classroom

Students reported a variety of self-directed learning strategies that extended beyond the formal ESP classroom. These strategies can be grouped into four main categories such as seeking additional resources, adjusting personal schedules, collaborating with lecturers and peers, and applying knowledge in authentic contexts.

First, several students actively sought supplementary materials. S1, for instance, explored extra ESP resources recommended by the lecturer, while S2 proactively requested additional resources for home study: *"I have been more proactive in requesting that teachers provide me with more*

ESP resources related to my major so that I can improve my vocabulary and grammar at home in my spare time."

Second, students rearranged their schedules to create regular self-study time and to maximize daily exposure to ESP, as shown in S1's earlier account of reorganizing his daily routine.

Third, students used interaction with lecturers and peers as a learning resource. They consulted lecturers about effective learning strategies and expanded communication channels beyond class, such as via Zalo messaging, to maintain academic exchange outside formal lessons.

Fourth, students integrated ESP learning into their daily work and real-life communication. S2 described practicing ESP daily in his current working environment, while S5 explained how he used ESP knowledge in work situations and asked questions when incidents occurred.

These strategies reflect a practical orientation toward self-directed learning that connects classroom content with professional contexts.

3.3. Personal Characteristics, Attitudes, and Contextual Factors Influencing Learner Autonomy

3.3.1. Learners' Attitudes toward Self-directed Learning

A positive learning attitude was consistently identified as a foundation for autonomous ESP learning. Students perceived self-directed learning as beneficial for their future careers, confidence, and soft skills. S1 stated: *"Student views on self-directed learning are important because it improves skills for vocational school students in their future careers."* S3 further linked self-directed learning to the development of soft skills: *"Student views on self-directed learning are important as it forms the ability to use different soft skills for students."*

The role of the instructor in shaping these attitudes was also evident, S4 noted that the instructor helped students recognize the effect of English on contemporary life. Moreover, personal motivation and awareness were seen as essential, as S5 emphasized: *"For attaining the student views on self-directed learning level as projected, each person must have a unique awareness and motivation to achieve the goal."*

Thus, positive attitudes, combined with lecturer support and individual awareness, were regarded as key factors promoting effective ESP learning.

3.3.2. Learners' Personality and Contextual Barriers

Personal characteristics strongly influenced how students participated and exercised autonomy. Confidence, language proficiency, and communication ability functioned either as facilitators or barriers. S2, for example, described how limited vocabulary affected his confidence: *"Due to my limited vocabulary, I lack confidence in English-speaking classroom activities and I am uncomfortable with English-speaking group activities. My conveyance of ideas is inadequate, negatively impacting my English communication."* S3 expressed even stronger hesitation due to perceived inferior language proficiency: *"I feel my English skills are weaker than my classmates', so I hesitate to interact. This slower uptake makes me less confident and comfortable speaking English in class, and I frequently make basic grammar and vocabulary mistakes."*

Other students, although generally at ease in classroom settings, still struggled with expressing ideas during group work. These findings indicate that low confidence and limited proficiency were significant barriers to autonomous engagement, while a supportive environment and gradual improvement could mitigate these challenges.

3.4. Application of ESP Knowledge to Real-Life and Workplace Contexts

The data revealed that students applied ESP knowledge and skills primarily through daily workplace communication and situational practice. Workplace contexts served not only as a motivation for learning but also as a practical environment for consolidating ESP competence. S1 emphasized the direct connection between ESP and his daily work: *"Recognize the significance of ESP that is present in my daily work and studies. In order to maintain current knowledge and make my ESP more applicable to the job, I have rearranged my schedule so that I can daily enhance my ESP. I've specifically implemented the knowledge I've gained in the workplace, and I consider this to be my most beneficial ESP practical experience."*

S2 similarly reported using the current working environment to practice ESP daily, and S5 described applying ESP knowledge at work and using proactive questioning to deal with ESP-related incidents. These examples show that the transfer of ESP knowledge to real-life situations was not only possible but actively pursued by students, reinforcing the practical relevance of their learning.

4. Discussion

The present study reveals that Vietnamese vocational students enact three primary roles in ESP learning, participant, initiator, and autonomous learner, with agency being shaped by personal traits such as self-confidence, language proficiency, and learning motivation, as well as by contextual factors like instructor support and curriculum authenticity. This tripartite role framework resonates with recent reconceptualizations of learner agency. For instance, Little (2022) reaffirmed that autonomy in language learning is not a fixed state but a capacity that emerges when learners exercise control over their learning content and process, precisely as our participants did when they requested additional resources or initiated topic discussions. Similarly, Teng and Zhang (2020) demonstrated that SRL strategies mediate the link between motivational beliefs and academic achievement. In our data, the use of personalized schedules and out-of-class communication channels for example Zalo reflects exactly such self-regulatory mechanisms.

The finding that a supportive learning environment and lecturer encouragement foster agency aligns with the work of Chong and Reinders (2025), who argued that autonomy flourishes in environments where learners feel psychologically safe and receive appropriate scaffolding. Our students' reports of gaining confidence when instructors adopted a flexible, responsive stance echoes the concept of "autonomy support" discussed extensively in self-determination theory. However, the study also uncovered persistent barriers: language anxiety, limited vocabulary, and lack of confidence hindered several learners from taking an active role. This observation matches the conclusions of MacIntyre et al. (2020), who emphasized that language learner psychology, particularly anxiety and willingness to communicate, can significantly constrain or enable agentic behavior. The S2 participant's statement about feeling uncomfortable in group speaking due to vocabulary deficits illustrates this tension vividly.

Our data further suggest that even inadequate, outdated curricula can paradoxically stimulate agency, as learners become initiators to fill gaps. This phenomenon has been noted by Lai (2022), who found that learners often develop compensatory strategies when formal instruction lags behind practical needs. In our context, the proactive questioning and out-of-class material search reflect such compensation. Likewise, Gregersen and Mercer (2021) showed that directed motivational currents and goal-orientedness can override environmental deficits, which explains why some students with strong career orientation maintained high agency despite curricular shortcomings.

The influence of learners' personality traits, particularly self-confidence and communication skills, corroborates Kormos and Csizér (2014), who found that individual difference variables like L2 self-confidence and self-efficacy are powerful determinants of autonomous language learning behavior. In our study, the contrast between the confident S1 and the hesitant S3 perfectly illustrates the individual variation highlighted by these authors. Moreover, Oxford et al. (2021) emphasized the role of metacognitive and affective strategies in nurturing agency, our participants' acts of rearranging schedules, seeking lecturer feedback, and applying workplace practice exemplify such strategy use.

Regarding the vocational context, our findings echo Karakaya and Bozkurt (2022), who documented that mobile and blended learning can enhance learner agency in professional education, provided that tasks are authentic and collaborative. The integration of Zalo as a learning platform in our study suggests a similar potential, though it was not formally part of the curriculum. Importantly, the study also confirms Yang's (2016) conclusion that ESP learners' agency is highly domain-specific, strategies that work in general English may not transfer directly to specialized registers. Hence, tailored pedagogical interventions are needed.

Finally, the observed shift from passivity to agency over two semesters aligns with Stenalt and Lassesén (2022), who in their systematic review concluded that agency develops incrementally through active participation in meaningful academic tasks. Our participants' trajectory supports their call for curriculum designs that deliberately foster learner voice and choice. Together, these comparisons not only validate our findings but also position them within a vibrant global discourse on learner agency, autonomy, and ESP pedagogy.

5. Conclusions

This study has shown that students in ESP classes in Vietnam are gradually taking on a more active role in the learning process, as demonstrated by behaviors such as seeking additional materials, initiating discussions, setting up personal learning plans, and applying

knowledge to practice. These roles are reinforced by a positive learning attitude, a clear awareness of career goals, and timely support from instructors. However, there are still significant challenges, such as a lack of confidence in communicating in English, dependence on inflexible curricula, and a lack of real-world practice environments. These barriers significantly affect the level of agency demonstrated by learners.

The findings contribute to the existing literature by extending the discussion of learner agency and autonomy from general EFL and university contexts to vocational ESP education. While previous studies have often emphasized the cognitive and metacognitive dimensions of autonomy, the present research highlights the situated and relational nature of agency in vocational settings. Students' agentic behaviors were not merely individual traits but emerged through the interaction of personal characteristics, teacher support, and authentic workplace needs.

Practically, the study suggests several implications for ESP teaching and curriculum design. First, training institutions should build a flexible learning environment where learners are recognized as knowledge creators, are guided in self-study skills, and have access to practical learning content. Second, curricula should be updated regularly to reflect real-world professional situations, thereby enabling students to connect classroom English with workplace communication. Third, assessment methods should be adjusted to capture students' proactive abilities, such as self-directed learning, creativity, and personal responsibility, rather than focusing solely on linguistic accuracy.

Despite these contributions, the study has some limitations. The qualitative design and small sample size of 15 students from two majors limit the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on self-reported data may also be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could employ mixed-methods approaches with larger samples, include classroom observations, and examine the longitudinal development of learner agency over time. Such efforts would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how self-directed learning and agency evolve in vocational ESP contexts.

In conclusion, fostering learner agency in ESP requires not only individual effort but also systemic support from teachers, institutions, and curriculum developers. When these factors align, vocational students are more likely to become confident, autonomous, and work-ready communicators.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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