



## EFL TERTIARY STUDENTS' PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE WITH LANGUAGE LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: THE CASE OF VIETNAM

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### Abstract:

While language teaching is widely acknowledged as preparation for real-life language use, attention is still focused mainly on classroom-bounded learning. However, the development of technology allows language learners to extend their learning opportunities beyond the classroom. Using a mixed method design that included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, this study aims to explore how Vietnamese EFL tertiary students perceive and utilize language learning beyond the classroom (LLBC) resources in learning English. This study finds that the students perceived well the feasibility of the LLBC, and believed in the benefits of LLBC resources and activities in improving pronunciation and vocabulary, listening, and speaking skills. In addition, the students are found also to try to develop strategies for making the most of individual LLBC resources and activities to improve their English proficiency. The study also provides implications for the teachers to prepare and equip themselves with the effective utilization of LLBC resources and activities to provide their students with helpful advice.

**Keywords:** language learning beyond the classroom, learning experience, education policy, Vietnamese EFL tertiary students

### 1. Introduction

Language learning beyond the classroom (LLBC), broadly defined by Benson (2011) as including any kind of activities that lead to language learning in the contexts outside the classroom, entails learners' "deliberate" and "independent interaction" with material social and technological resources available for them to self-direct their own learning (p.

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127). In non-English speaking nations such as Vietnam, where learners' interaction with English occurs primarily in the classroom, the notion of language learning beyond the classroom (LLBC) offers a potential alternative for overcoming some of the shortcomings of traditional classroom-based learning.

In reality, a large body of research has yielded consistent findings on EFL students' active participation in LLBC. For instance, LLBC activities were prevalent among EFL students in Indonesian junior high schools (Lamb, 2004a). In addition, EFL learners at universities in diverse areas, including Hong Kong (Spratt et al., 2002), Turkey (Inozu et al., 2010), and Taiwan (Shen et al., 2005), reported engaging in a similar range of LLBC resources and activities, despite minor variances in the frequency of usage. Besides, language learning experiences of a few successful adult EFL learners in Japan, recorded in the study of Murray, G. (2008), showed the pivotal role of LLBC, which was reflected in their active involvement in pop culture, such as TV programs, movies and music.

Further studies into this field have extended our knowledge of the variety of LLBC resources and activities, as well as their associated affordances and constraints for language learning. For instance, self-organized communities or 'English corners' (Gao, 2009), independent learning in the home (Kuure, 2011; Palfreyman, 2011), heritage language learning in the community (Moore & MacDonald, 2013), face-to-face or Skype tutoring in the home (Kozar & Sweller, 2014) and language 'cafes' in educational institutions (Murray et al., 2014) have been acknowledged to be newly emerged LLBC settings. With the advance of the Internet, together with Information and Communication Technology, there is also a growing number of studies of language learning in online settings, for example, 'fan fiction' (Black, 2008), 'online TV dramas' (Wang, D., 2012) and 'digital gaming' (Chik, 2014). Besides, Freeman's study (1999) found that ESL/EFL language learners spent most of their time engaging in a variety of LLBC settings in a playful manner, hence demonstrating their solid preferences for LLBC activities over in-class ones. In Vietnam, Vo's (2017) study into LLBC shed light on the correspondence between Vietnamese university students' perception of the helpfulness of LLBC activities with their actual practice in Vietnamese EFL contexts. That being said, the study was conducted with only 40 third-year English majors, which is quite small in scope within the purview of an EFL context. Hence, there is still a gap for further study into English-majored students' perceptions of the usefulness of LLBC resources and activities and how they made use of such resources and activities to improve their English proficiency. Therefore, the following research questions are posed:

- 1) How do English-majored students at the university under study perceive of the utility of LLBC resources and activities?
- 2) In what ways do they use such LLBC resources and activities to improve their English proficiency?

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

LLBC has been referred to in a variety of terms, including 'out-of-class', 'after-class', 'extra-curricular', 'self-access', 'out-of-school', and 'distance learning'; 'informal', 'non-formal' and 'naturalistic learning'; 'non-instructed learning' and 'self-instruction'; and 'autonomous', 'independent', 'self-directed', and 'self-regulated learning'. For LLBC to become a coherent field of research, however, it is necessary to untangle the dimensions indicated by these terms (Reinders & Benson, 2017; Reinders, 2021).

In educational research, Schugurensky's model (2000) divides 'informal learning' into three major categories based on the degree of intentionality and conscious awareness. 'Self-directed learning' is conscious and intentional; 'incidental learning' is conscious but indeliberate; and 'socialization' is non-intentional and unconscious. While this model is often cited in the literature, its nomenclature is somewhat perplexing. Informality is just one dimension of LLBC, and its key terms are associated with other unaccounted-for terms (e.g., 'self-directed' with 'other-directed', 'intentional' with 'incidental'). In language education, Benson's (2011) proposes a model which gives information about four key dimensions of LLBC based on four of the most widely cited oppositions in the literature: namely location – whether the language learning happens 'in the classroom' or 'outside the classroom', formality – whether the language learning is 'formal' or 'informal', pedagogy – whether the language learning is 'instructed' or 'non-instructed' and locus of control – whether the language learning is 'self-directed' or 'other-directed'.

Subsequently, Chik (2014) adds another significant feature to the model, which focuses on the trajectory of a learner's participation in a particular form of LLBC. In addition, additional critical dimensions may include mediation, which refers to the resources used in language learning (teaching and learning materials, authentic texts, technologies, etc.); sociality, which refers to the social relationships and networks involved in the language learning process; modality, which refers to the language learning practices engaged in (e.g., language study, or language use: reading, listening, spoken, or written interaction); and linguistic, with regard to language competence levels and language skills.

All in all, LLBC can be categorized by a number of distinct characteristics:

**Table 1:** Overall dimensions of LLBC

Dimensions	Description	Example
<b>Intentionality</b>	Where the attention of learners is focused in language learning	intentional, general, specific, incidental
<b>Location</b>	Where and when the learning takes place	out-of-class, after-class, extra-curricular, self-access, out-of-school, distance
<b>Formality</b>	The degree to which learning is linked to educational qualifications or structured by educational institutions	informal, non-formal, naturalistic

<b>Pedagogy</b>	The degree to which teaching is involved	non-instructed, self-instructed
<b>Locus of control</b>	How decisions are distributed between the learner and others	autonomous, independent, self-regulated
<b>Trajectory</b>	Learner's engagement in a particular form of language learning	one-off, life-long
<b>Mediation</b>	The resources and materials used in language teaching and learning	authentic texts, technologies (computer, mobile phone, television)
<b>Sociality</b>	Social relationships and networks involved in the learning process	individual, pair, group
<b>Modality</b>	The practices engaged in language learning	in speech or writing, whether face-to-face, online, e-mail
<b>Linguistic</b>	The language skills and levels of language competence involved in language learning	listening, reading, writing, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, cultural competence

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research context & participants

In this study, a cohort of 200 second-year students from two majors (English language studies & English language teaching) were chosen to be included in the sample. The surveyed respondents were also asked to rate their four English skills, namely listening, reading, speaking, and writing on a four-level proficiency scale of "Limited", "Fair", "Good" and "Very good". This four-level scale was chosen to match the current English proficiency level being adopted in the regular curriculum in Vietnam at various educational levels, including tertiary ones. As can be observed from Table 2, female respondents (79.5%) outnumbered their male counterparts (20.5%) by nearly four times. In general, the "Fair" level accounted for the highest percentages in all four English skills, chosen by 52.0% of the respondents in reading skill, 46.0% in listening skill, 49.0% in writing skill, and 43.5% in speaking skill. Meanwhile, those participating in the research were least confident with their listening skills, with 36.0% indicating "Limited" level. In contrast, 28.5% of the respondents rated their speaking skills as "Very good", occupying the highest proportion in all four English skills.

**Table 2:** Research participants' characteristics

			N = 200	
			F	%
Gender	Male		41	20.5
	Female		159	79.5
Major	English Language Studies		160	80
	English Language Teaching		40	20
Self-rated English proficiency	Listening	Very good	7	3.5
		Good	29	14.5
		Fair	92	46.0
		Limited	72	36.0
	Reading	Very good	8	4.0

		Good	44	22.0
		Fair	104	52.0
		Limited	44	22.0
	Speaking	Very good	10	5.0
		Good	57	28.5
		Fair	87	43.5
		Limited	46	23.0
	Writing	Very good	7	3.5
		Good	51	25.5
		Fair	98	49.0
		Limited	44	22.0

**Note:** F = Frequency, % = Percentage.

### 3.2 Research instruments

A mixed method design which included both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, namely a questionnaire and semi-structured interview, was employed in this study. The questionnaire consisted of 2 main sections; the first component includes 3 closed-ended items on learner variables (gender, major and self-rated proficiency in four English skills) whereas the second part comprised 1 closed-ended multiple-choice item and 26 5-point-Likert scale items to find out participants' perceptions of the utility of LLBC resources and activities in improving their English proficiency. The interview was used to generate qualitative data regarding how the overall picture emerging from the questionnaire was incidentally related to or diverted from individual students. Participants in the interviewing section were asked a set of questions, which basically focus on how they made use of various LLBC resources & activities to improve their English proficiency in practice. The interview prompts focused on participants' justifications and clarifications of their responses to the questionnaires, regarding 2 main areas: (1) the range of LLBC resources and activities frequently used by the interviewed students and (2) the benefits of using such LLBC resources and activities. Upon leaving the interview, participants were also asked to provide the researcher with the artifacts (books, newspapers, articles, novels, movies, TV programs, YouTube channels, social media sites, etc.) that represent their use of LLBC resources and activities via email later.

### 3.3 Data collection and analysis

Concerning the collection of quantitative data, once the online survey questionnaire was finished, it was sent to 10 random students at the university under study for pre-testing. Upon considering their responses, modifications were made, and mistakes were corrected. Afterward, the researcher distributed the questionnaire to 200 second-year English-majored students at the university under the study via several groups on Facebook to control the number of participants.

Regarding the collection of qualitative data, 10 participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the interviewing section while taking the online survey. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to help participants express their ideas precisely and thoroughly. To keep track of the data, both tape-recording and note-

taking were used. Moreover, their real names were not mentioned to ensure confidentiality for the participants. Instead, descriptive coding was performed to help with the identification of the data. In this study, those participating in the interviews were coded based on the order of the interviews (from 1 to 10) and their demographic information gender (M/F), academic major (ELS for English language studies and ELT for English language teaching). For example, the first interview would be presented as "S1-F-ELS".

The quantitative data from the responses to the questionnaire were analyzed with SPSS. The statistical analysis based on descriptive statistics of means (M), and standard deviations (SD) was performed to summarize the students' perceptions of LLBC resources and activities. The intervals for the mean scores were interpreted as "insignificant" (mean helpfulness scores in the range of 1.00 to 2.49), "fair" (mean helpfulness scores in the range of 2.50 to 3.49), and "significant" (mean helpfulness scores in the range of 3.50 to 5.00). Meanwhile, the qualitative data were transcribed and translated into English for quoting and analysis using the thematic analysis to identify recurrent patterns surrounding the pre-defined themes related to how participants used LLBC resources and activities to improve their English proficiency.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Perception of the usefulness of LLBC resources & activities

#### a. The overall perception of LLBC

The surveyed participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement towards the following statement on a five-point rating scale, with "1 = Strongly Disagree (SD)", "2 = Disagree (D)", "3 = Neutral (N)", "4 = Agree (A)", and "5 = Strongly Agree (SA)". This contributed to exploring their overall perceptions of LLBC, which were considered closely related to students' willingness to use LLBC resources and activities.

**Table 3:** Overall perception of LLBC

Statement	N = 200		Level	Interpretation
	M	SD		
I think that language learning can happen only in the classroom.	2.15	.95	Strongly disagree	1.00-2.49

As can be seen from Table 3, respondents reported a low level of agreement towards the aforementioned statement (M = 2.15, SD = .95), expressing their disagreements with the opinion that language learning could happen only inside the classroom. In other words, English-majored students in this study were found to be aware of the possibility of LLBC, thus being willing to use LLBC resources and activities to enhance their English proficiency.

## b. The perceived utility of individual LLBC resource

**Table 4:** Perceived utility of individual LLBC resource

Item	LLBC Resources	N = 200		Level	Interpretation
		M	SD		
5	Online/computer/mobile-based materials	4.09	.86	Significantly useful	3.50-5.00
3	Traditional broadcast materials	3.85	.70	Significantly useful	3.50-5.00
6	Monolingual/Bilingual dictionary	3.55	.80	Significantly useful	3.50-5.00
1	Academic print materials	3.26	.83	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
2	Non-academic print materials	3.22	.76	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
4	Recorded materials	3.06	.95	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
	Average	3.51	.82		

As indicated in Table 4, the survey respondents rated all six types of LLBC resources as "fairly" or "significantly" useful. This finding was highly indicative of the positive behavioral intention to use such LLBC resources. Among these, the LLBC resources perceived as "moderately helpful" were *Academic print materials*, *Non-academic print materials* and *Recorded materials* whereas the other three LLBC resources that fell into the category of high level of utility include *Online/computer/mobile-based materials* (M = 4.09, SD = .86), *Traditional broadcast* (M = 3.85, SD = .70), and *Monolingual/Bilingual dictionary* (M = 3.55, SD = .80).

## c. The perceived utility of individual LLBC activity

**Table 5:** Perceived utility of individual LLBC activity

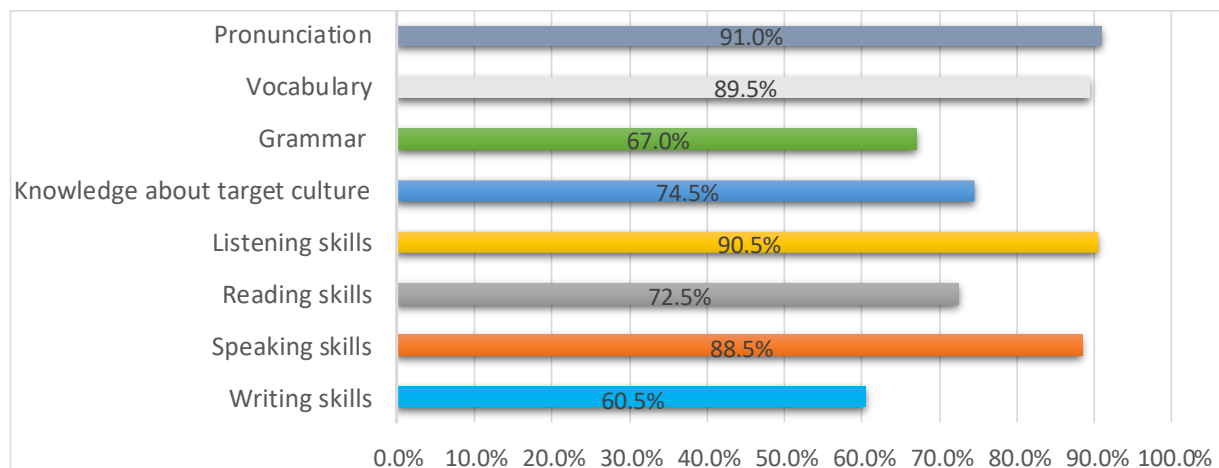
Item	LLBC Activities	N = 200		Level	Interpretation
		M	SD		
10	Watch YouTube	4.13	.76	Significantly useful	3.50-5.00
19	Speak with foreigners	4.03	.87	Significantly useful	3.50-5.00
12	Surf the Internet	3.81	.81	Significantly useful	3.50-5.00
22	Listen to songs	3.85	.75	Significantly useful	3.50-5.00
24	Use social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	3.65	.94	Significantly useful	3.50-5.00
8	Watch TV programs	3.52	.84	Significantly useful	3.50-5.00
9	Watch movies	3.48	.91	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
23	Use computer/mobile-based learning software	3.45	.76	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
17	Speak with other colleagues/ fellows students in English	3.43	.91	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
13	Read academic books and articles	3.32	.83	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49

16	Participate in English clubs	3.31	.88	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
14	Read newspapers and magazines	3.29	.80	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
11	Listen to the radio	3.23	.80	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
15	Read novels	3.16	.79	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
18	Speak with family members in English	3.03	.96	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
21	Write emails	2.90	.94	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
20	Write to pen-pals	2.92	.96	Fairly useful	2.50-3.49
	Average	3.44	.85		

The results in Table 5 show that all LLBC activities were perceived as "moderately" or "highly" useful. This finding was highly indicative of the positive behavioral intention to use such activities among researched students. Specifically, *Watch YouTube* ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = .76$ ), *Speak with foreigners* ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = .87$ ), *Listen to songs* ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = .75$ ), *Surf the Internet* ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = .81$ ), and *Use social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)* ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = .94$ ) received the highest rating from survey respondents while the remaining LLBC activities fell into the category of "moderate" level of utility.

#### d. The perceived utility of LLBC resources and activities in improving their English proficiency

**Figure 1:** Perceived utility of LLBC resources and activities in improving English proficiency





As can be seen from Figure 1, pronunciation and vocabulary were regarded as two English language areas most likely to be improved thanks to the utilization of LLBC resources and activities by 91.0% and 89.5% of the survey respondents, respectively. Meanwhile, the possibility of gaining knowledge about the target culture through LLBC resources and activities was presumed by nearly three-quarters of the participants. On the contrary, only 67.0% of respondents acknowledged the probability of consolidating their grammatical competence, making it the English language knowledge area that would be least positively influenced using LLBC resources and activities. Besides, one survey respondent suggested gaining "general knowledge in English" as one additional benefit from LLBC resources and activities.

## 4.2 The practice of participants' utilizing LLBC resources and activities to improve their English proficiency

### a. Participants' selection of LLBC resources and activities

**Table 6:** Participants' selection of LLBC resources and activities

Students	Selection of LLBC resources	Selection of LLBC activities
S1-F-ELS	Online/computer/mobile-based materials	Watch movies
		Watch YouTube
S2-F-ELT	Online/computer/mobile-based materials	Watch YouTube
		Use social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
S3-F-ELS	Online/computer/mobile-based materials	Watch movies
		Watch YouTube
		Listen to radio
		Read newspapers and magazines
		Use computer/mobile-based learning software
S4-F-ELS	Online/computer/mobile-based materials	Watch movies/videos/DVDs/VCDs
		Watch YouTube
		Listen to songs
		Use social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
S5-F-ELT	Non-academic print materials	Read novels
S6-F-ELS	Online/computer/mobile-based materials	Watch movies
		Watch YouTube
		Use social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
S7-F-ELT	Online/computer/mobile-based materials	Watch YouTube
		Listen to songs
		Read novels
		Use social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
S8-F-ELS	Online/computer/mobile-based materials	Watch YouTube
		Listen to the radio
S9-M-ELS	Online/computer/mobile-based materials	Watch YouTube
		Listen to the radio
		Listen to songs
S10-F-ELT	Academic print materials	Read academic books and articles

As noted in Table 6, 8 out of 10 interviewees frequently opted for *Online/computer/mobile-based materials* as their main LLBC resource. The rest tended to use *Academic print materials* and *Non-academic print materials* for language learning outside the classroom. Meanwhile, the respondents exploited LLBC resources in a variety of ways for learning. In other words, they undertook a wide range of LLBC activities to improve their English proficiency, namely *Watch movies, Watch YouTube, Listen to radio, Listen to songs, Read academic books and articles, Read newspaper and magazines, Read novels, Use computer/mobile-based learning software, and Use social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)*.

### **b. Affordances of LLBC resources and activities**

As explained in the previous parts, learners had different strategies to draw on individual LLBC resources, thereby engaging in various LLBC activities to boost their English proficiency. Among these, *Watch YouTube* was undertaken by the majority of interviewees who consistently reported that through this LLBC activity, they could gain a vast pool of both academic and general knowledge in English:

*"By visiting channels for learning English such as Rachel's English or VOA Learning English, I can acquire academic knowledge as well as learning tips from experts."* (S1-F-ELS)

*"The channels to which I subscribe, including BBC news, Insider, Business Insider, provide the latest news so that I can retrieve tons of information and broaden my general knowledge in English."* (S3-F-ELS)

*"I usually look for channels that provide easy-to-understand contents of my interest, (e.g. Loopers for news, IGN for games, Morts for horror, Simple History for history, and Tifo Football for football) through which I can gain valuable insights into a variety of topics."* (S6-F-ELS)

In addition, some of them stated that YouTube videos assisted them in improving their pronunciation and expanding their vocabulary range:

*"I practice the shadowing technique, which requires me to first focus on how native speakers pronounce a word (vowels and consonants) and stress the sentence (intonation), and then repeat after them immediately. Thanks to this kind of drill, I now feel more confident in pronouncing difficult sounds, such as /ð/ or /θ/."* (S8-F-ELS)

*"Whenever I come across a word that causes me some trouble understanding the contents of the videos, I turn on the English captions to see the context and make a guess about its meaning. After that, I look it up in the dictionary to make sure that I get it right. In this way, I can extend my vocabulary range to a great extent."* (S9-M-ELS)

Furthermore, others attributed the significant enhancement of their listening and speaking skills to videos on YouTube:

*"Watching videos of native speakers from different countries, I can familiarize myself with various accents. In this way, I can now comprehend English spoken by those with strong accents such as Indian people. I can even practice repeating what the native speakers say, which helps me boost my fluency and form my own accent."* (S2-F-ELT)

*"I usually pay special attention to how native speakers deliver their speeches using both verbal (words/expressions) and non-verbal communication tools (body language and eye contact) on English speeches or TEDx Talks so that I can practice combining these elements while giving my speech in real life."* (S7-F-ELT)

The second preferred LLBC activity was *Watch movies*, which was reported by respondents to provide them with opportunities for bettering their pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar:

*"While enjoying the movies, I usually mirror the way the characters say their lines, especially the pronunciation of words or chunks of words."* (S1-F-ELS)

*"To compensate for my limited vocabulary range, I always watch movies with English captions to make sure that I fully understand the contents. This helps me a lot because I can remember the words/phrases by repeatedly looking at their spelling and hearing their pronunciation."* (S3-F-ELS)

*"I watch movies without English captions to avoid being disturbed. However, I sometimes turn on the captions in case there are informal expressions (slangs/idioms) or grammatical structures that I keep hearing without understanding their meanings for many times. Under these circumstances, I often take some screenshots so that I can look them up and put them into use later."* (S6-F-ELS)

Besides, students claimed that they saw significant improvement in their listening and speaking skills thanks to watching movies:

*"I pay close attention to how the actors use proper accent, stress, and intonation in different contexts. Thanks to this, I can capture various accents and recognize the meaning of the word."* (S3-F-ELS)

*"After hearing some special words and structures used by the characters in the movies time and time again, I realize that I sometimes can use them in my daily conversations without much thinking."* (S6-F-ELS)

Using social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) ranked third in the list of LLBC activities frequently done by participants in the interview. Specifically, the interviewees revealed that they made use of three different social media sites, namely Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, for learning language outside the classroom.

Two interviewees indicated that the use of social media allowed them to learn vocabulary and grammar, as well as gain general knowledge in English:

*"I only watch videos for English language learning posted on Facebook accounts/pages that I follow, such as the Shermans English. In these videos, new words and grammatical points are presented in an interesting way, which I find extremely helpful."* (S6-F-ELS)

*"I can read posts from celebrities that I follow on Instagram. Besides, I follow BBC news to keep myself up to date with what is going on in the world. During this process, I scan for new words to learn and interesting ideas to retain."* (S7-F-ELT)

Meanwhile, the remaining one shared that she could recognize the significant improvement of her speaking:

*"I subscribe to TikTok channels that provide duet videos in English with native speakers, for example, mikethechamelon and christian.faina. By accepting to take the challenge, I can first listen to the speakers, then practice speaking and reflecting upon my performance later. After a while, I realize that I can speak English more fluently."* (S2-F-ELT)

By contrast, *Listen to radio*, *Listen to songs*, and *Read novels*, took the fourth places in the preference rankings of LLBC activities, each of them being employed by two informants. On the one hand, the podcast listeners agreed that they could get used to the English-using environment, catch up with the speaking pace of native speakers, as well as recognize the pronunciation and accent of people from different countries by adopting passive listening techniques while undertaking this LLBC activity. Similarly, the music addicts reported that they could practice listening skills by taking gap-filling exercises based on the song lyrics. Apart from that, their pronunciation could be trained by merely listening to the way the singers pronounced the sounds. Besides, their knowledge about the target culture, vocabulary, and grammar was also extended as they tried to find out the special meaning of the songs. Specifically, they tended to focus on "strange" terms that were highly likely to denote concepts specific to a particular culture or words and expressions that repeatedly appeared in the song lyrics. On the other hand, the novel readers had different strategies to utilize the affordances of this LLBC activity to improve their reading comprehension skills, as well as enrich their vocabulary and grammar:

*"I have to say that I have grown into an extensive reader. This means that I read mainly for pleasure and information. As a result, I tend to ignore vocabulary and grammar that I do not know and focus on acquiring the main ideas of what I am reading. In this way, I feel*

*that my reading fluency is significantly boosted. Besides, I usually spend a lot of time reflecting on what I have just read immediately after finishing reading. That is the way that I practice my inferring skill so that I can figure out the underlying meanings of the artworks.” (S5-F-ELT)*

*“When I started reading online English novels, I chose the ones with very basic language (Dilan and the Gorillas, The drive to Dubai) to avoid getting any trouble comprehending the contents. As time went by, I gradually opted for other novels with higher difficulty level of vocabulary and grammar (The Book Thief, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, James and the Giant Peach, The Riverman, All the light we cannot see). That was when I could familiarize myself with the written styles of native speakers by analyzing the use of words, expressions and grammatical structures.” (S7-F-ELT)*

The least favorite LLBC activities, which attracted only one participant per activity, include *Read academic books and articles, Read newspaper and magazines, and Use computer/mobile-based learning software*. Being an advocate of the cliché "practice makes perfect", the interviewee who enjoyed reading print academic books and articles simply took the traditional method of acquiring language out of the classroom boundaries. This involved reading the theory before doing the practice exercises, which, according to her, allowed for practicing and learning of a variety of English skills and language areas outside the classroom. Conversely, the respondent who preferred reading newspapers and magazines in online websites attributed the improvement of reading skill and the expansion of general knowledge in English to her strategic utilization of information in the news:

*“When reading a piece of news, I only filter and note down the keywords and details. After that, I can practice my summarizing skill.” (S3-F-ELS)*

Similarly, the user of English learning software only exploited certain apps on her mobile phone, with a special focus on vocabulary:

*“My acquisition of English vocabulary is greatly facilitated by Intelli, which is an app that integrates attractive flashcards into learning new words. Besides, the app called Vocabulary acts as a reminder for me to review the words that I have learned by sending notifications whenever I use my phone.” (S3-F-ELS)*

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Participants' perceptions and practice of utilizing LLBC resources and activities to improve their English proficiency**

In line with several research findings, the results of this study indicate that the students at the university under study utilized a wide range of LLBC resources and activities. This

could be because the importance of LLBC was well-perceived by the researched participants. Therefore, they were more willing to use resources and activities available to create affordances for learning English outside the classroom.

Meanwhile, it is undeniable that one reason behind the significant variations in participants' selection of LLBC resources and activities lied in their perceptions of the utility of such LLBC resources and activities. The consistent findings from the questionnaire and the interview reveal a positive relationship between the perceived level of utility and the practice of using individual LLBC resource and activity for improving their English proficiency. Particularly, the LLBC resources (*Online/computer/mobile-based materials, Academic print materials, and Non-academic print materials*) and activities (*Watch YouTube, Listen to songs, Use social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), and Watch TV programs*) perceived as the most helpful ones were also frequently used by the interviewees to improve their English proficiency.

However, while participants acknowledged the utility of *Speak with foreigners*, they tended to avoid such activity when it came to actual practice. It may be because students live in a non-English speaking country, making them hesitant to communicate in English. Moreover, some students do not feel comfortable speaking English owing to their language proficiency (Hyland, 2004), personality (Pearson, 2004), etc. To make matters worse, the alternatives available are not applicable to learners' everyday utilization. The reason may lie in the fact that talking with native speakers or writing to a pen pal is challenging, for learners do not have the chance to contact them daily. Even among their peers, some students can have trouble finding a companion to speak English with regularly. As a result, they feel their time is being wasted since their buddies would merely respond to them back in their native tongue anytime they speak English. This could lend support to Hyland's finding (2004), which indicated the prevalence of activities in the private domain among students in Hong Kong. It can be argued, however, that the students in this study expressed their preferences for private activities over 'public' ones largely due to the restricted availability of resources, which was worsened by the complicated developments of the COVID-19 pandemic across Vietnam during the research period, rather than the negative social connotations associated with those using English in a Vietnamese-speaking community.

## 5.2 Affordances of LLBC resources and activities

Besides revealing the LLBC resources and activities perceived as most useful, the current study also discovers the benefits of these resources and activities as perceived by them. The analysis of their responses to the questionnaire leads to the conclusion that participants believed the use of LLBC resources and activities would yield the most notable improvement in their communication skills (listening and speaking) as well as certain language areas (pronunciation and vocabulary).

Indeed, the results from the interview justify the quantitative findings, for almost all the researched students exploited at least one LLBC resource and activity that provided opportunities for them to either practice their listening or speaking skills or

ameliorate their pronunciation and vocabulary in actual practice. Surprisingly, despite being mentioned by one surveyed respondent, gaining "general knowledge in English" was reported by most interviewees as another major benefit of using LLBC resources and activities. What is more interesting, in addition, is that participants tended to develop different strategies for dealing with individual LLBC activity. This can be explained by the findings of Benson's (2011) study, in which the author concluded that it was essential for language learners participating in a variety of LLBC activities to be able to create settings in which they could both engage their interests and improve their language learning.

Particularly, the most preferred LLBC activity, namely *Watch YouTube*, was claimed by the interviewed informants to bring about clear improvement in their general knowledge in English, their pronunciation and vocabulary, as well as their listening and speaking skills. This finding agrees with the study by Almurashi (2016) where the author assumed that YouTube videos are valuable resources that may be used both inside and outside of the classroom for English language acquisition. This is because they can aid students in grasping the lesson's topics, improving their overall performance, simplifying complex concepts, and making learning more interesting. In addition, using YouTube's library of videos that contain linguistic, background and cultural information presented in authentic scenarios, students can observe language use in different settings (Maness, 2004). These videos provide circumstantial learning through audiovisual aids that make up for any misunderstanding that could occur due to listening alone, thus yielding better learning outcomes (Mackey & Ho, 2008). This promotes the clarity of information and the creation of a memorable web of connections between important ideas. In addition, studies by Zaidi (2018) and Heriyanto (2018) suggest that YouTube had significant effects on students' pronunciation and vocabulary acquisition. This can be explained by the fact that learners can improve such language areas through observation, mimicry, self-correction and carrying out tasks. Besides, YouTube also has video clips that show authentic use of language (Godwin-Jones, 2007), which not only hold students' interest, but also make learning new words in context easier (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011). In addition, modeling can be a kind of skill training (Unkovich, 2011) when learners have a more realistic image of what is required of them as they continue to acquire sophisticated speaking abilities by observing an experienced speaker. The availability of a visual element, such as facial expressions and body language, contributes to the improvement of speaking skills.

In addition, another LLBC activity favored by participants in the interview, namely *Watch movies*, was said to have a positive impact on their pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as their listening and speaking skills. This result is in line with several findings by recent research where the authors reported the advantages of integrating movies into English language learning. Specifically, movies can act as a powerful source of materials for English language acquisition (Ismaili, 2013), since learners can acquire several useful English expressions like colloquial and idiomatic expressions (Eken, 2003). This is because they are provided with opportunities to get

exposed to the use of English from real situation, authentic settings, and foreign cultural context as they watch movies (Rao, 2019). Besides, the study by Qiu (2017) also suggests that watching English movies can be helpful for improving listening comprehension, as well as fluency and conversational skills, thanks to the availability of visual elements such as facial expressions and body language (Harmer, 2007).

Besides, the interviewees agreed that the third most popular LLBC activity, *Use social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)*, helped them improve their vocabulary and grammar as well as their communication skills. These favorable impacts are attributable to the fact that social media is a collection of Internet applications that enables the development of diverse material in the world (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This means that students can do a lot of things through social media sites which have some common features such as interactivity, platform quality, knowledge sharing mechanisms (Chou, 2014). Regarding Facebook, one of the most popular social networking sites, several studies by Kabilan (2010), Shih (2011), Eren (2012) and Akhiar (2017) have shown that it could be utilized to promote EFL students' incidental learning of skills in both content and language knowledge. Instagram as a learning platform afforded learners the ability to engage in meaningful interactions, which may aid in the development of their communication skills, language proficiency, and understanding of English grammar and vocabulary (Zarei & Rudravarapu, 2020). As for TikTok, numerous short videos of English language learning material shared by English instructors, educators and native speakers are available on this site. Additionally, EFL students may utilize TikTok to produce their own digital oral English presentations in the form of short videos. By producing videos and commenting on these videos in English, TikTok users can improve their English communication without being bound to space or time constraints (Dai & Chen, 2019).

Conversely, *Listen to radio/songs* was among the least favored LLBC activities by those taking part in the interview. On the one hand, participants in the study preferred podcast over traditional radio because it was much easier to find and download. A podcast, according to Asmawati (2017), is an online audio recording that serves as a learning tool. It contains a variety of media, such as audio, video, and still image (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007). While only a small number of interviewees chose to listen to podcast, they nevertheless acknowledged the significant benefits of podcast on their listening skill. This is in accordance with Sze's study (2006) where the author believed that students' listening can be enhanced using podcast. This is because it offers up-to-date content and authentic native voices which create favorable conditions for practicing listening (Kohler et al., 2010). On the other hand, the finding indicates that the use of English songs facilitated the expansion of learners' knowledge about target culture, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, in addition to the enhancement of their listening skills. This corresponds with Cheung's study (2001) in that learners seem to get many benefits from listening to English songs hours and hours. Specifically, Horn (2007) suggests that music enriches one's vocabulary and teaches articulation and pronunciation. This is because songs provide an effective source of language input for learners (Chusanachoti, 2009), and introduce the repetition of words and phrases, which enables them to remember the



learned content (Mora, 2000). Besides, reading song lyrics is another form of literacy, which expands the learners' grammar and vocabulary, and develops skills needed for learning the target language in greater depth (Murray, S.K., 2005).

According to those who participated in the interviews, the activity that require reading different kinds of materials, namely *Read academic books and article/newspapers and magazines/novels*, was also rated as the least favorite LLBC activities. Regarding the first activity, participants indicated that it facilitated the development of a variety of English skills and language areas. This is understandable when examining the characteristics of academic English books and articles. Normally coming with specific objectives in accordance with the learners' level of proficiency, these materials concentrate on assisting students in expanding their lexical and grammatical knowledge as well as learning and developing new skills. Concerning the other two activities, respondents asserted that they aided in the development of their general understanding of English, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as the improvement of their reading skills. This finding is in conformity with Inderjit (2014), Lee (2017), and Ali et al. (2019) who suggested that regular reading habits among students are likely to support their language learning by increasing general knowledge, extending their vocabulary and grammatical level, and enhancing their language skills. This is because English newspapers and magazines provide a wealth of information. In addition, by presenting a variety of interesting themes, newspapers and magazines can increase the number of words that a student learns. Furthermore, the word selections and the writing style of news articles and magazines are clear and straightforward, making it easier for learners to grasp (Ahmmed, 2016). Novels, meanwhile, are great tools for fostering the development of English skills thanks to their varying topics, lengths, and difficulty levels (Garies et al, 2009).

The remaining LLBC activity, namely *Use computer/mobile-based learning software*, was ranked as one of the least popular LLBC activities. Among the various possibilities that mobile applications offer for language learning, the student in this study paid special attention to the positive impacts on vocabulary learning. Specifically, she could acquire the target words and retain them in her long-term memory, which is attributable to the unique advantages of mobile phones apps, such as "*accessibility, personalizability, and portability*" (Saran & Seferoglu, 2010, p.253). These findings can find a large amount of support from other studies (Bensalem, 2018; Jiang, 2016; Ornprapat & Wiwat, 2015, Wang, Z.Y, 2014).

## 6. Conclusion and Implications

It can be concluded that participants are well-perceived of the feasibility of LLBC. Particularly, they believe in the fact that using LLBC resources and activities can bring about significant impacts on their pronunciation and vocabulary, as well as listening and speaking skills. In fact, the most common LLBC resources and activities are also rated by the survey respondents as the most helpful in improving their English proficiency. However, apart from the common usage, the researched students also try to develop

different strategies for making the most of individual LLBC resources and activities to improve their English proficiency.

Consequently, it is critical for students to develop an awareness of the appropriateness of all LLBC resources and activities, even though each LLBC resource and activity is meant to serve a particular learning purpose. A thoughtful manipulation of the different LLBC resources and activities would benefit students' language learning process. In addition, more communication between teachers and students would be necessary. There should be the establishment of a network where students may approach instructors with their issues to receive guidance. On the other hand, teachers need to equip themselves with the principles behind the effective utilization of LLBC resources and activities to provide their students with useful advice.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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