Learning Place Control: Vietnamese EFL students' Appreciation and Trust

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Abstract

Learners in the contemporary digital world tend to move from space to space during their learning process. However, transforming such spaces to effective learning places is not simple. This study aims to investigate Vietnamese EFL students' appreciation for various learning spaces and their willingness in turning those spaces into places for learning purposes. The factors associated with this process are also explored. Employing a short questionnaire distributed to 226 undergraduate students and several follow up individual interviews, the study shows that most students travel across some spaces in their daily learning activities, but they do not try to control those spaces. They only appreciate their teacher-created and self-created solo learning spaces and accept these spaces as their learning places. They also agree that these are the spaces where they can best control their learning. These findings present a complex picture of students' exercise of taking control in their learning. It appears that the initiation of their learning must start with trust and convenience in a learning space. The attempt to control a learning space does not start with careful considerations as often seen in autonomous learners. This emphasises the role of trust in nurturing and shaping learners' capacity of space control for learning purposes.

Literature Review

Space and Place

Space is used to understand human sense of location. An individual can nowadays engage in many spaces at the same time. People are seen not to stay in a space but shift from space to space constantly. Therefore, their interactions within a space are often disrupted as they are taking part in different spaces. It is frequently seen that a learner is physically here but virtually there. A student is physically sitting in a classroom with their peers around but chatting with some other friends in a virtual chat room. When it comes to learning, it is not always easy to differentiate space from place. One of the original attempts to declare this distinction is a study in 1993, in which Carter et al. proposed that place is a "space to which meaning has been ascribed" (p.xii). This notion was then clarified by Creswell (2004) who stated that places are created through actions by people doing things in a particular space. The key difference between space and place is not about whether it is physical or virtual, but about the players' mental and behavioural engagement.

Learning Control Capacity

Capacity of controlling learning processes is referred to as learner autonomy. This construct has widely been developed during the last four decades (Dang, 2012) and suggested to be one of the most important competences of the workforce in the 21st century. It has also been included recently in the education agenda of many countries, particularly those in Asia where the majority of students are traditionally believed to be passive. Controlling learning process should be different from controlling a place (Murray & Lamb, 2017) as the ultimate aim is for learning, not place. However, in a particular context of learning, controlling a learning place is actually controlling a learning process. Therefore, the current research uses these two ways of wording interchangeably. Controlling a learning place in this paper does not refer to the capacity for managing the place technically only, but also managing the learning activities in that discourse.

Learning Place Appreciation

Numerous factors contributing to students' appreciation and engagement in a learning place have been researched. These factors range from environmental aspects, such as noise, colour, furniture, lighting, temperature, and air quality (Keep, 2002; Higgins et al., 2005) to personal aspects, such as experience, emotion, task organisation, safety, and social structure (Beckers et al., 2016; Bowen et al., 2008; Dang & Robertson, 2010). The current study does not employ a particular task design for a learning place experiment, it neutralises all the factors associated with learning environment and task organisation. It assumes that the target population is generally exposed to similar spaces and places in the local context. Therefore, it only aims to look for the distinct factors which are closely relevant to the local context of Vietnam that students exhibit. It focuses more on the beliefs that local students tend to hold and the social constraints that they perceive towards a learning space.

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Objectives

Together with the development of technology, Vietnamese learners have various opportunities to be introduced to a lot of spaces during their social and learning life. Lecturers at tertial education level tend to throw students a lot of learning resources and management advice at the beginning of each course. They expect their students to invest a substantial amount of time on learning outside of the classroom and take advantages of these spaces. Vietnamese students have been traditionally known as being quiet in class, particularly in higher education due to the big class size and influence of Confucianism. Lecturers' interactions with their students in class are often very limited. Students are expected to attend class regularly, pay full attention to the lesson, and memorise all the details (Albright, 2019; Dang, 2010). Despite of a clear objective on learning control capacity is stated, support for achieving this objective is very limited. It is necessary to understand how students navigate their learning activities effectively. This study, therefore, focuses on students' development process of controlling a learning place from many spaces and associated factors. To achieve this objective, the current research needs to understand (1) the number of spaces among which students often travel, (2) the control that they have over a learning place, and (3) the reasons that foster the transformation of a space into a place.

Methodology

Participants

226 students taking a BA in English as a Foreign Language in a public university in Vietnam

freshmen	sophomores	juniors	seniors
77	61	69	19
34.1%	27%),	30.5%	(8.4%)

Design

Sequential mixed method design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017),

Questionnaire	(1) the spaces that students travelled across in their daily life (2) the space in which they most frequently stay (3) the space that they most appreciated (4) the level of control that they exercised in their learning place.
Interview	(1) describing their own journey of travelling across the spaces (2) their controlling behaviours in a learning place (3) the reasons for their transformation of a space into a learning place

Findings and Discussion

Travelling Spaces

The participants reported over a dozen of spaces that they travelled across in their learning journey, including conventional spaces such as formal class, virtual class, library, group discussion; entertainment spaces such as coffee shop, youth union network; and emerging spaces such as part-time job environment, online community. These spaces can be characterised as either social, digital, and physical only. There is an absence of emotional, political, and philosophical spaces as reported by tertiary students in New Zealand (Hobbs & Dofs, 2017). However, the number of spaces that the students came across are quite different from one another, unequally ranging from 1 to 12 with an average of 3.9. This reflects a big variation of the learning opportunities perceived by the students in the contemporary context of Vietnam.

Learning Places Appreciated

The data show that the learning place which was most greatly appreciated by the students is their self-created solo learning place at home. However, this was only rated by 35.8% of the sample although it accounts for the biggest variance of the variable. In other words, the best learning place for each student is quite different from one another, indicating their diverse perceptions of the usefulness of learning spaces. In a transition period of promoting learner autonomy and emergence of many learning spaces initiated by technology, Vietnamese students clearly exhibit a diversification in their personalised learning routes. This is contradictory to what has been traditionally believed, in which students should focus on only one best learning plan to achieve success most efficiently.

Learning Control

Given that a variety of learning places are appreciated by students, it is necessary to know to what extent they can control those places. As analysed from the questionnaire data, the students reported quite a high level in controlling their own learning places. They rated their level of learning control over their most appreciated place to be 3.9, 3.8, and 3.9, for learning content, learning management, and cognitive process, respectively. This shows that they could exercise learner autonomy quite well in their most favourable place.

Areas of Control	Min	Max	SD	Mean
Learning content (choosing what to learn)	1	5	0.70	3.9
Learning management (plan, organize, evaluate learning)	1	5	0.74	3.8
Cognitive process (attention, awareness, mental process)	2	5	0.70	3.9

Reasons for Appreciation

Students reported a moderately high level of acknowledging the importance of their teacher-created virtual space. Combining the data on students' appreciation of learning space produces a highlighted role of trust on students' perception of learning spaces.