

Enhancing French Learners' Self-Learning Competence: A Case Study at Thang Long University

Duong Viet Trung

Department Of French Language, Thang Long University, Hanoi, Vietnam

ABSTRACT: Developing learners' self-learning competence has become a critical priority in higher education in Vietnam. While substantial research has investigated learner autonomy in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, little attention has been paid to students' development and application of self-learning competence in French as a second foreign language (FSL) within Vietnamese universities. To address this gap, this study explores the perceptions, practices, and challenges of 100 undergraduate students enrolled in French 1 and French 2 courses at Thang Long University during the 2024-2025 academic year. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach and employing thematic analysis, the findings reveal a substantial gap between students' positive attitudes toward self-learning tasks and their limited engagement in autonomous practices. Key barriers include insufficient goal-setting skills, limited exploration of learning resources, and reluctance to seek instructor feedback. Based on these insights, the study proposes a three-pillar model integrating curriculum innovation, structured teacher facilitation, and learner strategy training to enhance students' self-learning competence. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on learner autonomy while offering practical implications for curriculum design and teaching practices to promote French learners' sustainable language learning habits.

KEYWORDS: self-learning competence; learner autonomy; French as a second foreign language; higher education; vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The importance of learning French in the 21st century

In today's era of expanding intercultural interactions, learning French continues to play a vital and valuable role. As one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, with over 300 million speakers across five continents, French serves not only as a key international language of diplomacy, culture, and science, but also as an official language of many global institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the International Organization of La Francophonie. At an individual level, French provides learners with access to a rich intellectual and artistic heritage, fostering cultural literacy and cross-cultural understanding. In other words, in a rapidly changing world where multilingualism is increasingly seen as an asset not only for personal growth and academic development but also for professional mobility, learning French equips individuals with the communicative and intercultural competencies necessary to thrive in a diverse international environment. Accordingly, French language education plays a strategic role in preparing 21st-century citizens to participate in a globally connected society.

1.2 Key challenges in learning French as a second foreign language in Vietnamese universities

Teaching and learning French as a second foreign language (L2) in Vietnamese higher education face multiple challenges that hinder both instructional effectiveness and student engagement. These challenges stem from such factors as institutional priorities, curricular limitations, resource scarcity, and learner motivation. To begin with, French as L2 occupies a marginal position in most university curricula. As English remains the dominant foreign language required for graduation and career advancement, French is often relegated to an elective or secondary subject (Nguyen & Le, 2020). This positioning results in limited institutional investment in French L2 programs, leading to reduced class hours and minimal administrative support. Additionally, limited instructional time presents significant barriers. Many French L2 programs offer only 2 to 3 credits per semester and focus heavily on grammar and vocabulary, making it difficult for students to acquire sufficient linguistic proficiency. Resource constraints further worsen the problem. Students have limited access to up-to-date learning materials or digital tools tailored to multi-level French learners. Another major issue is low learner motivation, often rooted in the perceived irrelevance of French to students' future careers. Unlike English, which is widely seen as essential for employability, French is rarely a job requirement so students often approach French L2 study with minimal intrinsic motivation, focusing primarily on fulfilling academic requirements (D'Orazzi, 2020).

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1.3 The necessity of self-learning in French language acquisition

In light of the context discussed above regarding French teaching and learning, fostering self-learning competence has become an essential requirement for achieving language proficiency. Unlike classroom-based instruction, which is often limited in time and scope, self-learning competence empowers students to take ownership of their learning process, explore diverse resources, and practice beyond the boundaries of formal education. To master the complexity of the French language, particularly its grammatical structures, phonetics, and cultural nuances, learners must engage in consistent and autonomous effort to reinforce what they have learned and to close the gap between theoretical knowledge and communicative competence. Moreover, self-learning promotes important academic qualities such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability, which are essential for tackling the challenges of language learning in dynamic, real-world contexts. To conclude, as language education increasingly shifts towards learner-centered models, the ability to learn independently is not just a supplement, but a core necessity for long-term success in mastering French.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Previous studies

Numerous studies have highlighted the significance of self-learning competence in foreign language acquisition. Benson (2013) and Little (2007) acknowledge that self-learning competence, closely related to learner autonomy and self-regulated learning, is a key determinant of successful language learning outcomes. They further argue that fostering autonomy enables learners to take greater responsibility for their own progress, which is particularly important in second and foreign language contexts. Studies in applied linguistics have also shown that learners who are able to set their own goals, monitor progress, and adapt learning strategies in response to challenges tend to achieve higher levels of linguistic proficiency. Learners also exhibit greater long-term retention of knowledge compared to those who rely exclusively on teacher-directed instruction (Oxford, 2017). Similarly, Zimmerman and Schunk (2011) emphasize the role of self-regulated learning processes, emphasizing the interconnection between metacognitive awareness, motivation, and academic achievement.

Research in Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian universities on learners' self-learning competence indicates that students tend to depend heavily on teacher-centered instruction and display limited familiarity with individualized learning strategies (Nguyen & Gu, 2013; Dang, 2020). Although learners often report positive attitudes toward self-learning competence, this awareness does not consistently lead to concrete practices, particularly when structured guidance and institutional support are lacking (Le, 2022). To address these challenges, several studies have stressed the necessity of incorporating strategy training, resource accessibility, and motivational support into language education as a means of developing learners' self-learning competence (Reinders, 2010; Lamb, 2017).

While there has been a marked rise in research addressing learner autonomy in Asian higher education, studies focusing specifically on French as a second foreign language remain limited in Vietnamese context. This research gap brings to light the need for further investigation into how self-learning competence can be cultivated among university students studying French.

2.2 The concept of self-learning competence

2.2.1. Definition and core components of self-learning competence

In the field of education, self-learning competence is broadly understood as an individual's ability to take initiative, regulate, and sustain their own learning processes without continuous external supervision. Holec (1981) defines autonomy in language learning as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning," highlighting the learner's active role in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their educational progress. Extending from this foundation, Knowles (1975) emphasizes the self-directed nature of adult learning, where learners identify their needs, set learning goals, locate appropriate resources, and assess their own achievements.

The key components of self-learning competence encompass four interrelated dimensions. First, metacognitive skills, including goal-setting, self-monitoring, and reflection, enable learners to plan and evaluate their learning effectively. Second, motivational regulation, such as persistence, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation, holds a pivotal role in sustaining long-term engagement. Third, strategic learning behaviors which involve the use of appropriate learning strategies and effective time management, contribute to improved learning outcomes. Finally, resource utilization, which relates identifying and leveraging suitable materials and learning environments, supports learners in achieving greater autonomy.

2.2.2 Self-learning competence in foreign language learning

In foreign language learning, particularly in contexts where classroom exposure and access to authentic language environments are often limited, self-learning competence is considered a critical determinant of success. This competence is reflected in several interconnected aspects. First, learners need the ability to set goals and plan their learning, such as identifying objectives in pronunciation, vocabulary expansion, or listening comprehension, and translating these into concrete study schedules and manageable tasks. Equally important is the strategic use of learning resources, as independent learners actively seek opportunities beyond the classroom through online courses, mobile applications, authentic media, or interactive platforms. In addition, metacognitive awareness plays a central role, enabling learners to reflect on their progress, evaluate strengths and weaknesses, and

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adjust strategies when necessary. Motivation and persistence are also essential, since sustained effort, often driven by intrinsic motivation, allows learners to overcome challenges even without external reinforcement. Another important factor is independent practice, through which learners create their own opportunities to use the target language, integrate different language skills, and reinforce retention by means such as journaling or language exchanges. Moreover, adaptability and problem-solving skills help learners navigate unfamiliar linguistic or cultural input by experimenting with new strategies, consulting peers, or seeking explanations from external sources. Finally, reflective learning and self-evaluation consolidate the process, as learners assess the effectiveness of their strategies and make informed adjustments for future learning.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research method

A qualitative research design, employing a phenomenological methodology, guides this study. This design was selected to thoroughly explore the subjective experiences and interpretations of self-learning competence among French language students at Thang Long University. Meanwhile, phenomenological approach focuses on understanding experiences from the participants' perspectives. By delving into their narratives, this study can uncover rich descriptive data about their self-learning competence journey, which is crucial for capturing the nuanced perceptions and practices associated with autonomous learning.

3.2 Sample selection

Participants for this study were 100 students enrolled in French 1 and 2 courses at Thang Long University during the 2024-2025 academic year. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich information relevant to the research questions. Selective criteria included active enrollment in an FSL (French as a Second Language) courses and a willingness to reflect on personal learning experiences.

3.3 Data collection instruments and procedures

The primary data collection tool employed in this study was semi-structured interviews. This method allows for flexibility, enabling the researcher to explore recurring themes while maintaining focus on the core research questions. Interview questions were designed to elicit detailed descriptions of students' understanding of self-learning competence, their engagement in independent study, the strategies they employ, and the challenges they encounter. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure participants could express themselves fully without language barriers, then translated into English for analysis.

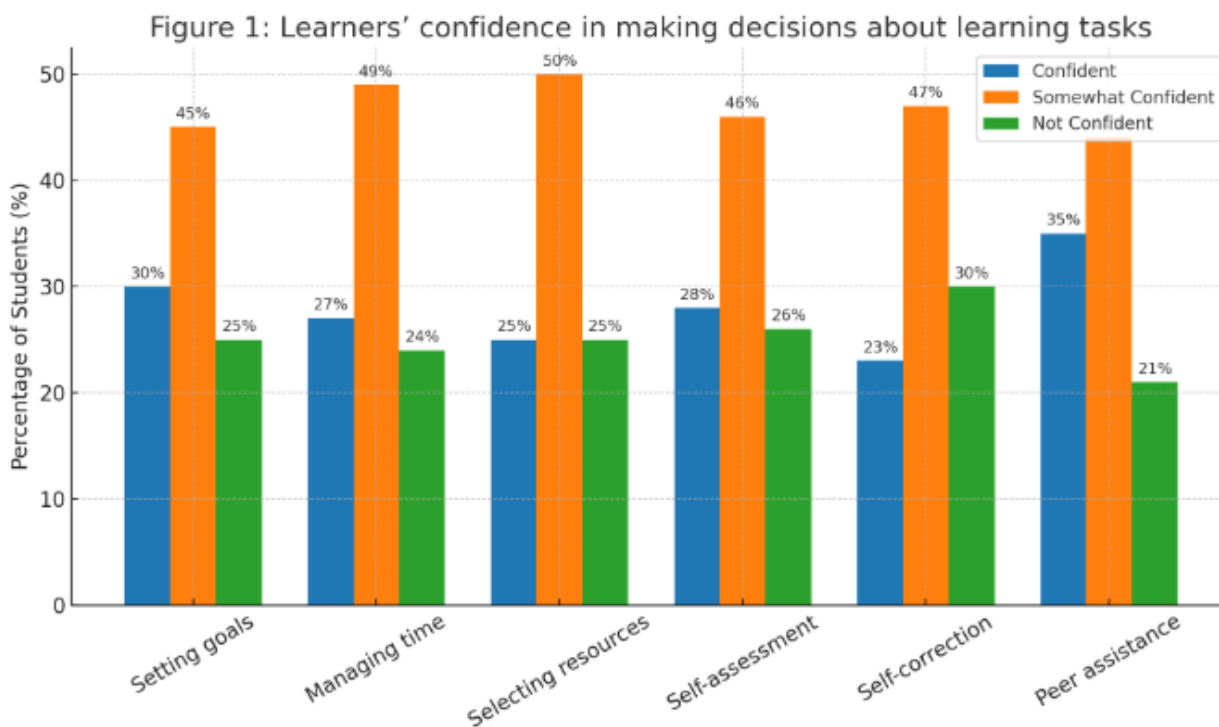
3.4 Data analysis methods

The collected interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and ideas related to students' perceptions and practices of self-learning competence. The analysis process followed a six-phase approach namely familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Initially, transcripts were read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Subsequently, relevant phrases and sentences were highlighted, encoded and then grouped into broader categories. Notably, attention was paid to both explicit statements and underlying meanings conveyed by the participants. This rigorous analytical process allowed for the systematic interpretation of qualitative data, ensuring the validity and reliability of the findings.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

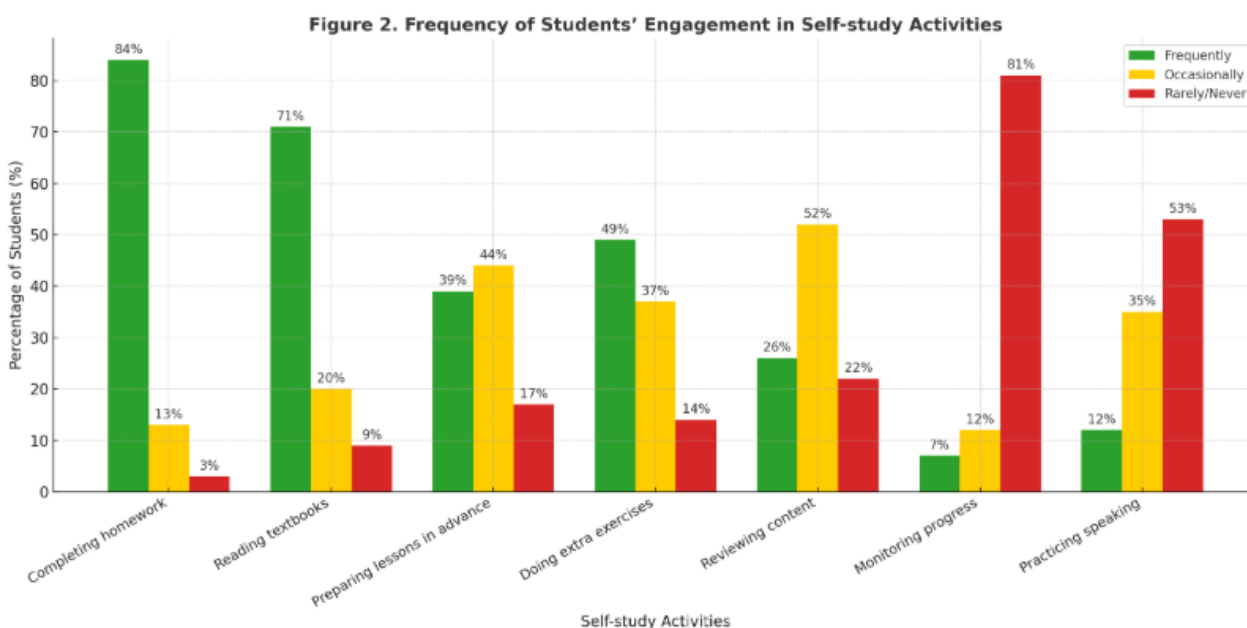
4.1. Learners' confidence in making decisions about learning tasks

To gain insights into learners' decisions about learning tasks, participants were asked to rate their confidence levels in making various learning decisions, including setting learning goals, allocating time for self-study, choosing learning materials, evaluating their own learning, self-correcting mistakes, and assisting peers. The responses were categorized into three levels: confident, somewhat confident, and not confident. As shown in Figure 1, a significant majority of learners reported being *somewhat confident* across all learning tasks, with this group consistently representing the largest proportion. Specifically, confidence in selecting resources reached its peak at 50%, whereas the lowest proportion in this category was observed for peer assistance (40%). This pattern suggests that while learners do not feel fully confident, they also do not display a severe lack of confidence. A closer examination of the data reveals that the highest level of overall confidence was found in peer assistance (35%), indicating a potential strength in collaborative learning contexts. Conversely, learners expressed the lowest level of confidence in self-correction (23%), where the not confident group also recorded its highest percentage (30%). This finding suggests that internal, self-correction may present a greater challenge for learners compared to external, socially-oriented tasks. The data collectively underscores the need for instructional interventions that specifically target and bolster learners' confidence in skills closely relating to error identification and correction.



4.2. Self-study activities

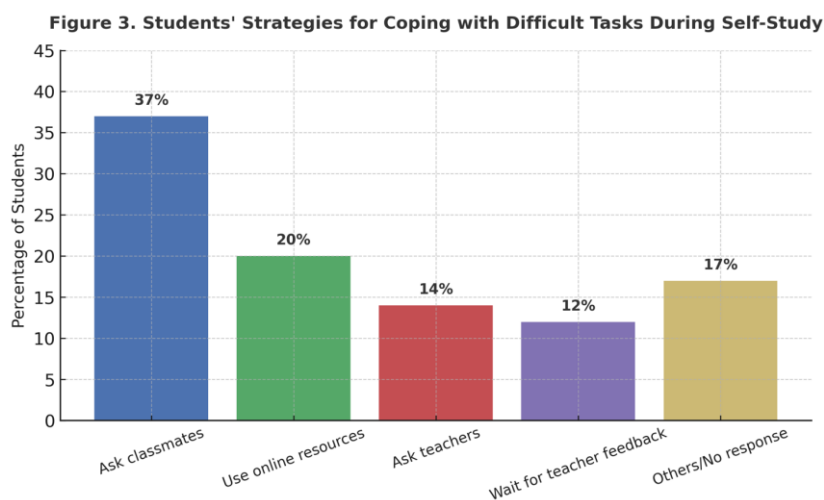
To examine students' self-regulated learning behaviors, the survey investigated how frequently they engaged in a range of self-study activities. As presented in Figure 2, the results reveal a clear distinction between students' reliance on passive teacher-directed tasks and their limited engagement in active autonomous strategies. A large majority of students reported regularly completing homework (84%) and reading textbooks (71%), indicating a strong commitment to tasks assigned by instructors. However, only 39% of respondents frequently prepared lessons in advance, while 49% practiced exercises from supplementary sources, suggesting limited active engagement with learning materials. More critically, several essential autonomous learning strategies remained significantly underutilized. Only 26% of participants reviewed course content regularly, and just 7% actively monitored their own academic progress, despite the acknowledged importance of self-monitoring for developing learner autonomy (Benson, 2013; Holec, 1981). Similarly, while oral communication is central to language proficiency, only 12% of students practiced speaking French with peers outside the classroom, highlighting a lack of collaborative learning opportunities. The findings suggest that students' self-study activities remain largely response-oriented rather than action-oriented. This imbalance reinforces the necessity to launch structured pedagogical interventions to enhance learner autonomy.



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4.3. Strategies for handling difficult assignments

When asked how they cope with difficult tasks during self-study, respondents overwhelmingly reported relying on peers or online communities for support. As illustrated in Figure 3, when confronted with challenging assignments, 37% of students turn to classmates and 20% rely on online communities, while only 14% directly seek support from instructors. This reliance on informal networks reflects an avoidance of authoritative feedback, potentially caused by fear of embarrassment or limited rapport with teachers. Several participants explained that this hesitation stemmed from fear of embarrassment or a lack of established rapport with instructors. Additionally, 12% of respondents stated that they neither sought help from peers nor teachers but instead waited passively for teacher-led feedback during class sessions. According to Zimmerman and Schunk (2011), help-seeking is a crucial self-regulated learning strategy that allows learners to access targeted guidance and overcome cognitive barriers. The findings, however, reveal a potential limitation in students' academic help-seeking behavior, as their reluctance to communicate directly with instructors may reduce opportunities for personalized feedback and hinder the development of effective self-regulation in autonomous learning contexts.



5. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS FOR ENHANCING FRENCH LEARNERS' SELF-LEARNING COMPETENCY

In this section, the study proposes a Three-Pillar Model to enhance Thang Long University French learners' self-learning competence. Basing on the frameworks of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2013), self-regulated learning (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011) as well as the findings discussed above, this model outlines three interdependent components, each playing an indispensable role in fostering more autonomous and effective learning behaviors.

5.1. Curriculum and learning material enhancement

To effectively enhance learner self-learning competence, it is essential to integrate self-learning skill development into the formal French language curriculum. As defined by Holec (1981), autonomy involves the learner's ability to take charge of their own learning, including setting goals, choosing appropriate resources, and evaluating progress. Such competence, however, cannot be cultivated passively; it requires intentional pedagogical support. Therefore, integrating independent learning tasks such as learning plans, self-assessments, and reflective journals or portfolios into coursework can promote metacognitive awareness and long-term self-regulation. It is highly recommended that each course dedicate 5-10% of the total grade to these components, supported by clear rubrics and reflection templates. Along with this, developing a system of Open Educational Resources (OER) can further personalize learners' learning experience. Drawing on Knowles' (1975) theory of self-learning competence, a structured archive of digital resources categorized by proficiency level and language skills can empower students to access content that aligns with their goals. These resources, including mobile applications, podcasts, YouTube channels, and e-books, should be systematically introduced during class through guided orientations. Another critical solution is promoting project-based learning (PBL) to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Indeed, PBL enables learners to engage in collaborative and authentic language use through tasks such as producing videos in French, delivering multimedia presentations, or organizing mini-conferences (Vygotsky, 1978). It is essential that these projects be incorporated into the curriculum of each semester and assessed based not only on the final product but also on the learning process itself, using clearly defined rubrics to guide both student performance and instructor feedback.

5.2. Strengthening instructor guidance and support

A key factor in supporting students' self-learning competence lies in the evolving role of instructors, from traditional knowledge deliverers to learning facilitators. Within learner-centered pedagogy, this shift requires teachers to act as coaches who guide students in setting personal goals, developing learning strategies, and monitoring their own progress. As Little (2007) argues, such guidance at the early stages of autonomy development is essential in helping learners gradually assume responsibility for their learning.

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Personalized coaching, particularly in the form of small-group sessions held two to four times per semester, can significantly enhance students' motivation and confidence. These sessions provide an opportunity for students to set SMART goals, i.e. Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound objectives that help students focus their efforts and track their progress, reflect on their learning journey, and adjust their strategies as needed. Beyond the classroom, maintaining open lines of communication is equally important. Blended learning models underscore the value of sustained interaction outside scheduled class time, which can be achieved through digital platforms such as Facebook, Zalo, or Moodle. These moderated online channels allow students to ask questions, share learning resources, and engage with peers in an ongoing dialogue. It should, however, be noted that clear guidelines and the involvement of peer moderators or teaching assistants are fundamental to ensure that these communities remain active and constructive. Another essential component of instructor support is the use of formative feedback. According to Black and Wiliam (1998), timely and constructive feedback helps learners identify their current stage of development and make meaningful progress. Rather than simply correcting errors, effective feedback encourages students to reflect on their learning and build metacognitive skills. This can be facilitated through structured feedback templates that address key aspects such as strengths, areas for improvement, and specific suggestions for next steps. AI-powered tools may also be used to provide fast, diagnostic feedback on students' writing or speaking tasks, allowing instructors to focus more on personalized guidance and student growth.

5.3. Developing students' autonomous learning competence

It is evident that developing students' capacity for autonomous learning requires more than structural or instructional changes; it also involves equipping learners with the tools, strategies, and mindset necessary to manage their own educational progress. One effective approach is to organise regular workshops focused on language learning strategies, particularly at the beginning of each academic term. These sessions are advisable to provide practical guidance on study planning, time management, and the use of conveniently available digital tools. Such training not only improves immediate performance but also builds long-term confidence and independence. In addition to individual skills, peer collaboration also plays a significant role in building learner autonomy. Students certainly benefit from engaging in shared communities, where learning becomes a social and contextualized activity. Hence, creating chances for informal interactions such as French clubs, reading groups, or film discussion sessions can encourage students to use the language in meaningful, real-life contexts while building mutual accountability and support. Finally, helping students develop reflective habits is vital to sustaining autonomous learning over time. Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practice stresses the value of learners regularly analyzing their experiences, outcomes, and learning strategies. Encouraging students to maintain weekly learning journals and conduct self-assessments using well-designed rubrics enables them to monitor their progress, identify gaps, and make informed adjustments. Ultimately, these practices not only enhance academic performance but also cultivate the lifelong learning skills.

6. CONCLUSION

This study reveals a significant gap between Thang Long University students' perception of self-learning competence and their actual learning practices in studying French as a second foreign language, with major obstacles observed in goal-setting, resource selection, independent problem-solving, and an overreliance on instructor guidance. To address these issues, the study has put forward three strategic initiatives namely integrating structured self-learning training into the curriculum, redefining instructors' roles as learning coaches, and enhancing students' capacity through workshops, collaborative communities, and self-assessment. If implemented effectively, such initiatives have the potential to foster a more autonomous, reflective, and sustainable language learning environment. Future research should adopt a broader scope by investigating similar issues across multiple universities or exploring additional factors, such as digital literacy and cultural attitudes toward independent learning to better understand factors influencing learner autonomy in Vietnam.

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