

## TEACHER'S PERCEPTION OF LEARNER'S AUTONOMY IN ONLINE EFL CLASSES

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
<b>Received:</b>	<b>29/6/2024</b>	With its important role in enhancing students' independence and engagement in online English classes, encouraging learner autonomy (LA) has been the target of teachers. Additionally, it is commonly believed that teachers' perceptions strongly affect the pedagogical activities chosen for the classroom, which may accordingly decide the success of the target set. This paper aimed at investigating teachers' perceptions in promoting LA in language teaching and learning in online language classes, specifically at International School, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. In-depth interviews were conducted for 7 teachers and the results were obtained via thematic analysis. The insights gained were hoped to improve those teachers' awareness, adaptation, and application of suitable pedagogical methods to advance LA in online classes. Recommendations for educational institutions and teacher training curriculum developers on supporting teacher professional development were made subsequently.
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## NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN ĐỐI VỚI TÍNH TỰ CHỦ CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TRONG CÁC LỚP HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ TRỰC TUYẾN

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
<b>Ngày nhận bài:</b>	<b>29/6/2024</b>	Trong các lớp học tiếng Anh trực tuyến, việc phát huy tính tự chủ của người học luôn là mục tiêu của các giáo viên để nâng cao tính độc lập và thúc đẩy sự tham gia của học sinh. Ngoài ra, nhận thức của giáo viên được cho là ảnh hưởng mạnh mẽ đến các hoạt động sư phạm mà họ lựa chọn, từ đó có thể quyết định sự thành công của mục tiêu đã đặt ra. Bài viết này nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu nhận thức của giáo viên về việc thúc đẩy tính tự chủ của người dạy và người học trong các lớp học ngoại ngữ trực tuyến, cụ thể tại Trường Quốc tế, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội. Phỏng vấn sâu được thực hiện với 7 giáo viên và thu kết quả thông qua phân tích chuyên đề. Kết quả bài viết hy vọng sẽ nâng cao nhận thức, khả năng thích ứng và áp dụng các phương pháp sư phạm phù hợp của giáo viên để nâng cao tính tự chủ của người học trong các lớp học trực tuyến. Các khuyến nghị dành cho các cơ sở giáo dục và nhà phát triển chương trình đào tạo giáo viên về việc hỗ trợ phát triển chuyên môn giáo viên cũng được đề xuất.
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## 1. Introduction

The ubiquitous influence of internationalization and the advancement of educational technology in higher education has led to various changes in language learning [1], which includes the promotion of LA [2] – [4]. Within the area of English language teaching in the 21st century, autonomous learning is essential in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom [5], [6]. Much literature has, therefore, focused on patterns in which learners can be responsible for their own learning and types of support which teachers can offer their students to become more autonomous [7]. In this regard, exploiting technology to foster learners' autonomy is undeniably potential.

In the context of technological development and force majeure such as the Covid-19 pandemic, online foreign language classes are increasingly popular, and research on autonomous learning in this environment has been conducted. According to researchers, online learning creates a friendly and low-anxiety learning environment that allows “all” rather than “some” students to participate and encourages affective support among peers to increase students' motivation towards L2 learning [8], [9]. In those online language classes, autonomy is enhanced through digital tools, interactive platforms, and opportunities for self-assessment. Teachers play a crucial role by providing clear guidelines, diverse resources, and fostering a supportive virtual community. They maintain engagement through synchronous and asynchronous communication, offering timely feedback to ensure motivated and accountable learning.

Recently, in Vietnam, the development of the pedagogy of foreign language learning has experienced a quick adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), constructivism, student-centered learning, active learning and collaborative learning which has been promoted with one of the goals being fostering the autonomy of learners through their active exploration of knowledge via the Internet [10]. The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in 2019 has fundamentally changed the way people work and study, which did not exclude language learning. The availability of more learning management systems and various online tools in Vietnam, like many other countries, has both required and enabled learners to be autonomous. Accordingly, it is important that teachers are well aware of the concept as well as effective methods to foster this competence among their learners.

With this concern, in this study, the author attempted to examine the perception of EFL teachers to promote LA within the context of post-pandemic education with Vietnam National University, Hanoi-International School to be the case for analysis. Specifically, this research aims to answer the following question: *What are teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy in language teaching and learning?*

### 1.1. The conceptualization of learner autonomy

Learner autonomy is a long-standing concept and field of science with many developments and many different definitions. Among those, Holec's is seen to be the original and prevailing in the field [11]. According to Holec, learner autonomy is “the ability to take charge of one's own learning” and an autonomous learner is able “to have, and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning” [12]. Holec's definition acts as a guideline for later definitions of many other researchers [13] – [15]. The following changes focus on different names of the concept “hold responsibility for all the decisions” and at the same time develop more thoroughly in the direction of studying psychological aspects of learners, especially the self-discipline and independent critical thinking of learners.

In the current study, following the quintessential strategy [16], LA is conceptualized as *learners' willingness and ability to take responsibility for their learning within and beyond the classroom, including setting goals, planning, practicing, monitoring and evaluating their learning in interaction and cooperation with others and especially with the support of and through negotiation with the teacher.*

### 1.2. The construct of learner autonomy

Many studies have been carried out and many models and theories of autonomous learning have been accordingly proposed. Based on such a wide range of literature, LA is understood as a multidimensional construct [15], [17]. Within the scope of this research, four perspectives of LA, proposed by Benson, P. & Voller, P. (1997) [18] and then supplemented and interpreted by later researchers [19] - [21] are used.

Specifically, the technical perspective involves a set of learner-independence supporting skills that help learners acquire knowledge through their discovery and make decisions for their own learning rather than waiting for knowledge to be passed down from the teacher. The psychological perspective stands for a personal capacity or a construct of attitudes and abilities that encourages learners to take on more responsibilities for their own learning. The political-critical perspective focuses on learners' access, control, power and ideology in their community. In language learning, political-critical autonomy stresses control and power of learners over the learning process as well as the learning content in individual and institutional contexts where the learning takes place. The socio-cultural perspective focuses on social interaction as a major part of cognitive and language development [19]. In comparison to the model, initiated Benson, P. & Voller, P. (1997), this perspective of autonomy no longer emphasizes exclusively the learners with their independence in decision-making.

### 1.3. The enhancement of learner autonomy in language learning

Fostering LA involves multiple approaches that empower students to take control of their learning, of which the resource-based, the technology-based approach, the classroom-based approach, the curriculum-based approach, the teacher-based approach and the learner-based approach are the popular ones [22].

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were seven full-time and adjunct English instructors in the Department of Applied Linguistics of the International School, Vietnam National University (VNU-IS). The selection of these participants was based on purposive sampling method, which may establish a good correspondence between sampling and research questions. The chosen participants included those who had experience in teaching at least one online English course on the same Learning Management System at VNU-IS. There is some heterogeneity among this group of teachers in terms of age and seniority. All participants in the study were females and all had Masters degrees in TESOL. Three of them had less than three years of teaching experience in the program and four of them were seniors who had been teaching in the school for more than ten years.

Table 1. Participant demographics

	Gender	Educational level	Seniority			
N = 7	Male	0	Master Degree	7	< 3 years	3
	Female	7	Others	0	>10 years	4

### 2.2. Data collection

The study employed a qualitative-interpretative research methodology. The main instrument used for data collection was a semi-structured interview. The interview protocol contained three main question items, which sought teachers' perception of LA in online English classes. All seven participants were acquaintances of either of the two researchers. All participants were contacted through email or phone and they agreed to have the interview conducted and recorded via online meeting.

To ensure that participants could fully express their opinions and thoughts with confidence, as per the participants' request, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese—the participants' and the researcher's first language. Each interview lasted for eleven to fifteen minutes. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed verbatim.

### **2.3. Data analysis**

Once the data was transcribed, the process of was conducted in several consecutive steps. The first step involved listening and reading the written transcripts several times to gain a general idea about the views and ideas of the participants in each question asked. In the second step, the transcription of each interview was coded. The codes applied are keywords which were identified based on the conceptual framework of learner autonomy, and they were used to organize and categorise text into themes and sub-themes. The coding process was conducted independently between the two researchers. The results were then compared among all the interviews to identify repeated themes or sub-themes and between the two researchers to ensure the objectiveness of the process. For any differences in coding between the researchers, discussions for agreement were held. In the final step, quotes were selected to relevant subcategories and then translated into English.

## **3. Results and discussion**

### **3.1. Teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy – The rationale**

In response to the questions about the rationale for promoting LA, the participant 3 emphasize that foreign language learning requires significant interaction and communication, motivating students to self-study. Classroom time, often limited to 3-4 hours a week, is inadequate for mastering a language, making self-study crucial for skill development. Additionally, autonomy leads to better learning outcomes, and foreign language teaching is increasingly student-centered, with teachers guiding rather than providing all the answers. Participant 2 believed that *“it is necessary to self-absorb, learn, and practice to develop students' foreign language ability. Foreign language subjects need this ability to serve the purpose of communication and practice”* and Participant 4 shared the same belief *“The specific characteristics of learning a foreign language require a large amount of self-study time, so promoting learning autonomy is even more important.”* The mentioned approaches are believed to help students engage in activities independently both in and out of class.

Self-study habits should be cultivated from middle and high school, supported by recent curricular changes and extracurricular activities.

*“In recent years, students have gradually developed the ability to self-study because in the secondary and high school curriculum, many extracurricular activities as well as learning activities have been added to support their students. students' self-study.”*

*(Participant 3).*

It can be seen clearly from participants' answers that societal demands for foreign language proficiency further highlight the need for students to take responsibility for their learning, transforming education into a self-driven process. Effective language learning requires extensive self-study, as classroom instruction alone is insufficient for full language comprehension and use as “social interaction as a major part of cognitive and language development [17]. Thus, promoting LA is essential.

### **3.2. Teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy - From technical and socio-cultural perspective**

The majority of participants (6/7) perceive LA from two main perspectives: technical and socio-cultural. Technically, those participants view LA as a set of skills and strategies that learners can develop to manage their own learning. This, as those participants believed, includes the ability to set goals, select appropriate resources, monitor progress, and self-assess which

“help learners acquire knowledge through their discovery and make decisions for their own learning rather than waiting for knowledge to be passed down from the teacher” [16]-[18].

As opined by participants 5, 6, 7, “*LA is the ability for students to self-control their learning, including planning, knowing their strengths and weaknesses, knowing how to overcome them, self-relating, and evaluating their learning*” and “*LA is the ability of learners self-acquire surrounding knowledge based on what the teacher teaches and proactively revises it after class, thereby gaining knowledge for themselves*”, and that “*A student with the ability to self-study will first be very proactive, and know how to set goals, have a learning roadmap, and also know how to exploit teachers*”.

The socio-cultural perspective, according to the teachers, emphasizes the importance of the learning environment and social interactions in fostering autonomy. Participants recognize that LA is not only about individual skills but also about a supportive learning context where students feel empowered to take control of their learning. Our participants believe that LA enhancement is the development of student potential through interaction and the specific studying environment in which learners apply their autonomy:

*“Learner autonomy can be enhanced in a studying environment where students have chances to actively take the lead in group work, knows what he is doing with his studies, not just doing whatever the teacher tells him to do and they can voluntarily raise questions to the teacher and the whole class for discussion and have tendency to help others be more motivated to study and support other students”.*

*(Participant 3)*

Mentioning LA in online classes, being well-understood that “online learning creates a friendly and low-anxiety learning environment that allows “all” rather than “some” students to participate and encourages affective support among peers to increase students’ motivation towards L2 learning [20], [21], surveyed participants perceived that with the absence of a physical classroom and direct supervision from teachers, students must manage their schedules, navigate digital resources, and maintain motivation independently. This shift necessitates the development of strong self-regulation skills, including goal setting, progress monitoring, and resource seeking.

The virtual learning environment demands that students take greater responsibility for their educational progress: “*Online learning requires more self-study activities and personalized activities require students to be active while learning online*” (Participant 1). Participants claimed that they have to exhibit greater flexibility and creativity in online teaching environments. Designing effective instructional activities and assessments suitable for online delivery is crucial. Traditional classroom drills and activities are adapted for digital formats, utilizing interactive tools, multimedia content, and virtual group work to engage students. Additionally, innovative assessment methods are required to evaluate student work comprehensively. Teachers must invest more effort in supervising and supporting students remotely, ensuring that they remain on track and engaged with the coursework:

*“Activities that I design to increase students' self-study are different, offline classroom activities are more diverse and different games to play in groups, pairs, writing can also be collaborated writing, but online to design grouping activities are time consuming and less effective. For example, on MS Teams, we often send students to the breakout rooms, the teacher has to constantly come in to watch and remind, but it's not really effective”.*

*(Participant 5)*

One significant challenge in online learning, as emphasized by the participants, is the difficulty in measuring the success and effectiveness of teaching and learning activities. Unlike traditional classrooms, where teachers can observe students' immediate reactions and provide instant feedback, online classes often lack this direct interaction. This makes it harder to accurately gauge student understanding and engagement. Teachers may need to employ varied and frequent assessments, such as quizzes, discussion posts, and project submissions, to monitor progress.

*“In general, it is still necessary to have a clear plan when teaching online, teachers have to control students more carefully. For example, when assigning homework, you need to make sure that you can control whether your students have done it or how they do it because online testing will be very difficult. We have to rely on software like Google Form to control whether students are actually doing it or not, and the exercises must be designed in ways that students cannot copy or use answers available online”.*

*(Participant 4)*

Despite these efforts, obviously, the lack of face-to-face interaction complicates the assessment of the true impact of pedagogical techniques on LA and overall learning outcomes.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research aims at examining teachers' perceptions of LA in language teaching and learning. By applying a qualitative-interpretative research methodology, the data was collected from semi-structured interviews with 7 teaching staff from the Faculty of Applied Linguistics at Vietnam National University, Hanoi-International School. Results from thematic data analysis showed diverse and insufficient understanding of the concept of LA. Various rationales were also mentioned for the promotion of LA in online EFL classes. However, participants showed more negative than positive attitude toward the online learning environment in terms of supporting LA. The participants also reported challenges they met when implementing LA activities in ELF online classes, among which a lack of consistent guidelines and policies as well as insufficient LA related professional training were the two most significant obstacles. Therefore, it is recommended that school authorities should be well aware of the importance of LA in EFL classes, especially when conducted in an online learning environment, so that they can build suitable policies, guidelines and offer relevant professional training in a consistent way to assist EFL teachers to develop LA effectively.

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