

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES TO PROMOTE LEARNER AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT

Many researches have been examined learner autonomy in other countries in recent years. Teachers' beliefs and practices towards learner autonomy at the tertiary level in Vietnam are, however, very marginalized and neglected. This study investigated 385 English language teachers' perceptions and practices to promote learner autonomy using the quantitative approach with the combination of the adapted Borg & Al-Busaidi's 2012 questionnaire with the researcher-made items. The results indicated that teachers have high beliefs on learner autonomy; they think it is feasible and desirable to promote learner autonomy in English language teaching and learning. Most of teachers agreed on the factors which limit learner autonomy, and there is no difference in the perceptions regarding the gender in terms of promoting learner autonomy. Therefore, it is necessary for the teachers to encourage the learner autonomy in English language teaching and learning with some pedagogical implications for innovating teaching methodology.

Keywords: *teachers' beliefs; learner autonomy; teacher-centered model; learner-center model; blended learning*

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NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIẢNG VIÊN TIẾNG ANH VÀ ỨNG DỤNG THỰC TIỄN ĐỂ NÂNG CAO TÍNH TỰ CHỦ CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC

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TÓM TẮT

Tính tự chủ trong học tập đã được nghiên cứu nhiều ở các quốc gia khác trong những năm gần đây. Tuy vậy, sự cảm nhận và ứng dụng của giảng viên đối với tính tự chủ ở cấp độ đại học tại Việt Nam thì hầu như không được quan tâm và bị lãng quên. Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện với 385 giảng viên tiếng Anh về sự cảm nhận và ứng dụng trong việc thúc đẩy tính tự chủ của người học, nghiên cứu định lượng được thực hiện thông qua việc sử dụng kết hợp câu hỏi trích dẫn trong nghiên cứu của Borg và Al-Busaidi (2012) với các câu hỏi thiết kế của tác giả nghiên cứu. Kết quả chỉ ra rằng giảng viên có quan điểm cao về tính tự chủ, giảng viên cho rằng có tính khả thi và mong muốn cao về thúc đẩy tính tự chủ của người học trong việc học tiếng Anh. Hầu hết giảng viên đều đồng ý với những nhân tố hạn chế sự thúc đẩy tính tự chủ, và không có sự khác biệt quan điểm giữa giảng viên nam và nữ trong việc xác định tính tự chủ. Như vậy, giảng viên cần thiết phải thúc đẩy tính tự chủ trong việc dạy và học tiếng Anh thông qua một số đề xuất sự phạm đối với việc cải tổ phương pháp giảng dạy.

Từ khoá: *nhận thức của giảng viên; tính tự chủ của người học; mô hình giảng viên là trung tâm; mô hình người học là trung tâm; học tích hợp*

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1. Introduction

Learner autonomy (LA) plays a crucial role in a second language acquisition. Many researches [1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 9] have mentioned about the nature of learner autonomy, the rationale for promoting it, and its implications for teaching and learning activities. In teaching methodology, the shift in teaching tendency has been witnessed by the conversion from teacher-centered model to learner-centered one, which yields the trend to require active learning and teaching. The role of learners has been transformed from passive to active participants [10]. Besides, the influence of Industry 4.0 [11] states that the scale and breadth of the unfolding technological revolution result in economic, social and cultural changes of such phenomenal proportions that they are almost impossible to envisage. Thus, the impact of the fourth industrial revolution on an educational setting has been noticeably recognized by the emergence of e-learning or blended/hybrid learning in recent years.

Benson [3] defined the term LA as a capacity to control important aspects of one's learning which is also recognized that autonomy is not a single, easily desirable behavior. As for the form of autonomous language learning, LA refers to learning practices involving learners' control over aspects of their learning or, more broadly, learning that takes place outside the context of formal instruction. A more simple definition suggested by [12], LA is the principle that learners should be encouraged to assume a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it. This will be reflected in approaches to need analysis, content selection, and choice of teaching materials and learning methods. Nunan [13] ascertains that autonomy is not an absolute trait as it can take different forms depending on various factors, such as age, learning experience, learning goals and perceptions about learning.

Although many researches [1], [4], [6], [9], [14], have mentioned about the relationship between LA and language learning for about 20 years, the results have shown that both teachers and learners do not clearly understand the nature of LA. Actually, LA has been a major area of interest in English language teaching, its effect has been highlighted that LA improves the quality of language learning, promotes democratic societies, prepares individuals for life-long learning, that it is a human right, and that it allows learners to make best use of learning opportunities in and out of the classroom. One of the remarkable factors in teaching and learning process is the presence of teachers, which is not mentioned from such analyses. Not many researches have been conducted on what LA means to language teachers. This study was carried to make up for the gap that needed to be addressed the influence which teachers' perceptions have on how they teach, and on whether and how they could do to promote LA in their own right. Moreover, this research would investigate the meaning of LA towards English language teachers at the tertiary context. The results would be the basis for proposing some practical methodological activities to promote LA in English language teaching and learning (ELT). To achieve these goals, the study addressed the following questions;

1. What are teachers' perceptions on language autonomy in terms of English language teaching and learning?
2. What do teachers reckon the desirability and feasibility of promoting language autonomy?
3. What are teachers' beliefs on the factors limiting language autonomy?

The results of this study would help teachers understand the role of LA in ELT at the tertiary context. Furthermore, future studies could use the outcomes of this research as resourceful references to ascertain the influence of LA in educational settings.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

The study was primarily designed to find out 385 teachers' beliefs on LA in ELT, employing the quantitative approach with descriptive method. The research was incorporated some adapted parts of Borg & Al-Busaidi's 2012 questionnaire [1] with the researcher-made items. University administrators were initially contacted for permission to carry out the survey questionnaire. Using Cochran's formula with the margin of error $\pm 5\%$ to determine the sample population, 385 participants were chosen through judgment sampling method. The respondents were asked to answer the questionnaire, which, with a supporting letter from the university administrators, were sent to the participants through email attachment with the active link of Google form to get the quick and economic ways to have access to a large number of respondents. They were requested to return the questionnaire after one month since the date of email shot. In the case of a low response rate, another email served as a reminder would be sent to the participants. The collected data went through the data screening before the data were treated by IBM SPSS program for the purpose of data analysis.

2.2. Sample population

The participants were selected from universities in Vietnam with the help of university administrators in approving of the permission for floating the questionnaire and providing their lecturers' email addresses. Because of uncertainty about the population agreeing to participate in the survey, judgment sampling method was applied to choose 385 participants basing on Cochran's [15] formula. 195 male teachers accounting for 50.6%, together with 190 female lecturers, equivalent to 49.4% were selected. Their years of experience as an English language teacher ranged from 0-4 years including 39 lecturers or

10.1%, 5-9 years (96 lecturers/24.9%), 10-14 years (106 teachers/27.5%), 15-19 years (50 lecturers/13%), 20-24 years (53 teachers/13.8%) to over 25 years (41 lecturers/10.6%). Their highest qualification comprised of 40 bachelors, which was similar to 10.4%, 245 masters accounting for 63.6%, and 100 doctors or 26.0%. In terms of English program they taught most hours on, 35 lecturers, equivalent to 9.1% taught only English major students, 69 teachers, similar to 17.9% taught non-English major students, and the majority of lecturers taught both kinds of students, namely 281 teachers or 73%.

2.3. Research instrument

The study adapted some parts of Borg & Al-Busaidi's 2012 questionnaire with the researcher-made items. In particular, part 1 included the researcher-made questions investigating the participants' demographic information, part 2 comprised of 3 groups of questionnaires, namely 37 questions asking about teachers' opinions on LA which masked into 10 categories such as technical perspectives (items 2, 3, 6, 21, 30), political perspectives (items 4, 7, 14, 22, 27), social perspectives (items 16, 19, 25, 31), the role of the teacher in learner autonomy (items 8, 18, 24, 35), age and learner autonomy (items 1, 10, 20), psychological perspectives (items 11, 29, 32, 33, 37), the relevance of learner autonomy to diverse cultural contexts (items 13, 23), the relationship of learner autonomy to effective language learning (9, 26, 34), the implications of learner autonomy for teaching methodology (15, 17, 28), and learner autonomy as an innate vs learned capacity (5, 12, 36), these 37 questions were rated as (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) unsure (4) agree (5) strongly agree. 14 questions examined the desirability and feasibility of LA with the scales of (1) undesirable/unfeasible, (2) slightly desirable/feasible, (3) quite desirable/feasible, and (4) very desirable/feasible, respectively, and 6

researcher-designed questions were about the factors which limit LA with the yes-no choice, these questions had been presented to 3 experts on educational assessment and accreditation for content validation.

2.4. Statistical tools

The research used the IBM SPSS software for the data treatment. For demographic information, descriptive frequencies were used to analyze the frequency and percentage of the respondents participating the study. Descriptive statistics were used to find out the mean and standard deviation of teachers' beliefs on LA using Likert's scale such as (1.0 - 1.79) very low, (1.8 - 2.59) low, (2.6 - 3.39) neutral, (3.4 - 4.19) high, and (4.2 - 5.0) very high, their desirability and feasibility of LA with the scale of (1.0 - 1.74) undesirable/unfeasible, (1.75 - 2.49) slightly desirable/feasible, (2.50 - 3.24) quite desirable/feasible, and (3.25 - 4.00) very desirable/feasible, and the factors which limited LA, based on yes-no choice with the descriptive frequency. Independent-Samples T Test was used to compare the differences between gender and their opinions on LA.

3. Results and discussion

When examining the teachers' opinions on technical perspectives, the results showed that teachers had very high viewpoints for the statements which LA was promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone ($M = 4.5$; $SD = .674$), LA was promoted by independent work in a self-access centre ($M = 4.44$; $SD = .497$), and independent study in the library was an activity which developed LA ($M = 4.40$; $SD = .490$). They also had high opinions expressing that autonomy could develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom with the high mean of 4.08, and that learning to work alone was central to the development of learner autonomy ($M = 3.86$). In general, technical perspectives strengthen the role of

individual work which is not constrained in one location. Learners are encouraged to study on their own, not bound in any settings or forces to study [2], [16].

As for political perspectives, teachers believed learner autonomy was promoted when learners had some choice in the kinds of activities they did, which was denoted by a very high mean of 4.38, and the respondents did not have much difference in their choices ($SD = .701$). Teachers also agreed when learners could choose their own learning materials, it promoted LA ($M = 4.17$; $SD = .464$). Another teachers' viewpoints stated that involving learners in decisions about what to learn promoted LA ($M = 4.08$). For another perspective, teachers also highly thought learners had a right to choose the form of their learning assessment ($M = 3.88$). The highly noticeable lecturers' views asserted the necessity for learners to choose how they learnt ($M = 3.71$). The high opinions on the political perspectives denote that learners should be allowed to choose their ways of learning, their learning programs, and their assessment [3], [5], [13].

In terms of teachers' social perspectives on LA, teachers reckoned that activities encouraging learners to work together promoted LA very highly with the mean of 4.30. Out-of-class tasks using the internet enabled learners to encourage LA ($M = 4.12$; $SD = .567$), and thanks to activities that learners had opportunities to exchange and learn from each other, teachers revealed that they had high remarks on this point ($M = 4.11$). On the same way, teachers highly believed that the development of LA was supported by co-operative group work activities ($M = 3.65$; $SD = .721$). For social perspectives, many researches [8], [9], [14] share the similarities in the view that interpersonal skills are needed to enhance the development of LA.

The role of teachers in LA was investigated to assess the influence of teachers in LA. Teachers had very high opinions to acknowledge that without the assistance of teachers, LA could not be developed ($M = 4.22$), so respondents mostly shared the similar viewpoints on this perspective ($SD = .592$). This seemed to be a little opposite to the statement that LA meant learning without a teacher ($M = 4.16$), which referred to the idea learners wanted to be independent in their decision on what they did in their learning process [9], [16]. For another viewpoint, investigating the role of teachers in supporting LA, the participants responded the role of the teachers was very important ($M = 4.00$). Surprisingly, the respondents had a high agreement on the idea which learners were totally independent of their teachers ($M = 3.67$). Although it cannot deny the role of the teachers in LA, teachers' role should be facilitated, not supervised or highly influenced learners [10], [17],

When considering the relationship between the age and LA, the results came out that young language learners and adults could be combined in one setting to promote LA ($M = 4.05$). Another viewpoint revealed that language learners of all ages could develop LA ($M = 3.91$). When asked about whether LA was only possible with adult learners, the respondents confessed that they had a low remark on this notion. Therefore, there is no difference in the age in terms of promoting LA.

Psychological perspectives also affected LA to a great extent. Teachers reckoned that learning how to learn was important to develop LA with a very high mean of 4.36. Similarly, teachers accepted that motivated language learners were more likely to develop LA than learners who were not motivated, which was denoted by a very high mean of 4.29. Teachers also agreed that the ability to monitor one's learning was central to LA ($M = 4.12$; $SD = .541$), these figures referred to

the fact that teachers recorded a high mean and their decisions on this item were somehow similar as the standard deviation was 0.541. In this aspect, teachers highly thought confident language learners were more likely to develop autonomy than those who lacked confidence ($M = 3.99$). In order to be autonomous, learners were expected to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning, which was confirmed by the figures ($M = 3.39$; $SD = .489$). For psychological perspectives, it is important for learners to be allowed to be autonomous in the case they have the rights to demonstrate themselves [2], [4], [14].

According to Schwab [11], the world is flat so the relevance of LA to diverse cultural contexts is taken into account. The respondents asserted that learners from all cultural backgrounds promoted LA very highly ($M = 4.47$). Clearly, the participants rejected LA was a concept which was not suited to non-Western learners ($M = 3.93$). Because of the concern about the diverse cultural contexts which can affect LA, the results prove the development of the scientific innovations removes all barriers that deter LA in different cultures [1], [11].

As for the relationship of LA to effective language learning, teachers acknowledged that the proficiency of a language learner did not affect their ability to develop LA ($M = 4.29$), this figure denoted that it earned a very high mean. When examined the possibility which was harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than that of beginners, teachers did not agree that and they expressed a low mean ($M = 1.97$). Surprisingly, teachers believed that promoting autonomy was easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners ($M = 3.40$; $SD = .588$). The aforementioned ideas acknowledge the higher proficient language learners are not influenced by LA, the beginners are,

somehow, affected the teachers in promoting LA [5], [7], [16].

Considering LA towards teaching methodology, teachers had a high view on the statement that learner-centred classrooms provided ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy ($M = 4.02$; $SD = .429$). For other investigations relating to the role of teacher-centred classrooms and rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching, the participants showed high means ($M = 3.25$), and ($M = 3.19$), respectively. These implications strengthen teachers' responsibilities in choosing the effective teaching methodology [10], [13], [14], [17].

For the point of view LA was regarded as an innate vs learned capacity, teachers had a high remark when thinking that LA had a positive effect on success as a language learner ($M = 4.08$; $SD = .517$). The respondents also supposed individuals who lacked autonomy were not likely to be effective language learners ($M = 3.21$). Similarly, LA allowed language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would ($M = 3.86$). The relationship between learners' aptitude towards LA is highly accepted by the researchers.

In searching the desirability of LA, teachers assessed that it was quite desirable for learners to be involved in decisions about the objectives of a course, the materials used, the kinds of tasks and activities they did, the topics discussed, how learning was assessed, the teaching methods used, and classroom management with the weighted mean 2.98 and all figures were in the range of quite desirable indexes. In addition, teachers believed learners had the ability to identify their own needs, strengths, and weaknesses, monitor their progress, evaluate their own learning, learn co-operatively, and learn independently, and the weighted mean (3.13) denoted that it was quite feasible. Teachers reckoned that their learners had a high desirability to promote LA, so it is easy for teachers to promote LA in ELT.

Another aspect to explore the feasibility of LA was used the same questions as the desirability of LA. Teachers expressed learners had quite feasibility to involve themselves in decisions with the weighted mean of 3.13. Similarly, learners were quite feasible to have the ability to perform themselves in LA, which was revealed by the weighted mean of 3.14, according to the remarks by the participants.

Table 1. Factors limiting learner autonomy

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1. Learner characteristics, such as a lack of motivation.	Yes	298	77.4	77.4	77.4
	No	87	22.6	22.6	100.0
2. The fixed nature of the curriculum and its assessment do not encourage and may even hinder the development of learner autonomy.	Yes	306	79.5	79.5	79.5
	No	79	20.5	20.5	100.0
3. The students were not trained to be autonomous learners before entering a university.	Yes	291	75.6	75.6	75.6
	No	94	24.4	24.4	100.0
4. Autonomy is not promoted and required in students' society.	Yes	323	83.9	83.9	83.9
	No	62	16.1	16.1	100.0
5. Learner autonomy is hindered as teachers have to maintain order in the classroom.	Yes	311	80.8	80.8	80.8
	No	74	19.2	19.2	100.0
6. Other factors are not mentioned above.	Yes	16	4.2	4.2	4.2
	No	369	95.8	95.8	100.0
Total		385	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 shows the factors which limit learners' LA. It is clear to recognize that most teachers supported the agreement of the factors presented in Table 1. The minority – 16 teachers accounting for 4.2% expressed that they had different ideas besides the 5-mentioned factors. The results of the factors could be found similarities in other researches [1], [4], [5], [7].

When investigating the difference in gender about the beliefs on LA, the results revealed that there was no disparity of the teachers towards the 10-perspectives of LA.

4. Conclusion and limitations

4.1. Conclusion

This study examined the teachers' perspectives on LA in ELT at the university level. Through a survey questionnaire consisting of three sections based on the principles of LA, teachers have high beliefs on LA, they think it is necessary to promote the role of LA in ELT. Besides, teachers believe it is desirable and feasible to promote LA for students in view of ELT. Teachers also agree to involve students in the decision-making process concerning the language learning. The results indicate a strong preference for a more autonomous learning process, but teachers themselves lack proper training and expertise in this area. Findings confirm the assumption that the autonomous learners take proactive roles in the learning process, generating ideas and availing themselves of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teachers. Teachers also expect learners to work independently and take responsibility of their learning. Otherwise, most teachers accept the factors which limit the promotion of LA. The result confirms that there is no difference in the perceptions of male and female teachers towards LA.

4.2. Limitations of the study

Although the research has found out teachers' beliefs to promote LA, it has not investigated

the perceptions of learners towards LA in order to compare the mismatch between the teachers' and students' perceptions. One more limitation is this study only investigated teachers of English, not other subjects. Ideally, future studies should incorporate the stakeholders' beliefs on LA so there should be more studies which comprise three components, namely administrators, teachers, and learners, which will provide a perfect perspective on LA.

5. Implications for promoting learner autonomy

The following suggested strategies for teachers to promote LA in ELT should be proposed into two categories. Firstly, teachers should encourage their learners develop independent work such as individual work, pair/group work, outside class work, online work, student presentations, task-based project or using dictionaries on their own. Secondly, teachers should give controls to students by giving them choices of LA, making students teaching assistants or using drama in teaching. It is advisable for teachers to elicit students' feedback on lessons, and exploit peer assessment or self-assessment.

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