

TEACHERS' ROLES AND CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY FOR EFL STUDENTS

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Received:	30/01/2024	EFL teachers play different roles in supporting students' development of learner autonomy in their learning. However, they may encounter challenges in fulfilling their task. This study aims to investigate EFL teachers' roles and challenges they may face in developing learner autonomy for non-English majors at a college in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. A mixed-methods research design was used. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through the use of questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. 100 EFL students and 28 EFL teachers participated in the study. The findings of the study revealed that teachers implemented various strategies reflecting their four main roles as a facilitator, counselor, resource provider, and manager in learner autonomy development for students. The findings also showed that in the process of developing learner autonomy for students, teachers faced challenges related to students, teachers themselves, and the learning environment. The study highlights the teachers' roles in learner autonomy development for students and provides recommendations for teachers and students to enhance the quality of teaching and learning English in the EFL context.
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VAI TRÒ CỦA GIÁO VIÊN VÀ NHỮNG THÁCH THỨC TRONG VIỆC HỖ TRỢ NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH PHÁT TRIỂN NĂNG LỰC TỰ CHỦ TRONG HỌC TẬP

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 30/01/2024	Giáo viên có những vai trò khác nhau trong việc hỗ trợ người học tiếng Anh phát triển năng lực tự chủ trong quá trình học tập. Tuy nhiên, giáo viên có thể gặp một số những thách thức nhất định trong quá trình hoàn thành nhiệm vụ của mình. Bài báo có mục đích nghiên cứu vai trò của giáo viên và những thách thức họ gặp trong quá trình phát triển năng lực tự chủ cho sinh viên không chuyên Anh tại một trường cao đẳng ở Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, Việt Nam. Thiết kế phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp được áp dụng cho nghiên cứu này. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua bảng câu hỏi khảo sát và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Có 100 sinh viên và 28 giáo viên dạy tiếng Anh tham gia vào nghiên cứu này. Kết quả của nghiên cứu cho thấy giáo viên đóng vai trò là “tư vấn”, “khuyến bảo”, “cung cấp ngữ liệu” và “quản lý” trong việc phát triển tính tự chủ cho người học. Giáo viên cũng gặp một số thách thức liên quan tới người học, môi trường học và chính bản thân họ. Nghiên cứu làm rõ thêm vai trò của giáo viên và đưa ra những đề xuất giúp giáo viên và sinh viên nâng cao chất lượng dạy và học tiếng Anh.
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1. Introduction

Learner autonomy (LA) has become an increasingly important concept in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) education. It is widely recognized that developing LA can lead to better learning outcomes, increased motivation, and enhancement of our students' capability to engage in lifelong learning [1]. It is essential to develop LA in language learning in order to cultivate the skills and knowledge required for learning to continue throughout learners' life. Language teachers may successfully encourage LA in their classrooms by using a variety of instructional tactics, and their roles might also shift depending on how they engage with their learners. According to Voller [2], a teacher may perform such functions as a facilitator who initiates and supports decision-making processes or creates a pressure-free learning atmosphere [3], and creates courses that provide opportunities for learners to develop academic skills [4]; a counselor who responds to learners' ongoing needs, a resource provider who makes knowledge and skills accessible to the learner in times of needs, or a manager who plans, organizes the process of learning and teaching and assess students according to the objectives.

Nonetheless, developing LA is a complex and challenging process, and teachers may encounter several challenges when they attempt to develop LA in their classrooms. According to Borg and Al-Busaidi [5], challenges in developing LA can be categorized into three major factors: teacher-related challenges, student-related challenges, and learning environment-related challenges. Regarding teacher-related challenges, Deci and Ryan [6] identify the difficulties teachers may face in developing LA due to their limitations. This can include a lack of autonomy or experience in training learners to become autonomous in learning. Teachers may also have unreasonable expectations of what learners can achieve, making it challenging to inspire them to take care of their own learning. Additionally, student-related challenges refer to students' difficulties in developing LA. For instance, inadequate English proficiency, lacking motivation, aptitude, or skills to utilize resources or learning methodologies can be a significant challenge. As Benson and Voller [7] point out, some learners may resist taking control of their learning because they are used to a more traditional teacher-centered approach or lack confidence in their abilities or lack motivation in learning. What is more, the learning environment may also cause teachers challenges in the process of developing LA, such as so much pressure placed on teachers, being overwhelmed and overloaded with work, prescribed curricula or lack of relevant resources for both teachers and students like webs, the Internet, videos, and many other things [8].

So far, many studies have investigated LA in language learning, LA and culture, teachers' and students' beliefs in LA, and teachers' roles in fostering LA [9] - [13]. Nevertheless, there is still a need for research, specifically focusing on the roles and challenges of teachers in developing LA for non-English majored students at colleges in Vietnam.

With the aim of investigating teachers' roles and challenges encountered in developing LA for non-English majored students, the above-mentioned four roles of teachers and three challenges relating to teachers, students and the environment are chosen as the conceptual framework for the current study. The study made an effort to address two research questions:

- a) What are EFL teachers' roles in developing LA among non-English majors at Ho Chi Minh City Technical-Economic College from students' perspectives?
- b) What challenges do EFL teachers encounter in developing LA among non-English majors at Ho Chi Minh City Technical - Economic College from EFL teachers' perspectives?

It is expected that exploring EFL teachers' roles and challenges in developing LA among non-English majors at a college will certainly contribute to the existing knowledge of this study field.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Research site and participants

This study was conducted at Ho Chi Minh City Technical-Economic College (HOTECH) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. HOTECH currently trains students in such majors as Economics, Information Technology, Building management, Fashion Design and English. The total number of the staff is 245; and there are nearly 4.000 students. English is a compulsory subject with three levels: English 1, English 2, and English 3 taught in their first, second, and third year respectively. The goal of the courses is to provide students with English knowledge and ability to use English for international communication.

Regarding the sample, the study invited two cohorts of participants, including 28 EFL teachers. Among them, 13 (46.4%) are male and 15 (53.6 %) are female. Their ages range from 24-29 (14.3%), 30-35 (17.9%), 36-40 (35.7%) and 41-over (42.1%). They have taught English for 2-4 years (3.6%), 5-7 years (21.4%), 8-10 years (28.6%) and 11-over (46.4%). 27 of them are MA degree holders, and one is a PhD degree holder. The second cohort consists of 100 non-English majored students. 60% of them are male and 40 % are female. Their ages range from 18-20 (90%), 21-23 (8%), to 27 (2%). Most of them have studied English for 8 years (59%); 33% for 1-3 years and 8% for 4-7 years. All the students have 9 hours of English per week at the college.

2.2. Research instrument

The current study employed mixed methods research design, using two research instruments: the questionnaire and interview for collecting quantitative and qualitative data. Regarding the questionnaire, two versions of questionnaire were designed to collect data from EFL students and teachers. The student questionnaire consists of two parts; the first part aims to ask about personal information such as gender, age, learning experience. The second part with 20 items ($\alpha = 0.851$) using a 5-point Likert scale (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always) aims to ask about the teachers' roles in LA development, including four items asking about the role as "facilitator", five items asking about the roles as "counselor", six items asking about the role as "resource provider", and five items asking about the role as "manager". The teacher questionnaire also has two parts; the first part asks about personal information such as gender, age, qualification, and teaching experience, and the second part consists of 18 items ($\alpha = 0.908$) using a 4-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree) asking about the challenges encountered by the teachers in LA development, including seven items asking about student-related challenges, four items asking about teacher-related challenges, and seven items asking about learning environment-related challenges. Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews consisting of eight open-ended questions for asking students about what roles the teachers usually play to support their EFL learning, and seven questions for asking the teachers about what challenges they encountered during LA development for students. The interview was used to collect qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions to support quantitative data collected from the questionnaires.

2.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

In terms of data collection, the student questionnaire was piloted with five students who did not take part in the official study. Following the pilot test, 108 EFL students from four classes of non-English majors completed the questionnaire within 15 minutes. Due to the irrelevant completion of the eight questionnaire copies, 100 copies were relevant, so the final number of student participants was 100. Regarding the delivery of the questionnaire copies to the teachers, the teachers completed the questionnaire within 15 minutes. No copies were incomplete or irrelevant, so the total number of teacher participants was 28. For the interviews, ten students and

five teachers volunteered to join the interviews. Each participant had about 15-20 minutes to answer the questions. To ensure that all interview data was accurate and comprehensive, every interview was performed in Vietnamese and meticulously recorded. Besides, an interview sheet was also used for each participant; the researcher also took particularized notes throughout the interview procedure.

With respect to data analysis, through SPSS software, “descriptive statistics” was employed to analyze the quantitative data. Mean (M) and standard deviation (St.D) were calculated. The meaning of the means (M) scores for students’ perceptions of the roles of the teachers were interpreted as follows: For research question 1, based on the calculated interval coefficient for four intervals in five points ($5 - 1 = 4$), intervals with the range of 0.80 (4/5) were arranged. The following criteria in the Likert scale were used to interpret the data: never (M = 1.00 - 1.80); rarely (M = 1.81 - 2.60); sometimes (M = 2.61 - 3.40); often (M = 3.41 - 4.20); always (M = 4.21 - 5.00). For research question 2, intervals with a range of 0.75 (3/4) were arranged based on the interval coefficient for three intervals in four points ($4 - 1 = 3$). To interpret the results, the following Likert scale criteria were used: Strongly disagree: (M = 1.00 - 1.75), Disagree: (M = 1.76 - 2.50), Agree: (M = 2.51 - 3.25) and Strongly agree: (M = 3.26 - 4.00). “Content analysis” was employed for analyzing data collected from the interviews. The students were coded as S1, S2, S3... and S10, and the teachers were coded as T1, T2... and T5.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Teachers' roles in LA development

The data from both questionnaire and semi-structured interviews are displayed in this section. The data displayed in Table 1 reveal that the teachers effectively developed LA through strategies or activities reflecting their roles as a facilitator, counselor, resource provider, and manager with M = 3.99, 3.75, 3.75 and 3.82 and St. D = 0.870, 0.829, 0.826 and 0.866.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of 4 roles of the teachers

No	Categories	N	M	St. D
1	The Role as “Facilitator”	100	3.99	0.870
2	The Role as “Counselor”	100	3.75	0.829
3	The Role as “Resource provider”	100	3.75	0.826
4	The Role as “Manager”	100	3.82	0.866

Regarding the role as a “**Facilitator**”, most of the students reported that teachers often “assisted them in setting their learning goals” with M = 3.78 and St. D = 0.97 and “helped choose materials for learning” with M = 4.01 & St. D = 0.860. More interestingly, teachers also “assisted students in self-assessing learning process and progress” with M = 3.84 and St. D = 1.06 and “encouraged students to reflect on their learning process” with M = 3.92 and St. D = 1.11. Concerning qualitative data, it was found that most students stated that they received a lot of assistance from their teachers. For example: “My teacher usually encourages me to take part in English clubs on the internet, to set goals for my English learning and to choose extra materials to study” S1; “My teacher recommends materials for me to read. She also instructs me how to set goals for learning the English subject. She shows me videos to watch and listen to improve my English” S2.

In terms of the role as a “**Counselor**”, it was revealed that most teachers often acted as a counselor through the use of 5 strategies, implying that the teachers often paid attention to LA development for students. More specifically, teachers sometimes “identified psychological problems that inhibit students’ progress” with M = 3.29 and St. D = 1.17, they often “made students be aware of the abilities and techniques required for independent learning”, and “discussed with students to find solutions for their learning difficulties”, “encouraged students to make study plans”

and they were “positive and supportive, especially when giving feedback” with $M = 3.87$, 3.71 , 3.94 and 3.96 and $St. D = 0.97$, 1.11 , 0.97 and 0.98 respectively. Regarding the qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews, most students reported that their teachers frequently assisted them in resolving their issues. For example: “... If you or your friends have problems in class, the teacher will sit down and point out those points” (S10); “... If I don’t understand something during the study, the teacher always helps to discuss the problem at the end of the lesson” (S3).

With respect to the role as a “**Resource provider**”, six strategies were investigated. It is evident that the teachers also supported students in searching for materials for self-study through which they could develop their LA. Most students reported that their teachers often employed those strategies for LA development in class. For example, they “suggested self-assessment tools and techniques for students” with $M = 3.45$ and $St. D = 1.21$, “utilized computer-based learning materials with $M = 3.72$ and $St. D = 1.14$ ”, “evaluated materials based on student needs” with $M = 3.85$ and $St. D = 1.04$, “recommended resources for English practice outside the classroom” with $M = 3.67$ and $St. D = 1.16$, “encouraged students to read English books, magazines and newspapers outside the classroom and study with peers” with $M = 2.61$, 4.20 and $St. D = 1.12$, 0.090 respectively. Qualitative data also revealed that teachers often provided students with learning resources inside and outside classrooms, which they found very useful for their autonomous learning. As illustrated below: “The teacher introduces books and short stories to the class for reference” (S3); “...She often recommends free English learning websites with exercises related to that day lessons” (S4).

Concerning the role as a “**Manager**”, there is evidence that the teachers often employed all five strategies. The data showed that teachers often “organized classroom games and activities” with $M = 3.41$ and $St. D = 1.28$, “provided clear task instructions to students” with $M = 4.05$ and $St. D = 1.00$, “explained the objectives and significance of the tasks assigned to the students” with $M = 3.92$ and $St. D = 1.07$, “gave opportunities for students to voice their opinions in classroom management and learning activities” with $M = 3.79$ and $St. D = 1.04$, and “gave opportunities for students to voice their opinions in learning activities” with $M = 3.97$ and $St. D = 1.01$. Qualitative data revealed that teachers frequently planned activities for classes. For example: “My teacher often holds activities using English and calls for us to participate, such as playing games with the gifts for the winning team” (S2). “The English teacher often organizes classes with games for me to participate in” (S5). It can be concluded that the data gathered via the questionnaire and the interviews are comparable, showing that the teachers have developed LA for their students.

3.1.2. Challenges encountered by teachers in developing learner autonomy

It has been found that EFL teachers encountered those challenges related to students, teachers themselves and the learning environment.

Regarding **student-related challenges**, the data showed that the teachers agreed and strongly agreed with all the seven challenges with mean scores ranging from 3.21 to 3.39 . More specifically, they reported that most students “lacked knowledge and skills to become autonomous learners” with $M = 3.39$ and $St. D = 0.57$. They only “wanted to depend on teachers in learning English” with $M = 3.29$ and $St. D = 0.60$. Especially, they “lacked motivation to study English” with $M = 3.43$ and $St. D = 0.63$. In addition, many students still could not make decisions in their learning. They consistently “followed the guidance and judgment of the teachers” with $M = 3.43$ and $St. D = 0.50$. Another challenge is that they “did not have many opportunities to use English outside the classroom” with $M = 3.21$ and $St. D = 0.83$. More interestingly, the teachers strongly agreed that the students only “wanted to pass the exam with high grades”, and “their English proficiency is not very high” with $M = 3.32$, 3.54 and $St. D = 0.61$, 0.64 respectively. In terms of qualitative data collected from the semi-

interviews, it can be found that 4 out of 5 teachers reported that the students were not motivated to learn English. For example: *"In fact, non-English major students need more motivation to learn English. English is not their strong point in previous grades"* (T5). *They often focused on subjects such as Math, Physics, Chemistry, Literature, etc.; As a result, English is a big obstacle when entering colleges and universities"* (T2). According to three teachers, students' English proficiency was low, leading to their low enthusiasm for learning English, for instance: *"...as for me, non-English majors at my school ignore learning English because they don't have basic knowledge of English"* (T4). In addition, their attitudes toward learning were not positive. For example, one teacher said: *"...students depend so much on the teacher"* (T4); it is evident that challenges relating to students have had a detrimental impact on teachers' efforts to develop LA for non-English majors at HOTECH.

Concerning **"teacher-related challenges"**, it was explored that the teachers agreed with all the 4 challenges, including: teachers *"lacked strategies to foster LA"* with $M = 2.82$ and $St. D = 0.55$, *"were not autonomous in their teaching methods"* with $M = 3.11$ and $St. D = 0.92$, *"lacked pedagogical expertise regarding instruction in learning strategies"* with $M = 2.93$ and $St. D = 0.77$; and some teachers *"did not create an autonomous learning environment for students"* with $M = 3.25$ and $St. D = 0.84$. Regarding the qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews, two challenges were reported related to teachers: teachers' lack of autonomy and pedagogical knowledge. As illustrated below: *"... teachers need to learn more about learner autonomy. Traditional Vietnamese educational perspectives such as 'teacher-centered class,' lecturing methods, and 'the teacher are always right', etc., give very little encouragement in the school"* (T2); *"In most public and private educational institutions, teachers have little autonomy regarding teaching time frames, assessment methods, textbooks, etc. Therefore, they cannot give autonomy to their students"* (T3). It can be seen that despite some similarities, interview data indicated that not many teachers were aware of their own capabilities or their shortage of developing LA.

With respect to **"Learning environment-related challenges"**, the teachers reported that they faced seven challenges, including *"excessive workload impeding teachers' creative contributions to teaching"* with $M = 3.14$ and $St. D = 0.52$, and *"limited time for English classes"* with $M = 3.25$ and $St. D = 0.59$, *"insufficient technology for EFL learning"* with $M = 3.50$ and $St. D = 0.51$, *"followed by institutional rules and regulations limiting teachers' instructional freedom"* with $M = 3.29$ and $St. D = 0.53$. Other challenges include *"a lack of professional development workshops on autonomy"*, *"prescribed syllabi and materials hindering creativity"* and *"shortage of extra resources"* with $M = 3.29$, 3.29 and 3.29 and $St. D = 0.53$, 0.53 and 0.60 respectively.

In terms of qualitative data, five teachers agreed that prescribed syllabi and materials hindered teachers from developing LA. For example: *"...students have to study many subjects at school, so they don't have enough time to practice English as they want"* (T5); *"the textbooks need to keep up with the development speed and level of real life and work"* (T2). The teachers also admitted that the school had no investment in facilities. For example: *"School facilities such as labs and practice rooms are a few, limiting students' research and group learning"* (T2). In conclusion, these environment-related challenges might cause the complexity for teachers to develop LA for students.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Teachers' roles in developing learner autonomy

The findings of the study show that EFL teachers at HOTECH often performed strategies related to the four roles of a teacher in developing LA for non-English majored students, including the role as a facilitator, a counselor, a resource provider and a manager. More specifically, the teachers performed many strategies to facilitate the development of LA among students. They helped make English learning become easier. The study's findings align with those discovered by Alonazi [11], showing that teachers played a critical role in creating a supportive

learning environment, offering choices so students could make decisions in their learning. They guide learners in setting their learning goals, choosing materials, and reflecting on their progress, which is considered very important in supporting students' LA development.

What is more, it is evident that acting as a counselor, the teachers might give students advice, help them become more self-monitoring, overcome their learning obstacles, which might help students understand the necessary skills for self-learning, and identify psychological barriers. Especially, they offered feedback that might support learning toward the target of autonomous learning. This finding is consistent with Zhang and Liu's research [14], showing that teachers could develop LA for students by giving them constructive feedback and guidance.

In addition, most students perceived that acting as a resource provider, the teachers provided them with relevant resources such as educational websites, materials, and so on. Students may find it meaningful and useful to access these learning resources as autonomous learners. In this way, teachers might contribute to creating a learning environment for students to develop LA. This finding is consistent with that of Haizhen and Qiuping [15], stating that autonomous learning requires teachers to act as resource providers so that learners can expose themselves to various learning sources.

And finally, to support students in developing LA in learning English, acting as a manager, the teachers are supposed to organize various kinds of games and activities that are efficient and appropriate for students' needs and interests. The teachers clarify the procedures of each activity and highlight how important the tasks are for English learning. This study supports the finding of the study conducted by Le, Ho and Tran [16], confirming that teachers have beliefs on different roles to develop LA for EFL learners through their responsibilities to use a variety of strategies as Sinclair [17] and Little [18] argue, teachers play a critical role in developing LA by creating a supportive learning environment, providing opportunities for learner choice and decision-making, and offering guidance and feedback on learning strategies.

3.2.2. Challenges encountered by teachers in developing learner autonomy

Regarding challenges encountered by teachers in developing LA for EFL students, the findings of the study revealed three main challenges, including: firstly, student-related challenges which reflect learners' lack of knowledge and skills of LA, dependence on teachers, low motivation, limited English use outside the classroom, exam-oriented mindset, and low English proficiency. These findings are in alignment with those of Le and Gu [19], Hoang [20] and Le [21], showing that Vietnamese students face difficulties in becoming autonomous learners because of several reasons. For example, they lack confidence or motivation. In addition, because they are non-English majored students, their limited language proficiency might hinder LA development. They might only try to pass exams so that they could finish the course as scheduled. What is more, these students might lack skills or strategies for developing LA, which implies that teachers might not train them how to become autonomous learners.

Secondly, teacher-related challenges include a lack of strategies for developing LA, lack of pedagogical knowledge on learning strategies training, and failure to create an autonomous learning environment. The findings are consistent with other previous studies' findings revealing that inadequate teaching training causes difficulties in helping develop LA [3]. Therefore, teachers require pedagogical training to achieve fruitful outcomes. This indicates the need for professional development focusing on LA development for learners.

Finally, environment-related challenges include technological constraints, institutional rules and regulations, lack of professional development workshops, prescribed syllabi, heavy workload, resource shortage, and limited time for English classes. The findings showed that limited classroom time and lack of resources are the main barriers to autonomy development. These factors suggest that an optimal learning environment might be more helpful for developing LA; however, it has not yet been established.

4. Conclusion

The aim of the study is to investigate the teachers' roles and challenges they encounter in developing LA for EFL students at HOTECH. The findings revealed that the teachers played such roles as a facilitator, counselor, resource provider, and manager to develop LA for students. The findings also revealed three challenges related to students, teachers and the learning environment. Student-related challenges involve students' reliance on teachers, limited English usage outside the classroom, demotivation, and a strong focus on exam outcomes. Teacher-related challenges include a lack of strategies, pedagogical knowledge about learning strategies training, or autonomous teaching. Environment-related challenges include insufficient technology for English language learning, restrictions due to institutional rules and regulations, heavy workloads, a lack of resources, and limited time for English classes.

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that teachers should know their multifaceted roles and clearly understand challenges so that they can find ways to overcome them to help students develop LA. They should understand and use different strategies in LA development for their students. Most importantly, they should be autonomous teachers and take initiative in organizing activities and assignments for their students to do by themselves and gradually they can develop LA in the process of English learning. Regarding students, it is advisable that they be able to recognize the values of strategies the teachers apply and the challenges their teachers face to develop LA for them. They should actively participate in learning activities, consider self-study outside the class to be important. They need to be more aware of their own roles in the learning process and more accountable for their progress.

This study was conducted at only one college in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam with the participation of 100 non-English majored students and 28 EFL teachers so it can be said that the scale of the study is so modest; more extensive research is needed in the future with more participants and research locations so that the findings can be generalized to more similar EFL contexts.

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