

AN EXPLORATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PERCEPTION ON FOUR PERSPECTIVES OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

Pham Duc Thuan

Hoa Lu University

Email: thuan0880@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade learner autonomy (LA) has been placed a growing recognition in education. Learner autonomy is widely accepted to play fundamental role in English language teaching and learning in the 21st century. This paper reports a study conducted in a provincial university in the north of Vietnam, where the credit-based training system was recently applied. The research focuses on investigating how the English language teachers perceive learner autonomy from its four aspects: technical, psychological, political and socio-cultural. Fifteen teachers served as participants in the study. The teachers answered a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire which was adapted from the questionnaire written by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), and then took part in semi-structured interviews. The overall findings show that the teachers are positive toward learner autonomy in terms of its four aspects. The results of the study help to shed light on the teaching practice in the institution. It is also hoped that the findings partly contribute to literature regarding aspects of learner autonomy.

Key words: learner autonomy, teachers' perception, perspectives of learner autonomy

1 INTRODUCTION

With the shift from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness in education, learner autonomy is widely recognized as a desirable goal in tertiary education as it is found to comply with learner-centered approaches and enables students to pursue life-long learning (Ciekanski, 2007). It is claimed that learner autonomy brings the values for language teaching and learning, which include learners' active participation in classroom activities (Dam, 1995; Natri, 2007; Nunes, 2004; Rao, 2005), increased motivation (Lee, 1996; Tagaki, 2003), and enhanced responsibility for learning (Cunningham & Carlton, 2003; Mizuki, 2003; Stephenson & Kohyama, 2003).

Moreover, Nunan (1996) added language learning can be effective if learners are allowed to develop and exercise their autonomy. And to contribute the development of learner autonomy, teachers should be involved in the learning process (Chan, 2003). Similarly, Dam (1995) argues that it is largely the teachers' responsibility to develop learner autonomy.

From the the standpoints mentioned above, understanding teachers' belief is essential in the development of learner autonomy and in the effective integration of learner autonomy in teaching practice.

This study aims to explore how the EFL teachers perceive learner autonomy from its four aspects technical, psychological, political and socio-cultural. The study was conducted in a provincial university in the north of Vietnam, where there was recent change to the credit-based training system characteristically requiring students to be autonomous, independent, active and responsible in the learning. The data collection instrument employed is an adapted five-point Likert-scale questionnaire by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). The participants of the study also took part in a semi-structure interview to gain insights into the teachers' views. The findings were in line with the related literature. The teachers were positively disposed to the concept of learner autonomy. They mostly agreed on the indicators of LA: independent learning, involvement, decision making, self-evaluation, effective learning strategies, carrying out learning outside classroom, ability to monitor the learning.

Hopefully, the findings of this study, to some extent, can contribute to the literature; and will shed light on the English teachers' perception and help the administrators of the research context gain a better understanding of the teaching staff.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions of learner autonomy

There are many definitions of learner autonomy. However, the definitions proposed by Holec (1981), Little (1991), Dam's (1995), Littlewood's (1999), and Benson's (1997) gain more attention in the literature.

First, it is worth mentioning that Holec's (1981, p.3) definition of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" is the most often cited definition in the literature. It dates back to Holec's (1981) report for the Council of Europe's Modern Language Project. This definition interprets autonomy as a capacity that can be developed, and a list of characteristics were also named, including "determining the objectives, defining the contents and the progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.), and evaluating what has been acquired" (Holec, 1981, p.3).

Inspired by the work of Holec (1981), Little (1991) picks up on and expands the notion of autonomy as a capacity of the learner but emphasizes the central role of psychology in the development of this capacity, which is regarded as a contribution to the theoretical discussions of learner autonomy. According to Benson (2005), Holec's definition describes "what autonomous learners are able to do", whereas Little's definition "explain how they are able to do it" (p. 23). Little (1991) attempts to differentiate autonomy from the previous individualistic interpretation by digging deeper into the describable behaviours and asks why and how learners are willing to take a step further to assume greater responsibilities.

Dam's (1995) definition of autonomy entails both "a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person" (p. 102). The learner is viewed as "an active participant in the social process of classroom learning", which emphasizes the same social aspect discussed above in Little's (1991) definition. However, different from Holec's and Little's definition, teachers' roles and responsibilities are equally highlighted. For most learners the process of promoting learner autonomy in school settings can be "a long, difficult and often painful" process of change, which "demands constant effort on the part of the teacher and learners, not only as individuals but in collaboration with one another; for it is in the interactive process of collaboration that growth-points occur" (ibid, p. 6).

Littlewood (1999) characterizes the practice of autonomy into two types, proactive and reactive. The former is similar to Holec's definition, referring to the capacity to "take charge of their own learning, determine their objectives, select methods and techniques and evaluate what has been acquired". The latter, reactive autonomy is not self-initiated, "the kind which does not create its own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal" (p. 175). With regard to teachers' beliefs and views toward learners' autonomy, he therefore proposes two versions, the strong and the weak pedagogies. The strong version of pedagogy for autonomy refers to the kind of practice that creates space for student-directed learning, whereas in the weak version of pedagogy for autonomy, the teacher, or the institute, determines the curriculum and the syllabus leaving very little room for students to express their needs.

It is obvious that the researchers approach learner autonomy in different ways. However, central to these definitions are four factors: cognitive factors (ability or capacity), affective factors (attitudes, willingness, readiness, self-confidence), meta-cognitive factors (setting learning goals, choosing learning materials, planning learning activities, self-monitoring, self-management and self-evaluating progress) and social factors (working with others which promote interactions and scaffolds, a condition for enhancing one's independent problem-solving skills).

2.2 Perspectives of Learner Autonomy

Benson (1997) uses the terms 'technical', 'psychological' and 'political' to describe three major versions of autonomy in language education. Recently the socio-cultural feature of autonomy (Oxford, 2003) has been examined and added to the field of LA.

Technical perspective

The technical perspective of learner autonomy is confined to "the act of learning a language outside the framework of an educational institution and without the intervention of a teacher" (Benson, 1997, p.19). This version emphasizes learning-to-learn in order to promote independent life-long learning. It is interpreted as providing learners with skills they need to manage their own learning outside the framework of an educational institution, and without the intervention of teachers. This model of autonomy comes out of the positivist view that knowledge is a reflection of the objective reality of the world. Learning is viewed as the transmission of knowledge from one individual to another, and the knowledge is best discovered with the help of a teacher. The

positivist view encourages the preservation of traditional teacher- learner relationships in which the knowledge learners acquire is transmitted directly from teachers to learners; language learning consists of the acquisition of predetermined structures and forms; and the classroom is considered a natural place for that acquisition to occur. Accordingly, autonomy is seen as a particular set of situational conditions (other than the classroom) under which the language acquisition can take place. Technical autonomy, thus, refers to a set of skills which support learner independence, thus helping them acquire knowledge through discovering learning, and making decisions for their own learning by themselves, not waiting for knowledge to be passed down from the teacher.

Psychological perspective

In the psychological version, autonomy is defined as a capacity, “a construct of attitudes and abilities which allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning” (Benson, 1997, p.19). Therefore, the psychological perspective involves investigating mental and emotional characteristics of learners and relating them to the development of autonomy. Autonomy is associated with an internal transformation within each learner and might be supported by technical autonomy but not necessarily dependent on it. Constructivist theory is at the heart of this version of autonomy. In contrast to the positivist view, constructivism maintains that knowledge is represented as the construction of meaning. On the basis of the same objective reality, individuals construct their personal meaning systems. Learning is a matter of reorganization and restructuring of existing experience, not the gradual memorization of knowledge. Language learning is not simply the internalization of a set of structures and forms. Instead individuals generate their own version of the target language with their own creativity. Learners are in charge of their own learning and are expected to think and act according to their thinking. Interaction, creativity, and meaning negotiation lay the foundation for psychological autonomy.

Political perspective

The political perspective refers to the “learners’ control over the process and content of learning” (Benson, 1997, p.19). This perspective also focuses on students’ becoming aware of the context of learning, such as the purpose and the implications of learning a language, and the potential for personal and social change provided by learning another language. Political autonomy is based on critical theory. Sharing the view with constructivism that knowledge is constructed rather than acquired, critical theory focuses on the social context and the constraints within which the learning is conducted. Critical theory argues that knowledge is not a neutral reflection of objective reality; rather it consists of contradicting ideological versions of the reality which express interests of various social groups. In learning, the critical approach places great emphasis on the issues of power and control. Learning is a process where basic social relationships that lie behind the ideological surface are discovered and criticized. Autonomy grows when learners are more aware of the social context and the constraints in the learning process.

Socio-cultural perspective

Oxford (2003) strongly disagrees with the theoretical framework of LA for ignoring the sociocultural perspective. Considering essential constructs of LA such as contexts, agency, motivation, and learning strategies, she proposes a more comprehensive and systematic framework for LA. She argues for the examination of these four strands in any discussion about complete LA. The three models of LA (technical, psychological, and political) in her framework originate from Benson (1997). What is innovative in her framework is the sociocultural perspective which focuses on social interaction as a major part of cognitive and language development. In her model of sociocultural autonomy, there are sociocultural I and sociocultural II. The first type is grounded in Vygotsky's theory of the ZPD which highlights the importance of social relations and interaction in the learning process. The role of parents or teachers as "more capable" is vital in developing learners' ability to act intentionally and independently. Sociocultural II derives from the theory of communities of practice developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). This perspective focuses on community participation and the context of autonomy. Learners, at first are not members of their community. However, by building relationships with other members of the community, they gradually become peripheral and later full participants of the community to which they belong. Oxford (2003) maintains that from the angle of sociocultural II, the practitioners or old members play a significant role in helping "the newcomers to gain the strategies, meanings, and artifacts needed to enter the community of practice" (p. 88).

2.3 Previous Studies on Teachers' Beliefs about LA

Various studies have been conducted on teachers' beliefs concerning learner autonomy. Aguirre & Speer, Austin, Borg, Calderhead, Mansour, Munby, Pajares, Prawat, Woods (as cited in Nga, 2014) claim that beliefs have great impact on different walks of life including education. Teachers' beliefs about diverse factors in education have great impact on teaching.

Camilleri (1999) conducts a study on 328 teachers from six European locations (Malta, The Netherlands, Belorussia, Poland, Estonia and Slovenia). The study discovers that students should be involved in decisions about a number of learning strategies, such as determining and establishing the objectives of the course and selecting the course content.

In a more specific context, Balçıkanlı (2010) investigates the opinions of 112 student teachers of English in Turkey. The results reveal that students should be engaged in naturalistic setting activities and decision making about various classroom actions as well. People, who can take responsibility of their own learning, who can make decisions, who think about the reasons behind their learning, are thought to be the most fruitful and autonomous learners.

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) conducted a project to promote learner autonomy in Oman. They administered a survey with 200 teachers. And they found that the teachers have a positive outlook toward the concept of LA. Besides, the teachers are motivated to make LA their focus in the process of teaching. And the teachers summarize LA as a set of capabilities and skills that the

learners have to master in order to learn independently. What’s more, the teachers subordinate autonomy with possibilities for independent learning.

In the same context of Turkey as in Balçıkanlı’s (2010), Dogan (2015) carried out a study on the beliefs of 96 EFL instructors from 9 universities. The findings revealed that the instructors had highly positive views on different aspects of LA. The teachers stated that LA should be developed in the learning process by involving learners in decisions taken.

A noticeable study conducted recently on teachers’ beliefs of learner autonomy is the study of Alhaysony (2016). The participants are 77 EFL teachers at Aljouf University, Saudi Arabia. The findings of the study reveal that the teachers were mostly positive about LA and aware of its importance for language learning.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Question

The research question overarching the research is “How do the EFL teachers perceive learner autonomy?”

3.2 Participants

The participants took part in this study were 15 English language teachers in a faculty of foreign languages at a provincial university in the north of Viet Nam. All were females with age range from 28 to 43.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

The instruments used for collecting the required data are a questionnaire consisting of 19 items employing a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) to strongly agree (5), and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire is adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), but some modifications were made. Several items in the questionnaire are omitted, for the study focus is only on 4 perspectives of learner autonomy. The statements in the questionnaire are categorized as follows (Table 1): 4 items (1, 4, 9, 15) are about the technical perspective; 5 items (6, 13, 17, 18, 1) are about psychological perspective; 5 items (3, 5, 10, 12, 16) are about political perspective; and 5 items (2, 7, 8, 11, 14) are about socio-cultural perspective.

Table 1: The distribution of the statements of the questionnaire according to 4 perspectives

Technical Perspective	Psychological Perspective	Political Perspective	Socio-cultural Perspective
1. Independent study in the library is an activity which develops LA.	6. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.	3. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	2. LA is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.

Technical Perspective	Psychological Perspective	Political Perspective	Socio-cultural Perspective
4. Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.	13. Learning how to learn is key to developing LA.	5. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes LA.	7. LA is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.
9. Out-of-class tasks that require learners to use the internet promote LA.	17. The ability to monitor one's learning is central to LA.	10. LA is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.	8. LA is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.
15. LA is promoted by independent work in a self-access center.	18. Motivated language learners are more likely to develop LA than learners who are not motivated.	12. LA is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.	11. Co-operative work activities support the development of LA.
	19. To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	16. LA is promoted when learners have some choice in the kind of activities they do.	14. Learning to work alone is central to the development of LA.

Semi-structures interviews were conducted to further explore the teachers' answers in in the questionnaire. The interviews were carried out within 2 weeks with 9 volunteered teachers. Each interview lasted about 15 minutes, face to face at the university.

3.4 Procedure

The process of data collection is done via an online questionnaire using Google Forms emailed to the participants. The administration of the questionnaire is done within 2 weeks. For the purpose of analyzing the data, SPSS version 20 is used to calculate descriptive statistics (means and standard deviation).

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings from both qualitative and quantitative data show that the teachers were positively disposed to the concept of learner autonomy with an average mean value of 3.95 of the total 19 items. They mostly agreed on the indicators of LA: learning how to learn (M = 4.47), making choices (M = 4.40), independent learning (M=4.33), involvement, decision making, self-evaluation, effective learning strategies, carrying out learning outside classroom, ability to

monitor the learning. Table 2 below illustrates the descriptive statistics related to teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy (LA).

Table 2: Summary of Descriptive Statistics for teachers' perception questionnaire

Statements	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy.	15	3	5	4.40	.737
2. Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.	15	1	5	3.53	1.125
3. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	15	1	5	4.33	1.047
4. Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.	15	2	5	3.53	.915
5. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.	15	1	5	4.20	1.207
6. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.	15	1	5	4.27	1.163
7. Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.	15	2	5	4.07	.704
8. Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.	15	2	5	3.87	.834
9. Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access center.	15	2	5	3.47	.990
10. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.	15	1	5	3.40	1.121
11. Co-operative work activities support the development of learner autonomy.	15	2	5	3.73	.961

Statements	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
12. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.	15	2	5	3.87	.915
13. Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.	15	1	5	4.47	1.060
14. Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy.	15	2	5	4.00	1.000
15. Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy.	15	1	5	3.73	1.387
16. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds activities they do.	15	3	5	4.07	.799
17. The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.	15	1	5	3.73	1.223
18. Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.	15	2	5	4.27	1.100
19. To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	15	1	5	4.33	1.047
Average				3.95	

The findings were in line with the related literature suggesting that there is a significant correlation between learner autonomy and language learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). The results also support Balçıkanlı(2010) study that students who make decisions are autonomous learners. Moreover, the results of this study resemble the findings of Camilleri (1999) regarding involving learners in decisions about learning activities. From the semi-structured interviews, all the teachers agree on the importance of learner autonomy for language learning. This is similar to the findings in the study of Alhaysony (2016).

More specifically, table 3 shows the mean average of the four perspective. It can be seen that psychological and political orientations as the most supported ones. The teachers put great emphasis on “learning how to learn”, “independent study”, and “ability to evaluate the own learning”. Technical dimension of LA was not highlighted as much as the previous ones.

Table 3: Mean Average of the four perspectives

Perspectives	Mean Average
<i>Psychological</i>	4.21
<i>Political</i>	3.97
<i>Social</i>	3.84
<i>Technical</i>	3.78

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated EFL teachers' perceptions on learner autonomy in English language learning at tertiary level. A questionnaire adapted from Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012) questionnaire was administered on EFL teachers to collect the required data. SPSS version 20 was used to analyze the teachers' opinion about learner autonomy. The findings revealed that the teachers mostly hold strong beliefs in the core aspects of learner autonomy and they stressed the importance of learner autonomy in English language learning process.

It is also acknowledged that there are limitations of this study. The number of participants was not big enough, so the sample should be increased. The participants are from only one university. Various factors were not included in this study (age, years of experience in teaching).

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