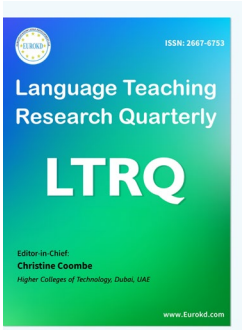

Language Teaching Research Quarterly

2022, Vol. 27, 9–23

E-Learning and Learner Autonomy in an EFL Class in Vietnam

Tran Thi Ngoc Lien

Department of Foreign Languages, Haiphong University of Management and Technology, Vietnam

Received *19 November 2021* ***Accepted*** *24 March 2022*

Abstract

Learner autonomy has long been a matter of great interest in the world of EFL pedagogy and practice. It is one of the qualities that teachers want to cultivate as they know that developing this core value is synonymous with training an independent, confident, and effective learner. There have been numerous studies on this subject in the educational setting; however, those conducted to examine learners' ability to self-control their learning in the online context are still far from sufficient. This research was conducted with the exploratory survey to examine learner autonomy in EFL classes in Vietnam, where e-learning has recently been made mandatory due to the Covid 19 pandemic. It involved the total participation of 20 teachers and 100 students randomly selected from five Vietnamese tertiary institutions. Results showed a good understanding of the course instructors about the importance of learner autonomy in the online courses and the need to promote it. The students, however, were not well aware of their self-regulated learning tasks. From the study results, we could realize some problems regarding the students' behavior in the virtual learning environment and differences in teachers' and students' perceptions of this notion. The research findings also supported the researcher in making recommendations to motivate self-controlled learners.

Keywords: *E-Learning, Learner Autonomy, EFL Class*

Introduction

Learner autonomy plays a fundamental part in improving learner performance in language education. The development of autonomous learning is considered essential in this setting as it helps to bring about effective learners (Breen, 1984; Littlewood, 1996; Nunan, 1997; Benson, 1997; Hermagustiana & Anggriyani, 2019). Those with a good level of autonomy are known as the more confident ones (Yuzulia, 2020) and capable of acquiring knowledge more

lienttn@hpu.edu.vn

doi:10.32038/ltrq.2022.27.02

independently and finding solutions and appropriate learning methods to achieve "fruitful upshots" (Kashefian & Kouhpeyma, 2020). They know how to apply the skills and strategies that they have learned (Yildiz & Yucedal, 2020) in practice. "Success in learning very much depends on learners having a responsible attitude" (Scharle & Szabo, 2000, p.4) and "the end product of all education should be an independent learner" (McDevitt, 1997, p.34). Sharing these viewpoints, Kohonen (1992) and Knowles (1980) propose that learners take an active role in the learning process rather than just react to the teachers' stimuli. Little (1991) believes that making the learners autonomous first means making their learning more efficient and effective because learning then will become more personal and focused. He concludes that the development of this quality helps the learners both 'know' and 'use' the target language.

Crucial as it is, promoting learner autonomy has not yet been an easy task to complete and its assessment is also problematic (Benson, 2001; Homes, 2021). Factors influencing this task are numerous and range from the macro ones such as educational policy, pedagogical approach, technological support, and psycho-social motivation (Williams, 2003; Voller, 1997) to more individualistic ones, including learners' straits (Scharle & Szabó, 2000), students' lack of constructivism (Begum & Chowdhury, 2016), the learner-context interface (White, 2008), students' maturity (Little, 1991), or emotion (Oxford, 2015). Though learner autonomy is the ability to learn independently (Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1991; Bension, 2001), hardly can it be achieved without teacher support (Yildiz & Yucedal, 2020). As a "pedagogical dialogue between learners and teachers" (Benson, 2007, p.22), learner autonomy needs the cooperation between teachers and students and the promotion of this relationship (Hermagustiana & Anggriyani, 2019). In reality, teachers know how to develop students' awareness of learner autonomy (Kashefian & Kouhpeyma, 2020) and deploy pedagogical measures to motivate it (Yosintha & Yunianti, 2021). Accordingly, they are one of the two determinants that can foster learner autonomy.

In Vietnam, compulsory online learning (which has been deployed due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic) has exerted huge impacts on both EFL teachers and learners. The students got confused about what to do and showed a certain degree of perceived deficiency of autonomy (Ariebowo, 2021; Goulas & Megalokonmou, 2021; Al Ghazali, 2000). This fact drove the researcher to conduct this survey research to investigate learner autonomy in EFL classes in some universities in Vietnam. We hoped that from the research findings, the researcher would be able to make some recommendations to enhance learner autonomy in general and the students' self-regulated learning in her university in particular.

Literature Review

Definition of Learner Autonomy

Holec (1981, as cited in Nunan, 1997) defines learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.193), so learners should be well aware of their learning purpose, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness. Smith (2008) proposes that autonomous learners are those responsible for their learning success and have the ability to self-control it with or without others' sources of help (Dickinson, 1987; Nunan, 1997; Benson, 2001;

Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). Concerning the nature of learner autonomy, researchers have suggested other terms for this notion, including the "independence" of learners (Sheerin, 1991), "self-direction" (Candy, 1991), or "andragogy" (Knowles, 1980). Such uses consolidate the fact that developing learner autonomy is to bring about independent and active learners, focus on learner-centredness, and direct students towards independence from other people in their thinking, learning, and behavior (Littlewood, 1996).

As Benson (2001) proposes that learner autonomy can hardly be achieved with only students' responsibility, it will be, therefore, better nurtured and developed with the help from teachers and in the light of its "relatedness" (Sanparsert, 2009 cited in Muhammad, 2020). Littlewood (1999) considers relatedness as a learning habit in Asia society. In class, the sense of relatedness became a prerequisite for teachers and learners (Andrade & Bunker, 2009). Besides the characteristics of relatedness, autonomous learning can be defined more as a decision-making process (Little, 1991; Dickinson, 1987) than purely as a learning method or a teaching strategy. Within this study, learner autonomy is examined both as a part of students' self-control and concerning other related individuals.

Components of Learner Autonomy

According to Benson (2001), an autonomous learner knows how to control (1) learning management, (2) learning strategies, and (3) learning content. The first component refers to the cognitive behaviors of the students who are directly engaged in the process of planning, organizing, and assessing. The second component involves two main learning strategies: cognitive and metacognitive strategies. As for the former, Oxford (1990) suggests four main paradigms: (1) practicing, (2) receiving and sending messages, (3) analyzing and reasoning, and (4) creating the structure for input and output. These paradigms are split into 15 sub-categories, each of which is an act performed by learners to gain their learning independence. In language teaching and learning, Cook (1993) suggests some cognitive strategies with the very basic ones including "repeating", "resourcing", "translating", and "note-taking", and more complicated ones such as "deducting", "contextualizing", "transferring", and "inferencing". The metacognitive strategies; however, are mainly associated with the ability to think about thinking (Wenden, 1998). The third component, content control, is a controversial issue. Learners are not the only ones who take control of the learning content but other stakeholders namely school policymakers, education practitioners, teachers, or even businesses. However, it is the learners who are the determinants and show their ability to control what they are going to learn. They need to "develop their capacity to participate in social interactions concerning their learning, to negotiate for the right to self-determine its broad direction, and ultimately to participate in the transformation of educational structures" (Benson, 2001, p. 99)

Learner Autonomy in EFL Class

According to Yildiz & Yucedal (2020), there is an association between learner autonomy and language learning. Should learners have the ability to manage their learning, they will be better prepared and likely to accomplish their learning targets with ease. Oxford (1990) proposes that language use and language learning are highly social practices that require interdependence from other language users and learners. To promote learner autonomy for EFL students, Esch (1996)

stresses the practice of providing circumstances and contexts for them to "take charge, at least temporarily, of the whole or part of their language learning program" (p.37). These contexts are more likely to help rather than prevent learners from exercising their autonomy. Benson (2001) highlights six different approaches for doing this. They include resource-based, technology-based, learner-based, classroom-based, curriculum-based, and teacher-based approaches. While the first two weigh importance on learner autonomy outside the classroom, the last four refer to promoting learner autonomy within it. Considering autonomy as a "multidimensional capacity," Littlewood (1996) introduces a framework for developing this individual power in foreign language teaching. He defined autonomy as a communicator (on the task level), as a learner (on the learning level), and as a person (on the personal level). To be autonomous in any of these three domains, learners should have the "ability into knowledge and skills" and the "willingness into motivation and confidence". Dam (2011) proposes a more detailed framework describing the development of learner autonomy as "a move from teacher-directed teaching environment to a learner-directed learning environment" (p. 41). He shared with Littlewood a point that improving learners' autonomy is to empower them to be "willing" and "capable" to take over the responsibility for learning. They are truly autonomous when they are 'fully willing to do" what they are doing and "embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment" (Deci & Flaste, 1995, p. 2). Within this study, these two aspects will be examined. The first is students' willingness to get engaged in the learning process, and the second is students' capability to take over their learning responsibility.

Technology and Learner Autonomy

The role of technology in enhancing learner autonomy in a language class has long been discussed (Schmenk, 2005; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Warschauer & Liaw, 2011). Technological mastery supports the students to self-control their learning and enhances their freedom of choosing (Benson, 2001; Reinders & White, 2016). According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), the ability to make effective use of technological applications or technological products such as film strips and audio and video recordings enables the students to gain their self-access study resources. In this way, they can improve their learning autonomy and gain enhanced language experiences in a "digital social environment". They could engage in authentic interactions (Zhong, 2018) and use language for meaningful communications in place of purely practice or learning.

Although these scholars confirmed the advantage of tech-savvies over their peers in the language learning process, they did not concentrate much on the role of technological tools in promoting learner autonomy through online interactions and ignored the problems likely borne out from the web use.

E-Learning and Learner Autonomy

E-learning has greatly contributed to creating a technologically literate workforce and meeting the need for life-long self-directed learning (Kandies & Stern, 1999; Nycz & Cohen, 2007) as it provides learners with increased accessibility to information (Ozkan & Koseler, 2009). According to Wedawati et al. (2020), the subjects of their study developed a certain degree of autonomy and showed a good level of satisfaction with Zoom, a platform used for delivering the

lessons virtually. Zhong (2018) concludes that students, with technological assistance, can be critical users of multiple online resources, collaborative e-learners, and more capable managers and organizers of their online learning. These built-up qualities are what we often find in autonomous learners. Besides its role to promote learners' engagement, virtual learning can provide them with both linguistic and non-linguistic input (Benson, 2001), the key elements for language learning practice and improvement. Such experience has become more pivotal during the COVID-19 pandemic as it has encouraged "student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, and active learning" (Baldwin & Jesus, 2017, p. 1). However, there remained a question regarding how autonomous online learners were and how much learner autonomy was promoted in virtual settings as even learners who can self-regulate their learning may encounter challenges (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2004). Anyway, the engagement of learners plays a key role in yielding good academic outcomes and secures the performance of active learning and the quality of education (Carini et al., 2006; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008).

To promote learner autonomy in virtual learning, Benson (1997) proposes three main approaches including the technical approach realized through the provision of self-access resources and technical support; the psychological approach stressing students' willingness and readiness to assume responsibility, and the political approach highlighting that the roles of schools and policymakers. Savery & Duffy (1995) also suggest four principles for technology-enhanced learning conditions that are supposed to secure that (1) learning is an active and engaged process, (2) learning is a process of constructing knowledge, (3) learners function at a metacognitive level, and (4) learning involves social negotiation.

Research Methodology

Research Questions

The study aims to examine teachers' and learners' perspectives on learner autonomy in EFL classes in some universities in Vietnam. Two research questions are set as follows:

RQ_1: What are teachers' perspectives on learner autonomy in EFL classes in Vietnam?

RQ_2: What are learners' perspectives on learner autonomy in EFL classes in Vietnam?

Research Method

Exploratory survey research was conducted to examine teachers' and students' perspectives on learner autonomy in EFL classes in Vietnam. The survey supported the researcher to "collect data in most areas of social inquiry" (Nunan, 1992, p. 140) and "generalize about the beliefs and opinions of many people by studying a subset of them" (Kasunic, 2005, p. 3). Kerlinger (1986) proposes three main types of survey research: descriptive survey, exploratory survey, and explanatory survey. Without any fixed model, the exploratory survey is flexible and can be adapted throughout the process of researching (Cohen et al., 2007). It is also capable of laying the foundation for future studies with no prior work.

To carry out survey research, several models and procedures can be used such as those proposed by Nunan (1992), Kasunic (2005), and Brown (2011). In this study, we made use of Kasunic's procedure with seven separate steps: (1) identifying the research objectives, (2) identifying and characterizing the target audience, (3) designing the sampling plan, (4) designing

and writing the questionnaire, (5) pilot testing the questionnaire, (6) distributing the questionnaire, and (7) analyzing the results and writing a report. This model was selected because it could help to separate the studying process into specific and manageable stages. The questionnaires were also piloted to guarantee the validity and reliability of the research findings.

Research Setting

The study was carried out in five different universities in the north of Vietnam where English is a compulsory subject and is assigned a total of 15 credits. The graduates are required to have English level B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, mandatory online classes were deployed and the technological platform used for lesson delivery was "Zoom". This is a cloud-based video communications app that allows the users to set up virtual video and audio conferencing, webinars, live chats, screen-sharing, and other collaborative capabilities. This platform was trialed and assessed by the universities' administrators and education practitioners before being officially used. There was a general agreement that Zoom was usable and allowed a high level of teacher-learner interaction and effective classroom management compared to other technological platforms.

The study involved the participation of 20 teachers and 100 students equally and randomly selected from these five universities. This sample size was big enough to generate reliable statistical findings of a language program or educational research (Cohen et al., 2007; Griffee, 2012).

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Two survey questionnaires were designed and distributed to gauge teachers' and students' perspectives of learner autonomy in EFL classes. The first 15-item questionnaire, as shown in Table 1, was to examine teachers' perspectives on both their students' willingness to get engaged in the lessons (S1-S8) and their capability to self-control their learning process (S9-S15).

Table 1

Statements to Get Teachers' Perspectives on Learner Autonomy

Purpose	Code	Statement
To evaluate students' willingness	S1	Students often log in Zoom in time.
	S2	Students always join Zoom meetings with their cameras on.
	S3	Students always join Zoom meetings with their audio on.
	S4	Students often drop messages on the chat box.
	S5	Students often use reaction icons.
	S6	Students know how to use all the sharing options.
	S7	Students are actively engaged in Q and A sections.
	S8	Students show their enthusiasm for online classes.
To evaluate students' capability	S9	Students often collaborate with peers.
	S10	Students often interact with instructors.
	S11	Students can understand the lectures.
	S12	Students can fulfill the course objectives.
	S13	Students can use web-based materials.
	S14	Students often contact teachers online for after-lesson queries.
	S15	Students can fulfill teachers' requirements for the upcoming lessons.

Concerning the first objective, the two main aspects including (1) students' familiarity with the used platform and (2) students' eagerness to learn were investigated. To figure out how familiar the students were with the selected platform, six statements (S1-S6) were presented to collect information about virtual class punctuality, camera use, audio setting, chatbox, reaction icons, and sharing options. To evaluate how much the students feel engaged and interested in their online lessons, two statements (S7-S8) were provided.

Turning to the second objective, seven statements were made to examine if the students knew how to learn online (S9-S13) and whether their study continued offline (S14-S15). Responses to statements 9 to 13 were to shed light on teachers' perceptions of peer collaboration, teacher-student interaction, student comprehension, course objective achievement, and student ability to use web-based materials. The remaining two statements helped to collect data about teacher-student communication outside the classroom and the students' fulfillment of learning requirements.

The second 15-item questionnaire, as Table 2 illustrates, was designed to examine students' perspectives on learner autonomy with two overall objectives similar to those presented in the teachers' survey questionnaire. The first three statements (S1-S3) were to get data about the students' habit of using Zoom and their ability to explore the available functions on this platform. The next four statements (S4-S7) supported the researcher to know if the students were keen on or got distracted from their learning.

Table 2

Statements to Get Learners' Perspective on Learner Autonomy

Purpose	Code	Statement
To evaluate students' willingness	S1	Students spend time exploring the functions offered in Zoom.
	S2	Students know how to use the functions offered in Zoom.
	S3	Students often make use of the functions offered in Zoom to get engaged in the lessons.
	S4	Students are eager to join the online lessons.
	S5	Students love participating in Q and A sections.
	S6	Students often fall asleep during lessons.
	S7	Students are often diverted to other online activities rather than learning.
To evaluate students' capability	S8	Students often collaborate with peers.
	S9	Students often interact with instructors.
	S10	Students can fulfill the course objectives.
	S11	Students can use web-based materials.
	S12	Students keep on contacting teachers online after lessons.
	S13	Students often search online for information relevant to the lessons.
	S14	Students often contact their peers for further discussions about lessons.
	S15	Students often self-study after the online lessons.

To grasp the students' perceptions of their ability to learn online, eight statements from S8 to S15 were provided. While statements 8 to 11 helped to evaluate whether the sampled population performed some class activities such as peer collaboration, teacher-student interaction, or web-

based material usage, statements 9-15 judged the possibility that the students continued their study outside the virtual classroom.

These questionnaires were designed with five-point Likert scale items, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Both the participants and the statements were coded to support the process of statistical analysis. They were also explained for the use of the questionnaires and the procedure to carry out them. The questionnaires were first piloted with two teachers and ten students from the researcher's university before being distributed to the remaining participants. The pilot stage revealed no problem concerning the comprehension of the statements and assisted in improving the validation of the methods and findings in this study (Creswell, 2008a). The collected data were analyzed with the help of the EPSS 2.0 software.

Results

As shown in Table 3, the surveyed teachers mostly agreed that their students joined the virtual classes on time (M=4.25, SD=0.55), and showed good experiences with the technological platform. The students knew how to use Zoom with some basic functions such as having the audio on (M=3.65, SD=0.48), using the chat box (M= 3.65, SD=0.67), and sharing their lessons (M=3.7, SD=0.65). However, what stands out from the statistics is that the teacher participants disagreed that their students used reaction icons to communicate (M=2.65, SD=0.58) and had their cameras on (M=1.90, SD=0.71) when joining Zoom meetings. A paradox remained concerning students' eagerness to learn. While the teachers disagreed that students actively partook in the Q and A section (M=2.4, SD=0.59), they mainly agreed that their students showed a certain degree of enthusiasm in the online lessons (M=3.5, SD=0.68).

A closer look at the table from S9 to S15 reveals that most of the teachers agreed their students could take responsibility for their learning process. They contacted the instructors, understood the lessons, made use of the web-based materials, and fulfilled the course objectives with the mean scores ranging from 3.05 to 4.15 and the standard deviation being lower than 0.7. However, a point worth mentioning is that most of the teachers disagreed that their students worked collaboratively (M=2.6; SD=0.50) and had a tendency to contact their teachers after the online lessons (M=2.3, SD=1.08). Though opinions diverged, most of the teachers agreed their students could fulfill the requirements set for the upcoming online lessons.

Table 3
Teachers' Perspectives on Learner Autonomy

Statement	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
S1	20	3	5	4.25	.550
S2	20	1	4	1.90	.718
S3	20	3	4	3.65	.489
S4	20	2	5	3.65	.671
S5	20	2	4	2.65	.587
S6	20	3	5	3.70	.657
S7	20	2	4	2.40	.598
S8	20	3	5	3.55	.686
S9	20	2	3	2.60	.503
S10	20	3	5	3.55	.605
S11	20	3	4	3.60	.503
S12	20	3	5	4.15	.671
S13	20	2	4	3.05	.605
S14	20	1	5	2.30	1.081
S15	20	1	5	3.70	1.081

About Students' Perspectives on Learner Autonomy

As indicated in Table 4, in response to five out of seven statements concerning students' willingness to learn, the surveyed participants said that they were familiar with the used platform and knew how to make use of it. However, they admitted not spending time exploring the functions offered (M=2.2, SD=0.57). As for their love for online learning, the participants stated that though not yet ready to join Zoom meetings, they loved Q and A activities. A surprising fact; however, is they often fell asleep (M=3.38; SD = 0.64) and suffered from virtual distractions (M=3.24; SD=0.55).

Table 4
Students' Perspectives on Learner Autonomy

Statements	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
S1	100	1	4	2.22	.579
S2	100	2	5	3.26	.579
S3	100	2	4	3.11	.549
S4	100	1	5	2.24	.638
S5	100	2	4	3.00	.492
S6	100	3	5	3.38	.648
S7	100	2	5	3.24	.553
S8	100	1	3	2.02	.376
S9	100	2	5	3.13	.418
S10	100	2	5	3.25	.575
S11	100	2	5	3.51	.659
S12	100	1	4	2.07	.537
S13	100	2	5	4.16	.526
S14	100	1	3	1.85	.479
S15	100	1	5	3.71	.640

Regarding students' capability to take the responsibility for their learning process, the sampled students agreed they often communicated with their teachers during online lessons, and this finding is similar to the one taken from the teachers' survey (M=3.13; SD=0.41) on the same subject matter. They said that they used the web-based materials, searched for further information online, and most importantly could meet the lessons' requirements and self-study (M=3.71; SD=0.64). However, the participants disagreed that they collaborated with their classmates, and this fact was consolidated when the students reported eschewing peer interaction outside the classroom (M=1.85, SD=0.47). In addition, these students stated that they did not have the habit of keeping in touch with their instructors after class.

Discussion

The research was conducted to examine teachers' and students' perspectives on learner autonomy in EFL virtual classes in some tertiary institutions in Vietnam. To begin with the teachers' perspectives, most of the participants agreed that their students showed a certain degree of willingness to take part in the online courses. This finding agreed with Littlewood (1996)'s and Dam (2011)'s conclusion that learner autonomy was manifested via their willingness to take over the responsibility for learning and it further consolidated Deci and Flaste (1996)'s statement. Second, the students' agreement that they were familiar with Zoom and knew how to use it was in alignment with the finding provided in Wedawati et al. (2020), which said that Zoom was an easy-to-use system and that the students in their survey research had positive responses to this platform. However, the statistics of students' refusal to have their cameras on in Zoom meetings or to use reaction icons for virtual communication partly disagreed with the finding found in Muhammad (2020) about "students' active participation inside Schoology" and in Wedawati et al. (2020) confirming the learners' comfort with online platforms. This problem could be mainly attributed to the lack of virtual classroom regulations. However, from informal interviews, we got to know that these students did not want to show their surroundings to others as most of the learning activities were taking place in their private rooms. Some agreed that they did not feel comfortable showing their faces and that turning on the camera meant that they could not do anything but study. This behavior was certain to impede the teacher-student interaction as well as peer interaction.

Regarding the students' willingness to participate in online classes, the finding that students did not fancy the Q and A activity went against the recent research results concerning the association between learners' active participation and learner autonomy (Benson, 2001; Littlewood, 1996; Little, 1991). Bloom's taxonomy categorizes cognitive levels into 6 major hierarchical domains and the application of Q and A activities is more likely to support teachers to realize their students' cognitive ability from these domains. For example, low-rank questions can elicit responses in the knowledge, comprehension, and application domains while high-rank questions not only can evoke the ability in the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation domains but also provoke learners' deeper and critical thinking. The active involvement of the learners was an indicator for their autonomy development and vice versa the enhancement in the learners' self-control could result in their self-efficacy. In this case, the students' disinterest in this highly

interactive activity could explain the assumption that they were not fully engaged in their online learning. This problem could not be blamed for the pedagogical reason stating that the teachers did not get involved to help. Instead, there could be a possibility that the students might be more engrossed in something behind the screen than in their teachers' instructions.

Regarding the assessment of students' capability to take their learning responsibility from the teachers' perspective, the finding of students' ignorance of working with peers and contacting their teachers after class partly denied the previous research findings of peer collaboration and teacher-learner interaction in an EFL class. Collaborative working proves learners' active participation which, as generally assumed, contributes to fostering learner autonomy (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2004). In class, it is a must that the teachers and their students be related (Andrade & Bunker, 2009 cited in Muhammad, 2020) and the refusal to be a part of a group or community might imply students' low level of autonomy and beyond. This might mean that the teachers did not facilitate this activity in their online classes. They had not yet been so skilled with delivering a multi-approached lesson virtually and this was a common sign that I caught at my university where the teachers sat in front of the computer screen and just went into a long monologue. Furthermore, when the questions were provided via Zoom's chatbox eliciting why my students had not worked with their classmates, the answers I got were they could not find a way out. They found the physical barrier and the lack of interactive functions in Zoom a challenge for group and peer work performance.

The findings, however, showed the teachers' belief in their students gaining some degree of autonomy as they could understand the lectures and fulfill the course objectives or learning goals (Nunan, 1997). The student's ability to make use of web-based materials indicated a certain level of responsibility for their learning outside the classroom (Hermagustiana & Anggriyani, 2019; Muhammad, 2020) and their learning independence (Dickinson, 1987; Nunan, 1997; Benson, 2001).

Concerning students' perspectives on learner autonomy, the findings of students' willingness to learn were in line with those found in the survey delivered to the teachers. They could use the platform with ease, showed their interest in the online lessons, and did not like the Q and A activity. However, there were some points worth consideration. First, the students did not spend time exploring the functions in Zoom. Although this finding agreed with the statement provided in Wedawati et al. (2020) that there were no difficulties in understanding the materials and running the online learning platform, it partly contradicted the belief of learners' self-control and independence in learning (Benson, 2001; Dickinson, 1987). Moreover, the finding disclosed that the sampled students slept in class and faced virtual distractions and this challenged the afore-mentioned conclusion about the advancement of learner autonomy in online classes. These circumstances did not align with the students' behavioral engagement, which is an important factor for learner autonomy (Deci & Flaste, 1996).

Eliciting the students' opinions about their ability to self-control their learning, the findings were very much the same as those found in the teachers' survey. The participants mostly agreed that they did not collaborate with their peers but they could fulfill the course objectives and explore the learning materials on the internet. However, the fact about learner-instructor

interaction in class somehow contravened the earlier conclusion about students' problems in engagement. That the students often communicated with their teachers during their online lessons elucidated some degree of inter-subjectivity between the students and the teachers (Little, 2007). Another finding confirmed the enhancement in learner autonomy. Although the students did not contact their teachers and classmates outside the online classroom, they could develop the habit of searching for learning materials online and showed their self-study competence. The failure to stay in contact with peers or teachers might mean students' lack of engagement but it also displayed some enhancement in learner autonomy: the quality of being independent (Benson, 2001) and the ability to make learning a self-regulated and life-long process (Kashefian & Kouhpeyma, 2020).

Conclusion

This study was carried out with the involvement of 20 teachers and 100 students coming from 5 universities in Vietnam. An exploratory survey was designed to examine teachers' and learners' perspectives on learner autonomy in online EFL classes. Findings concluded that the students showed a certain level of learner autonomy. Their willingness to get engaged in virtual learning was seen through their familiarity with the used technological platform and the capability to take over their learning process. Most of the teachers agreed that their students knew how to use the provided technological platform. They could seek the required learning materials online, fulfill the course objectives, and self-study. However, there remained some disagreement as to whether the students had been actively engaged in their online learning. This was indicated via some behavioral problems, including students' refusal to have a camera on or to use reaction icons, their disinterest in joining the Q&A part and working with peers, and their hesitation in contacting the instructors and classmates after class.

Pedagogically, this study suggested that the teachers make changes to their teaching procedures and methods. Improvements in teaching methods are generally believed to captivate the students' attention and arouse their learning interest. The problem that the students disliked the Q and A learning activity or working with peers was stated and it could be partly dealt with if the lessons were made more intriguing. Though learner autonomy implies learner-centeredness (Littlewood, 1996), learners' self-control (Benson, 2001), "independence" (Sheerin, 1991), and "self-direction" (Candy, 1991), it is the teachers' autonomy (Benson, 2001) that makes the learners more engaged and more autonomous. Politically, to ensure and improve learner autonomy in online classes, university policymakers are supposed to get involved and specific requirements and instructions for online learning be issued. This non-conventional educational approach is still novel to Vietnam and the deployment of online learning seems not quite effective in this country. That the students did not have their cameras on might refer to the lack of school discipline and if such behavior was not formally prohibited, the teachers would not be able to make their students show their faces. This, for certain, prevented the teachers from supervising their learners and adversely affected the teaching and learning quality. Psychologically, the study indicated that the students had to show greater responsibility and more active participation in their learning. Little (2007) argues that "learners are often reluctant to take

charge of their learning" (p.17) and this problem may be more obvious in Vietnam as the culture of teacher-centeredness has long been deeply cultivated in children's minds. The students, thus, need to be taught more about their independence and learning responsibility.

Anyway, this is exploratory survey research, so further studies can be conducted with the application of other data collection procedures or tools to make full use of the exploratory and explanatory nature of qualitative data to examine teachers' and learners' perceptions on learner autonomy in online EFL classes. Moreover, as this study just examined learner autonomy in terms of students' willingness and their capability to self-study, a wealth of other factors such as psychological motivation, community support, or cognitive problem-solving skills can be further investigated. We believe that further studies will help to address our limitations.

References

Al Ghazali, F. (2020). Challenges and opportunities of fostering learner autonomy and self-access learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 11*(3), 114-127. https://doi.org/10.37237/110302

Andrade, S.M., & Bunker, L.E. (2009) A model for self-regulated distance language learning. *Distance Education, 30*(1), 47-61. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587910902845956

Ariebowo, T. (2021) Autonomous Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic: Students' Objectives and Preferences. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, *6*(1), 56-77. https://doi.org/10.18196/ftl.v6i1.10079

Baldwin, S. J., & Jesús, T. (2017). Evaluation instruments and good practices in online education. *Online Learning*, *21*(2), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v21i2.913

Begum, N.A., & Chowdhury, F.R. (2016) The factors that affect learner autonomy in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at tertiary level in Bangladesh. *ELK Asia Pacific Journal*. *2*(4).

Benson, P. (1997). The philosophy and politics of learner autonomy. In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. Longman. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315842172

Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. Longman.

Benson, P. (2007). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching. 40*(1), 21-40. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444806003958

Breen, M. (1984). Process syllabus for the language classroom. In C. J. Brumfit (Ed.), *General English syllabus design ELT Document*, 118, (pp 47-60). Pergamon Press

Brown, J.D, & Coombe, C. (2011). *The Cambridge guide to research in language teaching and learning*. Cambridge University Press.

Candy, P. C. (1991). *Self-direction for lifelong learning: A comprehensive guide to theory and practice*. Jossey-Bass. https://doi.org/10.1177/074171369204200307

Carini, R. M., Kuh, G. D., & Klein, S. P. (2006). Student engagement and student learning: Testing the linkages. Research in Higher Education, *47*, 1-32. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-005-8150-9

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203029053

Cook, V. (1993). *Linguistics and second language acquisition*. Macmillan. https://doi:10.1007/978-1-349-22853-9

Creswell, J. W. (2008a). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.

Dabbagh, N., & Kitsantas, A. (2004). Supporting self-regulation in student-centered web-based learning environments. *International Journal on E-Learning*, *3*(1), 40-47.

Dam, L. (2011). Developing learner autonomy with school kids: principles, practices, results. In D. Gardner (Ed.), *Fostering autonomy in language learning* (pp. 40-51). Zirve University. https://doi/10.13140/RG.2.1.2654.8886

Deci, E.L., & Flaste, R. (1995). *Why we do what we do*. Penguin

Dickinson, L. (1987). *Self-instruction in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.

Esch, E. (1996). Promoting learner autonomy: criteria for the selection of appropriate methods. In R. Pemberton, E. S. L. Li, W. W. F. & H. D. Pierson (Eds.), *Taking control: autonomy in language learning* (pp. 35-48). Hong Kong University Press.

Goulas, S., & Megalokonomou, R. (2021, August 1). *Student autonomy and academic performance*. VoxEU. https://voxeu.org/article/student-autonomy-and-academic-performance

Warschauer, M., & Liaw, M. (2011). Emerging technologies for autonomous language learning. *Studies in Self - Access Learning Journal*, 2 (3), 107-118. https://doi: 10.37237/020302

Griffee, D.T. (2012). *An Introduction to Second Language Research Methods: Design and Data.* TESL-EJ Publications.

Hermagustiana, I., & Anggriyani, D. (2019). Language learner autonomy: The beliefs of English language students. *Indonesian Journal of English Education, 6*(2), 133-142. https://doi.org/10.15408/ijee.v6i2.15467

Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Pergamon Press.

Homes, G. D. A. (2021). Can we actually assess learner autonomy? The problematic nature of assessing student autonomy. *Shanlax International Journal of Education, 9*(3), 8-15. https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v9i3.3858

Kandies, J., & Stern, M. B. (1999). Weaving the web into the classroom: An evolution of web-enhanced instruction. *Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference* (10th). San Antonio, TX. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED432270.pdf

Kashefian, S., & Kouhpeyma, Y. (2020). Fostering learner autonomy in educational settings. *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding, 7*(7), 190-201. https://doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v7i7.1765

Kasunic, M. (2005). *Designing an effective survey*. Carnegie Mellon University. https://doi.org/10.1184/R1/6573062.v1

Kerlinger, F. N. (1986). *Foundations of behavioral research*. (3rd ed.). Holt, Rinehart, and Winston

Knowles, S. M. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: from andragogy to pedagogy.* Associated

Kohonen, V. (1992). Experiential language learning: second language learning as cooperative learner education. In D. Nunan (Ed.), *Collaborative learning and teaching* (pp. 14-39). Cambridge University Press.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Lee, J. Q., McInerney, D. M., Liem, G. A. D., & Ortiga, Y. P. (2010). The relationship between future goals and achievement goal orientations: An intrinsic–extrinsic motivation perspective. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 35*(4), 264–279. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2010.04.004

Little, D. (1991). *Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, issues, and problems*. Authentik.

Little, D. (2007). Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited. *International Journal of Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, *1*(1), 14-29.

Littlewood, W. (1996). Autonomy: An anatomy and a framework. *System*, *24*(4), 427-435. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X(96)00039-5

Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and Developing Autonomy in East Asian Contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, *20*(1), 71-94

McDevitt, B. (1997). Learner autonomy and the need for learner training. *Language Learning Journal*, *16*, 34-39. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09571739785200251

Muhammad, M. (2020). Promoting students' autonomy through online learning media in EFL class. *International Journal of Higher Education*, *9*(4), 320-331. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v9n4p320

Nunan. D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning.* Cambridge University Press

Nunan, D. (1997). Designing and adapting materials to encourage learner autonomy. In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 192-203). Longman. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315842172

Nycz, M., & Cohen, B.E. (2007). The basics for understanding e-learning. In N. Buzzetto-Hollywood (Eds.), *Principles of effective online teaching* (pp. 1-17). Informing Science Press.

Ozkan, S., & Koseler, R. (2009). Multi-dimensional students' evaluation of e-learning systems in the higher education context: An empirical investigation. *Computers & Education, 53*(4), 1285-1296. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2009.06.011

Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know.* Heinle & Heinle.

Oxford, R. L. (2015). Expanded perspectives on autonomous learners. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 9(1), 58-71. https://doi.org/ 10.1080/17501229.2014.995765

Palfreyman, D., & Smith, R. C. (2003). *Learner autonomy across cultures.* Palgrave Macmillan

Reinders, H., & White, J.C. (2016) 20 years of autonomy and technology: How far have we come and where to next? *Language, Learning, and Technology*. *20*(2), 143-154.

Robinson, C. C., & Hullinger, H. (2008). New benchmarks in higher education: Student engagement in online learning. *J. Educ. Bus*, *84*(2), 101-109. https://doi.org/10.3200/JOEB.84.2.101-109

Savery, J.M., & Duffy, T.M. (1995). Problem Based Learning: An Instructional Model and Its Constructivist Framework. *Educational Technology*, *35*(5), 31-38.

Scharle, A., & Szabó, A. (2000). *Learner autonomy: A guide to developing learner responsibility*. Cambridge University Press.

Sheerin, S. (1991). State of the art: self-access. *Language teaching, 24*(3), 143-157. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444800006315

Schmenk, B. (2005). Global Learner Autonomy. *Tesol Quarterly, 39*(1), 107-118. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588454

Smith, R. (2008). Key concepts in ELT: learner autonomy. *ELT Journal*, *62*(4), 395-397. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccn038

Voller, P. (1997). Does the teacher have a role in autonomous language learning? In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning*, (pp. 98-113). Longman. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315842172

Wedawati, M. T., Wibisono, G., Subandi, & Fanani, U. Z. (2020) *Learner autonomy in Mandarin class*. International Joint Conference on Arts and Humanities (IJCAH 2020) pp. 1043-1048. https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.201201.174

Wenden, A. L. (1998). Metacognitive knowledge and language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 19*(4), 515-537. https://doi-org.eres.qnl.qa/10.1093/applin/19.4.515

White, C. (2008). Language learning strategies in independent learning: An overview. In S. Hurd & T. Lewis (Eds.), *Language learning strategies in independent settings* (pp. 3-24). Bristol Multilingual Matters.

Yildiz, Y., & Yucedal, M. H. (2020). Learner autonomy: A central theme in language learning. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies, 7*(3), 208-212. https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v7i3p208

Yosintha, R. & Yunianti, S. S. (2021). Learner autonomy in EFL online classes in Indonesia: Students' voices. *Langkawi Journal of The Association for Arabic and English*, *7*(1), 119-133. http://dx.doi.org/10.31332/lkw.v7i1.2637

Yuzulia, I. (2020). EFL Teachers' perceptions and strategies in implementing learner autonomy. *Linguistics*, *6*(1), 36-54. http://dx.doi.org/10.29300/ling.v6i1.2744

Zhong, Q. M. (2018). The evolution of learner autonomy in online environments: A case study in a New Zealand context. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, *9*(1), 71-85. https://doi.org/10.37237/090106

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Ethics declarations

Competing interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

Rights and permissions

Open access