

EMPOWERING LANGUAGE LEARNERS: STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN VIETNAMESE TERTIARY EFL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to enhance learner autonomy (LA) in communication skills. Set against the backdrop of Vietnam's evolving educational landscape, the study is informed by the theoretical frameworks of learner autonomy and sociocultural theory. The research utilizes semi-structured interviews with nine EFL teachers from two institutions, encompassing novice, mid-career, and near-end career stages. The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed four key strategies: collaborative learning, integration of technology, reflective practices, and personalized learning approaches. These strategies were found to be prevalent across different teaching experience levels, each contributing uniquely to fostering learner autonomy. Collaborative learning emerged as a tool for enhancing peer interaction and self-directed learning, while technology integration was highlighted for extending learning beyond the classroom. Reflective practices were shown to deepen students' self-awareness and critical thinking, and personalized learning approaches were noted for catering to individual learner needs and preferences. The study highlights the importance of adaptable, context-sensitive teaching strategies in promoting learner autonomy in EFL contexts. It suggests the need for educational environments that support collaborative, technology-enhanced, reflective, and student-centered learning.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Strategies, Vietnamese Tertiary EFL Education

INTRODUCTION

The concept of learner autonomy (LA) has emerged as a pivotal element in modern language education, particularly within the sphere of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Little et al., 2002; Yen et al., 2023; Yildiz & Yucedal, 2020). This qualitative study focuses exclusively on Vietnamese tertiary EFL educators and their pedagogical strategies aimed at fostering LA, with a specific emphasis on communication skills. LA, defined as the ability of students to take charge of their own learning process, is increasingly recognized as a key factor in effective language learning (Benson, 2016; Little et al., 2017). This is especially relevant in the acquisition of communication skills, which are essential in today's interconnected global environment.

Vietnam's educational landscape, traditionally dominated by teacher-centered approaches (Thanh, 2010; Tran et al., 2023), presents a unique context for exploring how educators are shifting towards facilitating LA. This research zeroes in on the methods and approaches employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers in this endeavor. The central research question guiding this study is: What strategies do Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers employ to enhance LA in communication skills?

By exploring this question, the study seeks to shed light on the specific practices and methodologies Vietnamese educators are utilizing to encourage independent learning and effective communication skills among their EFL students. The significance of this research is twofold: it contributes to the academic discourse on teaching methodologies in EFL contexts, and it offers practical insights that can be applied to improve language education effectiveness, not only in Vietnam but also in similar educational settings worldwide.

The concept of LA has been extensively explored in the field of language education. Holec (1979) first defined it as the ability of the learner to take charge of their own learning process. Benson (2013) expanded this definition to include the capacity for self-directed learning and the freedom to make choices about one's own learning. Little et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of LA in language learning as a means to enhance motivation and the effectiveness of learning. Research by Jianfeng et al. (2018) further highlighted the positive correlation between LA and language proficiency, noting that autonomous learners tend to develop better communicative competence. These studies have set a foundational understanding that underpins the strategies educators use to foster autonomy in language classrooms.

The teaching and learning of EFL in Vietnam have traditionally been influenced by Confucian heritage culture, which values teacher authority and rote learning (Pham & Renshaw, 2015). However, Nghia et al. (2020) noted a gradual shift towards more learner-centered approaches, driven by the need to equip students with practical language skills in a globalizing world. Vu and Burns (2014) discussed the challenges and opportunities in this transition, particularly in relation to enhancing communication skills and learner independence.

Several studies have explored various strategies to promote LA in EFL settings. These include collaborative learning techniques (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), the use of technology and digital tools (Lenkaitis, 2020), and curriculum reforms that incorporate learner choice and self-assessment (Reinders et al., 2017). Specific to the Vietnamese context, researchers like Nguyen and Duong (2022) and Yen et al. (2023) have investigated the use of group work, project-based learning, and reflective practices as methods to enhance LA. These studies suggest that such strategies not only support language acquisition but also foster critical thinking and cultural awareness.

The development of communication skills in language learning is a key area of interest. Canale and Swain (1980) and later Hymes (2013) have articulated models of communicative competence that highlight the importance of not just linguistic ability but also sociolinguistic and strategic competencies. In the Vietnamese context, studies by Tran (2020) have shown that interactive and communicative teaching methods can significantly

improve students' speaking and listening skills, which are crucial for real-world language use.

In conclusion, the background establishes a comprehensive understanding of LA in language education, particularly within the Vietnamese context. It highlights the shift from traditional teacher-centered approaches to more learner-centered methodologies that foster autonomy and effective communication skills. This study aims to contribute to this evolving educational paradigm by examining the specific strategies employed by Vietnamese EFL educators to enhance LA, offering insights that can be beneficial beyond the Vietnamese educational setting.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, primarily utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights into the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers for enhancing LA in communication skills. The qualitative approach was chosen for its strength in exploring complex phenomena within their specific contexts, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the pedagogical practices and the perceptions of educators in a naturalistic setting.

To clarify, the research design of this study is underpinned by two primary theoretical frameworks, each contributing a distinct perspective to the investigation of strategies used by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers to enhance LA in communication skills. The first theoretical framework is centered around the construct of LA in language learning. This concept, initially introduced by Holec (1979), has been extensively developed by subsequent scholars such as Benson (2013, 2016) and Little et al. (2002, 2017). According to this framework, LA is a vital component in the effectiveness of language learning. It influences various aspects of the learning process, including the learners' motivation, their engagement in the learning activities, and ultimately, their language proficiency. This framework forms the basis for examining how teachers' strategies can foster an environment where learners are encouraged and enabled to take charge of their learning, thereby enhancing their language skills.

The second theoretical framework is the sociocultural theory (ST) as proposed by Vygotsky (1978). This theory places a strong emphasis on the social context of learning and the integral role of interaction in cognitive development. From this perspective, learning is seen as a socially mediated process, where knowledge is constructed through interactions with others. This sociocultural standpoint is especially relevant in the context of learning communication skills in a language setting. It highlights the significance of social interaction and collaborative learning processes, which are key in developing communicative competence. In the context of this study, the strategies employed by teachers are examined not only in terms of how they promote LA but also in relation to how they facilitate the development of social and communicative skills among learners. This dual focus aligns with the ST's emphasis on the interactive and communal aspects of learning.

Participants

The participants in this study comprised nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, selected from two distinct educational institutions in Vietnam. This diverse group was intentionally chosen to encompass a wide range of teaching experiences, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the strategies employed across different stages of teaching careers. The participants were categorized into three distinct cohorts based on their years of experience in teaching: three novice teachers (with less than five years of experience), three mid-career teachers (with five to fifteen years of experience), and three near-end career teachers (with over fifteen years of experience). This stratification was designed to capture the evolving perspectives and practices across the spectrum of a teaching career, providing insights into how strategies to enhance LA might vary with experience.

In conducting this research, ethical considerations were paramount. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, its scope, and the nature of their involvement. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, ensuring that their identities would be protected and their responses would not be linked to them personally. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, emphasizing that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any adverse consequences. To further safeguard participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of real names in the study's findings.

Additionally, care was taken to ensure that the participants felt comfortable and understood that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' responses. The focus was on their personal experiences and perceptions, and they were encouraged to express themselves openly and honestly. The ethical approach to this research underscores the respect for the participants' autonomy and the commitment to maintaining the integrity of the research process.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its flexibility in allowing participants to express their thoughts in depth while maintaining a structured line of inquiry. Prior to the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted. This involved preliminary interviews with two EFL teachers who were not part of the main study. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the interview questions for clarity, relevance, and flow. Based on the feedback and observations from this pilot phase, necessary revisions were made to the interview questions to ensure they effectively captured the required information.

The revised interview questions included inquiries such as "Can you describe the methods you use to encourage LA in your EFL classes?" and "How do you adapt your teaching strategies to cater to different levels of student independence?" These questions were designed to elicit detailed responses about the teachers' strategies and their perceptions of LA in the EFL context.

Interviews were conducted in locations convenient for the participants, often within their institutions, to create a comfortable and familiar setting for them. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, allowing sufficient time for participants to elaborate on

their responses. The use of Vietnamese was a crucial aspect of the data collection process, as it enabled participants to express themselves more freely and accurately, ensuring a more authentic and nuanced collection of data. For participants who were more comfortable in English, the option to use English was available.

The choice of language was made clear to the participants beforehand, and they were encouraged to choose the language in which they felt most comfortable. This approach ensured that language did not become a barrier to expression and that the data collected was as rich and accurate as possible. In cases where Vietnamese was used, the responses were later translated into English for analysis, with careful attention to maintaining the essence and nuances of the participants' expressions. This multilingual approach to data collection was instrumental in capturing the depth of the participants' experiences and insights.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, a method particularly suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data. This approach allowed for a rich, detailed, yet complex account of the data. Following the guidelines by Braun et al. (2023), the analysis involved a rigorous and systematic process to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives regarding strategies to enhance LA in EFL communication skills.

Initially, the data, including responses translated from Vietnamese, were meticulously transcribed. This transcription phase was critical for ensuring that the nuances and subtleties of the participants' expressions were accurately captured. Following transcription, the data were read and re-read to gain a deep familiarity, which is essential for thematic analysis. This immersion in the data facilitated the initial coding process, where preliminary codes were generated by identifying significant features of the data that were pertinent to the research question.

Subsequently, these codes were sorted into potential themes. This involved collating all the relevant coded data extracts and organizing them under thematic headings. These themes were then reviewed and refined in a recursive process, ensuring they accurately reflected the coded extracts and the entire data set. During this phase, some themes were merged, refined, or separated to best represent the underlying patterns and insights in the data.

The final step in the thematic analysis was defining and naming the themes. This entailed a detailed analysis of each theme, identifying the essence of what each theme captured about the data and determining what aspect of the research question it addressed. The analysis culminated in a coherent and organized narrative, structured around these emergent themes, that provided insightful answers to the research question.

Throughout this process, rigor and reflexivity were maintained to ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis. Efforts were made to stay true to the participants' meanings and perspectives, while also critically examining the role of the researcher in interpreting the data. The thematic analysis thus provided a structured yet flexible approach to exploring the complex data gathered in this study, leading to a nuanced understanding of the strategies used by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers to foster LA in communication skills.

RESULTS

Collaborative Learning as a Strategy for Enhancing LA

One significant finding of this study was the widespread use of collaborative learning as a strategy to enhance LA in communication skills among Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers. This approach was mentioned by a majority of the participants across all experience levels: two of the three novice teachers, all three mid-career teachers, and two of the near-end career teachers.

A novice teacher, Minh (pseudonym), described using group discussions and peer feedback sessions in her classes. She noted, *“In group discussions, students seem more willing to express their ideas. They learn not just from me but from each other, which helps them become more independent in thinking and communicating.”* Minh’s observation aligns with the construct of LA, suggesting that such collaborative settings encourage students to take more responsibility for their learning. It also resonates with ST, where learning is seen as a social activity, and peer interactions play a crucial role in cognitive development.

Linh, a mid-career teacher, shared her experience of integrating project-based activities that required students to work in teams. *“When they work on projects together, they have to communicate, negotiate, and make decisions. It pushes them to use English in real-life contexts,”* she explained. Linh’s approach demonstrates an application of the LA framework, as it empowers students to manage their own learning processes within a collaborative environment. From the sociocultural perspective, this strategy leverages social interaction as a tool for language development, facilitating the practical use of language skills in a communal setting.

Finally, a near-end career teacher, Phuong, highlighted the evolution of her teaching style over the years. *“Earlier, I focused more on lecturing. Now, I see the value in students collaborating. They learn to rely on themselves and each other, not just the teacher,”* she reflected. Phuong’s transition to a more collaborative approach underscores the principles of LA, as it shifts the focus from teacher-led instruction to learner-led exploration. In line with ST, it suggests that the social context of learning, particularly in later stages of a teaching career, becomes increasingly important for cognitive and linguistic development.

Integration of Technology to Promote LA

Another key finding from the study was the integration of technology as a strategy to promote LA in communication skills. This strategy was notably prevalent among participants, with all three novice teachers, two of the mid-career teachers, and one of the near-end career teachers emphasizing its importance.

A novice teacher, Anh, mentioned, *“I use language learning apps and online forums in my teaching. It encourages students to engage with English outside the classroom and take control of their learning.”* This approach reflects the principles of LA, as it allows students to extend their learning beyond the traditional classroom environment and manage their own progress. Anh’s use of technology also aligns with ST, as online forums create a virtual space for social interaction and collaborative learning.

One of the mid-career teachers, Bao, explained how he uses social media platforms for class assignments. *"Students create videos or blog posts in English. They learn by doing and receive feedback from peers globally,"* he stated. Bao's method not only fosters autonomy by encouraging students to create and reflect on their own language use but also embodies the concept of the social nature of learning, as students engage with a wider, international online community.

The near-end career teacher, Lan, who had recently started integrating technology, observed, *"Initially, I was hesitant about technology. But I have seen how it motivates students to explore language on their own."* Lan's transition reflects a growing recognition of the role technology can play in supporting autonomous learning, resonating with the LA framework. Additionally, her observation supports ST, suggesting that technology can create diverse social contexts for language development and interaction.

Reflective Practices to Foster LA

The third significant finding from this study was the emphasis on reflective practices as a strategy to foster LA, particularly in communication skills. This strategy was highlighted by all three groups of teachers: two novice teachers, all three mid-career teachers, and two near-end career teachers specifically mentioned its importance.

One of the novice teachers, Trang, shared her use of reflective journals. *"I ask my students to write weekly journals reflecting on their learning experiences and challenges. It helps them become more aware of their learning processes and take responsibility for their improvement,"* she explained. Trang's strategy is in line with the LA framework, as it encourages students to self-assess and take control of their learning journey. From the sociocultural perspective, such reflective practices also facilitate internalization of learning experiences, as students articulate and analyze their interactions and experiences in the language.

A mid-career teacher, Hoang, described incorporating peer reviews and self-assessment in his classes. *"I find that when students evaluate their own and their peers' work, they develop a deeper understanding of their strengths and areas for growth,"* Hoang remarked. This method aligns with the principles of LA by empowering students to self-regulate and critique their language use. Additionally, it reflects ST, as peer reviews create a social context for learners to engage in reflective thinking and collaborative evaluation.

Finally, a near-end career teacher, Tuan, emphasized the role of teacher-led reflective discussions. *"In our discussions, I prompt students to think about how they have used English in different settings and what they have learned from those experiences,"* Tuan said. His approach fosters LA by guiding students to reflect on their learning experiences critically. In line with ST, it also exemplifies how social interaction, in this case, teacher-student dialogues, can be instrumental in developing cognitive and communicative competencies.

Personalized Learning Approaches to Enhance Autonomy

The study also uncovered the use of personalized learning approaches as a strategy to enhance LA, particularly in the realm of communication skills. This approach was

referenced by participants across the experience spectrum: two novice teachers, two mid-career teachers, and all three near-end career teachers highlighted its effectiveness.

A novice teacher, Minh, described her approach to tailoring lessons to individual student needs. *"I try to understand each student's interests and language goals. This helps me create activities that are more engaging and relevant for them, which in turn fosters their autonomy in learning,"* she said. Minh's strategy aligns with the LA framework by recognizing and addressing individual learner differences, thereby encouraging students to take a more active role in their learning. It also resonates with ST, as personalized learning considers the social and cultural backgrounds of students, facilitating more meaningful and contextualized language interactions.

A mid-career teacher, Hoang, emphasized the role of choice in his teaching. *"I offer students options in assignments and projects. This choice gives them a sense of control and ownership over their learning, which is crucial for autonomy,"* he explained. Hoang's method of providing choice is a direct application of the principles of LA, fostering a sense of independence and self-direction in students. From the sociocultural perspective, offering choices also facilitates engagement in social learning activities that are more aligned with the students' interests and contexts.

Among the near-end career teachers, Lan highlighted her evolving teaching style. *"Over the years, I have learned to listen more to my students and adapt my teaching accordingly. I focus on what they need and how they learn best,"* she reflected. Lan's adaptive teaching style demonstrates an understanding of LA as a dynamic and individualized process. In line with ST, it also shows an appreciation of the importance of the learner's social and cultural context in shaping their learning experiences.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of literature on strategies for enhancing LA in EFL contexts, particularly within the Vietnamese educational setting. While aligning with several aspects of previous research, the current study also presents distinct contributions through its exploration of strategies across different career stages of teachers and its incorporation of theoretical frameworks.

Previous studies have consistently emphasized the importance of collaborative learning in fostering LA (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The current study's findings reinforce this perspective, with participants across all experience levels highlighting the use of collaborative learning. However, the unique contribution of this study lies in how these strategies are adapted and perceived differently by teachers at various stages of their careers. For instance, the transition from a lecture-based approach to a collaborative one, as noted by the near-end career teacher Phuong, provides new insights into how teaching styles evolve over time in the context of promoting LA.

The integration of technology as a strategy to enhance LA aligns with the growing body of research advocating for digital tools in language learning (Lenkaitis, 2020). The current study extends this research by illustrating how teachers at different career stages incorporate technology, from the enthusiastic adoption by novice teachers to the cautious acceptance by more experienced educators. This nuanced understanding of technology

adoption adds depth to the existing literature, highlighting the dynamic nature of teaching practices in the digital age.

Reflective practices have been recognized as effective in promoting LA (Şener & Mede, 2023). The current study corroborates these findings, with teachers across different career stages employing various reflective methods. The study's unique contribution lies in its detailed exploration of how these practices are implemented and valued differently depending on the teacher's experience. For example, the novice teacher's use of reflective journals offers a fresh perspective on how newer teachers are incorporating reflective practices into their teaching repertoire.

The emphasis on personalized learning approaches found in this study echoes previous research that highlights the importance of addressing individual learner differences (Basri, 2023). The current study expands on this by showing how teachers at different stages of their careers implement personalization strategies. The insights from experienced teachers, who have shifted their teaching styles over the years to become more learner-centered, provide valuable information on the practicalities and challenges of adopting personalized learning approaches.

In conclusion, while the findings of this study align with several aspects of existing research, they also provide novel insights into how strategies for enhancing LA are implemented and evolve over the course of a teacher's career. The incorporation of the theoretical frameworks of LA and ST further enriches the understanding of these strategies, offering a comprehensive view of how they function in the specific context of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers. This study, therefore, makes a significant contribution to the field by providing a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the strategies used to foster LA in communication skills.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers to enhance LA in communication skills. Positioned within the evolving landscape of language education in Vietnam, the research was underpinned by the theoretical frameworks of LA and ST. A qualitative approach was adopted, utilizing semi-structured interviews with nine EFL teachers from two institutions, representing a range of teaching experiences – novice, mid-career, and near-end career. The data collection process involved detailed interviews conducted in either Vietnamese or English, based on participant preference, to ensure comfort and authenticity in responses. These interviews were then meticulously transcribed, translated where necessary, and analyzed through thematic analysis. This approach allowed for the emergence of rich, nuanced insights into the pedagogical strategies of the teachers.

The study's findings revealed several key strategies for fostering LA: collaborative learning, the integration of technology, reflective practices, and personalized learning approaches. These strategies were found to be prevalent across different stages of teaching careers, each offering unique insights into how LA can be promoted in the EFL context. The implications of these findings are manifold. Firstly, the study underscores the importance of collaborative learning in developing autonomous learners, suggesting that educational

institutions should foster environments that encourage group interactions and peer learning. Secondly, the integration of technology was highlighted as a vital tool in modern language education, indicating the need for teachers to be trained and supported in the use of digital resources. Thirdly, the use of reflective practices pointed to the benefit of encouraging students to engage in self-assessment and reflection, promoting deeper learning and autonomy. Lastly, the emphasis on personalized learning approaches suggests a shift towards more student-centered teaching, where understanding individual student needs and preferences is crucial. In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of how LA in communication skills can be enhanced in the Vietnamese EFL context. By highlighting the effective strategies employed by teachers at various career stages and contextualizing them within the frameworks of LA and ST, this research provides valuable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in EFL settings. It emphasizes the need for adaptable, context-sensitive approaches in language teaching, aimed at empowering learners to become more independent, engaged, and proficient in their language acquisition journey.

The present study, while providing valuable insights into the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers for enhancing LA, is not without its limitations. First, the sample size of nine teachers, though diverse in terms of teaching experience, is relatively small and confined to just two educational institutions in Vietnam. This limitation restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of EFL teachers. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data through semi-structured interviews, while rich in qualitative detail, may be subject to personal biases and may not fully capture the complexity of classroom dynamics and student responses to the strategies employed. Additionally, the study's focus on only Vietnamese tertiary education limits its applicability to other educational contexts or cultures, which may have different pedagogical norms and challenges. Given these limitations, further research is recommended to expand the scope and depth of understanding in this area. Future studies could involve a larger and more varied sample of teachers from different regions and types of institutions, which would enhance the generalizability of the findings. There is also a need for longitudinal studies that track the implementation and outcomes of different autonomy-enhancing strategies over time, offering a more dynamic view of how these strategies impact LA and language proficiency. Additionally, incorporating student perspectives and objective measures of student learning outcomes would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of these strategies. Research in different cultural and educational settings would also be valuable, as it would shed light on how cultural and contextual factors influence the promotion of LA in EFL learning. Finally, exploring the impact of technology and digital advancements on LA in language learning could provide insights into how emerging tools and platforms can be effectively integrated into language education.

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