

# EFL High School Teachers' Beliefs and Practices of Learner Autonomy

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## Abstract

This paper aimed to investigate the beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy (LA) among the Vietnamese EFL teachers at high schools. Data were collected from the survey and the interviews. A total of 136 EFL teachers from high schools across Vietnam completed the questionnaires, and 10 of them participated in the interviews later. The results showed that the participants expressed positivity towards LA and preferred socio-cultural and psychological modes of LA, but some of them did not have sufficient knowledge of LA. The teachers perceived that their students did not possess a reasonable level of LA. Those teachers made efforts to promote LA in the English classes and found it challenging because of learners, teachers, family, and institutional factors when implementing LA. The implications are then put forward for the improvement of LA among high school students at three different levels of the individual teacher, management, and the decision-making process.

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## 1 Introduction

The past four decades has marked an increasing attention to learner autonomy (LA) in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Regarded as an educational goal (Dang, 2010; Little, 2007;

Raya & Vieira, 2015; Teng, 2019;), LA is the paramount essential out of eight essentials for successful language learning (Farrell & Jacobs, 2010). Notably, promoting LA becomes one of the key competences in the 21st century (OCED, 2005) and pedagogically facilitates lifelong learning (Dam, 2012).

LA has been conceptualized in numerous ways. The most cited definition is that of Holec (1981), who defined LA as an “ability to take charge of one’s own learning...to have and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning” (p. 3). Accordingly, an autonomous language learner is able to determine the objectives, define the contents and progressions, select methodological techniques to be adopted, monitor the procedures of acquisition (rhythm, time, place, etc.), and evaluate what has been required (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Drawn from this seminal definition, an increasing number of publications have been dedicated to LA (e.g., Benson, 2006, 2013; Chong & Reinders, 2022; Dam, 1995; Hamilton, 2013; Lai, 2017; Lamb & Reinders, 2008; Little, 1991; Little, Dam, & Legenhausen, 2017; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Teng, 2019). Such volumes highlight different definitions of LA in diverse contexts, characteristics of autonomous learners, strategies to foster LA, the roles of the teachers in promoting LA, challenges for autonomous learning, and relationships between LA and other variables such as language proficiency, age, and motivation.

LA has also been conceptualized from different perspectives: psychological, technical, political (Benson, 1997), and sociocultural (Oxford, 2003). The psychological perspective values learners’ attributes and stresses that LA is a construct of capacity. An autonomous learner develops a capacity for “detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” (Little, 2009, p. 223). This person may have some qualities such as willingness to take on more learning responsibilities (Dam, 1995; Le, 2013; Littlewood, 1996; Sinclair, 2000a), motivation (Swatevacharkul, 2009; Ushioda, 2011a, 2011b, 2014), and metacognitive capacities (Cotteral, 2009; Le, 2013; Sinclair, 2000a, 2000b; Wenden, 1991). The technical perspective highlights the value of situational aspects or the physical settings of language education. Those situations or learning environments such as self-access centers, classrooms, home settings, or travel environments can be seen as the determining factor that influences students’ activities. In that sense, resource-rich environments enable students to decide on what, when, and how to reach their goals (Oxford, 2003), enhance their motivation, and give them more control to employ appropriate learning strategies (Dang, 2012). Research on the basis of this perspective prepares and organises learning activities as well as supports students technically, and provides learning consultancy (Bui, 2019). The political critical perspective focuses on power, access, and ideology. Autonomous learners are supposed to have power to control their learning processes, have choices in learning content, and have freedom from oppressiveness in these contexts (Oxford, 2003). Studies following this perspective provide learners with opportunities to decide and select in their learning process. The socio-cultural perspective is of interest in interaction and social engagement towards the learners’ development of LA, which is called a “socially situated” view (Smith & Ushioda, 2009, p. 244). As a result, an autonomous learner is a responsible social person, a good cooperater, and a constructive problem solver. Although LA is associated with individual learners, socio-cultural context and collaboration with others remain important in not only education but also human lives (Palfreyman, 2003). The studies adopting this perspective are concerned about contextual choices, dialogic negotiations, interactive activities, and critical reflection to foster LA (Bui, 2019; Little, 2009; Sinclair, 2009). Although scholars have not arrived at a complete agreement on a consistent definition of LA, thirteen aspects of LA synthesized by Sinclair (2000b) have gained widespread acceptance in English language teaching (ELT). According to Sinclair (2000b), LA had certain levels and was identified as learner’s capacity and responsibility which might be interpreted differently by different cultures and contexts.

These academic understandings have been widely acknowledged in the field of LA. However, it is nearly impossible to imply that EFL teachers, especially those at high schools, have ever touched the bulk of research on LA and that they have analogous knowledge of the concept. EFL high school teachers’ beliefs and practices of LA have remained a largely under-theorized and under-explored

area. More importantly, because of the superior role of teachers in Vietnam, a more thorough examination of their beliefs about LA must be conducted before any policies or works can be implemented (Bui, 2019). Additionally, “significantly influenc[ing] the ways in which teachers interpret and engage with the problems of practice” (Skott, 2014, p. 19), those beliefs “can powerfully shape both what teachers do; consequently, the learning opportunities learners receive” (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012, p. 6). As a matter of fact, EFL teachers' beliefs about the concept of LA, their students' level of LA, and the related issues will influence the ways and extent to which they promote LA in language classrooms (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). High school education, moreover, is an important stage in foreign language learning and teaching (Sun & Dang, 2020).

Internationalisation and globalisation have facilitated the expansion of English language teaching and learning in Vietnam. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has given priority to developing English language proficiency so that young generations are better-prepared for the globally competitive labor market. Accordingly, English has become the most important foreign language and served as one part of the curriculum from grade 3 to grade 12. High school students are expected to achieve level 3 of English proficiency in the Vietnamese version of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which is equivalent to level B1 in CEFR (MOET, 2014). Therefore, this study is conducted to investigate how EFL teachers at Vietnamese high schools perceive and implement LA in their teaching contexts, as a way to inform the relevant stakeholders.

## 2 Literature review

Vietnamese high school system is structured into lower secondary (grade 6 to 9) and upper secondary levels (grade 10 to 12). The upper secondary levels for student from 16 to 18 years old are also referred to as high school levels in this research. English is taught as a foreign language from lower secondary levels to high school levels, and teachers play an important role in these language classrooms. The typical language classroom follows a teacher-centered approach in which teachers provide knowledge and learners act in accordance with teachers' instructions (Ho & Binh, 2014).

In recent years, with the adoption of Communicative Language Teaching method in the new language teaching curriculum, there has been a strong propaganda to learner-centered approach in language education where learners are expected to be more active in their own learning process (Lam, 2018). However, with the long-lasting influence of the Confucianism ideology in Vietnamese culture, teachers remain the source of knowledge and the models of good behaviours (Bui, 2019). At times in the classroom, they may interchangeably act as an instructor, a facilitator, an advisor, or a supervisor. However, for most of the time, teachers seem to be more concerned with the role of a knowledge transmitter. In addition, because of the power distance, Vietnamese students are often reluctant to raise questions or challenge their teachers in public (Bui, 2019). As a result, the scenarios of most high school English classrooms are teacher-led instruction in which language activities are initiated and primarily guided by teachers. In that context, LA is faintly shown and sometimes underrepresented.

There has been vast research on teachers' beliefs and practices with regard to LA for the past 30 years, since LA became “an established concept in language education” (Borg, 2016, p. xi). In recent years, numerous publications have focused on teachers' beliefs towards LA (e.g., Lengkanawati, 2017; Yasmini & Sohail, 2018), but many more have explored both teachers' perspectives and their practices toward LA (e.g., Ahmadianzadeh, Seifoori, & Tamjid, 2018; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Doğan & Mirici, 2017; Mansooji, Ghaleshahzari, & Javid, 2022; Nakata, 2011; L. Nguyen, 2016).

Since Borg and Al-Busadi's (2012) study, numerous studies have adopted their questionnaire to investigate teachers' perceptions of LA and their implementation of LA activities. These works were collected in an edited book by Barnad and Li (2016) on teachers' beliefs and practices on LA. It is significant because the studies were conducted in a range of contexts in various Asian countries where teachers seemed to play a more dominant role and be responsible for the learning process in the classroom (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). These duplication studies supported and confirmed

the findings of Borg and Al-Busadi (2012).

Other studies in more recent years, whether they focused on only teachers' beliefs or both teachers' beliefs and practices, if they used survey questionnaires as their instrument for data collection, were mostly based on Borg and Al-Busadi's (2012) generated one. Most significantly, Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) replicated the original research with 359 university lecturers in Saudi Arabia and found out that the notion of LA was associated with students' independence and control in the completion of classroom tasks. These teachers believed that their ultimate goal in teaching was to promote LA, which they tried to achieve in their daily teaching practice. However, most of these teachers were doubtful of the feasibility of promoting LA and placed the responsibility for external factors such as societal or curricular factors. More importantly, they specified learner factors, namely lack of motivation, lack of independence in the learning process, and low English proficiency level, as the main barriers to their LA promotion. The findings of this research, which used a slightly modified survey questionnaire by Borg and Al-Busadi (2012) with a much bigger sample of participants and in another context, provided important insights into the notion of LA and generally reaffirmed some main findings of the original one.

Recent literature on teachers' beliefs and practices on LA has revealed salient themes. First, most studies focus on either teachers' perceptions on LA or both teachers' perceptions and their actual implementation of LA activities in class using the robust questionnaire developed by Borg and Al-Busadi (2012). These studies have produced firm, reliable, and concurring findings. Second, in the wider context of foreign language teaching in other countries in the world generally and in Asian contexts particularly, most studies took university lecturers as their main participants, paying less attention to high school teachers. This imbalanced focus may be related to the timid nature of Asian learners and the teachers' control over classroom interaction in lower grades at high schools. Finally, similar to the abovementioned theme, in the Vietnamese context, the literature has indicated a lack of research on high school teachers' beliefs and practices on LA. Grounded in the literature review and three themes above, this study is expected to fill the gaps and to answer the following research questions:

- (1) *How do EFL teachers at high schools perceive learner autonomy?*
- (2) *How do they perceive their students' level of learner autonomy?*
- (3) *How do they promote learner autonomy in their context?*
  - (3.1) *Do they promote learner autonomy?*
  - (3.2) *What do they do to promote learner autonomy?*
  - (3.3) *Which challenges do they face when promoting learner autonomy?*

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Participants

A total of 136 teachers of English from high schools across Vietnam agreed to participate in the study and completed the questionnaire, 10 of whom were invited for the interview phase upon their consent. Table 1 presents the background information of the survey participants

**Table 1. Background information of the survey participants**

Gender		Years of experience						Highest qualifications		
Male	Female	0-4	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25+	M	B	C
10.2	89.8	12.5	17	34	23.5	11	2	19.8	79.4	0.8

Note: M: Master's Degree; B: Bachelor's Degree, C: Certificate

#### 3.2 Instruments

Two instruments were employed in this study: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

Participants were surveyed via an adapted version of the questionnaire by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). The original questionnaire had five sections (i.e., LA; desirability and feasibility of LA; your learners and your teaching; about yourself; and further participation). However, due to this study's objectives, sections Two and Five were not included. Accordingly, this study employed the whole first section without any changes. Section Three was used with minor word changes (i.e., *at SCU into your school*). In section Four, question six regarding nationality and question eight about the language center were excluded because of their inappropriateness in this research.

The questionnaire was divided into three main parts, each of which was designed for different purposes. In the first part, respondents were asked to decide their level of agreement with each of the 37 statements about their beliefs about LA. All the items were designed on the basis of the five-point Likert scale. The participants would choose one of the following responses that best reflected their level of agreement: 1= *Strongly disagree*; 2= *Disagree*; 3= *Neutral*; 4= *Agree*; 5= *Strongly agree*. The second section comprises two open-ended questions, which offered the participants the opportunity to give more information about their work at their school. Finally, the participants gave their background information in the third part.

Individual semi-structured interviews aimed at eliciting more information about their beliefs about LA in their language teaching and learning classes, key characteristics of an autonomous language learner, effects of LA on a language learner's success, their perceived level of LA, and challenges in promoting LA. The interview questions were also from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) but question Five was extracted because this study did not investigate desirability and feasibility of LA.

After the questionnaire and interview questions were translated from English using the back-translation method and experienced English language translators (see more at Sousa & Rojjanasrirat, 2011), the final questionnaires delivered to the participants were presented in English and Vietnamese so that they could fully understand the items (see *Appendix 1* for the questionnaire). Also, ten interviews, entirely in Vietnamese, were held online or via phone due to geographical distance (see *Appendix 2* for interview questions).

### 3.3 Data collection

Once all the instruments were ready for data collection, the survey questionnaires were delivered online through the community of high-school teachers on social networking sites such as Zalo (a Vietnamese network), Facebook, and emails and the sample was selected on the basis of snowball sampling. All of the participants were notified that their responses would be completely confidential and only used for research purposes. As a result, 136 EFL teachers at high schools submitted the questionnaire to the researchers.

In the second phase, after the interview questions were piloted and revised, 10 respondents of survey questionnaire who agreed to participate in the semi-structured interviews were asked some questions in Vietnamese. The participants were given minimal guidance in their responses, with clarification questions to confirm the intended meaning of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

### 3.4 Data analysis

A convergent parallel analysis design was adopted (see more at Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Specifically, the quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and analyzed separately before the results were combined for explanations and discussions of the findings.

The data from the questionnaire were analyzed statistically using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS; Version 24) to calculate descriptive statistics based on frequencies and percentages and to examine inferential statistics using tests such as Friedman tests due to the non-normally-distributed data (see more at Field, 2018). The initial analysis indicated a high level of reliability for section One with 37 items (Cronbach's alpha  $\alpha = 0.912$ ). This means the 37-item survey in section 1 was a reliable tool.

Interview data were transcribed in Vietnamese by one researcher, and double-checked for accuracy by three other ELT experts. The data were then categorized into different themes and the interviewed teachers were labeled from T1 to T10 to ensure their anonymity and to identify the data sets. Specifically, the interview data were analyzed into three following main significant themes: (1) Beliefs about LA; (2) Perceived level of students' LA; and (3) Challenges in promoting LA.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Beliefs about learner autonomy

LA, in Vietnamese EFL high school teachers' notions, was characterised as students' ability to take charge of their own learning with teachers' facilitation. They emphasized the importance of teachers in promoting LA as well as their students' self-study and self-discipline.

The findings revealed that the teachers supported the socio-cultural perspective the most ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $Sd = 0.69$ ). This was illustrated by the following items in the questionnaire:

- LA is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.
- LA is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.
- Co-operative group work activities support the development of LA.

The psychological perspective was the second most supported among the four ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $Sd = 0.59$ ), followed by the political perspective ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $Sd = 0.63$ ) and the technical perspective ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $Sd = 0.62$ ). The items of each perspective were noted in *Appendix 1*. Our inferential statistics also showed that teachers' understandings tended to be more associated with the socio-cultural perspective and the psychological perspective than with the political perspective and the technical perspective ( $\chi^2 = 86.3$ ;  $df = 3$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). This means they highlighted the roles of social interaction, co-operative learning, and learners' attributes in fostering LA more than those of power, access, and physical settings.

According to the high level of agreement, the following elements were commonly acknowledged in the teachers' beliefs about LA (see Table 2).

**Table 2. EFL teachers' beliefs about LA**

Statements	M	Sd	SD & D (%)	N (%)	A & SA (%)
Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner.	4.25	0.77	2.9	4.4	92.7
Learner-centered classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy.	4.14	0.85	5.8	3.7	90.5
Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.	4.14	0.84	4.4	8.8	86.8
Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.	4.09	0.83	5.1	8.1	86.8
Learner autonomy can be achieved by learners of all cultural backgrounds.	4.08	0.89	5.8	8.8	85.3
Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.	4.04	0.82	4.4	9.6	86.0
It is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults.	4.04	0.92	8.1	9.6	82.3

Learner autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	4.03	0.90	5.8	12.5	81.7
The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy.	3.99	0.74	3.7	11.7	84.6
Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.	3.99	0.89	7.3	11.1	81.6
Independent study wherever possible is an activity which develops learner autonomy.	3.96	0.87	7.3	11.0	81.7
Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy.	3.94	0.81	5.2	9.6	85.2
To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	3.93	0.77	5.1	9.6	85.3
Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.	3.92	0.87	6.6	13.2	80.2

Note: *M* = Means; *Sd* = Standard deviation; *SD* = strongly disagree; *D* = disagree; *A* = agree; *SA* = strongly agree

Most interviewees ( $n = 9$ ) agreed that LA is students' capacity to regulate their own learning and that LA is relevant to the learner-centered approach, but teachers still play an important role in promoting LA. To illustrate, T1 defined LA as "... students' capacity to actively responsible for their learning process and learn English whenever possible. I think LA is like learner-centeredness, and the teacher facilitates that process...". Only one interviewed teacher (T3) described LA as "a process to play down the teachers' role in the learning process because the students need to grow up and be independent from the teachers sooner or later". This view of LA echoed the definition of LA with regard to teachers' roles proposed by Dickinson (1987) and the description of the language education process by Farrell and Jacobs (2010).

The interviewed teachers delineated autonomous learners as those who are self-disciplined (e.g., T2, T5, T9), motivated (e.g., T1, T2, T6), and hard-working (e.g., T4, T8, T9). Some other concepts that recurred in the teachers' responses included self-study (e.g., T1, T5, T7), learning objectives (T2, T5, T10), and learning strategies (T2, T3, T5, T7). The observable behaviours, supported by teachers if necessary, included doing more tasks by themselves (e.g., T1, T4, T7, T10), searching for knowledge (e.g., T2, T3, T6, T7), looking for reference materials (e.g., T1, T5, T6, T9), preparing lessons (e.g., T4, T8, T10), or staying focused on studies (e.g., T2, T5, T7). All of the interviewees ( $N = 10$ ) valued the importance of LA and stated the close relationship between LA and the language learning process. To illustrate, T2 shared that:

*The relationship between LA and the language learning process is really close. If a language learner wants to be successful, s/he needs LA. Learning English is not like learning Math or Science, which can be learned from books. There are too many things that books cannot deliver in learning English, so LA is required to facilitate students' English improvement.*

## 4.2 Perceived level of learner autonomy

EFL teachers at high schools expressed diverging viewpoints about whether their students have a reasonable level of LA. These views were grounded in diverse interpretations of the evidence of LA. Our data analysis indicated that more than half of the teachers surveyed (over 55%) disagreed that their students were reasonably autonomous, around 30% were unsure or stayed neutral, and a small percentage (14%) agreed. The teachers were then asked to explain why they thought about the students' level of LA in that way. The responses created 13 categories of evidence of LA. Obviously, the teachers held various beliefs about the evidence of LA, but some certain issues were mentioned more frequently than others. Table 3 lists eight categories that were most noticeable and presents some quotations as examples for each.

**Table 3. Evidence of learner autonomy and evidence of lack of learner autonomy**

Category	Quotations
Activeness ( $n = 7$ )	- "Most students learn when asked and assigned, not at their own will." - "Students actively search for knowledge to complete tasks."
Motivation ( $n = 8$ )	- "Students do not have high motivation."
Independence from teachers ( $n = 9$ )	- "The majority of my students depend on teachers' urge." - "...Teachers still play a central role in the lessons."
Learning objective ( $n = 6$ )	- "They have not identified their objectives yet."
Awareness ( $n = 7$ )	- "Students are not aware of self-study and LA." - "Students have awareness of their studies."
Learning strategies ( $n = 7$ )	- "My students know how to use reference materials, to search for information inside and outside the classroom, to ask teachers for useful sources, to set goals, and to plan their studies to achieve the goals." - "At their young age, they do not know how to learn and self-study..."
Proficiency ( $n = 6$ )	- "Students got low entrance scores, so the level of LA is nearly zero." - "Students have high level of English proficiency, and interests in English. English is their specialized subject."
Diligence ( $n = 7$ )	- "They are not hard working to learn new words." - "Because many students are lazy in learning English."

All the teachers interviewed did not feel that their learners had an acceptable level of autonomy basically because their learners lacked motivation, activeness, awareness, objectives, and learning strategies. They depended too much on teachers, and they were not hard working. One teacher explained her view:

*I must say that I have worked at both public and private schools. The number of autonomous students is very small. Up to 95% of the students still depend too much on teachers...they ignore their studies even at home although I try to inspire them by giving examples....Only a few students, those 5%, complete all tasks, ask for more tasks, need more materials, or need teachers' feedback. (T5)*

Some interviewees ( $n = 3$ ) admitted that many teachers themselves were not competent enough to promote LA. T7 thought that:

*There are not many autonomous students because students are quite lazy. But a more important reason is that teachers do not know how to promote LA. They follow exactly what is in the textbook without creating any other activities and motivating students in different ways....*



### 4.3 Promoting learner autonomy

The teachers were asked whether they gave their students opportunities to develop LA as well as why and how they promoted LA among the students. The majority of the teachers (84.3%) in the survey and all the interviewees agreed that they focused on providing their learners with chances to foster LA. Over 15% were unsure whether they promoted LA or not. Meanwhile, only three teachers (2.2%) surveyed disagreed on this matter. The qualitative responses suggested five broad categories through which the teachers thought that they encouraged autonomous learning (see Table 4).

**Table 4. The teachers' frequently used strategies to develop LA**

Category	Sub-category	Quotations
Encouraging independent study (n = 9)	Project-based learning	"We set up projects and have students run them in a certain period of time (normally one semester)...In that period, there are progress reports from students and regular supervision from teachers..."
	Pair/group work	"I assign topics and design group-work activities for my students to discuss and explore knowledge by themselves..."
	Self-study	"I ask my students to read, and prepare lessons at home with my facilitation..."
Giving control (n = 7)	Peer assessment	"...I assign tasks to them and allow them to discuss with each other and to assess their peers' products."
	Self-assessment	"I assign homework to my students. Then they have chances to self-assess their work, assess their peers' work, and take responsibility for their assessment."
	Chance to choose	"My students can choose topics and content to develop their self and to stimulate their interests..."
Facilitation (n = 7)	Presentation	"In my daily teaching, I often let my students choose the topics for their presentation in front of the class. I found out that they were really interested in the topics."
	Chance to say	"In each lesson, I let my students work in groups and express their own ideas. I can help them if they wish."
	ICT	"Integration of ICT or online classes will help to make students more excited about learning."
Facilitation (n = 7)	How to learn	"My aim is to teach students how to learn or learning skills and problem-solving skills in learning foreign languages. However, when the students face exams, I sometimes force them to follow my materials."
	Facilitative activities	"Normally, I state general problems and requirements. Then, students work on the problems by themselves and clarify them. I will summarize points and correct wrong points."

Motivating ( $n = 9$ )	Motivation	“I tell stories about how Jewish students learn by themselves to talk about benefits of autonomy. I continually use methods to encourage my students to actively prepare lessons at home. I give compliments and gifts to motivate them because they tried and achieved something.”
	Extra-curricular activities ( $n = 4$ )	“...students can do experiments or join English clubs....”
Others	Exam preparation ( $n = 6$ )	“As for 12th grade students, the most important thing is focusing on practicing tests for the best entrance examinations. Teacher will transmit knowledge and provide the students with every material.”
	Homework ( $n = 3$ )	“...I give them homework.”

#### 4.4 Challenges in promoting learner autonomy

EFL high school teachers are, more or less, making efforts to promote LA; however, there still exist several challenges that hinder the development of LA in their teaching contexts. The findings from the questionnaires and face-to-face individual interviews indicated four main challenges in promoting LA related to the learners, the family, the teachers themselves, and the institutional factors.

##### The learners

The participating teachers repeatedly mentioned that the students themselves determined the success or failure of promoting LA. As noted before, students at high schools are under pressure of a heavy workload. “They are busy attending classes, including extra classes. They have little time to further study themselves and find out the suitable and effective learning methods”, T6 said. Hence, their time allocated to learning English is not sufficient. Also, they do not identify their objectives in English learning, as many teachers commented. T3 emphasised that “the biggest obstacle, in my opinion, is the learners who do not define their learning objectives and goals in learning English.” Their goal is to graduate from high school because a high school graduate diploma is equivalent to a passport to entering either the universities or the labor force in Vietnam. For many students, learning English, which is temporarily unnecessary, aims to pass all English exams and to be qualified for graduation. Another issue was that the students seemingly lack motivation to learn English mainly because they have not been aware of the importance of English to their future, as reported by a large number of teachers, and partially because some students made efforts to learn English but they failed several times. Moreover, the teachers complain about the students’ laziness and their lack of systematic knowledge and skills of English at primary and secondary schools, so most of them are EFL beginners at high schools. It is believed that the issues aforementioned are closely related. They, in the teachers’ opinion, are impeding the students’ development of LA and the teachers’ promotion of LA.

##### The family

A number of teachers were concerned about the role of family in contributing to promoting LA. They maintained that the family influenced their children’s LA. At home, the students remain relatively dependent on their parents, who believe their children need help at all times. Accordingly, students do not have many opportunities to practise LA. Besides, the parents, particularly in disadvantaged areas, pay almost no attention to their children’s studies, so probably no advice about and no guide on how to become autonomous in learning are provided when necessary, and those

parents may have no ideas about LA. In some families with difficult socio-economic conditions, the students' potential for developing LA is not fully unlocked. One teacher told a story of a family in her neighborhood,

*....that family with good conditions tries their best to invest time and money in their daughter so that she will be aware of and become autonomous in her learning. In fact, she is. Then, she becomes the first in our neighborhood to enter the best gifted school and succeed in learning English. Gradually, she grows independent from her family and teachers. So, I mean, family conditions are very important to the promotion of LA.... (T1)*

### **The teachers**

The literature postulates that the teachers perform a prominent role in effectively enhancing LA (e.g., Ludwig, & Tassinari, 2023). Indeed, a high proportion of teachers surveyed (84.6%) and all of the interviewees concurred that the role of teachers is vital in supporting LA ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ). However, many of them ( $n = 6$ ) admitted that it was the teachers that negatively influence the promotion of LA. First, although the teachers believed they were autonomous in their own learning, they did not have a comprehensive overview of LA. Specifically, they had not been trained about LA or even heard of it before (see more at Mai & Pham, 2019). Surprisingly, despite being an EFL teacher, one interviewee said, "Learner autonomy? Well, I have neither heard of this word before or looked it up in the dictionary, so I do not know what it is" (T8). One teacher interviewed contended that:

*I was not familiar with this term [LA]. I had one training related to it but due to the limited time, I did not learn much about it. Now, when being asked, I realize that I tried to apply some activities in my class, but I do not fully understand LA. (T5)*

This view was shared by many others. Second, another concern was teaching competence. Many teachers in our study ( $n = 8$ ) agreed that some of the colleagues themselves were not proficient in teaching and/or in English so they could not accommodate their students' proficiency betterment. Additionally, other colleagues merely covered what is required by the curriculum so that their students could do well in exams. Those teachers lacked creativity as well as flexibility and still followed traditional teaching methods, focusing mainly on grammar, vocabulary, and translation. Arguably, those teaching practices lead to students' decrease in motivation and a lack of activities to promote LA.

### **The institutional factors**

Some institutional aspects challenge the promotion of LA according to all interviewees ( $N = 10$ ) and more than three quarters of the open-ended responses in the surveys. Firstly, large-sized classes with uneven levels have a negative impact on practising and promoting LA in the context of high schools, especially the public ones. The mixed ability classes are really crowded for ELT, which was concurred by most teachers interviewed and many qualitative responses in the questionnaire. Specifically, "the students' levels are uneven, which places both low achievers and good students under pressure", T2 shared. The number of students in a class varies from 40 to 60, preventing teachers from managing classes and carrying out student-centered activities such as group work, presentations, and discussions. A teacher in a rural area (T7) revealed a reality at her school, saying that "each of my classes has around 42-45 students. It is too crowded for students to work in groups. Even group division takes time, nearly one lesson." Another one strongly believed that "such large-sized classes make it impossible to follow communicative approaches in ELT" (T10). As a result, the autonomy-promoting activities in class probably do not have their potential effects.

Secondly, the evidence from the interviews and the surveys demonstrates that there is an inadequacy of teaching conditions for English language education at high schools. Teaching materials available include textbooks, boards, chalk, and radios. Notably, even though the education authorities and the school leader boards are endeavouring to improve school facilities and teaching conditions for the betterment of language teaching and learning, the number of high schools

equipped with projectors, large-screen TVs, computers, and specialised ELT rooms is really limited. A teacher reflected that:

*At my school, the leaders equipped one room for teaching English with a projector and computers. However, many teachers want to use that room for their lesson at the same time, so sometimes we do not know how to deal with it.....The Internet and wifi are not allowed at my school because the leaders think students may abuse the Internet during lessons, so when I want to apply ICT in my lessons or show something interesting, I have to turn on my own 3G package. There has not been any financial support for this until now because it depends on whether many teachers use 3G or not. (T1)*

Thirdly, the heavy syllabus limited efforts to foster LA at schools in rural, remote, and/or mountainous areas. The teachers reported that the current program contains some parts that are too difficult for their students although they can adapt them for most levels in class. Consequently, a 45-minute lesson appears not to cover all contents required in most cases, and the teachers sometimes use optional lessons of the week to finish the rest and to provide their students with more exercises for practises. They tried their best not to miss any points in entrance examinations. One teacher (T9) exemplified the point, “the students’ capacity of the students in rural areas is 20 kilograms, but the syllabus requires them to carry 50 kilograms, so they, again, break up with English, and I think they are psychologically struggling.” Such a testing-oriented program with little flexibility precluded teachers from employing engaging teaching methods and limited LA-promoting techniques.

Fourthly, many EFL teachers shared the viewpoint that students’ development of LA was remarkably influenced by the leaders’ conceptions of language teaching and learning. The question was whether and to what extent these authorities are well informed about LA and how they value teachers’ autonomy-promoting activities. Unfortunately, most interviewed teachers did not accept the fact that they had worked in contexts where LA was considered an important issue to develop for learners. One interviewee (T5) complained, “I have fun games for students in class, but the leaders do not think that it is serious learning”. Another one confirmed that:

*I work at a public school and developing LA at public schools remains at an average level. Specifically, as for English, how to promote LA and how to develop communicative competences are truly teachers’ struggling issues because my leaders prefer high results in the high school graduation exams. As a result, our focus is not autonomy-supportive activities but grammar and vocabulary for exams. (T8)*

## 5 Discussion

This study ought to provide insights into EFL high school teachers’ beliefs and their practices regarding LA. The teachers acknowledged the importance of LA to successful language learning and valued the contribution of teachers to fostering LA. Autonomous learners are motivated, confident, and able to make choices about how they learn as well as evaluate their own learning. They learn how to learn, and study independently wherever and whenever possible. Teachers understood that learners of different ages and/or from diverse cultural contexts could develop autonomous learning. LA can be promoted through regular opportunities for students’ completion of tasks alone or their co-operative group work, especially in learner-centered classrooms. The characteristics of autonomous learners the teachers described were mostly plausible, whereas in many responses, those were not justifiable. For example, doing homework was mentioned as evidence of LA, but obviously, it was not (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). Thus, there are some issues regarding LA that remain under-examined or even unknown by teachers. This point is reinforced by the interviews with teachers who had not felt familiar with the concept of LA before. Some of them understood nothing about it or even did not know the meaning of LA in the dictionary. The question here is how they can promote LA if they are that ill-informed (Balçıkınlı, 2010; Little, 1995). The teachers felt that their students did not have an adequate level of LA due to their lack of motivation, strategies, objectives, proficiency, hard work, and so on. The teachers maintained that they presented their students with chances to develop LA such as giving them self-control, stimulating independent work, facilitating their studies, motivating them, and some others. However, some teachers were

uncertain of their students' level of LA and whether they implemented LA-promoting activities in class. Besides, while the relationship between LA and the activities mentioned was persuasive, it was less in many cases. For instance, preparing students for important entrance examinations is cited by some teachers, but definitely it was not indicators of promoting LA (Yasmin, Naseem, & Abas, 2019). The teachers expected and suggested that there would be training workshops or conferences that would enable them to be better-informed about LA. They really hoped that they would have the chance to practically learn how to foster LA in their contexts.

The results of this study on the teachers' beliefs were mainly consistent with those in the previous research (e.g., Borg & Al-Busadi, 2012; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Doğan & Mirici, 2017; Lengkanawati, 2017; Nakata, 2011; L. Nguyen, 2016) in the way that the participants held positive viewpoints towards LA and shared some constraints that hinder the implementation of LA. However, the results were not aligned with each other regarding the practices of LA. In this study, the participants demonstrated that they promoted LA using different activities despite the barriers, whereas in the other studies, their respondents were skeptical about its feasibility. Arguably, the EFL teachers all raised awareness of the importance of LA to their students' success, especially when the students were going to enter universities where LA needs promotion because teaching methods are different from those at high schools. Also, the teachers themselves had experienced higher education before and they were aware of how important LA was to the learning process. The teachers would share the same ideas about the constraining factors when implementing autonomy-supporting activities in class because the contexts of the studies reviewed were in Asia, where there are many similarities in the educational practices such as a lack of conceptions of language teaching and learning, teaching facilities, and large classes. Nonetheless, the participants in this study showed confidence that they did implement LA in their classes. The reasons can be that along with the awareness aforementioned, the teachers were influenced by the teacher training programs held by their schools and departments of education. Although those programs were not systematically oriented toward LA, they provided the teachers with suggestions for class activities to engage and motivate their students. Also, thanks to the digitally technological advancements, the teachers can explore a variety of activities on the Internet and apply them to their students' learning.

The participants in this study identified teachers and their language competence as key roles in fostering LA. These findings were significantly different from previous studies (e.g., Ahmadianzadeh, Seifoori, & Tamjid, 2018) which considered students and policy-makers as agents of changes, or they assigned the responsibility for societal and curricular factors (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). The current findings also revealed that some teachers were not proficient enough in both language and teaching. This constraining factor can root from the lack of resources and teacher training (N. Nguyen, 2014). Although these teachers were well-defined of their role in LA promotion, they needed continuing support from policy-makers to be more competent and confident to take responsibility for implementing LA activities in their teaching practices. More interestingly, the role of family is the highlighted factor in this research. A number of participants believed that family condition would have certain impacts on students' LA. As an external factor, parents, siblings and relatives could contribute to social aspects of learning (Tran & Vuong, 2022). Therefore, parental guidance and encouragement might stimulate the development of LA.

## 6 Recommendations

Based on the findings, recommendations were made at three levels: micro, meso, and macro. It is feasible to put these suggestions into practice in other countries in the world, particularly in Asian countries, which share some social and cultural characteristics such as teacher and student relationship, and philosophical values. At the micro level, teachers are encouraged to attend professional development (PD) courses to understand LA systematically. With a strong theoretical and practical background, they themselves are able to design all activities both inside and outside classrooms to boost LA (see more at Benson, 2011, 2013) among their students. More importantly, to facilitate an effective learning process, it is highly recommended that teachers are willing to shift

the role from a knowledge transmitter to a facilitator (Bui, 2019; S. Nguyen & Habók, 2021; Wang & Ryan, 2023). As a matter of fact, changing the perceptions of the deeply-rooted teacher-student relationship in the Confucius culture is not an easy task, but teachers should be more friendly, open-minded, and responsive to students' criticism (Bui, 2019) and they can organize as many student-centered activities as possible. Teachers are advised to listen to their students' sharings and discern their needs, learning styles, and conditions. Teachers can also provide parents with brief information on LA and on how they can contribute to their children's autonomous learning, such as technical and/or financial support, or friendly reminders. Such teacher-family communications are proven to lead to greater student engagement (Kraft & Dougherty, 2012) and better academic achievements (Lawson, 2003).

At the meso level or institutional level (Richter & Dragano, 2018), school leaders should pay more attention to upgrading teaching facilities because LA is hampered by current poor conditions. More specific-use rooms should be equipped with projectors, big TVs, computers, and the Internet to support autonomous language learning based on computer-assisted language learning (CALL) (Hamilton, 2013; Lai, 2017). CALL not only improves in-class learning but also eases out-of-class studies, especially during the COVID19 pandemic. Additionally, subject to each school's conditions, a well-designed small library should be established to create a comfortable learning environment for both teachers and students (see more at Murray, 2014). Moreover, PD programs on LA should be developed so that teachers can augment their knowledge and skills to promote LA (see more at Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Some institution-related issues should be taken into account in those programs because LA originates from Western cultures and should be adapted in a culturally appropriate way. The participation of both international and domestic ELT experts should be encouraged for various perspectives. The events can be attended by teachers from several schools in the area, mainly to stimulate PD exchanges and partially to broaden networking. The school leaders can also participate in the events to formulate an overview of LA and to support EFL teachers' autonomy-fostering activities.

At the macro level, policy makers and educational stakeholders should have clear conceptions of autonomy to apply aspects of LA that suit local contexts. Those aspects need to be adapted and then practically introduced into the curriculum. Therefore, the syllabus for English courses should be more flexible and diversified. Accordingly, students can raise their voices and negotiate with teachers about which suitable activities should be chosen as a way to enhance LA (see more at Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). In addition, the revised syllabus increases more flexibility, thereby reducing workloads of both teachers and learners. There will be more chances for teachers to concentrate on PD activities, and learners can improve competence-based learning rather than knowledge-based learning. Forms of assessment should be more formative and should provoke thoughts, problem-solving skills, or creativity, such as presentations, projects, self-reflections, and reports. This may lead to a heavier workload for teachers in assessing students' products, so financial support for teachers becomes necessary. To make these things happen, the voices of ELT experts, teachers in diverse socio-cultural contexts, and even students should be listened to. Another concern for the policy makers is to reconsider the number of students in one class to lighten teachers' burdens of managing classes and organizing activities and to exploit students' potentials.

## 7 Conclusion

This study aimed to emphasize what LA means to EFL high school teachers in Vietnam, the perceived level of their students' LA, how those teachers promote LA, and the challenges of fostering LA they face. Details are provided through the data collected from the survey and the interviews, both adapted from Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012). A total of 136 EFL teachers from high schools across Vietnam completed the online surveys, and 10 of them participated in the interviews. The findings indicated that the EFL teachers held positive attitudes towards LA and their beliefs were inclined to be socio-cultural and psychological perspectives although there existed an inadequacy in their understanding of LA among some teachers. Many participating teachers did not think that their

students had a good level of LA and the teachers provided the reasons for their thought on the basis of many different aspects of the language learning process. Besides, the majority of the EFL teachers believed that they promoted LA in their teaching contexts and gave details on their activities even though some activities they listed were not really autonomy-supporting. Notably, the participants mentioned the challenges in fostering students' LA in terms of the students, the teachers, the family, and the institutional elements. Afterwards, the recommendations from the findings are discussed at three levels of micro, meso, and macro.

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## About the Authors

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