EFL learners' perceptions of factors influencing learner autonomy development

Thao Quoc Tran a,*, Tham My Duong b

a Faculty of English Language, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Ho Chi Minh City 700000, Viet Nam
b Faculty of Foreign Languages, Nong Lam University, Ho Chi Minh City 700000, Viet Nam

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ABSTRACT

Together with recent technological advances in a variety of tools (such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube), learners have been provided with freedom and openness to communicate with each other and to become proactive and independent in their learning. It is believed, however, that Asian learners seem to possess reactive autonomy so that while they can organize their resources autonomously to achieve their learning goals, they are unable to take responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, the aim of this paper was to explore the factors that influence Vietnamese EFL learners' support for or resistance to promoting learner autonomy within a 15-week, portfolio-based writing course. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews and writing logs in this qualitative research and analyzed through content analysis. The findings showed three major factors (personal, academic, and external) supporting and resisting developing learner autonomy in the portfolio-based writing course.

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Introduction

In the first decade of the 21st century, rapid technological development led to social change. According to Lian (2011, p. 5), the world is changing “at an unprecedented rate (largely through better communication and better understanding often facilitated and mediated by modern technology)”. Furthermore, individual differences should be taken into consideration because it is assumed that individuals have their own characteristics. McWhorter (1998) differentiates the characteristics of passive and active learners in dealing with a writing task. While active learners can decide what is important to write and expand their written work with their knowledge and experience of the topic, passive learners tend to follow the teacher’s instruction with the aim of obtaining a good grade. Given individual differences, responsibility for learning outcomes should be taken by learners rather than the teacher since it is believed that learners themselves will be more aware of their expectations, their strengths and weaknesses, and their problems. In this sense, individual differences are associated with learner autonomy.

As a result of the above-mentioned reasons, the concept of learner autonomy is supposed to be important within the changing landscape of English teaching in the 21st century, and advocates of learner autonomy believe that it plays an important role for life-long learning. In Asian EFL contexts (such as China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam), aspects of learner autonomy have been gradually promoted in the respective educational systems. In particular, Vietnamese learners have recently received greater opportunities to use English for communication; thus,

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there should be a strong focus on learner-centered approaches in which learners are able to take control of their own learning and then use the target language effectively and confidently in different social contexts.

This paper explored the underlying reasons why Vietnamese EFL learners support or resist the development of learner autonomy in a writing course in which a portfolio was used as a learning and assessment tool. Within the scope of this qualitative study, the researchers emphasized investigating learner autonomy development rather than language proficiencies.

Research Questions

1. What factors contribute to EFL learners’ support for developing learner autonomy in a portfolio-based writing course?
2. What factors influence their resistance to developing learner autonomy in the portfolio-based writing course?

Theoretical Background

Learner Autonomy

The concept of autonomy first came into language teaching in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, the first definition of autonomy in learning was provided by Holec (1981 as cited in Nunan, 1997, p. 193) stating that learner autonomy is “an ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. This definition, which refers to the decision-making abilities concerning management and organization of learning, has directed later research on learner autonomy. Along the same lines, Rivers and Golonka (2009, p. 255) refer to learner autonomy as “the active, independent management of learning…where the learner sets or attempts to control the goals, curriculum, pedagogical method, or content of the learning program”. That is, learner autonomy can be understood as self-management involving decision-making abilities that a learner needs to possess. In order to foster learner autonomy, it is necessary to develop a sense of responsibility and encourage learners themselves to make decisions about their learning (Scharle & Szabó, 2000). Furthermore, autonomous learners are responsible for not only all decisions relating to their learning but also implementations of their decisions (Dickinson, 1987; Nunan, 1997). Notwithstanding, Benson (2001) argues that it is insufficient to view learner autonomy as an ability to make decisions about or an ability to take responsibility for learning management. According to him, learner autonomy is “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (Benson, 2001, p. 47). Specifically, he asserts that the nature of autonomy consists of three clearly interdependent aspects: learning management, cognitive process, and learning content. This means that autonomous learners are assumed to be able to take control over their learning management, cognitive process, and learning content.

As far as the teacher’s roles in developing learner autonomy are concerned, the teacher has been viewed as a manager of resources in the establishment of life-long learning (Longworth, 2003). In addition, the teacher plays a role as a facilitator and a counselor in promoting learner autonomy (Little, 2004; Voller, 1997). As a facilitator, the teacher can help learners to plan and carry out their own learning, such as setting objectives, selecting materials, and evaluating their learning. The teacher can also help them to acquire the skills and knowledge to implement the items above. As a counselor, the teacher gives advice so that learners can achieve learning efficiency. As a resource, the teacher provides learners with information when necessary or helps them to solve their problems. In brief, different roles have to be applied at different stages to serve the different needs of individual students.

Portfolios

A portfolio is generally employed as a learning tool, an assessment tool, or a professional development tool, among others. For the purpose of this paper, a portfolio is a learning and assessment tool which helps to show the development of learner autonomy. Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991, p. 60) state that a portfolio is viewed as “a purposeful collection of learner work that exhibits the learner’s efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas”.

As regards the relationship between use of portfolio and learner autonomy development, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) introduce the nine elements of portfolios, of which four elements (collection, reflection, selection, and delayed evaluation) are considered relevant to the development of learner autonomy or learner-centered control in a course. Of the four elements, reflection is referred to as the most important characteristic of a portfolio which evaluates learner autonomy development. The pieces of reflection are associated with metacognitive development (learners’ capacity to improve their ability to think about their thinking, such as planning, monitoring, evaluating, or managing one’s own learning), self-assessment (learners’ capacity to judge the quality of their portfolios based on a portfolio assessment checklist, and decision-making ability (learners’ capacity to decide what they learned and how they learned it).

Bullock and Hawk (2005) present three types of portfolios: process, product, and showcase. Firstly, a process portfolio shows a person’s process in producing that person’s work in a given area over a period of time (Bullock & Hawk, 2005; Olson, 2003). Secondly, a product portfolio is a set of evidence developed over a short period of time to meet a desired outcome. Finally, a showcase portfolio is a collection of a person’s best work that is chosen by the individual. The purpose of a showcase portfolio is to show the author’s best work in one or more areas, and reflections emphasize the strengths of the evidence.

In summary, a portfolio, as an organized collection of samples of a learner’s work showing learning progress over time, is developed and predominantly assessed by learners themselves through clearly predetermined criteria with the help of the teacher. For this paper, a portfolio was created and developed using a combination of the aforementioned types.
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