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Vietnamese EFL Tertiary Teachers' Perspectives on Fostering Learner Autonomy in Online Teaching: Opportunities or Challenges

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic's shift to online teaching has highlighted the importance of learner autonomy in language education, especially in Vietnam where online teaching has been widely adopted since March 2020. This study explores Vietnamese online teachers' perspectives on promoting learner autonomy. It involves 82 EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers using a mixed methods approach with questionnaires and interviews. Findings reveal that while teachers generally understand the concept of learner autonomy, some may underestimate their role in nurturing it. The study highlights the effectiveness of specific pedagogical and communicative strategies in online environments, such as creating supportive learning spaces, encouraging resource exploration, using diverse materials, and facilitating meaningful interaction. While teachers recognize the potential of technology, they emphasize the need to go beyond mere access and actively foster self-directed learning through these strategies. The research also identifies challenges such as student engagement, distractions, and academic integrity, calling for targeted interventions. These insights provide valuable guidance for teachers and tertiary institutions seeking to enhance online learning environments that effectively promote learner autonomy in Vietnamese EFL contexts.

Keywords: Teachers' perceptions; Learner autonomy; Online teaching; Vietnam

1. Introduction

The advent of the Internet and Web 2.0 has sparked a growing interest in research exploring the relationship between technology and learner autonomy [1]. This trend arises because the integration of technology not only necessitates learner autonomy but also reshapes our understanding of it, involving the roles of teachers and learners [2]. The current body of research in this field primarily emphasizes how digital tools and platforms contribute to the development of learner autonomy, while giving less attention to teachers' voices regarding their online autonomy-promoting practices. This is attributed to the assumption that, thanks to the advancement of the Internet and technologies, learners can unintentionally develop learner autonomy by exploiting readily available online resources, which results in the role of language instructors diminishing [3]. Nonetheless, numerous studies emphasize the crucial contribution of teachers to the development of autonomous learning [4, 5, 6, 7]. This raises the question of whether the role of online teachers in the age of technology is being neglected or underestimated.

Taking this as a starting point, this research examines teachers' perspectives on fostering learner autonomy within online EFL teaching, with a specific emphasis on the context of higher education in Vietnam. Over the past 40 years, the field of language education has been experiencing an ongoing discussion regarding learner autonomy. According to the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, learner autonomy refers to "the principle that learners should be encouraged to assume a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it" [8]. Early studies into learner autonomy also attempt to exemplify an autonomous learner [9, 10, 11]. In this regard,

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autonomous learners exhibit a range of characteristics, including self-discipline, motivation, reflective thinking, and the ability to set learning objectives, employ effective strategies, and monitor progress.

Throughout the evolution of the notion of learner autonomy, various misunderstandings in literature have emerged. For example, some confuse learner autonomy with *self-instruction*, which means learning without the direct control of teachers [9, 11]. Moreover, terms like *self-access learning, self-directed learning, independent learning,* and *self-regulated learning* have been sometimes used as substitutions for learner autonomy [9], thereby narrowing down its meaning. Other delusions stated by Esch [12] are oversimplifying autonomy with skills training or assuming that it means learning in isolation. These misconceptions can impede the effective application of learner autonomy into teaching practices. Therefore, it is necessary to comprehend how language teachers perceive learner autonomy to successfully integrate it into teaching methodology.

Additionally, since the mid-1990s, the rise of technology has had a great impact on learner autonomy in language education, generating research interest in this field. The advancement of technology has changed the language learning approaches and required teachers to adapt and acquire new skills [13]. Yet, the integration of technology into education brought unexpected challenges, such as the disruption of traditional teacher roles and the resistance to change [14], and teachers' concerns about losing control in the classroom [15]. Therefore, it is imperative to consider teachers' perspectives regarding these transformative changes.

In Vietnam, online learning was introduced in the 1990s by two Open Universities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City [16], but it has gained significant popularity only since March 2020. In 2016, only 2% of higher education students were engaged in distance learning [17]. The initial slow adoption was due to universities' lack of technological integration motivation and inadequate government policies [17]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a dramatic increase, with about 46% (110 out of 240) of tertiary institutions adopting online teaching by 2020 [17]. The sudden change from the brick-and-mortar to the online approach, along with limited awareness of learner autonomy among both Vietnamese teachers and learners, inevitably caused several challenges. Duc Long et al. [18] mention certain obstacles related to Vietnamese lecturers and students lacking technology skills to access and use online learning platforms, and students displaying inadequate discipline and responsibility in online learning. Meanwhile, teachers still consider themselves as the centre, leading to delays in adopting new online teaching methods; as a result, ineffective teaching practices gradually made online teachers lose motivation and enthusiasm [18]. Bao [19] further highlights the impact of the rapid transition to online education during the pandemic. His research points to challenges such as technical difficulties, a lack of interaction, and the disruption of learning environments, all of which negatively affected student engagement and motivation. However, online learning satisfaction has improved over time due to teachers' increasing willingness to apply effective teaching methods and students' advancement in information technology competencies [20], implying a promising scenario for virtual learning in Vietnam provided that appropriate approaches are adopted.

Recently, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has provided more flexibility for e-learning and reviewed existing regulations related to university curricula and syllabi [17], stressing the significance of learner autonomy in this scenario. Nonetheless, some big questions emerge: Do lecturers in Vietnam perceive the importance of learner autonomy in online learning, and if they do, what strategies are they employing to foster it? Are there any challenges that existing literature has not yet identified? In addition, when searching literature about learner autonomy in the Vietnamese online context, it should be acknowledged that recent studies have primarily centered on the role of technology in supporting learners' independent learning without direct teacher supervision. Therefore, the aim of this research is to enrich the understanding of online teachers' influence on learner autonomy promotion. This can be achieved by (1) investigating their perceptions of learner autonomy, (2) the strategies they consider effective, and (3) the challenges they may encounter. It is hoped that the insights gained from this study will provide valuable guidance for educators seeking to enhance student engagement, motivation, and self-directed learning in online learning settings in Vietnam.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Concepts of Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is a subject of ongoing debate among researchers. Holec [10] defines learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.3), which can be acquired and developed through formal learning. In contrast, Little et al. [21] view autonomy as a universal human capacity and drive, inherent in all individuals. Dickinson [22] provides another perspective on learner autonomy, emphasizing that autonomous learners are responsible for all decisions related to their learning. Little [11] argues that previous definitions of learner autonomy have overlooked the psychological aspect, proposing a redefinition of learner autonomy as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection,

decision-making, and independent action" (p.4). Benson [23] supports this view, criticizing Holec's definition as problematic since it mainly illustrates the technical dimension of autonomy. Benson [23] also recognizes "control over learning content" (p.49) as an important aspect of learner autonomy. In an autonomy-focused classroom, the emphasis is on a collaborative approach where learners and teachers work together to determine the learning content, considering the goals, interests, and needs of the learners, as well as the curriculum and learning objectives.

2.2. Versions of Learner Autonomy

The difficulty in defining learner autonomy has led researchers to propose different versions. Benson and Voller [24] suggest three dimensions of learner autonomy: technical, psychological, and political. Oxford [25] criticizes this model as fragmentary and proposes a new model with four perspectives: technical, psychological, sociocultural, and political-critical. Nunan [26] introduces a model consisting of five degrees of learners' engagement and participation in the learning process: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence, while Littlewood [27] proposes two levels of autonomy: proactive and reactive. Proactive autonomy involves learners taking full responsibility for their learning, setting goals, and making decisions about materials and strategies, while reactive autonomy refers to independently managing resources within a set direction. In Asian contexts, students often show high reactive autonomy due to respect for authority but can also achieve proactive autonomy, especially in group-based learning environments.

2.3. The Significance of Autonomy in Language Learning

Autonomy in language learning is crucial for effective language acquisition. Dickinson [28] argues that learner autonomy leads to focused, purposeful, and effective learning, with immediate and long-term benefits. It removes barriers between learning and everyday life, enabling learners to transfer independent learning skills to other areas of their lives. Cotterall [29] takes a broader approach, highlighting philosophical, pedagogical, and practical justifications for learner autonomy. Philosophically, autonomy is essential as learners have the right to make choices in their learning. Pedagogically, involving learners in decision-making leads to more effective learning. Practically, promoting autonomy is necessary when teachers are not always available. In addition, Benson [30] emphasizes the importance of learner agency and control over management, acquisition, and content in successful language learning. He suggests that promoting learners' active involvement and agency is key to autonomous language learning.

2.4. CALL and Learner Autonomy

This emphasis on autonomy finds a practical application in the realm of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Since its inception in the 1970s, CALL has evolved through three phases: behavioristic, communicative, and integrative, each phase enhancing the capacity for learner autonomy in unique ways [23]. While the behavioristic phase offered limited personalization, the communicative phase encouraged problem-solving and spoken communication. It was the integrative phase that introduced multimedia and interactive technologies, promoting skill integration and enhancing learner autonomy. The future of CALL includes intelligent applications that personalize the learning experience, further promoting independence. Research by Schwienhorst [31] and Mutlu and Eroz-Tuga [32] highlights improved language learning strategies, motivation, and responsibility among students in CALL environments. CALL provides access to interactive materials, collaborative activities, and personalized learning, empowering learners to develop autonomy and proficiency. While technology assists, the role of teachers remains crucial for effective learner autonomy, as they can teach valuable lifelong learning skills [33]. Thus, CALL and learner autonomy are interconnected, with technology enabling and enhancing autonomous learning in language education.

2.5. Strategies to Promote Learner Autonomy Online

In this context, understanding the role of online teachers in fostering learner autonomy is of paramount importance. Ludwig and Tassinari [34] describe online teachers as multifaceted supporters: mentors, guides, facilitators, providers, and involvers. Teachers may offer technical support to enhance students' technological proficiency and independence. As instructional designers, they provide pedagogical support by creating engaging, personalized learning experiences that help students develop self-regulation and ownership of their learning process. Additionally, they provide motivational and emotional support, fostering a supportive, inclusive environment that enhances students' confidence and resilience. Communication support is also crucial, with effective management of both asynchronous and synchronous interactions to cater to different learning preferences, thereby fostering community and engagement. To fulfill their roles, teachers require appropriate strategies to foster learner autonomy. These strategies, listed in Table 1, are adapted from the Recommendations for Online Course Development for Adult Learners outlined by Cercone [35]. The application of these strategies is relevant to this study as it focuses on investigating adult learners, aligning with the participants involved in the current research. Furthermore, these strategies aim to support learners in becoming self-directed and independent in online learning contexts, which is suitable for the context of the current study.

Table 1 Strategies for Fostering learner autonomy in online courses (Adapted from Cercone [35])

Online Teacher Roles	Strategies
Technological support	Maximize interactions with embedded practice and feedback sequences.
	Use hyperlinks for student autonomy, allowing them to choose their learning paths and skip familiar topics.
	Offer flexible assignments for students to work ahead.
	Maintain session records for easy review of previous learning.
	Provide on-screen object manipulation when suitable for enhanced engagement.
Pedagogical support	Break learning into bite-sized units for manageable completion.
	Incorporate tasks to utilize participants' knowledge and experience.
	Present materials using various modes: text, graphics, audio.
	Encourage learners to identify and strategize resource usage for objectives.
	Include reflection activities in assignments or discussions.
	Create a student portfolio or personal scrapbook.
Motivational and Emotional support	Foster learner participation and treat them as equals in the learning process.
	Create an open environment where students can freely express disagreement with the instructor.
	Cultivate a safe and comfortable atmosphere for learners to voice their opinions.
Communication support	Maintain regular and consistent communication with individual learners and groups.
	Incorporate group problem-solving opportunities.
	Reassure learners that discussion board postings are attended to.
	Establish peer-learning groups.

2.6. Previous Studies on Learner Autonomy in Vietnam

Evaluating approaches to fostering learner autonomy requires a comprehensive consideration of contextual conditions [7]. This study, therefore, reviews existing research to gain a clearer understanding of how learner autonomy develops in the context of online teaching at the tertiary level in Vietnam. Van Loi [36] found that while teachers recognized the significance of learner autonomy, their focus primarily rested on its psychological and social dimensions, raising concerns about students' readiness for independent learning. Lien [37] examined learner autonomy in online EFL classes, revealing that students' reluctance to use cameras and limited engagement impeded interactions with both teachers and peers, likely due to distractions from activities occurring off-screen. On the other hand, Le et al. [38] revealed significant correlations between teachers' roles such as resource providers, evaluators, and facilitators and various dimensions of learner autonomy. They found that students' motivation and trust in their teachers played crucial roles in fostering autonomy. Nevertheless, the study underscored the need for teachers to adopt diverse strategies to support learner autonomy, especially in online environments where direct interactions are limited.

While previous studies have explored the barriers and challenges to fostering learner autonomy in Vietnamese tertiary education, particularly in online settings, there is a pressing need to investigate practical strategies and interventions that educators can implement to effectively promote learner autonomy in this context. By bridging this gap, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of online tertiary teachers' beliefs, strategies, and potential challenges in digital learning environments in Vietnam.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Objective and Research Questions

This study aimed to investigate Vietnamese EFL tertiary teachers' perspectives on fostering learner autonomy in online teaching, specifically focusing on the opportunities and challenges that arise. To accomplish this, the study addresses the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ 1: How do Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive the concept of Learner Autonomy in the context of online learning?
- RQ 2: What strategies do Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive as effective in fostering Learner Autonomy in the online classrooms?
- RQ 3: Are there any challenges Vietnamese EFL teachers encounter when promoting Learner Autonomy in the online learning context?

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The research focused on 82 college and university lecturers in Vietnam who teach English as Foreign Language online. These teachers possess relevant academic qualifications: 8 with a PhD, 74 with master's degrees, and none have a bachelor's degree as their highest qualification. Additionally, the majority of participants (99%) have a minimum of one year's experience in online English teaching (see Figure 1). This demographic data supports the validity of the findings due to their qualifications and teaching experience.
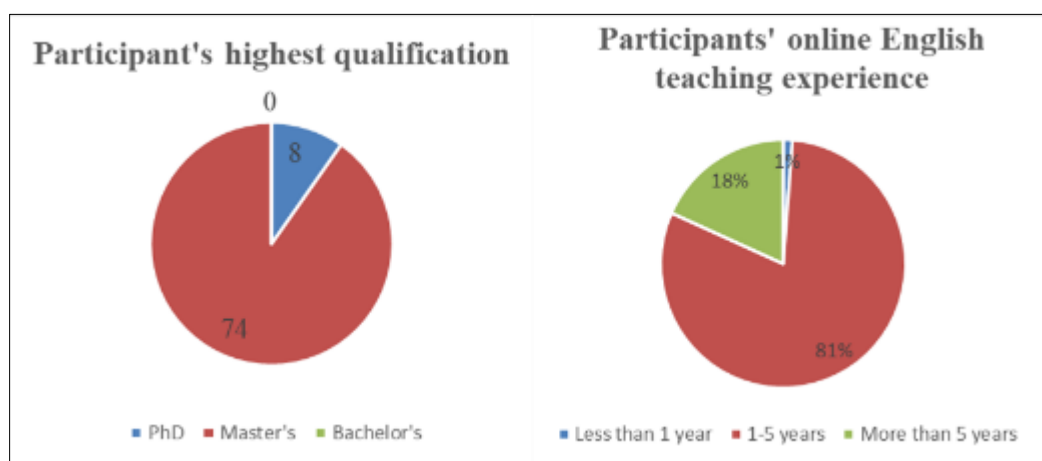

Figure 1 The participants' highest qualification and online English teaching experience

The study used convenience sampling to initially recruit participants who were readily available and met the study criteria. The researcher began by inviting former colleagues and friends through messaging apps, providing them with a survey link, an information sheet, and a consent form. Consent was given by ticking a "Yes" box on the form. Participants willing to be interviewed provided their emails at the survey's end. The researcher also employed snowball sampling, asking initial participants to refer other qualified EFL teachers. This method ensured the inclusion of participants who fit the research selection criteria, despite the limited research time.

3.3. Research Instruments and Data Collection

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods through questionnaires and one-on-one interviews. A 25-item Likert-scale questionnaire ranging between 1 – Strongly Disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Agree, 4 – Strongly Agree was administered online to teachers in Vietnam. It aimed to gauge their perceptions of learner autonomy in online classrooms, effective strategies for promoting learner autonomy, and encountered challenges. The questionnaire, adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi [39] and Cercone [35], consisted of three sections: perceptions of learner autonomy (technical, psychological, socio-cultural, political), strategies for promoting learner autonomy (technological, pedagogical, emotional/motivational, communication), and challenges. In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of teachers who completed it, complementing the questionnaire findings. Each interview, lasting about 12 to 15 minutes, was recorded with participant consent to ensure no critical information was missed, using the Zoom platform. The process included an initial briefing where the research topic was introduced, consent was verbally confirmed, and any participant questions were addressed, followed by discussions on the teachers' understanding of learner autonomy, their teaching strategies, and challenges, ending with a debriefing session to address any further concerns.

The data collection process was divided into two phases: questionnaire and interview. After sending the questionnaires via messaging apps, 82 EFL teachers teaching online at various universities and colleges in Vietnam consented to fulfil the questionnaire. The response rate was 100%, with no questions left blank. The questionnaire was collected via JISC software. Out of those participants, five agreed to participate in the interview, and all those interviews were conducted

in the Vietnamese language as preferred by the respondents. The collected data were then translated into English for analysis. The online interviews were conducted through Zoom, and the data were collected via audio recordings.

3.4. Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

This study analysed quantitative data on online learning strategies from Vietnamese teachers using JISC software, facilitating the processing of data into charts and tables to identify key patterns and trends. Sub-scales were also compared using Excel. Qualitative analysis followed Dörnyei's [40] method, employing manual transcription and coding to identify recurring themes. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative methods addressed the research questions, with a focus on ethical considerations including voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity through coding (participants' names were replaced with codes T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5), and secure data storage. These practices align with Cohen et al.'s [41] recommendations to uphold participants' dignity.

4. Results and Discussions

- Findings Related to Research Question 1: **How do Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive the concept of Learner Autonomy in the context of online learning?**

To answer this question, it is necessary to combine the results from the survey along with insights gathered from the interviews. To this end, it is evident that teachers generally have a good awareness of learner autonomy in all dimensions; however, there are some disagreements about certain aspects which will be discussed below.
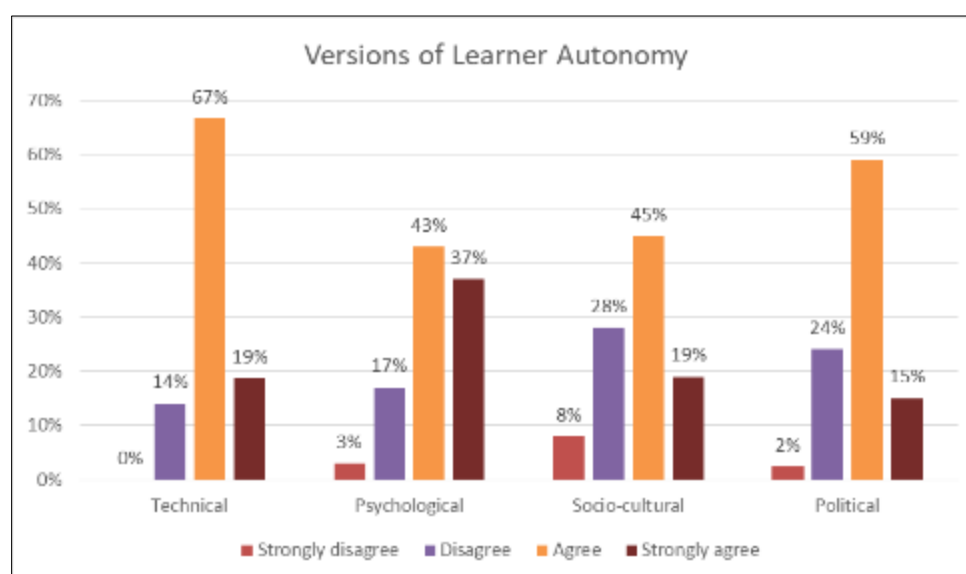

Figure 2 Mean values of teacher's support for different versions of Learner Autonomy

According to Figure 2, the psychological version of learner autonomy, which is related to learners' attitudes, abilities, high motivation, and self-efficacy [24, 25], receives the highest level of support among Vietnamese EFL teachers. More than a third of the participants (37%) strongly agree with this version, while 43% agree. On the other hand, 17% disagree, and only a small percentage of 3% strongly disagree. This aligns with the conclusions drawn from Van Loi's [36] study, in which teachers value the significance of nurturing learner autonomy from a psychological view rather than other dimensions. This stresses the necessity to analyse the specific items that contribute to this data.

Table 2 Psychological version of Learner Autonomy

Survey items	1 - SD	2 - D	3 - A	4 - SA	Mean	SD
2. The English proficiency of learners does not affect their ability to develop autonomy	2	28	40	12	2.76	0.73
4. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence	4	10	30	38	3.24	0.85

5. Motivated language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who are not motivated.	0	4	36	42	3.46	0.59

Table 2 shows a significant difference in mean values (2.76 versus 3.46), indicating varied participants' support for different aspects of learner autonomy. On one hand, the data suggests that motivated and confident students are more likely to develop autonomy. Learners driven by personal goals tend to set objectives, seek materials, monitor their progress, and engage actively. On the other hand, the lower mean for statement 2 (2.76) points to a need for further investigation. Interviews indicate that beginners may struggle with autonomy due to a lack of knowledge and strategies, which can lead to demotivation whereas advanced learners generally find it easier to manage their studies (T1, T3). Despite this, most respondents believe that both beginners and advanced learners can demonstrate some level of autonomy (T2, T3, T4, T5)

Table 3 Technical version of Learner Autonomy

Survey items	1 - SD	2 - D	3 - A	4 - SA	Mean	SD
1. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials	0	8	58	16	3.1	0.53
6. Out-of-class tasks that require learners to use the Internet promote learner autonomy.	0	14	52	16	3.02	0.6
10. Using English-learning apps for self-study is an activity that develops learner autonomy.	0	14	54	14	3.0	0.58

This study also examines teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy from a technical perspective, focusing on out-of-class activities using the Internet, seeking complementary materials, and self-study on learning apps. The mean values range from 3.0 to 3.1, indicating a relatively high tendency among teachers to view these activities as advantageous for promoting learner autonomy. However, there are some concerns about the effectiveness of these materials and activities when students undertake them independently. All interview respondents define an autonomous learner as someone who engages in out-of-class activities, but most of them also recognize that not all learners can discern good and accurate materials available online. This explains why teachers tend to mark "agree" rather than "strongly agree" for these activities conducted by students themselves.

Table 4 Socio-cultural version of Learner Autonomy

Survey items	1 - SD	2 - D	3 - A	4 - SA	Mean	SD
8. Learner autonomy is promoted through group discussions (eg: Breakout Rooms function) that give learners opportunities to learn from each other.	2	4	52	24	3.2	0.63
9. Learner autonomy requires learners to be totally independent of the teacher.	10	40	24	8	2.37	0.82
12. Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher.	8	26	34	14	2.66	0.88

According to Table 4, it could be seen that teachers believe learner autonomy can be developed through collaboration, with group discussions being highly effective (Mean rank 3.2, SD 0.63). The role of teacher's intervention in learner autonomy development is rated just above average (Mean values 2.37 and 2.66). Responses are split regarding whether learner autonomy requires total independence from teachers or cannot develop without teacher help. This suggests uncertainty about the nature of learner autonomy as either an innate capacity [21] or something developed through formal learning [10]. In this case, participants believe that learner autonomy cannot be developed without the help of the teacher, viewing it as a capacity that needs to be taught. Meanwhile, those who think that learner autonomy requires learners to be completely independent of the teacher may support the idea that it is an inherent capacity. Interviews reveal that online resources and flexible learning paths support self-directed learning. Teachers noted that some students advance independently, participate in English clubs, or seek jobs to improve language skills (T3, T4, T5). These activities align with Sociocultural version theories [25], emphasizing learning through social interactions and community integration.

Table 5 Political version of Learner Autonomy

Survey items	1 - SD	2 - D	3 - A	4 - SA	Mean	SD
3. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.	4	22	42	14	2.8	0.77
7. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.	0	6	60	16	3.12	0.5
11. Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching.	2	30	42	8	2.68	0.68

Table 5 highlights a strong belief in involving learners in learning decisions can promote learner autonomy (item 7, mean 3.12, 76/82 positive responses). However, there is division regarding the role of assessment in promoting autonomy (item 3, 56 agree versus 26 disagree) and the rejection of traditional teaching methods in fostering autonomy (item 11, 50 agree versus 32 disagree). Some participants believe that involving students in assessment decisions enhances motivation and dedication (T1, T2), while others argue that, despite the potential for autonomy, achieving true autonomy in assessment may be challenging in the Vietnamese context, where assessment is predominantly controlled by teachers and higher education institutions (T1, T3, T4, T5). This divergence reflects complex views on how learner autonomy can be developed and realized within educational systems.

Overall, it could be argued that Vietnamese teachers' understanding of learner autonomy is varied consisting of attributes belonging to autonomous learners, factors cultivating learner autonomy, and their roles in promoting it in the online context. As cited in the literature review, the absence of consensus on the interpretation of learner autonomy can be viewed as "more of a help than a hindrance" [7]. This paves the way for exploring various strategies to effectively use online learning platforms in fostering learner autonomy, which will be further discussed in the following part.

Findings Related to Research question 2: **What strategies do Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive as effective in fostering Learner Autonomy in the online classrooms?**

In general, Vietnamese EFL teachers strongly believe that employing strategies to assist students in all aspects, including Technology, Pedagogy, Motivation and Emotion, and Communication, is highly crucial for developing learner autonomy in their online teaching approaches (See Figure 3).
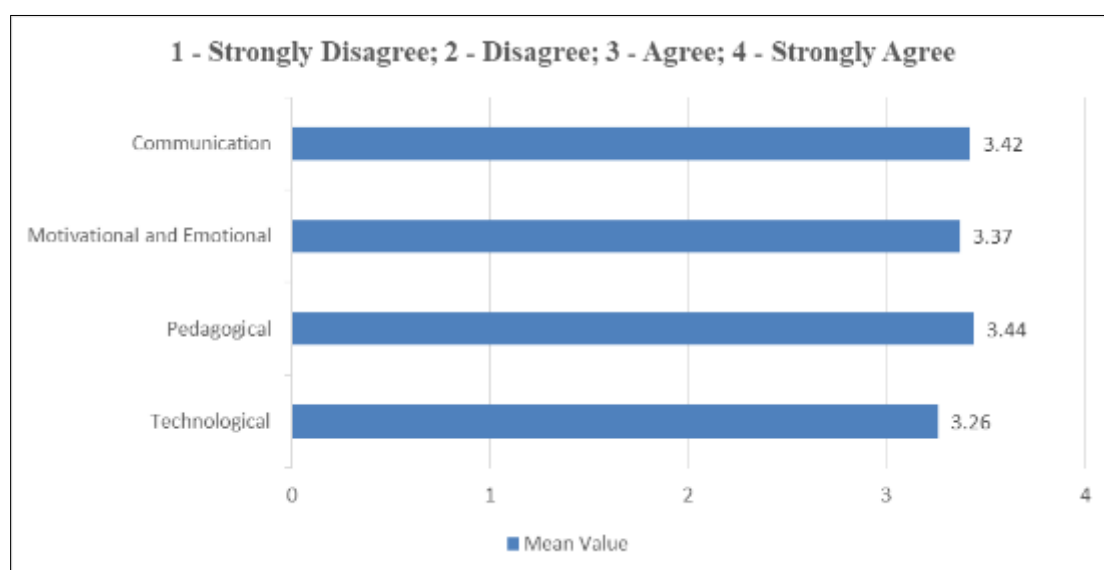
Figure 3 Mean values of the effectiveness of strategies to foster Learner Autonomy

As Figure 3 shows, the greater the mean values, the more effectively teachers perceive the strategy categories. Accordingly, Pedagogical support strategies are the most effective (mean = 3.44), followed by Communication support (mean = 3.42). Motivational & Emotional support and Technological support categories are the third and the least

productive strategies, with means equal to 3.37 and 3.26 respectively. However, the mean levels of all four categories are above 3.25 – falling into "strongly agree"; hence, it can be inferred that teachers perceive all sets of strategies as important and useful for fostering learner autonomy in their online teaching practices. From the quantitative data, the strategy of establishing an environment where learners feel safe and comfortable in expressing themselves, under the Motivational and Emotional support category, ranked 1st in effectiveness (see Table 6).

Table 6 The most effective strategies for learner autonomy promotion online

Strategies	Mean	SD	Rank	Categories
20. Establish an environment where learners feel safe and comfortable in expressing themselves.	3.68	0.27	1st	Emotional & Motivational support
14. Encourage students to find learning resources that help them achieve their learning goals.	3.59	0.54	2nd	Pedagogical support
24. Make sure the materials include text, graphics, and audio to suit different learning styles.	3.54	0.63	3rd	Pedagogical support
22. Encourage students to email teacher if they have questions outside of class.	3.51	0.63	4th	Communication support
21. Create opportunities for students to solve problems in groups.	3.41	0.68	5th	Communication support
17. Encourage students to interact with teacher and their peers in group charts.	3.34	0.57	6th	Communication support
23. Provide flexibility in assignments that allow students to work ahead	3.32	0.64	7th	Technological support
19. Have learners interact with objects on the screen if appropriate.	3.27	0.5	8th	Technological support

The results from Table 6 indicate that most effective strategies for promoting learner autonomy are: (1) creating a safe and comfortable expressive environment (Emotional/Motivational support), followed by (2) encouraging relevant resource exploration and (3) using diverse material formats (both belong to Pedagogical support). Communication support, such as synchronous and asynchronous teacher-learner interaction, was also effective. Meanwhile, Technological support ranked lowest.

The interview findings reveal that Vietnamese teachers use pre-designed games and quizzes from online platforms to encourage proactive learning and improve exam scores (T4). This finding challenges Cercone's [35] notion that adult learning is solely driven by internal factors, highlighting the significant role of extrinsic motivation in promoting autonomy. Teachers also empowered students with tools (e.g., dictionaries, self-study websites) and skills for lifelong learning, fostering independence beyond the classroom (T5). By recognizing learners' objectives and providing tailored support, teachers enabled proactive, self-directed learning and prepared students for independent learning in the absence of teachers. This approach, rooted in a psychological perspective, effectively promoted learner autonomy in the Vietnamese context.

Fostering collaborative problem-solving in group settings and promoting student engagement through group chats, under the Communication support category, are also considered effective strategies in online classes, ranking fifth and sixth respectively. This finding is consistent with the previous mentioned result where teachers appreciated opportunities for learners to learn from each other (see Table 4). For instance, T2 employs Breakout rooms to facilitate small group discussions, decision-making, and presentations, aligning with Cotterall's [29] view on the importance of learner autonomy in enhancing language acquisition. By assigning research topics on famous dishes, T2 encourages students to independently choose, research, and present their findings, fostering enhanced autonomy through online tools. This exemplifies Littlewood's [27] concept of proactive autonomy, as learners connect language learning to real-life contexts and actively engage with the language. Additionally, random grouping in online classes prevents off-topic discussions, unlike in physical settings where students sit with friends (T2). T3 sets time limits for tasks to maintain student focus and prevent distractions, promoting self-directed learning. Despite technology enhancing learning control, it can also create distractions, which may hinder learner autonomy, as reflected by the low mean value of the Technological support sub-scale (see Table 6). Other factors within the online learning context that hinder learner autonomy promotion will be further discussed in the following section.

Findings Related to Research question 3: Are there any challenges Vietnamese EFL teachers encounter when promoting Learner Autonomy in the online learning context?

To tackle this question, the quantitative data from question 25 of the questionnaire and the qualitative data from the interview will be combined, linking with the literature presented in this study. According to the quantitative data, a larger proportion of teachers acknowledge that nurturing learner autonomy in online environments is more demanding than in traditional classrooms (see Table 7).

Table 7 Statistics for item 25 from JISC

Survey items	1 - SD	2 - D	3 - A	4 - SA	Mean	SD
25. I find it more challenging to foster learner autonomy in online classrooms compared to physical (in-person) classrooms.	0	32	40	10	2.73	0.66

The data from Table 7 indicates that participants perceive cultivating learner autonomy in online environments as more challenging than in traditional classrooms, with a mean value of 2.73. However, the difference between those who agree and disagree is not significant: 40 agree, 32 disagree, 10 strongly agree, and none strongly disagree. This suggests that while there are obstacles in online settings, there are still advantages to developing learner autonomy.

Interviews revealed that a major factor discouraging responsibility in studies is students' lack of motivation and concentration due to insufficient teacher-student interaction. For example, students often keep their cameras off during online classes, making it difficult for teachers to maintain engagement (T2). Limited engagement may also indicate students are distracted by other activities rather than focusing on their learning (T1, T4). This aligns with Lien [37], who found that camera refusal hinders interactions and distractions from off-screen activities. Another issue is teachers' lack of awareness about their roles in fostering learner autonomy online. Some teachers believe that student autonomy depends more on individual effort than on teacher influence (T3, T4, T5). This is consistent with Little et al. [21], who noted that many Vietnamese teachers view learner autonomy as an innate ability. Moreover, cheating in online assignments and tests is another challenge. Students are more likely to search for answers online or ask peers (T1), which risks undermining their ability to control their own learning, both in management and cognitive processes, as cited by Benson [23].

5. Conclusion

This study examined Vietnamese EFL tertiary teachers' perspectives on promoting learner autonomy in online educational environments. The findings revealed promising opportunities and persistent challenges in fostering learner autonomy within these contexts. Specifically, 80% of teachers strongly value the psychological dimension of autonomy, emphasizing student motivation and confidence as crucial. As a result, they advocate for a supportive online environment that empowers students to explore resources, collaborate, and receive personalized guidance.

Pedagogical and communicative strategies, rather than mere technological support, are essential for cultivating learner autonomy. Creating a supportive and expressive environment, encouraging resource exploration, and utilizing diverse materials are highly effective. In addition, synchronous and asynchronous interactions greatly enhance student engagement and motivation. While technological tools can aid learning, they must be integrated thoughtfully to prevent distractions and cheating.

Addressing challenges such as concentration issues, minimal interaction, and off-screen distractions is crucial for fully realizing the potential of learner autonomy in Vietnamese EFL online contexts. This research provides a vital foundation for developing effective strategies that empower both teachers and students to thrive in these evolving learning environments. Future research should explore these strategies further and address the identified challenges to enhance learner autonomy in Vietnamese EFL online classrooms.

Addressing challenges such as concentration issues, minimal interaction, and off-screen distractions is crucial for fully realizing the potential of learner autonomy in Vietnamese EFL online contexts. This research provides a vital foundation for developing effective strategies that empower both teachers and students to thrive in these evolving learning environments. Future research should explore these strategies further and address the identified challenges to enhance learner autonomy in Vietnamese EFL online classrooms. The study's findings also suggest that allowing students to choose their assessment methods can benefit learner autonomy, indicating that rigid assessment conformity in Vietnam

may hinder its development. Universities and colleges should consider alternative assessments to grant learners more control over their learning.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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