

## An Investigation of Teacher Autonomy at Two Universities in Vietnam



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**ABSTRACT:** The study was conducted at two universities in Vietnam; namely Dong A University in Da Nang city and Dai Nam University in Hanoi aiming to investigate the teacher autonomy in teaching English to English majored students and non-English majored students and to see if the level of autonomy of the teacher differs with different types of learners. The study was carried out with 137 students which consist of 54 English majored and 83 non-English majored students. The research employs quantitative descriptive study design, adapting the Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ) (Núñez et al., 2012). The findings of the study indicated that the students' perception towards their teachers' autonomy was at medium level (M=2.6). The descriptive statistics also indicated that the level of autonomy was significantly different between majored and non-majored students; M=3.1 and M=2.3 respectively. In detail, the means of the level of autonomy of the teachers who teach English majored students is higher than those of non- English majored students.

**KEYWORD:** Teacher autonomy, English majored and non-English majored students.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background to the study

The communicative language teaching (CLT) has dominated the English language teaching (ELT) contexts for nearly 50 years. The approach highlights the learner-centered perspective, so what are the roles of teachers? Traditionally, teachers expect to be viewed as authority figures. In the traditional foreign language teaching, foreign language teachers are the centre and dominant of the teaching and learning process. Language learners passively acquire knowledge that is imparted by language teachers. As a result, language learners depend much on the teachers and lack of autonomy and agency in learning. In the new approach, the teachers are considered provider, nurturer, devotee, instructor, director, manager, judge, leader, evaluator, controller, facilitator and mediator (Saban, Kocbeker, & Saban, 2007; Wan, Low, & Li, 2011). The teaching profession is regarded not only as a bridge between teachers offering information and students receiving this information, but it is also one of the earliest career professions in which, by its nature, intensive social relationships are experienced as well as being inevitable for social life (Aydın, 2018). One of the concrete signs that any profession is regarded as a professional profession is the autonomy that the profession already possesses (Buyruk & Akbaş, 2021). In this regard, it has been claimed that autonomy is a critical term associated with the professional development of the teaching profession (Parker, 2015). Teacher autonomy playing a pivotal role in certain studies aiming to improve educational activities may be said to contribute to teachers, students, teaching-learning processes, and educational institutions (Freidman, 1999; Limon & Aydın, 2020). From the research and concern on learner autonomy, the term "teacher autonomy" was introduced into the field of foreign language education (Benson, 2006; Smith, 2003). Little (1995) published the article '*Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy*', which marked the beginning of "teacher autonomy" in second/foreign language education research. This paper presents some teachers' autonomy related issue in the development of autonomous language learners.

#### Problem statement

At the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) 2014 where educational experts share the views of future education as followed;

No more "teachers", lectures or imposed curricula: [...] school will no longer be a place where students are taught theoretical knowledge but instead a social environment where they receive guidance, enabling them to interact with their peers and build a diverse toolkit that will better prepare them for professional life. Innovation, not only technological but also social and pedagogical, will help transform the traditional "classrooms" into future "meeting rooms" where cooperative learning takes place and students prepare for their working future. (WISE, 2014: 1)

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The role of teachers from all-controlling figure in the learning process has shifted to facilitating roles. As indicated by WISE, 2014, “the role of teachers will shift toward guiding students along their autonomous learning paths” (WISE, 2014: 2). This requires a comprehensive innovation in the practical awareness of teachers during their teaching practices. In order to create autonomous learners, the teachers’ autonomy must be the first issue to consider.

### **Research Purpose statement**

The primary purpose of this paper is to investigate the autonomous levels of teachers at some universities in the North of Vietnam. This is important because teacher education program needs to provide teachers with opportunities to experience autonomy-oriented learning in order to provide teachers with the capacity to support learner’s autonomy. The secondary purpose of the study is to measure the effect of types of student i.e. majored or non-majored students on the levels of teacher autonomy.

### **Research questions**

With the above mentioned purposes, the following research questions are addressed;

- What is the perceived level of teacher autonomy through the eyes of students?
- Is there a significant difference in the levels of teachers’ autonomy when teaching majored and non- majored students?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical framework**

Earlier studies have attributed teacher autonomy in having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis, and affective and cognitive control of the teaching process (Little, 1995). Tort-Moloney (1997) claims that the autonomous teacher is one who has self-conscious awareness of why, when, where and how pedagogical skills can be acquired in teaching practice itself. Smith (2003) shares the same view that the autonomous teacher is one who is engaged in various investigative activities, e.g., asking questions which are useful in raising students’ awareness of learning. In order to engage students in autonomous and effective reflection on their own learning, teachers need to constantly reflect on their own roles in the classroom and monitor the extent to which they constrain or scaffold students’ thinking and behavior. Breen and Mann (1997) listed some important factors for facilitation of students’ autonomous learning: (i) the attributes which the teacher can contribute to their relationship with their students; (ii) self-awareness as a learner; (iii) belief in each learner’s capacity to learn and trust in each learner’s capacity to assert their own autonomy; and (iv) the desire to foster learner autonomy. Teachers need to help learners undergo a transformation in their beliefs as an autonomous learner. The role of the teachers is very important in supporting the development of their students’ autonomous learning.

### **Learner autonomy in language learning**

Learner autonomy has been considered the key factor for the success of university students where lecturers are unable to take care of individuals. Educators propose that one of the most important goals in education is to develop learner autonomy (Broady & Kenning, 1996; Benson, 1997; Jiménez-Raya & Vieria, 2015). Metaphorically, Chinese people said “If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; if you teach a man to fish you feed him for a lifetime”. This educational philosophy emphasizes the great significance of “autonomous learning” (Hedge, 2002). Learner autonomy “directly contributes to both processes and outcomes of learning activities”, helps “students to face the challenge of technical difficulties”, and “is especially important for knowledge construction and sustainable learning in today’s globalized world”. Tham and Seepho (2014) assert the increasing important role of learner autonomy in both academic study and teaching practices in the 21st century by pointing out that students are taught not only knowledge but also the practices of learning autonomy.

### **Teacher autonomy in language teaching**

In the traditional teacher-directed teaching environment, teachers ask themselves: *How do I best teach this or that?* In a learner-centred learning environment, teachers ask themselves: *How do I best support my learners in learning this or that?* In other words, there is a shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning on the part of the teacher. In the first situation, teachers focus on how best to pass over school knowledge to learners. In the second situation, teachers consider how best to engage learners in developing their action knowledge by activating their existing knowledge. This has an impact on the activities that teachers introduce into the learning environment. They have to consider activities where all the learners have the opportunity of actively taking part. A rule of thumb in this connection is to make sure that an activity gives scope for any learner to add to the activity as well as to gain from the activity (Dam, 2011).

Autonomy support refers to the teaching method used by teachers to identify, train and establish students’ intrinsic motivational resources (Reeve et al., 2004). The behaviors supported by teachers’ autonomy support include: providing the meaning of learning content, clarifying students’ self-perception, using autonomy language, providing voluntary choices and cultivating students’ internal incentive mechanism (Núñez and León, 2016). Specifically, teacher autonomy support is manifested in three aspects: organizational autonomy support which is mainly the comfort and happiness of the classroom environment, and program autonomy support which is mainly encouraging students to actively participate in classroom activities, and cognitive autonomy support which

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is mainly to encourage students to think about the content of learning at a deeper level and to have more lasting psychological engagement (Stefanou et al., 2004).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Participants are students of English majored and English non-Majored at Dong A University and Dai Nam University. The non-English majored students come from different disciplines such as Tourism Administration, Finance and Banking, and Business Administration. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for students of two majors; English majored and non-English majored students. The total participants consisted of 137. The most frequently observed category of majoring was non-majored ( $n = 83$ , 60.6%). The majored students accounted for  $n = 54$ , 39.4%. Frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Frequency table for majoring**

Majoring		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Majored	54	39.4	39.4	39.4
	Non-majored	83	60.6	60.6	100.0
	Total	137	100.0	100.0	

### Research design

The research design refers to the overall strategy that a researcher chooses to integrate the different components of the study in a coherent and logical way, thereby, ensuring you will effectively address the research problem; it constitutes the blueprint for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data. The function of a research design is to ensure that the evidence obtained enables you to effectively address the research problem logically and as unambiguously as possible. This paper employed a quantitative descriptive research design. It is the best design to answer the proposed research questions because a descriptive research design is a research method that aims to describe and analyze the characteristics, behaviors, or phenomena of a particular population or group without altering or manipulating any variables. It focuses on providing an accurate and detailed portrayal of a situation or phenomenon as it naturally occurs, without attempting to establish causal relationships or make predictions. The primary goal of descriptive research is to answer questions such as "What is happening?" or "What is the current state of affairs?" It involves systematically collecting and organizing data to provide an objective and comprehensive description of the subject under investigation.

### Data collection instruments

The perceived teacher autonomy support scale of this study was based on the Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ) (Núñez et al., 2012), adapted from the current teaching situation of the normal university in Guizhou province, China, and assessed students' perceived teacher autonomy support using 15 items (see appendix). The questionnaire use 5-point Likert scale with 1 means strongly disagree, 2 means disagree, 3 neutral, 4 agree, and 5 strongly agree. The means of the descriptive statistic rank from low level of autonomy (1.0-2.4), medium level of autonomy (2.5-3.4) and high level of autonomy (3.5-5.0).

A Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated for the Income scale, consisting of LCQ1, LCQ2, LCQ3, LCQ4, LCQ5, LCQ6, LCQ7, LCQ8, LCQ9, LCQ10, LCQ11, LCQ12, LCQ13, LCQ14, and LCQ15. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was evaluated using the guidelines suggested by George and Mallery (2016) where  $> .9$  excellent,  $> .8$  good,  $> .7$  acceptable,  $> .6$  questionable,  $> .5$  poor, and  $\leq .5$  unacceptable.

### Results

The items for Income had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.806, indicating good reliability. Table 2 presents the results of the reliability analysis.

**Table 2. Reliability Table for Learning Climate Questionnaire(LCQ)**

Scale	No. of items	$\alpha$	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
LCQ	15	0.806	0.75	0.83

*Note.* The lower and upper bounds of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  were calculated using a 95% confidence interval.

### Research procedures

The study was conducted at the beginning of the semester among 54 English majored students at Dong A University and 83 non-English majored students at Dai Nam University. The researchers administered questionnaires to students in three classes of Tourism Administration, Finance and Banking and Multiple Media. These students range from second year to fourth year of their studies.

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The English majored students consisted of 70 however, only 54 returned papers were valid. After collecting the returned papers, the researchers used SPSS to analyze the data.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### Research question 1

A descriptive statistics was conducted to examine the mean of Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ). In other words, it was used to measure the perceived practice that teacher delivered to students to foster the learner autonomy. The result showed the overall mean of LCQ was at medium level ( $M=2.63$ ). The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Mean of perceived LCQ by students**

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
LCQ	137	1.73	4.33	<b>2.6302</b>	.57724
Valid N (listwise)	137				

#### Research question 2

A two-tailed independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether the mean of Learning Climate Questionnaire was significantly different between the majored and non-majored students. The result of the two-tailed independent samples t-test was significant based on an alpha value of 0.05. This finding suggests the mean of LCQ was significantly different between the majored and non-majored students ( $M=3.106$  and  $M=2.32$  respectively). The results are presented in Table 4

**Table 4. Two-Tailed Independent Samples t-Test for LCQ by Majoring**

Group Statistics					
	Majoring	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
LCQ	Majored	54	3.1062	.60251	.08199
	Non-majored	83	2.3205	.26777	.02939

A two-tailed independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether the mean of each of LCQ item was significantly different between the majored and non-majored students. The results are presented in Table 5.

**Table 4. Two-Tailed Independent Samples t-Test for each LCQ item by Majoring**

Group Statistics						
		Majoring	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
LCQ1	I feel that my instructor provides me choices and options.	Majored	54	3.65	.850	.116
		Non-majored	83	1.78	.884	.097
LCQ2	I am able to be open with my instructor during class.	Majored	54	3.48	.986	.134
		Non-majored	83	1.36	.483	.053
LCQ3	I feel understood by my instructor.	Majored	54	3.20	1.155	.157
		Non-majored	83	1.00	.000	.000
LCQ4	My instructor conveyed confidence in my ability to do well in the course.	Majored	54	3.44	.945	.129
		Non-majored	83	2.08	1.309	.144
LCQ5	I feel that my instructor accepts me.	Majored	54	2.76	.930	.127
		Non-majored	83	2.64	.995	.109
LCQ6	My instructor made sure I really understood the goals of the course and what I need to do.	Majored	54	2.56	1.550	.211
		Non-majored	83	1.53	1.213	.133
LCQ7	My instructor encouraged me to ask questions.	Majored	54	3.76	.775	.106
		Non-majored	83	1.53	.770	.085
LCQ8	I feel a lot of trust in my instructor.	Majored	54	2.80	1.088	.148
		Non-majored	83	1.55	.500	.055
LCQ9	My instructor answers my questions fully and carefully.	Majored	54	3.72	.811	.110
		Non-majored	83	2.84	1.452	.159

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LCQ10	My instructor listens to how I would like to do things.	Majored	54	2.80	1.035	.141
		Non-majored	83	2.14	1.458	.160
LCQ11	My instructor handles people's emotions very well.	Majored	54	3.56	1.110	.151
		Non-majored	83	3.10	1.206	.132
LCQ12	I feel that my instructor cares about me as a person.	Majored	54	3.61	.998	.136
		Non-majored	83	2.98	1.490	.164
LCQ13	I feel very good about the way my instructor talks to me.	Majored	54	3.63	.653	.089
		Non-majored	83	3.95	.714	.078
LCQ14	My instructor tries to understand how I see things before suggesting a new way to do things.	Majored	54	3.70	1.021	.139
		Non-majored	83	2.57	1.222	.134
LCQ15	I feel able to share my feelings with my instructor.	Majored	54	3.43	.983	.134
		Non-majored	83	2.80	1.237	.136

## DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study illustrated that the level of teacher autonomy perceived by students of both majors was  $M=2.6302$ . This is not a very high level of autonomy that the teachers perform during their teaching practice. However, the descriptive statistics indicated that the level of autonomy was significantly different between majored and non-majored students;  $M=3.1062$  and  $M=2.3205$  respectively. The difference was clearly seen in different items in the questionnaires. For the LCQ1 “*I feel that my instructor provides me choices and options.*” The discrepancy was great  $M=3.65$  for English majored students and  $M=1.78$  for non-English majored students. This surprised us very much because of the distance in the perception of the students towards their teachers. In other items’ judgement, teachers’ autonomy was more appreciated by English majored students. The possible explanation for this might be in the diversities of activities when teaching these groups of learners. The teaching of English for non-English majored students should be received more attention so that students can become autonomous learners.

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## APPENDIX

### The Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ)

#	Statements	Ranking				
LCQ1	I feel that my instructor provides me choices and options.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ2	I feel understood by my instructor.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ3	I am able to be open with my instructor during class.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ4	My instructor conveyed confidence in my ability to do well in the course.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ5	I feel that my instructor accepts me.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ6	My instructor made sure I really understood the goals of the course and what I need to do.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ7	My instructor encouraged me to ask questions.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ8	I feel a lot of trust in my instructor.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ9	My instructor answers my questions fully and carefully.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ10	My instructor listens to how I would like to do things.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ11	My instructor handles people's emotions very well.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ12	I feel that my instructor cares about me as a person.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ13	I feel very good about the way my instructor talks to me.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ14	My instructor tries to understand how I see things before suggesting a new way to do things.	①	②	③	④	⑤
LCQ15	I feel able to share my feelings with my instructor.	①	②	③	④	⑤



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