



# EFL learners' perceptions of factors influencing learner autonomy development

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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 proficiency.

### *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.

## Methodology

### Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of a Vietnamese university which offered the Bachelor of Arts in English. English majors are required to take three general writing courses: Writing I, Writing II, and Writing III. This study focused on Writing III which is designed to enhance learners' academic essay-writing skills. In particular, a portfolio was used to help develop learner autonomy in this writing course. Specifically, the participants first set their long-term (the whole course) and short-term (each unit) goals and then created a study plan for each unit. Next, the participants chose learning activities (lecture, presentation, discussion, or self-study) and collected learning materials concerning the content of every single unit. After producing a writing piece, the participants self-assessed it based on the given writing rubric. Finally, they wrote reflection on their achievements and the difficulties they encountered after each unit and at the end of the course and put all the documents into the portfolio. In this regard, the teacher was a facilitator, a counselor, and a resource.

The participants consisted of 35 second year English majors who were conveniently sampled. There were seven males and 28 females. They had taken the first two writing courses (Writing I and Writing II) prior to this course. Hence, they were supposed to know about the writing process.

### Research Instruments

This study involved two instruments—writing logs in portfolios and semi-structured interviews. With regard to the writing logs, all participants needed to write reflection on their achievements as well on the as obstacles they experienced after each unit during the course. At the end of the course, they also reflected on their likes and dislikes of the course. They put all the reflections in their portfolios in chronological order. All the writing logs were collected for assessment in the last week of the course (week 15) and labeled from the first (SP1) to the last (SP35). To obtain in-depth information, the writing logs were written in Vietnamese. The portfolio assessment was conducted by the teacher researcher and one of her colleagues in order to increase the reliability. The assessment was based upon the criteria relating to reflection, collection, and selection which were adapted by the researchers.

Regarding the semi-structured interview, 10 participants were purposefully selected for the focus group interview which was conducted one day after the final test (week 16). The selection was based on the requirement that the portfolio included writing drafts, artifacts, and writing logs. In particular, the writing logs had to be clear and relevant. The interviewees were labeled from first (SI1) to last (SI10). All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese so that language barriers would not affect the results of the interview, and they were recorded for later transcription.

The qualitative data generated from the writing logs and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using content

analysis by means of three steps: familiarizing and organizing, coding and recoding, and summarizing and interpreting.

## Results

The findings obtained from the semi-structured interviews and writing logs in the portfolios demonstrated two opposing viewpoints consisting of supportive and hindering factors.

### Supportive Factors

Advocates provided evidence of supportive factors that benefited them throughout the course. The supportive factors included developed skills and awareness of learner autonomy, positive feedback on the use of portfolio, and teacher's autonomy-oriented role.

#### *Developed Skills and Awareness of Learner Autonomy*

Several participants confirmed that their autonomous learning skills had improved by the end of the writing course. In particular, they knew what learner autonomy was and how autonomous learning tasks were implemented in their writing class. Their awareness and skills of autonomous learning increased accordingly as follows:

*My autonomous learning skills are promoted now, and I can set learning goals for later courses (SP26).*

*I can learn autonomously and effectively now because I determine that learning is my business, not dealing with the teacher (SP27).*

The participants further attributed their learner autonomy development to freedom. In this sense, they had plenty of freedom to do tasks which really motivated their learning during this course. Seven out of ten interviewees shared the same idea that they were free to search for and choose learning materials appropriate for their writing or presentation. They also confessed that if they were not sure about the appropriateness of the materials, they would ask the teacher for counseling in class or through the Facebook group in which they could share materials with each other or discuss confusing matters with the teacher and/or classmates. Besides the choice of learning materials, the participants were able to do other tasks like setting learning goals, creating a study plan, self-assessing their own writing, and reflecting on their learning progress as stated in the following extracts.

*Apart from how to write an essay with different types, I know how to create a study plan, self-assess my own writing, and reflect my learning process (SP33).*

*I can also set learning goals and create a study plan efficiently. Now, I can manage my learning time well (SP19).*

#### *Positive Feedback on the Use of Portfolio*

The qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews and writing logs in the portfolios indicated that the portfolios generally helped the participants to keep and find documents easily, to keep track of learning, and to organize their own learning schedule.

Given the portfolio assessment conducted by the teacher researcher and one of her colleagues, it was apparent that the participants could choose and organize the documents for their portfolios. Most of the portfolios contained three major components (writing drafts, writing logs, and artifacts) which were classified according to each element or each unit. Of these components, artifacts, writing drafts and writing logs were probably seen as the most vital ones, whereas the documents relating to the course were sometimes not included in the portfolios. Specifically, the writing drafts, which consisted of first drafts, assessed ones, revised ones, and final ones throughout the course, showed constant improvement in the participants' writing ability. The writing logs indicated learner autonomy development and the specific ways the participants employed to enhance their writing skills. Furthermore, it was noteworthy that the last component, the artifacts, which was found in their portfolios were photos, a short story, sample essays, and newspapers, which were used to support their writing.

#### *Teacher's Autonomy-oriented Roles*

In addition to the important characteristics of a teacher, such as friendliness, enthusiasm, sense of humor, punctuality, and helpfulness, the participants reported a variety of roles for the teacher (as a helper, a supporter, a guide, a mentor, a resource, a facilitator, and a motivator) which helped to promote learner autonomy in her classroom. According to the participants, the teacher first introduced knowledge of learner autonomy and shared the materials with them. What is more, she presented some important writing strategies and guided them on how to create a good study plan, which really facilitated their learning. Moreover, she tried to get the participants involved in their learning activities through presentations, peer reviews, or self-study rather than by directing what they should do. When they encountered difficulties, she encouraged them to overcome their problems, and she also tried to assist them in finding solutions. Given the characteristics of these roles, in brief, these teacher roles in an autonomous classroom could be grouped into three main roles as a facilitator, a mentor, and a resource.

#### *Hindering Factors*

Despite the above-mentioned supporting viewpoint, some drawbacks of the development of learner autonomy were identified after the writing course, namely learning behaviors, doubt about the usefulness of the portfolio and about teacher as an assessor.

#### *Learning Behaviors*

Contrary to those supporting the idea that learner autonomy had developed by the end of the course, approximately half of the interviewees and a small number of the participants attributed their unchanging autonomous learning ability to their learning behaviors. Some of them generally admitted that negative learning behavior, particularly laziness, was the greatest hindrance to effective autonomous learning. One respondent frankly confessed, "I have not had any learning progress because I am not

really serious with my learning" (SP23). More obviously, they pointed out that mostly they did not do these tasks seriously (carrying out study plans, looking for learning materials, doing assignments or homework, and making preparations for new lessons). The most commonly found reasons for not carrying out a study plan were:

*I am still lazy and feel that a study plan does not work well for me. Therefore, I do not follow the study plan regularly (SP14).*

*Even though I have a clear study plan, I do not often follow it. I think I am too lazy to complete it every two weeks (SI9).*

Some possible explanations for these views were given by the interviewees. First, they did not have any previous properly determined learning methods and specific learning purposes, so they felt bored with their learning. Second, they did not like following a study plan or a writing log strictly, as they thought that creating a study plan would take considerable time, and if they were not able to complete the study plan, they would be disappointed. Last but not least, they were not confident about their ability. For example, SI8 explained that she really felt confused when the teacher gave her lots of freedom in choosing topics or materials for writing. SI3 added that she was not sure if the materials she chose were suitable or appropriate for her writing.

#### *Doubt About the Usefulness of Portfolio*

Regarding the drawbacks of a portfolio, a few participants complained about the high cost of a portfolio, despite the fact that the teacher encouraged them to buy one at a reasonable price. For example, they bought portfolios, which were twice or three times more expensive than the one the teacher suggested because of their appearance and usefulness. Furthermore, they admitted that they did not really like to use a portfolio in a writing course because they did not realize its usefulness. They thought that it was somewhat time-consuming in that they spent time preparing documents for the portfolio or printing out the writing log or documents they had found on the Internet and putting them in the portfolio. In addition, a couple of participants honestly admitted to cheating on the documents in their portfolios. This meant that they made a study plan and wrote their reflections in the writing log, although they did not actually follow the study plan or they just found some relevant documents to put in the portfolio when the teacher collected the portfolios for assessment.

In general, the use of a portfolio in the writing course was new to them, so they found it quite hard to get used to making use of it. Moreover, the limited time motivated the cheating as they had to spend time on at least seven courses in the term besides Writing III, so they did not have enough time to do all the autonomous learning tasks, especially preparing the documents for a portfolio.

*... When I was younger, I could manage time for my learning tasks better than now because I am currently taking a lot of courses at once. To be honest, I do not have enough time for all the courses in general and the autonomous learning tasks in this course in particular (SP15).*

### *Teacher as an Assessor*

It was expected that the teacher would be an assessor who gave students evaluations and/or suggestions on how to improve their writing. The students wanted their work assessed by the teacher because they wanted to be sure that their writing pieces were properly evaluated by the teacher who was assumed to have experienced assessment skills and sufficient knowledge, which would be more effective than peer assessment and self-assessment.

### **Discussion**

Given the qualitative analysis of factors influencing the participants' likes or dislikes of using a portfolio in a writing class to develop learner autonomy, all the supportive and hindering factors were categorized into three major factors (personal factors, academic factors, and external factors) and discussed regarding both their positive and negative aspects.

#### *Positive Factors*

The issues regarding learners' self-efficacy and attitudes toward learner autonomy, usefulness of portfolio, and teacher's flexible roles were:

#### *Learners' Self-efficacy and Attitudes toward Learner Autonomy*

The participants felt positive about their current autonomous learning ability as a result of sufficient knowledge, great awareness, and good skills in carrying out their autonomous learning tasks. It has been explained that one of the important reasons for this positive result was the freedom of choosing tasks and materials and expressing their ideas in class without any psychological barriers. This finding of positive attitudes toward learner autonomy was also reported in some studies in this field (Balçikanlı, 2010; Jimuro & Berger, 2010), which concluded that the opportunity to make a choice of learning content really helped the participants to increase their learning motivation which resulted in positive attitudes. This means that learning attitudes are one of the most important aspects that need to be taken into consideration for developing learner autonomy.

#### *Usefulness of Portfolio*

A portfolio was recognized as a useful learning tool that the participants experienced in this study as it provided learner benefits, such as reflection on and self-awareness of their learning, development of self-management ability, development of self-assessment and decision-making abilities, recognition of written language acquisition development, and development of revision ability through delayed evaluation (Weigle, 2002). For this study, three clearly-determined benefits of a portfolio were the ability to self-manage their learning through identification of learning goals, creation of a study plan with specific strategies, choice of reference materials, and reflection on learning; the ability to self-assess and make decisions about what they should put in a portfolio; and the ability to show improvements in their writing competence through a series of the drafts from first to last. The study conducted by

Büyükduman and Şirin (2010) also demonstrated the positive impacts of a portfolio on the development of learner autonomy and language learning performance. This can be interpreted as the participants being able to use a portfolio in a proper way to develop learner autonomy and writing competence.

#### *Teacher's Flexible Roles*

A teacher should work with learners in the autonomous learning process (Ganza, 2008; Scharle & Szabó, 2000). This does not mean that the teacher plays a leading role in an autonomous language classroom. The teacher should be a facilitator who helps learners to plan and carry out learning tasks, a counselor who gives advice when learners need help, and a resource manager who provides learners with information to solve problems (Little, 2004; Longworth, 2003; Voller, 1997). In the current study, it was expected that the teacher should take a role as a facilitator, a mentor, and a resource to help to promote learner autonomy with enthusiasm, friendliness, and a sense of humor, which would create a pressure-free learning atmosphere in which there was a good interaction between the teacher and learners. To sum up, it is vital for teachers to help learners to know how to become autonomous learners as, according to Mayer, Haywood, Sachdev, and Faraday (2008), learners do not become effective autonomous learners all by themselves.

#### *Negative Factors*

This section discusses learners' difficulties and expectations of developing learner autonomy, pitfalls of portfolio, and unfavorable learning conditions.

#### *Learners' Difficulties and Expectations of Developing Learner Autonomy*

Contrary to the positive results obtained from the majority of participants involving the development of self-efficacy and awareness of learner autonomy with the use of a portfolio in a writing course, a very small number of the participants admitted that they did not really pay much attention to the creation of a study plan, the choice of learning materials, and self-assessment of writing performance due to a lack of confidence in their writing ability (they relied heavily on the teacher assessment), laziness, shortage of time, an inability to complete time-consuming tasks, and the inflexibility of a fixed schedule. Thus, the participants expressed their expectation that the teacher should be the person to take the responsibility for assessment. Furthermore, they clearly lacked methods of dealing with the new learning approach. Similarly, the student participants in some studies (Duong & Seepho, 2014, pp. 129–137; Yildirim, 2012) were dependent on the teachers' evaluation and direction because they believed that teachers had more knowledge and experience of assessment than students. Therefore, teachers should provide adequate feedback on learners' homework or assignments not only to increase student confidence in autonomous learning, but also to develop a reflective aspect of autonomous learning (Mayer et al., 2008).



### Pitfalls of the Portfolio

A small number of the participants who did not support the use of a portfolio in the writing course felt doubtful about the usefulness of a portfolio because of its pitfalls. Their first concern was that it was a waste of time. It was reported that they spent much time on the preparation of documents (writing logs, drafts, artifacts, and other reference material) for a portfolio and the implementation of the predetermined study plan. The first concern, to some extent, led to the second concern, which was cheating regarding documents and the implementation of tasks. In particular, a few of them did not have sufficient time to prepare documents for a portfolio, so they just tried to fill the portfolio with any documents and artifacts, so they did not follow the study plan created and stored in the portfolio. These participants tended to be reactive learners who did not take control over their learning with the use of a portfolio.

This finding is somewhat similar to that of Aliweh (2011), who reported no significant effects of e-portfolios on learners' writing competence or on learner autonomy because of the traditional learning methods being teacher-dominated, textbook-centered, and exam-driven. Nevertheless, this result is contrary to the common belief that autonomous learners need to take responsibility for their own learning (Benson, 2001; Nunan, 1997; Scharle & Szabó, 2000). In short, to become an autonomous language learner, an EFL learner needs to be aware of the importance of autonomous learning.

### Conclusions

The reasons for and against developing learner autonomy in the portfolio-based writing course were categorized into two opposing groups: (1) supportive factors (developed skills and awareness of learner autonomy, positive feedback on portfolio, necessity of collaborative learning, non-threatening learning atmosphere, and teacher's autonomy-oriented role) and (2) hindering factors (learning behaviors; doubt about the usefulness of portfolio, disadvantages of collaborative learning, inconvenient learning conditions, and teacher as an assessor). All in all, the present study identified the factors influencing EFL learners' autonomy development. However, it focused on learner autonomy development rather than improvement of writing skills that might be explored throughout the portfolio-based writing course; therefore, language proficiency should be addressed in future research. In addition, the relationship between learner autonomy and writing competence achieved by the participants by the end of the course should be further explored in order to see whether or not they are correlated.

Despite the fruitful findings, there remain some limitations. Firstly, the traditional learning methods in which an EFL teacher plays a key role in the classroom has certain impacts on the learners' autonomous learning, especially, their awareness of autonomy. In fact, it is not an easy task to replace familiar teaching methods with totally new ones.

Secondly, the researcher was in charge of the experimental teaching, which to some extent affected the validity and reliability of the study.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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