



# Learner autonomy amid COVID-19 outbreak: Insights from EFL teachers' beliefs

Luh Putu Artini\*, Putu Kerti Nitiasih, A. A. Istri Sri Wirapatni

English Language Education, Faculty of Language and Art, Ganesha University of Education, Bali 81116, Indonesia

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## Abstract

This study aimed to provide insights into English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' beliefs regarding learner autonomy at the Indonesian senior high school level. The study followed a sequential mixed-method that employed questionnaires and interviews for data collection. Eighteen EFL senior high school teachers were recruited to participate in this study. It was found that the EFL teachers showed very positive beliefs toward learner autonomy. They associated learner autonomy with the concept of learners' initiative and independence to learn without any compulsions from the teacher. While, EFL teachers perceived their learners as less autonomous in learning, they had made some efforts to promote learner autonomy, such as maximizing the use of the internet and existing resources, emphasizing freedom in learning, and motivating learning. However, inadequate school facilities and learners' low motivation became teachers' constraints in promoting learner autonomy. Therefore, even though EFL teachers knew the importance of learner autonomy, they could not expect optimum development. This reveals the need for special attention from policymakers regarding learner autonomy in online teaching and learning.

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## Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease known as COVID-19 has been spreading all over the world. The rapid transmission of the virus has affected various aspects of life, including education. The Indonesian government has implemented new policies regarding educational issues, one of which is implementing remote learning for

learners to learn from home (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). The sudden transition in the mode of learning has led to a significant workload for teachers. Teachers who are accustomed to face-to-face teaching now have to put all the learning content online.

Learner autonomy is desirable in education (Benson, 2011). Over decades, it has been discussed in literature and is considered a key to lifelong learning (Egel, 2009). Learner autonomy has become the most prominent issue to achieve the learning goals within the COVID-19 situation. The active involvement of learners in controlling their learning will lead to better and more effective

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [putu.artini@undiksha.ac.id](mailto:putu.artini@undiksha.ac.id) (L.P. Artini).

works. In Indonesia, the term “learner autonomy” is not stated in educational discourse, yet it is embedded in government documents and substituted by synonymous terms (Cirocki et al., 2019). The national education system in Indonesia, as pointed out by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture through decree number 20/2016, has to produce graduates that are productive, critical, independent, collaborative, and communicative, which is connected to the idea of learner autonomy (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016).

As Indonesia shifted its education paradigm from teaching to learning, the learning process nowadays is focused on learner-centeredness. The transition from the traditional teacher-led way to learner-centered learning denotes the eminence of learner autonomy in education. Myartawan et al. (2013) assert that learning autonomy can improve the quality of English Language Teaching in Indonesia. This notion indicates the importance of teaching learner autonomy within all learning activities. It is affirmed by Benson (2011) that learner autonomy cannot be taught or learned, but it can be promoted through educational interventions that support autonomy among learners.

Teachers’ awareness of the learner autonomy concept is significant in helping learners become more autonomous. However, although the interest in learner autonomy is increasing in literature, teachers’ viewpoints are often absent from such discussion, particularly in terms of learner autonomy for language teachers (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Therefore, teachers’ beliefs become an essential consideration to design further intervention to foster autonomy among learners. Unfortunately, however, little research is conducted concerning learner autonomy in Indonesia (Lengkanawati, 2017; Melvina & Suherdi, 2019). Therefore, this current study was undertaken to give insights into teachers’ beliefs regarding learner autonomy, particularly amid the outbreak of COVID-19.

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## Literature Review

### *Learner Autonomy in EFL Learning*

Benson (2007) introduced three ways to express the idea of learner autonomy, especially in the context of language education: ‘technical perspective,’ ‘psychological perspective,’ and ‘political perspective.’ A technical perspective focuses on the physical setting of learning in which autonomy is seen as a situation where the learners can take ownership of their learning. A psychological

perspective emphasizes learners’ mental attributes and emotional characteristics that allow learners to be responsible for their learning. Meanwhile, a political perspective emphasizes ways in which learning context can be used to empower learners. The central concern of this perspective is to provide a circumstance for learners to control both their learning and the institutional context where the learning happens (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012).

Furthermore, Oxford (2003) elaborated these perspectives by introducing a view in her model, namely the sociocultural perspective, which concerns the social-constructivism theory. In this perspective, the role of interaction in developing learner autonomy is demanded. However, these four ways of representing the idea of learner autonomy may be divergent at a glance, but obviously, they are complementary (Dang, 2012).

Some studies have been done in the EFL context concerning learner autonomy. For instance, Tseng et al. (2020) conducted a study on how learner autonomy influenced online vocabulary learning. Their study found that the learner autonomy in learning the vocabulary in a virtual environment influenced the success of the vocabulary learning. Another study on learner autonomy was also done by Shen et al. (2020), who found that peer assessment improved students’ learning autonomy and writing skills of EFL learners. Hu and Zhang (2017) also found the positive effect of learner autonomy on English mastery of EFL learners. Their study proved that improvement of learner autonomy is in line with the students’ English mastery. To understand EFL learner autonomy further, Tran and Duong (2020) conducted a study to identify factors that influence EFL learner autonomy. They found that personal, academic, and external factors as the factors that influence learner autonomy.

The previous studies focused more on the students’ learning autonomy and its effect on their English mastery. Since the instructional process involves teacher’s and students’ activities, in this study, the researchers tried to see learner autonomy from the teachers’ perspective when they have to teach through online learning.

### *Teachers’ Beliefs*

The concept of beliefs has been discussed in several key areas of interest. From the viewpoint of Smith and Suharmanto (2001), belief is defined as a state of mind within a certain period that may or may not manifest in consciousness during that time. Besides, Borg (2001) affirmed that belief is an evaluative proposition accepted as valid by individuals and further served as a guide to

thought and behavior. Khader (2012) asserted that teacher's belief is a strong indicator that influences their instructional practices. In other words, it will influence their behavior in doing the instruction process and their expectation for students (Rueda & Ragusa, 2010). Thus, in this study, the researchers identified the teachers' belief in learner autonomy and how that belief influences their instructional practice to promote learner autonomy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *EFL Learning amid COVID-19 Outbreak*

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has brought many changes in EFL learning, particularly in learning mode. The transition from face-to-face learning to remote learning places an additional burden on teachers for their professional life and work (Allen et al., 2020). Certainly, some problems emerge amid integrating technology into teaching and learning, such as teachers' lack of skills in navigating the technology and the lack of school facilities supporting online-based learning (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Lestiyawati & Widyanoro, 2020). However, Allo (2020) reported that EFL learners in Indonesia perceived online learning as a good decision in the middle of the COVID-19 outbreak. They perceived that individual task and group task have their merit.

### **Methodology**

This study followed an explanatory sequential design that aimed at providing a general picture of the research problem through two phases of data collection: quantitatively and qualitatively (Creswell, 2012). The participants of this study were 18 EFL teachers from four state public senior high schools in Bali, Indonesia. A simple random sampling technique was used to select the participants, and two data sets were collected through questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire used was adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), which combined close-ended and open-ended questions.

In addition, a semi-structured interview was used to collect detailed information to support the data from the questionnaire.

There were three phases of data analysis in this study. First, the numerical data of each questionnaire response was computed to Microsoft Office Excel to find out the descriptive statistics of the results. Second, the interpretation of the result was obtained by determining the qualification level of each perspective. The qualification level used in this study refers to Koyan (2012), which can be seen in Table 1. Third, the data from the interview, which were analyzed qualitatively using an interactive data analysis model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), were used to explain the qualification level of each perspective.

### **Results**

#### *EFL Teachers' Beliefs on Learner Autonomy*

The questionnaire results confirmed that teachers were aware of the idea of learner autonomy. From the technical perspective, teachers believed the learning situation significantly impacts the development of autonomy among learners. For instance, 77.8 percent of teachers agreed that accomplishing tasks independently in a self-access center potentially enhance learner autonomy, and 72.2 percent agreed that learning outside the classroom is the most effective way to foster learner autonomy. Besides, from a psychological perspective, the questionnaire's responses indicated most teachers believed that learner autonomy is affected by learners' characteristics. This can be seen from the result of the questionnaire where 61.1 percent of teachers strongly agreed that motivated learners tend to be autonomous learners rather than those who are not. However, some of the teachers believed that learner autonomy could not be promoted for all learners. The result indicated that 11.1 percent of teachers disagreed with the possibility of promoting learner autonomy with both young and adult learners.

**Table 1** The guidelines of qualification level

No	Interval	Categorization	Qualification
1	$Mi + 1.5 SDi \leq \bar{X} < Mi + 3.0 SDi$	Very High	Very Positive
2	$Mi + 0.5 SDi \leq \bar{X} < Mi + 1.5 SDi$	High	Positive
3	$Mi - 0.5 SDi \leq \bar{X} < Mi + 0.5 SDi$	Average	Neutral
4	$Mi - 1.5 SDi \leq \bar{X} < Mi - 0.5 SDi$	Low	Negative
5	$Mi - 3.0 SDi \leq \bar{X} < Mi - 1.5 SDi$	Very Low	Very Negative

**Sources:** Adopted from Koyan (2012, pp. 24–25).

Regarding teachers' responses toward the political perspective, most teachers believed that learner autonomy is implied in decision-making and the implementation of choices. For instance, 83.3 percent of teachers agreed that autonomy means the learner can make choices about how they learn, and 77.8 percent agreed that learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some options in the kinds of activities they participate in. Nevertheless, teachers agreed that the idea of learner autonomy emphasizes the role of social interaction and participation in learning. Based on the questionnaire's responses, teachers support learner autonomy through learning opportunities that emphasize learner-centeredness in the learning activities. For example, 72.2 percent of teachers agreed that learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together, and 61.1 percent of learner autonomy is promoted through activities that allow learners to learn from others. Thus, teachers hold very positive beliefs toward learner autonomy. By consulting the qualification level criteria in Table 2, this was indicated by a very high mean score ( $\bar{X} = 104.73$ ) on the interval  $100.1 < \bar{X} < 125.1$ . From this very positive belief, it can be inferred that teachers are familiar with learner autonomy and have sufficient knowledge to help learners develop their autonomy.

Based on the interview results, most teachers associated learner autonomy with learner independence in learning (see Table 3). The ideas expressed by teachers follow the theory noted in the literature earlier, where the concept of learner autonomy is often associated with the concept of self-directed learning and independent learning.

### *EFL Teachers' Beliefs on Autonomous Learners*

Concerning the implementation of online learning during the outbreak of COVID-19, learners were required to be more independent of teachers and expected to control their learning. Thus, the questionnaire asked a question regarding the extent to which autonomous the learners are. The data results showed that 38.90 percent of teachers disagreed that their learners were autonomous, 33.33 percent of teachers were unsure, and 27.80 percent agreed. Based on the comments written in the open-answer part of the questionnaire, the main reason they consider their learners as less autonomous was affected by learners' factors (Table 4).

In the interview, most teachers admitted that autonomous learners had high curiosity, motivation, and independence. The excerpts in Table 5 reveal teachers' beliefs that curiosity, motivation, and independence lead the learners to become autonomous.

**Table 2** The qualification level criteria for teachers' beliefs

No	Interval	Categorization	Qualification
1	$100.1 \leq \bar{X} < 125.1$	Very High	Very Positive
2	$83.35 \leq \bar{X} < 100.1$	High	Positive
3	$73.35 \leq \bar{X} < 83.35$	Average	Neutral
4	$49.95 \leq \bar{X} < .35$	Low	Negative
5	$24.9 \leq \bar{X} < 49.95$	Very Low	Very Negative

**Table 3** How teachers define learner autonomy

Key Point(s)	Interview Excerpts
Learn without being accompanied by teachers/parents	"In my opinion, learner autonomy is about learners' responsibility to learn without being accompanied by teachers or their parents" (T1)
Not being dependent on the teacher Teacher as a facilitator or moderator	"I think learner autonomy means learners can innovate on their own, for instance, finding their material, not being dependent on the teacher. The teacher can be a facilitator or moderator, so the learners can implement the knowledge they get, not from teachers only but from other sources" (T7-I2)
Learn by themselves	"In my opinion, learner autonomy means learners learn by themselves, seeking information from various sources. Thus, they do not have to be dependent on their teachers, and they can set the time as well" (T9-I2)
Learn without any compulsions from the teacher	"...I define learner autonomy as learner's initiative to learn without any compulsions from the teacher..." (T12-I3)
Learn without teacher's guidance	"...learner autonomy is how the learners can find information on their own, with or without teacher's guidance" (T16)

Note: T = Teacher.

**Table 4** Teachers' comments on learners' low degree of autonomy

Category	Illustrative Quotations
Less motivated in learning	In general, students in the school where I teach do not have a fair degree of autonomy. There are several factors such as learners' low motivation in learning English.... (T12)
Lack of autonomous learner skills	Most of the students that I teach do not show any attitudes indicating learner autonomy. They tend to be passive and less capable of expressing themselves in language learning. (T15)
Being dependent on the teacher	Most of the students that I teach still need the teacher's guidance in learning. It seems there is no willingness from them to learn independently. (T4)

Note: T = Teacher.

**Table 5** Teachers' ideas on characteristics of autonomous learners

Key Point(s)	Interview Excerpts
High degree of curiosity, motivation, independence, and are open	"Learners who have a high degree of curiosity, motivation, and want to know about something, always make efforts independently. When they find the information they want to know, they always discuss such with their friends and people who know better than themselves." (T1-I2)
Ask more questions, perfectionist	"The learners usually ask more questions. They are not instantly satisfied with what they have done. They want to be perfect in completing the tasks. So, they ask more questions." (T2-I1)
Ask a lot of questions, independent.	"With regards to the learners' characteristics, for instance, they ask a lot of questions even before we start the lesson, they have started asking what the next topic is, then what is the task will be, they have searched for the information themselves beforehand, so I can see it from their participation and their comments." (T9-I3)
Huge curiosity	"First, it might be seen from the curiosity. For example, if they are autonomous, they certainly have huge curiosity; they ask questions that probably we have not taught yet at school or are off-topic since they learn by themselves, maybe at home. If there are things they do not understand, they will address questions..." (T12-I3)

Note: T = Teacher.

### *EFL Teachers' Efforts in Promoting Learner Autonomy*

The questionnaire's responses indicated that teachers possessed positive beliefs, in which 94.40 percent agreed, and 5.60 percent strongly agreed that they promoted learner autonomy within their teaching. Teachers thus explained their answers more specifically through

comments and interviews. When the learners have to stay home and carry out everything online, teachers' responses indicated that teachers had to encourage their learners to learn independently and motivate them to learn online. The efforts that teachers had made to promote learner autonomy are presented in [Table 6](#) below.

**Table 6** Teachers' efforts in promoting learner autonomy

Category	Illustrative quotations
Emphasizing freedom in Learning	Giving freedom for learners to solve the problems. (T17)
Maximizing the use of the internet and existing resources	EFL learning since then has been trying to develop learner autonomy by assigning the learners to watch at least two videos on the internet and encouraging learners to practice their English with native speakers. (T4)
Assigning group-work	I agree with the statement because it follows the essence of Curriculum 2013, which emphasizes learner-centered learning, one of which is by implementing group work in the learning process. Group work can develop learner autonomy. Even though the learners work in a group, each learner has a responsibility to complete the project. (T12)
Providing individual tasks	Autonomy is not just a matter of learning; it should be a way of life. Their success will depend on how successful they are in managing the learning independently. I develop learner autonomy by providing individual tasks that have to be done independently within strict product control to minimize plagiarism action.... (T3)
Motivating the learner to learn English	Learner autonomy will be developed after we inform learners of the importance of learning English. Then, although it is easy (mindset needs to be taught), the teacher still guides the learner in their learning, rewarding them for every phase they pass and giving them references concerning the learning process. And they are free to innovate, improvise, and select the material they like (as long as it suits the material being taught). Thus, they will enjoy learning and feel more challenged.

Note: T = teacher.

### Constraints on Promoting Learner Autonomy

Teachers' constraints in promoting learner autonomy were both derived from institution's factors and learner's factors. Teachers revealed that the conditions they encountered made it less feasible for them to encourage learner autonomy, particularly amid the outbreak of COVID-19. The constraints explained by teachers are presented in [Table 7](#).

### Discussion

Regarding the result of this study, EFL teachers in the Indonesian senior high school level showed positive beliefs toward learner autonomy, which were represented in four perspectives: technical perspective, psychological perspective, political perspective, and sociocultural perspective. Similar to English teachers' beliefs in other studies (e.g., Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Wichayathian & Reinders, 2018), EFL teachers in Indonesia acknowledged the concept of learner autonomy within teaching and learning, even though the literal term for learner autonomy is not yet stated officially in the Indonesian education documents. In addition, EFL teachers believed learner autonomy is emphasized in the physical setting, such as learning beyond the classroom by using the internet and self-access center.

Concerning the psychological perspective, most EFL teachers agreed that learners' capacity to work independently of a teacher is prominent in developing autonomy among learners. They admitted that learner's characteristics allow autonomy in learning, and one of the crucial characteristics is willingness toward active learning (Haddad, 2016). From a political perspective,

EFL teachers admit that providing choices in the learning activities creates a condition for the learner to control the learning process and content within the institutional context where the learning occurs. Like other perspectives, EFL teachers also support the sociocultural perspective in which learners' interaction and social participation permit autonomy. EFL teachers in Indonesian senior high school mainly attributed learner autonomy to learner's initiative and learned independence to learn without any compulsions from teachers. This finding follows some findings presented in other studies (e.g., Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Melvina & Suherdi, 2019). Most of the teachers associated autonomy with independence and control.

This study found that most of the EFL teachers considered their learners as less autonomous in learning. Learners tended to be passive and still dependent on the teacher. Concurring with other studies in Indonesia (e.g., Cirocki et al., 2019; Lengkanawati, 2017), this study found that learners were unfamiliar with the concept of learner autonomy in learning. They tended to be dependent on the teacher and showing low motivation to learn.

Additionally, EFL teachers also added that an autonomous learner is characterized by having high motivation and curiosity. The Ministry of Education and Culture, Indonesia, through decree number 20/2016, emphasizes that educational institutions of all levels have to produce graduates who are productive, critical, independent, collaborative, and communicative (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016). Therefore, promoting autonomy among learners has become crucial for teachers to achieve the goal of learning. This expectation can be fulfilled by teaching autonomy to the teaching and learning process.

**Table 7** Constraints in promoting learner autonomy

Category	Illustrative quotations
Learner's low motivation to learn	"...maybe because of learner lack of motivation to learn, especially in learning English. I have been asking them about the benefits of English for them, but they could not answer. So probably their motivation to learn is low because they do not know the benefits of learning English." (T12)
Learner's financial situation	"...sometimes not all learners have the same financial status to take advantage of the existing facilities" (T2)
Learner's lack of skill to set priority	"...maybe because it is influenced by their age and still wanting to be free, probably the time is not right regarding how many hours they have to study, how many hours they have for play, and so forth." (1)
Insufficient school facilities	"The situation that I faced during the COVID-19 pandemic became a key moment to see learner autonomy. There are several constraints we face such as unavailability of sufficient sources, materials, and internet." (T16)
Too many subjects have to be Acquired.	"In my opinion, there are too many subjects in the curriculum." (T7)

Note: T = teacher.



This study also found that EFL teachers believed they had provided opportunities to foster learner autonomy. Benson (2011) affirmed that learner autonomy could not be taught or learned, but it can be promoted through educational interventions that support autonomy among learners. From EFL teachers' viewpoint, some efforts have been made to promote autonomy among learners, such as maximizing the use of the internet, emphasizing freedom in learning, and improving learners' motivation. However, it seemed less feasible for them to do it within the current situation. As the global pandemic of COVID-19 hit the education sector, teachers had to adjust their teaching and learning activities into the online classroom. According to Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020), an online classroom is fruitful in building learners' self-confidence and minimizing the distance between teachers and learners. However, the teachers considered it quite challenging since the majority of students had problems with internet access.

There were two types of constraints pointed out: learner factor and institution factor. The former was to do with lack of motivation, financial situation, and skill to prioritize. As a result, they were more likely passive and dependent upon their teachers during the learning process. Since the learning activities were transitioned to online-based learning, learners had to meet their learning needs themselves. However, not all the learners had a similar financial situation to provide online-learning tools and internet access. These limitations become major constraints that hinder teachers from developing learner autonomy equally during the teaching and learning process. EFL teachers admitted that their school facilities were not adequate to support the development of learner autonomy. Besides, the large number of school subjects that the students had to concentrate on made it harder for them to develop their autonomy.

This study identified the potential problems faced by the teachers in promoting learner autonomy and the efforts made by the teachers to promote learner autonomy. However, it did not identify which problem was the biggest, and which solution best enhanced learner autonomy. Thus, a further quantitative study in the form of a factorial analysis study that analyses the greatest problem and the best solution needs to be conducted to decide the best way to boost learners' autonomy.

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## Conclusion and Recommendation

EFL teachers in Bali, Indonesia, showed very positive beliefs toward the idea of learner autonomy. They

believed that autonomy was attributed to learners' initiative and independence in learning without any compulsions. Promoting learners' autonomy was believed to enhance national education goals as postulated by the Ministry of Education and Culture decree number 20/2016 as detailed previously. Some efforts had been made by EFL teachers to promote autonomy among learners, particularly amid the outbreak of COVID-19. However, there were some constraints encountered by EFL teachers such as learners' lack of motivation to learn, lack of skill to set priority, and the economic factor. From the perspectives of the schools, there were problems with facilities and curriculum. This should be followed up with education policies regarding curriculum development and the provision of adequate facilities to promote learner autonomy.

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## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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