

# Teacher and Peer Supports on EFL Learners' Autonomy

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## ABSTRACT

The role of teacher and peer autonomy support place great importance on boosting learners' autonomy. Meanwhile, the first agent enables students to gain the feeling of acceptance and confidence, the second one supports them to deal with challenging tasks. This current research was carried out to dip into such social agents on learners' autonomy with three main objectives. The purpose of this study is to dip into such social agents on learners' autonomy with three main objectives. Firstly, the role of teacher autonomy support was examined. Secondly, the role of peer autonomy support was also investigated. Lastly, the role from which side more important in enhancing EFL learners' autonomy was analyzed. A survey through distributing a questionnaire was used to collect data of 58 adolescent participants from three classes, whose age ranges from 12 to 15 years old and whose English level is intermediate in a language center in Binh Tan District, Ho Chi Minh City. The findings revealed that both social supports played a significant role in promoting EFL learners' autonomy. However, teacher autonomy support appeared to be more important than the other. Such roles were deeply acknowledged, as teachers, we can provide students with necessary supports by applying different teaching practices or supplying suitable materials. Cultural aspects and psychological development stages need to be taken into teachers' consideration to understand students' behaviours in the classroom. Moreover, the role of peer is also vital to promote learners' autonomy, which partly makes mixed ability groups become a suitable way in the class discussion.

**Keywords:** learner autonomy, teacher autonomy support, peer autonomy support, social agents, adolescent participants.

## 1 Introduction

Learner autonomy draws a wide range of scholars' attention from different contexts (Nguyen and Habók, 2020), and its concept has also produced many controversies (Halabi, 2018). Although learner autonomy lays the solid foundation of learners' long-life learning (Yan, 2012), researchers have not thoroughly discussed learner autonomy in the Vietnamese context (Nguyen, 2016).

The term "autonomy" was originally derived from political and moral philosophic fields (Henkel, 2005). Later, different authors elucidate it based on their viewpoints. Such multiplicity makes the concept of learner autonomy appear far from a straightforward concept (Benson, 2001). One of the earliest attempts by Holec (1981) is considered a consensus definition (Halabi, 2018). Holec describes learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (p.3). In other words, learner autonomy is viewed as the crucial ability of learners to learn the target language independently. Henceforth, fostering learner autonomy has become "one of the most important goals that teachers and educators try to pursue" (Yan, 2012, p.558) or "a precondition for effective learning" (Benson, 2013, p. 1). Obviously, forming autonomy requires learners to make a big effort and commitment during their process both inside and outside classrooms (Halabi, 2018).

In the Vietnamese context, a few studies related to practices and challenges in fostering learner autonomy (An, 2019), strategies (Cao, 2018); and learners' beliefs about learner autonomy as well as their performances (Bui, 2016; N.T. Nguyen, 2014) have recently been conducted. Although learner autonomy has widely



drawn Vietnamese researchers, there appear to be no studies with the implementation of the quantitative design addressing the influence of social agents, including teachers and peers, on high-school students in the English learning process.

Henceforth the current paper was conducted to explore whether teachers and peers have positively fostered high-school students' learner autonomy. Later, the roles between teachers and peers were compared to figure out who plays a more critical role in enhancing high-school students' learner autonomy.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Concept of Learner Autonomy**

Autonomy is defined initially as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" by Holec (1981, p. 3). Benson concretizes autonomy in 2009 by demonstrating willingness and ability to take responsibility for both inside and outside classroom settings through various skills such as setting objectives, planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning process in interaction and collaboration with other peers. Furthermore, learner autonomy necessitates negotiation as well as teacher assistance.

After reviewing definitions by key authors (Holec, 1981; Little, 1996; All right, 1990; Benson, 2007), the researcher would like to provide an operational definition of autonomy in language learning for this study. Learner autonomy in language learning is viewed as learners' capacity to take responsibility and willingness. It enables students to learn independently and to cooperate with other peers when needed to achieve specific goals in their language learning. Additionally, teachers and peers play a significant role in providing guidance and assistance to promote learners' autonomy.

### **2.2 Learner Autonomy in English Teaching**

Learner autonomy is the result of a process of interaction in which the instructor gradually expands the extent of her students' autonomy by enabling them to do more things on their own. They have more control over the learning process and material. In the classroom communicative competence in a second or third language, as well as in naturalistic circumstances. A second language is also the result of a collaborative effort. As a consequence, language learner autonomy is a goal in education, and we must create a strategy to achieve it. The interaction improves communicative ability at the same time as student autonomy since autonomy in language use and autonomy in language learning are regarded as two sides of the same coin (Little, 2007).

### **2.3 Teacher Autonomy Support Learners' Autonomy**

In an autonomy-oriented context, instructors are likely to play a role in imparting knowledge and support their students in obtaining a certain level of learner autonomy (Liu Wanqiu, 2004). In other respects, teachers are viewed as mentors in the development of students' awareness, which facilitates the encouragement of students' autonomy.

Teachers' roles in an autonomous classroom were thoroughly discussed by Voller (1997), he assumed that teachers could play three distinctive roles, including the facilitator, counselor, and resource. Such three roles closely concur with assumptions by Yan (2012). In 2013, Voller gave further clarifications about teachers' roles. Teachers, in particular, are considered facilitators when they give both emotional and technical supports. The former refers to the ability to encourage students, whereas the latter refers to assist students in planning and executing their learning, such as setting goals, choosing resources, and assessing their progress. Teachers can then serve as resources by providing information to pupils as needed. Finally, teachers respond to learning issues in a meaningful way as counselors, allowing pupils to develop learning efficiency.

Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman (1981) found that students with autonomous teachers had higher self-efficacy, significantly higher achievement (Boggiano et al., 1993), a greater sense of competence (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981), more academic success (Flink et al., 1992), and more viewed autonomy than students with controlling teachers (Reeve & Jang, 2006). Furthermore, when teachers strive to establish classroom environments that are conducive to meeting students' needs, they are promoting inter-nationalization and intrinsic motivation in some way.

## **2.4 Peer Autonomy Support on Learners' Autonomy**

Peer autonomy support is just as important as independence. Receiving peer autonomy support improves one's well-being and emotions (Deci et al., 2006). Peer autonomy-promoting factors have an influence on other aspects of performance as well. Peers, on the other hand, may play a critical part in identity formation because close friends' opinion is valued the most (Schwartz et al., 2001). Peers are the individuals with someone whom emerging adults spend the majority of their time, which is expected. They may be more willing to discuss their emotional problems and concerns because of their close enough proximity, availability, and common life experiences. In times of adversity, peer support can be extremely helpful (Yearwood et al., 2019). Peers can be a beneficial and available source of assistance when students are encountering difficulties in their academic attempts.

Interactions between students and their classmates can help them improve their capability as well as their academic success in school since they can seek assistance from their peers, which can serve as motivation rather than working separately (Sotinis, Mirco & Michael, 2013). Student peer groups at school play a significant part in socializing teenagers with their classmates, which is beneficial because peer interactions can influence students and can be crucial in influencing their choices and affecting student progress (Skinner et al., 2009; Uzezi & Deya, 2017).

## **2.5 Research Questions**

The study aims to address the three following questions:

Do variables of teacher autonomy support have an impact on EFL learners' autonomy?

Do variables of peer autonomy support have an impact on EFL learners' autonomy?

Which side has greater importance on EFL learners' autonomy?

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Pedagogical Setting and Participants**

This study was conducted by delivering a questionnaire with the participation of 58 high school students at a language center in Binh Tan District, Ho Chi Minh City. Fifty-eight adolescent students from the three different classes with different shifts were invited to take part in the survey. They have studied at this language center for at least two years.

### **3.2 Design of the Study**

A quantitative method was utilized to collect data in this current study through distributing questionnaire to participants.

### **3.3 Data collection and Analysis**

Due to the center regulation, students are not allowed to use mobile phones in the classroom, which makes online form impossible; therefore, the paper-based questionnaire is the main instrument for collecting data.

The questionnaire consists of 26 items in total and it was adapted from three different authors since each of them dipped into different aspects of autonomy. The first part has 6 items related to autonomy by Lin and Reinders (2017), the second part for teacher autonomy by Williams & Deci, (1996), and the last one for peer autonomy support by Moldes et al. (2019) equally has 10 items each.

The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale, including Strongly disagree (1); Disagree (2); Neutral (3); Agree (4); Strongly agree (5). The questionnaire was delivered to adolescent students, whose level is intermediate, Vietnamese translated version could be needed in such case. With the great help of an expert in the linguistic field, the researcher adjusted and carefully chose equivalent words to make complicated terms simpler for students.

### 3.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher invited two peer teachers who are also in charge of the teenager courses to read the questionnaire first to minimize grammar mistakes. Later, the researcher delivered the questionnaire to a group of 12 students who comes from another class of colleagues to guarantee their comprehensibility. After collecting data from 12 sets of questionnaires, the researcher ran Cronbach alpha, the index was 0.842 (above 0.6) which refers to the consistency of 26 items in total. Therefore, the questionnaire has 26 items in total, and then, it was officially delivered to 58 students in 3 different classes.

After being completely collected, all responses were coded and analyzed by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. More specifically, a reliability test was run to determine the consistency. In addition, an independent sample T-test was used for checking gender invariance. One-way ANOVA was also applied to examine the correlation among factors.

## 4 Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Reliability Test

To check the internal consistency of 26 items in the question for three parts, the Cronbach Alpha was used and its result was released as follows:

**Table 1:** Cronbach's Alpha Test for 26 items

	Cronbach's Anpha	N of items
Total	.842	26
Items for Autonomy	.664	6
Items for teacher autonomy support	.643	10
Items for peer autonomy support	.766	10

From table 1, all the scales got a value higher than 0.6. In detail, teacher autonomy support and peer autonomy support show acceptable internal consistency ( $\alpha = .643$  and  $.766$  respectively).

## 4.2 Background of participants

**Table 2:** A brief description of participants

Items	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1. Gender	Male	18	31
	Female	40	69
2. Age	12 years old	15	25.9
	13 years old	6	10.3
	14 years old	17	29.3
	15 years old	20	34.5
3. Years of learning English at the center (any language center)	1 year	0	0
	2 years	7	12.1
	3 years	11	19
	4 years	17	29.3
	5 years	4	6.9
	6 years	10	17.2
	7 years	5	8.6
	8 years	4	6.9
<b>Total</b>		58	100

It can be seen that the number of female students is outstanding compared to its counterpart (69%). When it comes to age category, students between 14 and 15 years old occupy over half of the population, at 29.3% and 34.5% respectively. Four years of learning English at the center (any language center) is most popular among different groups of students.

## 4.3 Impacts of personal background (including gender, age, and years of learning English) on the degree of autonomy of adolescent students

**Table 3:** Tests of Between – Subjects Effects Dependent Variable: AUTONOMY

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power <sup>b</sup>
Corrected Model	10.090 <sup>a</sup>	30	.336	1.310	.241	.593	39.290	.732
Intercept	475.591	1	475.591	1851.972	.000	.986	1851.972	1.000
GENDERS	.249	1	.249	.971	.333	.035	.971	.158
YEARS	1.645	6	.274	1.067	.406	.192	6.405	.346
AGE	1.359	3	.453	1.764	.178	.164	5.292	.407

GENDERS * YEARS	1.109	5	.222	.864	.518	.138	4.318	.260
GENDERS * AGE	.219	3	.073	.285	.836	.031	.854	.097
YEARS * AGE	3.211	12	.268	1.042	.442	.316	12.502	.449
GENDERS * YEARS * AGE	.000	0	.	.	.	.000	.000	.
Error	6.934	27	.257					
Total	919.600	58						
Corrected Total	17.023	57						

a. R Squared = .593 (Adjusted R Squared = .140)

b. Computed using alpha = .05

Table 3 indicates that demographic factor has no a significant impact on learner autonomy (sig. > 0.05). This finding contradicts a study by Yasmin and Sohail (2018) that there is a big difference between two genders who differently experience their learner autonomy.

#### 4.4 Correlation between two independent factors (teacher and peer autonomy support) on learner autonomy

##### Correlations

		AUTONOMY	TEACHER SUPPORT	PEER SUPPORT
AUTONOMY	Pearson Correlation	1	.708**	.273*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.038
	N	58	58	58
TEACHER SUPPORT	Pearson Correlation	.708**	1	.548**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	58	58	58
PEER SUPPORT	Pearson Correlation	.273*	.548**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.038	.000	
	N	58	58	58

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 displays that there is a strong correlation between teacher and peer autonomy support on learner autonomy. More specifically, the stronger positive correlation was between teacher autonomy support,

$r = 0.708$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . This implies that participants could suppose the role of the teacher appears more important compared to the role of their peers in their learner autonomy ( $r = 0.273$ ).

## 5 Conclusions

When both roles of teachers and peers are deeply acknowledged, classroom activities should be suitably designed to meet students' demands. Teachers enable to implement group work activities in which students could support together. Following Vygotskian principles, learners can participate in intensive interactive usage of the target language since language production is believed to be a part of internalized mental resources of each learner (Swain, 2000; Thomsen, 2003). According to Thomsen (2003), group activities should conclude with the production of a group presentation, discussion, a report, or a story. Additionally, designed activities need to optimize the role of peers in promoting students' learner autonomy. Therefore, implementation of various activities such as task choice, debate, and grouping of small groups for sharing knowledge to enhance positive peer collaboration and interaction (Ntoumanis, Quested, Reeve, & Cheon, 2018).

The present study examined the role of social agents (teacher autonomy support and peer autonomy support) on EFL learner autonomy. The present study reveals the support from the two social agents played a significant effect on EFL learner autonomy since the interaction between students with their peers and students with teachers is inseparable as a conclusion made by Kinderman (2016). In contrast with the result by Zhou, Ntoumanis, and Thøgersen-Ntoumani (2019), whose result indicates that the effect of peers was stronger than teacher autonomy support on primary students. This could be explained by psychological development stages between different age groups and cultural practices between Vietnam and China. However, there is no doubt about the role of teacher in the EFL classroom in boosting EFL learner autonomy, the result of the current study is consistent with many previous studies in EFL context by Tran (2020), Pichugova (2016), Hagger (2009). Therefore, many useful practices for teachers are also recommended above to strengthen both teacher and peer roles in promoting ELF learners' autonomy.

## 6 Study Limitations

The study was conducted with a limited population, which could negatively impact on generalizability. Furthermore, students are quite young, they seem to be more dependent on others, including teachers and friends; therefore, the outcome of the study seems to be right to a specific subject. Although there is no a gender invariance in this study, the number of female and male participants experienced a big difference. In future research, the gender should be taken into consideration to guarantee the balance distribution.

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