

# Language Learner Autonomy: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices in Asian Contexts



Special Edition

Edited by Roger Barnard & Jinrui Li

**LEiA**  
Language Education in Asia



**CAMTESOL**

Language Learner  
Autonomy:  
Teachers' Beliefs and  
Practices in Asian  
Contexts

Edited by

Roger Barnard & Jinrui Li

Phnom Penh

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## Acknowledgments

IDP Education (Cambodia) and *Language Education in Asia* (LEiA) are pleased to present *Language learner autonomy: Teachers' beliefs and practices in Asian contexts*, a volume of research papers inspired by Simon Borg and Saleh Al-Busaidi's 2012 report, *Learner autonomy: English language teachers' beliefs and practices*.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Annual CamTESOL Conference, supported by IDP Education (Cambodia), is a particularly fitting venue for the launch of this volume; this year's conference theme is *Promoting autonomy in language teaching and learning*. We hope that, along with the conference presentations, this book helps to encourage the promotion of learner autonomy in the varied contexts across the region.

IDP Education (Cambodia) and LEiA sincerely thank the editors of this volume, Roger Barnard and Jinrui Li of Waikato University. For nearly two years, they ably organized and managed this project involving research, writing, review, and revision with contributors in eight countries. We are grateful for the dedicated work of the researchers / authors in adding to the scant body of knowledge on the teacher perceptions and practices supporting learner autonomy in their contexts. We are also pleased to note that the research for the Cambodian context, supported by an IDP Regional Research Grant, successfully resulted in a chapter in the volume. Our deep appreciation also goes to the eminent scholars who kindly participated in the project: Simon Borg, Phil Benson, and Lawrence Jun Zhang enriched the country reports with their contributions of the foreword, overview, and afterword, respectively, as did Roger Barnard and Jinrui Li with their introduction of the volume. We are also truly indebted to the teacher participants of all of the country projects for their willingness to learn about learner autonomy and share their beliefs, as well as their struggles, realizations, and classroom experiences in fostering learner autonomy in their students.

The LEiA Editorial Board also participated in this project by generously blind reviewing the country reports in addition to their reviews for the LEiA journal submissions. We thank them for their always insightful and constructive feedback.

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## Foreword

Simon Borg

The study of language teacher cognition has kept me engaged for over 20 years and there are several reasons I have been able to sustain my work in this domain for such a long time. Firstly, when I started investigating what language teachers know, think, and believe, the volume of existing work on these issues was very limited: compared to the large body of theoretical and empirical material on language and language learning, little was known about the process of becoming, being, and developing a language teacher as experienced by language teachers themselves. There was clearly a “gap” in the literature which we needed to start addressing. Additionally, teacher cognition is a versatile framework which can be applied to practically any aspect of language teachers’ work; thus while I started off by studying the teaching of grammar (e.g., Borg, 1998), my work over the years has also targeted other issues: what “research” means to teachers (e.g., Borg, 2009), how teacher education impacts on teachers’ beliefs (Borg, 2011), the beliefs and practices of teacher educators (Borg, 2013) and, of particular relevance to this volume, teachers’ understandings of “learner autonomy” (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012).

My interest in learner autonomy was driven by an observation that can be made about many central issues in applied linguistics: theoretical debate and learner-focused research dwarfed parallel analyses of teachers’ work and cognitions. Thus while learner autonomy had been an established concept in language education for over 30 years (Holec, 1981) and numerous publications had focused on its role in the process of language learning (for a review, see Benson, 2013), fundamental questions relevant to language teachers’ practices and professional development remained unaddressed: what exactly does *learner autonomy* mean to teachers? to what extent are these understandings aligned with those salient in the academic literature? how do teachers seek to promote learner autonomy? and how are teachers’ practices shaped not only by their understandings of what learner autonomy is but also by other forces at play in the contexts in which language learning takes place? Insight into such issues is important if we are to develop a fuller understanding of what learner autonomy means in practice.

One interesting dimension of our initial study (conducted with my colleague Saleh Al-Busaidi in Oman) was that we combined empirical work with subsequent professional development activity; that is, we first collected evidence from teachers of what learner autonomy meant to them, how they sought to implement it, and the challenges they felt they faced. We then used that evidence as the basis of workshops with those same teachers in which they were able to develop common understandings of how learner autonomy might be usefully defined in their context and to share strategies for promoting learner autonomy among their pre-university students. I have always seen the ultimate goal of teacher cognition as being practical: by understanding what teachers think, know, believe, and feel, we can support their development more effectively and promote curricular innovation more successfully, too. Our original study into teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy reflected such principles.

The work presented in this volume extends the study of what learner autonomy means to language teachers in a range of Asian contexts. The papers included here follow the broad methodological pattern established in Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012), but adjustments have been made in individual studies in response to specific contextual parameters each researcher or team of researchers faced; thus while this volume does replicate to some extent the original study, it more accurately extends the work we started and in doing so provides interesting and varied insights into the practical status of learner autonomy in several Asian English language learning settings. It is of course always gratifying for a researcher when their work is built on in this way, and I hope that in turn this volume will also stimulate additional and alternative research not just into teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy, but also into how such beliefs function as part of a broader complex system in which language learners develop, to a lesser or greater extent, the willingness and capacity to take control of their own learning.

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## Introduction

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### The Origins of This Book

The idea for this collection of case studies came to us after reading the two reports of the study by Simon Borg and Saleh Al-Busaidi (2012a; 2012b) which explored the perceptions and reported practices about learner autonomy (LA) of English language instructors at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. Our previous and current research has been heavily influenced by Borg's extensive and seminal research into language teacher cognition (e.g., Borg, 2006, 2012), and we were pleased to see that he had extended his own interests into the area of learner autonomy. What particularly struck us was the point Borg and Al-Busaidi made that “little is actually known about what learner autonomy means to language teachers” (2012b, p. 3), and their study was intended to occupy this research space. The first phase of their study involved surveying over 60 teachers at their research site and the questionnaire with individual interviews with 20 of the respondents. The second phase consisted of a series of professional development workshops intended to promote the participants' fuller awareness of practical approaches to teaching and researching LA among their students, and thus lead towards the development of an institutional learner autonomy strategy at the university.

We felt it would be useful to extend their work into various Asian contexts, and with a diverse range of language teachers. Our intention was not so much to replicate as to follow up what Borg and Al-Busaidi did in Oman. We were delighted when the authors kindly agreed to allow us to adapt their questionnaire and interview schedule and to base the professional development workshops on the ideas and techniques that they had applied in their study. We are most grateful for their permission and encouragement.

Therefore, we contacted academic friends in a range of Asian countries to see if they would be interested in contributing to this wide-scale project. We were pleased that colleagues in Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, and

Vietnam responded enthusiastically to our invitation, and the case studies that form the body of the present book constitute the results of their work in these specific contexts.

### The Design of the Case Studies

As noted above, the contributors based the design of their projects on that by Borg and Al-Busaidi. The original questionnaire (see Appendix A to this chapter) was modified only to the extent that in the final section, references to the language center at Sultan Qaboos University were replaced by items seeking similar information from the specific Asian contexts. It should be noted that the teachers in the study in Oman came from a wide variety of national backgrounds, whereas those in the present book were mostly (but not exclusively) nationals of the country concerned. Although we wondered whether it might be necessary to translate this questionnaire into the first languages of some of the participants, this was not done in most cases. The contributors largely followed Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012b, p. 31) interview schedule (see Appendix B). Interestingly, Borg and Al-Busaidi were able to tailor the interview questions in line with the particular responses to the questionnaire given by individual teachers. However, in the present projects, it was always not possible to do this because in most cases questionnaire responses were anonymous. Finally, the professional development workshops which were described in the present volume greatly benefited from the suggestions given in Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b, pp. 34-35); these enabled PowerPoint slides, handouts, and worksheets to be produced to meet the specific contexts in which the workshops were held. Some of the contributors also used specially prepared video-recorded lectures to provide input in the later workshops.

Thus, the research and professional development activities that were carried out in each of the eight contexts followed a similar overall pattern. However, there were considerable variations from case to case. As will be seen below, in some cases there were two workshops and in others four; elsewhere, focus group discussions replaced individual interviews or workshops; in some places the project was run by a single researcher, and in others there was collaborative effort; most of the participants were English teachers at tertiary institutions, but some were working in high schools; some of the researchers were able to follow up with their participants after the workshops, while others were not. It is important to note that the perceptions and practices of the project participants were those that they reported. The facilitators in each context were not asked to carry out any classroom observations to consider the extent of convergence between what the

teachers said and what they actually did. There are clearly implications here for further research, which will be taken up in the final chapter.

### The Structure of This Volume

The book begins with an overview chapter by Phil Benson, who has published frequently in the area of learner autonomy. Following this chapter, there are reports of the eight projects carried out in the various Asian contexts. The book concludes with an afterword by Lawrence Zhang relating LA to the metacognitive strategies applied by (language) learners.

In his overview chapter, Benson firstly considers the nature of learner autonomy and the different ways that the concept has been defined and interpreted. The key element in all conceptualizations is the ability of the learners to take control over their own learning. Teachers can play a vital role in developing this ability. Drawing on some of his recent research, Benson outlines ten strategies that teachers could be encouraged to employ to bring this about. He then turns to the importance of exploring what teachers know and believe about LA as a prelude to professional development in this area. Thus he comments on several issues raised in the seminal study by Borg and Al-Busaidi, drawing some implications with reference to the case studies in the present volume.

Nguyen begins his chapter by comparing “western” notions of LA to the Vietnamese construct of *tự học*, (literally, study by self). He then refers to a number of recent empirical studies that have investigated the potential for developing LA in Vietnam. However, because little research has been conducted into what Vietnamese teachers believe and know about LA, in his study, Nguyen decided to survey 84 teachers from six universities and interview a small sample of them to elicit their perspectives. After analyzing the results and findings, he makes direct comparisons with those of Borg and Al-Busaidi’s 2012 study, and finds similarities of attitudes in both contexts. Nguyen’s findings concur with previous empirical studies in Vietnam, that while some development of LA is possible in local contexts, the heavily centralized education system presents severe barriers to its fuller implementation.

In the second case study, Wang and Wang begin the report of their project by relating notions of learner autonomy to traditional Confucian concepts of self-instruction and self-discovery, and point out that these have been reactivated in recent Chinese literature. They also tie both Chinese and western notions of LA to the recent national curriculum guidelines which have emphasized the need for autonomous learning ability. In their project, Wang and Wang

surveyed 44 English teachers in one university with a bilingual version of the questionnaire, interviewed (in Chinese, either face-to-face or online) a sample of ten of these respondents, and held four workshops with these teachers, where the participants were encouraged to use their first language if they wished to express their ideas more clearly. Their analyses of the survey and questionnaire data very largely echo those of the study by Borg and Al-Busaidi in that the various phases of the study created a developmental journey both theoretically and practically. Finally, they point to some ways in which the teachers developed ideas for further research.

Stroupe, Rundle, and Tomita begin their report by considering the issue of LA in the light of stereotypes of Japanese learners as passive and reactive. They then review a number of relevant publications in Japan, and point out that the value of such studies lies in the documentation of the tensions and contradictions in LA as they arise in specific contexts. For their project with language and content teachers in a private Japanese university, they collected and analyzed data from a survey and an initial professional development workshop, followed by individual interviews. Another round of interviews was conducted during the following semester, and these were followed by a second workshop. Stroupe et al conclude that the workshops had an impact on clarifying the participants' perceptions of LA and their realization of the need to scaffold students' development towards LA to enable them to make choices and take decisions for themselves.

Keuk and Heng report that research has gained momentum in Cambodia with regard to English language teaching in general, but few studies have focused specifically on LA. Thus it was timely to explore the knowledge and beliefs of a group of local teachers. They surveyed 37 English language teachers working in a leading university in Phnom Penh, followed this up with email interviews with seven of the respondents, and then held professional development workshops with six teachers. The survey and interview data indicate that the participants strongly endorsed the desirability and need to develop LA among their learners, but were also sharply aware of the constraints that they were likely to face in implementing appropriate strategies. The workshop discussions revealed that the teachers had little knowledge of the research methods and skills needed to undertake LA research projects of their own.

Haji-Othman and Wood's case study also starts by explaining that very little research has been conducted on learner autonomy in Brunei, thus confirming the point made by Borg and Al-Busaidi that there is a need to explore teachers' perceptions of LA in specific local contexts. Their study followed the general pattern of the original study although

the 32 teachers who responded to their survey and the 18 workshop participants worked in various secondary and tertiary institutions, rather than in one particular center. In general, these teachers held positive views about LA, and conceptualized it as essentially the provision of choice to the learners. Unlike the interviews in the original study, Haji-Othman and Wood held a focus group meeting with selected Bruneian teachers some months after the workshops to consider the extent to which the ideas previously shared had taken root.

Despite principles of LA having been incorporated in Thailand's 1999 National Education Act, relatively few local studies have been conducted into the actual implementation of LA, or into teachers' perceptions and practices. Tapinta reports her survey of 35 teachers of either English major students or non-English major students, in four leading universities in Bangkok. Analysis of the questionnaire data was followed by email interviews with ten of the respondents. Subsequently, the four professional development workshops that she held were an opportunity to form a focus group to discuss the issues raised more fully and to co-construct possible ways to overcome constraints to implementing LA. Overall, the findings clearly indicate that the participants were knowledgeable about and had positive attitudes towards LA, defining it as developing the learners' ability and responsibility to control their learning process. They also recognized the need for teachers to carefully scaffold this development to overcome the considerable sociocultural and institutional constraints to the implementation of LA in their specific contexts.

In their report on their project in the Philippines, Rañosa-Madrugno, Tarrayo, Tupas, and Valdez also begin by pointing to the dearth of local research into LA despite the student-centered approach favored by the country's Commission on Higher Education. Thus the goal of their study was to examine the perceptions and reported practices of language teachers, particularly those working in an urban university in Manila. The team collected data from 50 questionnaire respondents, from which a sample of six were individually interviewed over a period of two weeks. Subsequently, a dozen or so teachers participated in a two-day workshop. The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data clearly indicates that the teachers genuinely accepted the role of LA in facilitating effective learning, but were skeptical of the possibility of its local implementation due to educational and cultural constraints.

Lengkanawati points out that the 2013 national curriculum in Indonesia implies that learner autonomy is fundamental to the teaching and learning processes, but that relatively few empirical



studies of LA have been carried out in the nation's schools. Thus, she focused her project on teachers in a range of secondary (and some primary) schools in different parts of the country. The analysis of the 48 questionnaire respondents reveals considerable differences of opinion among the respondents across the various issues covered by the survey. These issues were discussed in professional development workshop sessions conducted over two days. Lengkanawati decided to use the workshops to audio-record and analyze the comments made by some of the teachers while they discussed the issues presented to them in one of the focus groups. Generally speaking, while the participants were in principle favorably inclined towards LA, they pointed to some serious constraints to its implementation in their specific contexts.

Overall, therefore, the application of Borg and Al-Busaidi's approach to exploring the beliefs and reported practices of English language teachers across various Asian contexts has proven extremely useful to reveal the participants' perceptions and reported practices regarding learner autonomy. The findings from all the projects indicate that the teachers in these projects showed initial understanding of LA in their questionnaire responses and interviews. These perceptions were enhanced through their engagement in subsequent workshops and face-to-face discussions. There was strong general approbation of the need and desirability of developing autonomy among their learners, and many practical ideas about giving students more control over aspects of learning were constructed and shared in the professional development workshops and / or focus groups. While there was a sense that a number of appropriate steps could be, and were, taken in all of the specific contexts, there was also a clear awareness of the institutional and sociocultural constraints to the effective implementation of strategies to enhance a more comprehensive sense of learner autonomy. There were varying degrees of understanding about the nature of research, and consequently different levels of readiness to embark on action or exploratory research to investigate opportunities and / or constraints for developing learner autonomy within the specific contexts.

In the final chapter of the book, Lawrence Jun Zhang considers learner autonomy from a dynamic metacognitive systems perspective. He reviews key literature to make his point that LA, and indeed language learning in general, is "embodied action" (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 108) situated within specific sociopolitical environments. Thus, it is essential to redefine LA in terms of the cultural practices and beliefs of both learners and teachers in their own contexts. He then points out the timely significance of the studies in the present volume and comments on each of them in turn, relating

them to Benson's overview chapter and the seminal study by Borg and Al-Busaidi. Reflecting on these commentaries, he points out that teacher and learner autonomy go hand in hand; therefore, the research undertaken by the contributors to the present book needs to be augmented by further studies not only into the beliefs and practices of teachers, but also those of language learners. He concludes by suggesting and explaining two specific approaches that could be adopted: think aloud protocol analysis and stimulated recall.

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## Appendix A

English Language Teachers' Beliefs About Learner Autonomy  
 Reproduced with the kind permission of Borg and Al-Busaidi  
 (2012b, pp. 26-30)

**Section 1: Learner Autonomy**

Please give your opinion about the statements below by ticking **ONE** answer for each. The statements are not just about your current job and in answering you should consider your experience as a language teacher more generally.

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Language learners of all ages can develop learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
8. Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. It is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Learner autonomy can be achieved by learners of all cultural backgrounds.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centred classrooms.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
17. Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access centre.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. Learner autonomy is a concept which is not suited to non-Western learners.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26. Promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
27. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28. Learner-centred classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
29. Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
30. Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
31. Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
32. The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
33. Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
34. The proficiency of a language learner does not affect their ability to develop autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
35. The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
36. Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
37. To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Section 2: Desirability and Feasibility of Learner Autonomy

Below there are two sets of statements. The first gives examples of decisions **LEARNERS** might be involved in; the second lists abilities that learners might have. For each statement:

- First say how **desirable** (i.e. ideally) you feel it is.
- Then say how **feasible** (i.e. realistically achievable) you think it is for *the learners you currently teach most often*.

You should tick **TWO** boxes for each statement—one for desirability and one for feasibility.



	Desirability					Feasibility			
	Undesirable	Slightly desirable	Quite desirable	Very desirable		Unfeasible	Slightly feasible	Quite feasible	Very feasible
<i>Learners are involved in decisions about:</i>									
The objectives of a course	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The materials used	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The kinds of tasks and activities they do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The topics discussed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How learning is assessed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The teaching methods used	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Classroom management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Learners have the ability to:</i>									
Identify their own needs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify their own strengths	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify their own weaknesses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Monitor their progress	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evaluate their own learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learn co-operatively	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learn independently	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Section 3: Your Learners and Your Teaching

This section contains two open-ended questions. These are an important part of the questionnaire and give you the opportunity to comment more specifically on your work at The Language Centre at SQU.

1. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Choose ONE answer:

‘In general, the students I teach English most often to at SQU have a fair degree of learner autonomy.’

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please comment on why you feel the way you do about your students’ general degree of autonomy:

2. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Choose ONE answer:

‘In general, in teaching English at SQU I give my students opportunities to develop learner autonomy.’

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please comment. You may want to explain why and how you promote autonomy, if you do, or to explain why developing learner autonomy is not an issue you focus on in your work:

**Section 4: About Yourself**

Please tell us about your background.

1. Years of experience as an English language teacher (Tick ONE):

0-4	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25+
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Years of experience as an English language teacher **at SQU** (Tick ONE):

0-4	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25+
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. Highest qualification (Tick ONE):

Certificate	Diploma	Bachelors
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Masters	Doctorate	Other
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. Nationality :

5. Gender (Tick ONE): Male  Female

6. At the Language Centre, which English programme do you teach most hours on? (Tick ONE):

English Foundation Program (Levels 1, 2, or 3)	English Foundation Program (Levels 4, 5, or 6)	Credit English Program
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Section 5: Further participation**

1. In the next stage of the study we would like to talk to individual teachers to learn more about their views on learner autonomy. Would you be interested in discussing this issue further with us?  
Yes       No
  
2. We are also planning to run a series of training workshops on learner autonomy for teachers at the SQU Language Centre. Would you be interested in attending these workshops?  
Yes       No

**Thank you for taking the time to respond.**

Appendix B: Sample Interview Schedule  
Reproduced with the kind permission of Borg and Al-Busaidi  
(2012b, pp. 31)

1. Let's start by talking about what 'autonomy' means to you. In a few words, how would you sum up your views on what learner autonomy is?
2. What for you are the key characteristics of an autonomous language learner?
3. In item 36 – 'Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner' – you agreed. Can you tell me a little more about how you see the relationship between learner autonomy and language learning?
4. How have you come to develop the views you hold today about learner autonomy and its value? [Prompt as required – the aim here is to explore the roots of their current views on learner autonomy]:
  - a. Is it an issue you have focused on in your training as a language teacher?
  - b. Have you worked in other contexts where autonomy has been considered an important issue to develop with learners?
  - c. What about your own experience as a language learner – do you feel autonomy was / has been an issue you were aware of?
5. Focus on Section 2: Desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy.
  - a. In terms of decision-making, you were quite positive both about the desirability and feasibility of learner involvement. But to what extent are learners actually involved in such decisions?
  - b. You were also positive about the feasibility and desirability of learners having certain abilities. Again, does this mean you have a positive view of the situation you work in?
6. Focus on Section 3 Question 1 – 'In general, the students I teach English most often to at SQU have a fair degree of learner autonomy'.
  - a. Your answer to this question was strongly agree. Could you say more about why you feel this way?
  - b. What is it that learners do to make you feel that they have a fair degree of autonomy?
  - c. Are there any other particular factors at the LC that hinder learner autonomy?
7. Focus on Section 3 Question 2 – 'In general, in teaching English at SQU I give my students opportunities to develop learner autonomy':
  - a. Firstly, what role if any, do you feel the teacher has in promoting learner autonomy?
  - b. Your answer was strongly agree. Can you say more about what you do to encourage autonomy in your learners?

- c. What changes in the way the LC operates would allow you to promote learner autonomy better?
8. As part of this project we will be running some training workshops on learner autonomy for LC teachers. Do you have any suggestions for the kinds of issues the workshops might cover?

## Overview

### Language Learner Autonomy: Exploring Teachers' Perspectives on Theory and Practice

Phil Benson  
Macquarie University, Australia

#### Language Learner Autonomy

After more than forty years of research and practice on autonomy in language learning and teaching, we are beginning to see a more widespread acceptance of learner autonomy as both a desirable characteristic of language learners and an important consideration in the practice of language teaching. This is the consequence both of a broader global educational climate that is geared towards notions such as generic skills, learning-to-learn, and lifelong learning, and also the numerous experiments in autonomy in language learning that have been reported at conferences and workshops around the world and in the publications they have produced (for a review, see Benson, 2011).

While language learner autonomy has been defined in a number of different ways, two broad approaches stand out. One approach favors learning outside the classroom and views autonomy as a situational condition in which learners direct their own learning outside the classroom independently of teachers (Dickinson, 1987). The other emphasizes the learners' control over the learning process and does not preclude classroom teaching because control is essentially a matter of who makes the important choices and decisions in language learning, whether inside or outside the classroom (Little, 1991). In my own work, I have leant towards the second approach – defining autonomy as “the capacity to control one’s own learning” (Benson, 2011, p. 58) – but I do not see the two approaches as necessarily being incompatible. For language learners who study independently of teachers (and there are many who do so out of choice or necessity), a capacity to make informed choices and decisions about their learning may be crucial to persistence and success. Language teachers who aim to foster autonomy will do well not to confine their efforts to the classroom, but also draw on and attempt to extend their students' learning activities beyond the classroom (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Nunan & Richards, 2015).

An important point about learner autonomy, however, is the fact that in many parts of the world, second or foreign language teaching now begins at an early age. This is especially the case in Asia, where English language teaching is so deeply embedded in 21st century educational systems that students' approaches to language learning tend to be conditioned by successive experiences of being taught languages in classrooms, whose impact is likely to be both subtle and abiding. The degree to which language teaching allows for and encourages choice and decision-making at various levels of education thus becomes critical to the development of student autonomy in regard both to classroom learning and opportunities to learn outside the classroom. I would also argue that the choices and decisions that learners make must be both informed and meaningful to the students themselves (Benson, 2003), which points to two issues that are of particular importance to autonomy in language learning: the personal relevance of learning and ownership of the language learned.

Nunan (1988) observed a basic truth about language teaching when he commented that there is simply too much that can be learned of a foreign or second language to fit into a language course. What learners need to know of a language to achieve proficiency beyond its basic grammar and frequent vocabulary is also highly dependent on their interests and their purposes. For Nunan (1988), it is a basic principle of the learner-centered curriculum that class time should be used to teach "those aspects of the language which the learners themselves deem to be the most urgently required" (p. 3). Putting this differently, I would argue that it is important that teachers who intend to foster autonomous learning attend to the personal relevance of the language that is being learned. Learners are, of course, often best placed to determine their individual interests and purposes, while teachers can play a role in scaffolding self-determined goals and the decision-making processes that follow on from them. Teachers can also play an important role in guiding students towards resources and activities that will meet their personal learning goals.

Macaro (2008) developed the idea of individual purposes and goals in the context of a discussion of choices in language learning:

Having a choice in their own language learning means the language learner or user taking control not only of the language being learnt, but also of the goal and purpose of that learning . . . . Autonomy resides in being able to say what you want to say rather than producing the language of others . . . (pp. 59-60)



The importance of choice, in other words, does not simply lie in bringing language learning content and activities in line with personally relevant goals, but also in the ways in which language learning is transformed into language use. There is no single body of knowledge that constitutes, for example, the English language and no single way in which it should be used. Choices and decisions about what to learn, thus, become the building blocks of the learner's ownership of a second or foreign language – a sense, perhaps, that one owns this language in much the same sense as one owns a first language. From this perspective, the development of learner autonomy is, evidently, a long-term process that may begin with relatively straightforward choices and decisions about the when, where, and how of learning pre-determined content and skills, but must, sooner or later, engage with questions of what the learners are learning and what they are learning it for. Without attention to learner autonomy, classroom teaching is likely to shift most of these decisions onto curriculum planners, course writers, and teachers. Attention to autonomy also often focuses much more on the when, where, and how of language learning than it does on what and what for questions. This is understandable, because the what and what for questions are often settled at the level of curriculum planning and course writing, while the when, where, and how questions tend to be left to classroom teachers, although these may also be prescribed in advance (Benson, 2010b). Attention to the personal relevance of learning and ownership of the language learned, therefore, represent a way that teachers may be able to address the more difficult but nevertheless important questions of control over the content and purposes of language learning in their day-to-day work.

### Teachers' Conceptions of Learner Autonomy

Much of what I have said about language learner autonomy above is based on a body of work that has, over more than 40 years, led to a high degree of consensus on key ideas, in spite of differences of emphasis. It is significant, however, that this work has largely been produced by teachers whose pedagogical experiments are underpinned by a strong commitment to the value of learner autonomy, and who have experimented with pedagogical applications and reported the results. Little (2007) made the point that research on language learner autonomy has consistently been grounded in practice. While this is undoubtedly a strength of research in the field, we should also acknowledge that a teacher's commitment to make a pedagogical experiment work can often be a major factor in its success. On the other hand, experiments in learner autonomy that have involved

teachers who are less committed to, and perhaps less aware of, the history of research and practice in the field have proved more problematic and have sometimes been reported as failures (Hurd, 1998; Schalkwijk, van Esch, Elsen, & Setz, 2002). As the value of learner autonomy and the importance of incorporating it in language courses become more widespread, therefore, a new set of issues have arisen concerning the roles of teachers as mediators of the idea of autonomy in diverse contexts of practice.

In this context, Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012a, 2012b) study of teachers' beliefs and practices on learner autonomy in a university language center is a particularly important contribution to the field. Borg and Al-Busaidi argued that there is a dearth of research on teachers' perspectives on autonomy. This is not strictly true, because most research on autonomy is, in fact, carried out by teachers who articulate their perspectives on autonomy in their published work. There is, however, a dearth of the kind of research that Borg and Al-Busaidi have carried out, which explores the perspectives of the wider body of teachers who are aware of the idea of learner autonomy, but are not necessarily committed to it. The ways in which we identify this population of teachers and evaluate their perspectives on autonomy is somewhat problematic (see below), but I would agree with Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b, p. 7) that, because autonomy is now "a central concept" in language teaching and learning, it is important both that we carry out more research on teachers' beliefs and their relationship to practice, and base professional development initiatives on this research. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b) suggested that "the extent to and manner in which learner autonomy is promoted in language learning classrooms will be influenced by teachers' beliefs about what autonomy actually is, its desirability and feasibility" (p. 6); they also observed that previous studies have identified a gap between teachers' positive theoretical views on the value of autonomy and their less positive reports of classroom practice (Nakata, 2011). This gap points to the complexity of relationships between beliefs and practice, which might be a productive focal point for professional development work.

Borg and Al-Busaidi's questionnaire was grounded in a thorough review of the academic literature on autonomy, which means that it is well suited for international use, as the contributors to this volume have used it. Among the many findings reported in Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012b) detailed report, I would like to highlight three here. The teachers who completed the questionnaire articulated a wide range of beliefs, but there was convergence on the view that learner autonomy involved the freedom and / or ability to make choices and decisions. Among the items that expressed beliefs about the meanings

of autonomy, "Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn" (Agree / Strongly agree = 95.1%) and "Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy" (Agree / Strongly agree = 93.5%) received the highest levels of agreement. "Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher" (Disagree / Strongly disagree = 70.5%) received the highest level of disagreement. Learner autonomy was also rated as having "a positive effect on success" in language learning (Agree / Strongly agree = 93.4%) and as allowing "learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would" (Agree / Strongly agree = 85.2%). These findings suggest that the teachers' beliefs about the meaning of learner autonomy and its value in language learning largely concurred with what I would call the consensus view in the current academic literature.

The teachers' responses problematized learner autonomy, however, in two main respects. While it is widely acknowledged that learner autonomy is a matter of degree (Nunan, 1997), there is little consensus on how these degrees should be assessed or the ethics and practicalities of assessment (Benson 2010a). The questionnaire respondents also seemed to be uncertain about how autonomous their students were: 40% agreed that their students had "a fair degree of autonomy," 41.7% disagreed, and 18.3% were unsure. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b, p. 17) pointed to evidence of "differing expectations of what autonomous learners were able to do" in interviews as a possible explanation for this uncertainty. Individual differences among students and the consequent difficulty in making a general assessment of one's students may also be a factor. In addition, autonomy is also often described as a multidimensional construct in the literature. Students might well be autonomous in some respects, but not in others. Nevertheless, there appears to be some contradiction between the teachers' confidence in evaluating the meaning and value of learner autonomy and their uncertainty in identifying it among their students that might productively be tackled in professional development. Everhard and Murphy's (2015) collection of papers proposing approaches to the assessment of autonomy might prove to be a useful resource in this respect.

Published work has also explored constraints and possibilities for autonomy in classroom teaching (Benson, 2010b; Trebbi, 2003). In Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012b) questionnaire, this issue was addressed in questions that asked teachers to rate areas for student involvement in decision-making according to criteria of desirability and feasibility. The areas included classroom management, teaching methods, assessment, topics discussed, tasks and activities, materials, and objectives. In each case, the desirability of student decision-making

was rated above its feasibility and the gaps between the two were wider for objectives, materials, and assessment than they were for other items. The desirability of student decision-making in objectives and assessment was also rated below the desirability of decision-making in other areas. In other words, there was a tendency to rate both the desirability and feasibility of student decision-making on what and what for issues below that of when, where, and how issues. An open-ended question asking teachers to identify challenges in helping their learners become more autonomous pointed to three possible areas of constraint on the desirability and feasibility of student decision-making that might productively be addressed in professional development: the space provided within curricula and materials, limited language proficiency and learning ability, and expectations based on prior experiences of learning.

### **Learner Autonomy in Practice**

Almost 80% of the teachers who completed Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012b) survey believed that their teaching gave their students opportunities to develop learner autonomy. As learner autonomy is a somewhat abstract construct, however, this begs the questions of what kinds of teaching and learning activities help develop autonomy and how they do so, which are, perhaps, central to professional development in this area. Benson (2003) proposed five broad guidelines that teachers who want to foster autonomy in their classrooms might follow:

1. Be actively involved in students' learning
2. Provide options and resources
3. Offer choices and decision-making opportunities
4. Support learners
5. Encourage reflection

As part of a later professional development project, a group of teacher educators came up with a list of pedagogical strategies for autonomy that identified particular ways of organizing teaching and learning activities that could be applied in a lesson or throughout a course, without necessarily changing the planned curriculum or materials. A pedagogical strategy for autonomy was, in effect, a strategy for teaching something that was currently being taught in a teacher-centered way (e.g., as a lecture) in a more learner-centered way (e.g., as an independent research and peer-teaching activity). While the strategies could be applied comprehensively, the assumption behind the professional development project was that the introduction of a

single strategy could also make a significant difference. The strategies that we identified, and the list is by no means exhaustive, were:

- Encouraging student preparation. Students are more actively involved in teaching and learning if they know what is going to happen in class and have prepared some contribution to it.
- Drawing on out-of-class experience. This allows students to contribute to learning content by bringing in personally relevant material.
- Using “authentic” materials and “real” language. Again, this heightens involvement and personal relevance, especially if the students play a part in selecting materials.
- Independent inquiry. Asking students to find out things for themselves (rather than teaching them) is a basic strategy for student involvement. It can also allow students to pursue their own interests.
- Involving students in task design. Students can often contribute to the design of tasks by, for example, selecting reading or listening texts and writing comprehension questions for each other to answer or discuss.
- Encouraging student-student interaction. This heightens involvement and the more students talk to each other, the more personally relevant the content of learning.
- Peer teaching. Students teach each other aspects of the learning content, which can be an extension of student preparation for class, independent inquiry, and involvement in task design. As a more formal way of encouraging student-student interaction, it has similar benefits.
- Encouraging divergent student outcomes. Tasks that produce individual outcomes from each student in the class heighten involvement and personal relevance. Divergent outcomes can be a natural consequence of tasks based on out-of-class experience and independent inquiry, and students can be encouraged to read or listen to each other's work.
- Self- and peer-assessment. Encourage a sense that learning is being carried out for the students' own benefit, as well as a sense of responsibility and involvement.
- Encouraging reflection. Short reflection sessions, in which students talk or write about what they have learned, what they will do next or the direction of their learning, can play an important role in heightening student involvement.

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b, p. 37) included a list of 20 statements that cover similar ground. These statements were made in response to a question asking for examples of how teachers promoted autonomy in their classrooms. They were also incorporated into a professional development task, in which teachers discussed these and other practices that they used and their effectiveness. Several of these practices matched up above (e.g., co-operative and peer learning, preparing for lessons, reflection, independent learning projects, and peer assessment). Others were, from my perspective, less transparently related to autonomy (e.g., going to the library and doing Moodle assignments, using worksheets, giving homework).

One issue that arises from this, which might be pursued as an extension to this professional development activity, concerns the principles underlying pedagogical strategies that promote autonomy. How exactly do they work? If autonomy develops through the exercise of choice and decision-making, then it might be that strategies work to the extent that they lead to or create conditions for choice and decision-making. A shift away from the traditional teacher-talks-and-asks-questions, students-listen-and-answer-questions model of classroom interaction, for example, is likely to create an interactional dynamic in which students are more able and willing to make choices and decisions. Similarly, choices and decisions about the content of learning are more likely to be made when students bring knowledge and resources into the classroom from outside. My own contribution to the professional development project discussed above for example, involved peer teaching across groups, which in addition to creating interactional dynamics that supported choices and decisions about what to research and teach, also led to the introduction of knowledge into the classroom that went beyond the planned course content (Benson & Ying, 2013). Choices and decision-making are thus central to the development of learner autonomy, and professional development might productively involve exploring how they are promoted by strategies and activities that are claimed to promote autonomy. However, I would also argue that choices and decision-making are not the be-all-and-end-all of pedagogies for learner autonomy and that a broader attitude of involvement in student learning, valuing student input, support for learning processes, and care for outcomes are equally important. This view might provoke discussion more on styles and approaches to teaching than on specific strategies and activities.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I hope to have called attention to some of the issues that arise from Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012a, 2012b) study that will be taken up in the various country studies based on their questionnaire and professional development strategy that make up this volume. In conclusion, however, I want to return to the problem I raised earlier about the population that is identified by their study. Borg and Al-Busaidi consider learner autonomy to be an established concept in the field of language learning, not only at the level of research but also at the level of practice. Their questionnaire assumes, therefore, that teachers have beliefs about the meaning and value of learner autonomy and something to say about learner autonomy in practice. The response rate to the survey was 30.5%, which suggests the possibility of sample bias towards those teachers who had something to say about learner autonomy. The findings of the survey, on the other hand, show that the teachers who did respond held beliefs that largely concurred with those articulated in the academic literature. One important outcome of the study, therefore, is the confirmation of the assumption on which it is based. Borg and Al-Busaidi's study shows, and I believe that the studies in this volume will support this finding, that learner autonomy is, indeed, an established concept on which a substantial number of teachers around the world now hold beliefs that are worth investigating. What is more problematic, however, is the extent to which we can separate these teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy from their academic knowledge of it. Bearing in mind that 81% of the respondents in Borg and Al-Busaidi's study held a master's degree, could the high level of agreement between the teachers' beliefs about the meaning and value of autonomy and the consensus in the academic literature simply reflect their awareness of that consensus? While this possibility does not in any way invalidate the study or its findings, it does raise complex questions about teachers' perspectives on theory and practice in a climate where academic training is becoming increasingly available to professional language teachers.

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## Chapter 1

### Learner Autonomy in Vietnam: Insights from English Language Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

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This chapter reports the results of a study which employed questionnaire and interview as principal data collection methods to investigate English language teachers' beliefs and reported practices regarding learner autonomy in Vietnam. Eighty-four teachers from six public universities were involved. The majority of the participants emphasized the importance of enhancing learner autonomy and their vital role in doing this. However, they leaned more towards the psychological and social views of learner autonomy than the political and technical ones. In reporting their practices, they also raised the issue of students' ability to take control of their own learning, thinking that some aspects of learner autonomy may not be feasible in the context of Vietnam. In particular, the teachers showed a lack of trust in their students' ability to take charge of their own learning. Based on the findings and available literature, implications are drawn for promoting learner autonomy in teaching and learning English in Vietnam and similar contexts.

#### Learner Autonomy in Vietnam

Learner autonomy (LA) has been the focus of attention of teachers, educators, and researchers in various contexts (Balçikanli, 2010; Benson, 2006; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a; Chan, 2003), but in Vietnam, the concept has yet to be thoroughly researched. This is despite changes in educational policy intended to develop the skills required to be taught in the twenty-first century, including autonomous learning. This chapter reports the findings of a study that attempts to gain further insight into the implementation of LA by examining teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching English in the higher education context of Vietnam. The chapter will begin by discussing the different conceptualizations of LA in Vietnam, then present the study regarding

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university teachers' beliefs and practices about LA, and finally discuss implications for promoting LA in Vietnam and similar contexts.

Since the 1960s, the term *tự học*, literally translated as “study by self,” has been mentioned in Vietnamese educational circles (Cao, 2001). The slogan *Học, học nữa, học mãi* [study, study more and study forever], which implies the concept of lifelong and independent learning, has been promoted in school systems. However, what the term denotes and how it could be achieved in educational curricula have been scantily discussed.

According to Cao (2001), *tự học* can be understood in two ways. The concept firstly refers to individuals' entire independence in self-instruction, seeking to develop their own knowledge and skills, without resorting to educational institutions. This term also denotes the time and effort invested outside the classroom on self-training: observing reality, experimenting and discovering evidence, reading, and connecting to reality to deepen understanding of the subject matter taught. In his conclusion, Cao (2001) emphasized that this self-reliance, not teaching activity, plays a central role in determining success or failure in learning.

Recently, the Central Resolution No. 8, Course XI regarding radical reform about education and training (Nguyen, 2013), has specified *tự học* as one of the long-term educational goals. Accordingly, education should “emphasize teaching how-to-learn skills, thinking skills, encouraging *tự học*, giving learners the foundation to independently update their knowledge, skills and develop competence” (para. 25; my translation). Nevertheless, curricular documents provide no guidelines as to how to implement the concept in the educational system.

The concept of learner autonomy proposed by western authors came to be known to Vietnamese scholars who had access to a body of research in this area abroad in early 2000. Trinh (2005) was the first to draw on the notion of LA from the cognitive, psycholinguistic, social, and political perspectives to promote students' learner autonomy by using a two-key-parameter curriculum: interaction and choice. Specifically, learners in his study were trained with a task-based course curriculum which encouraged their interaction and their choice of learning activities and goals. In each unit of the course over a semester, the students had to complete a mini project using English to develop their language skills. As suggested by Trinh (2005), one important implication of this research was the possibility of fostering LA in an Asian culture like that of Vietnam. Later, Trinh (2010) applied the same task-based approach in teaching a writing course to students of English and concluded that it helped promote students' self-regulated learning and their writing performance. In both these studies,

Trinh defined *learner autonomy*, which he named *tự học* in his 2010 publication, as the ability of a learner to determine learning goals, manipulate learning actions, and show a positive attitude toward learning activities in order to work independently, self-regulate learning, and assess one's own learning results.

Drawing on a sociocultural framework, Dang (2010) proposed that LA be developed by integrating resources, educational practices, and persons (involving teachers and students) and, like Trinh (2005), by negotiating individuals' choices with their context of learning. In contrast, Duong (2011) compared the learner autonomy of two groups of students from the USA and Vietnam, and suggested that the centralized educational and administrative structure in Vietnam is a significant barrier to LA development. She emphasized that practices of LA are influenced by sociocultural factors and educational systems, and specifically noted, "Learner autonomy continues to be a very vague concept and theory in current Vietnamese education" (p. 12).

A few studies have subsequently explored teachers' perceptions of LA in the higher education context in Vietnam. For example, T.V. Nguyen (2011) investigated the perceptions of 47 teachers teaching English as a minor subject at many universities in Hanoi and found that the notion was still strange to both the teachers and students; most teachers were especially reluctant to believe in their students' capability to take charge of their own learning. Likewise, T. N. Nguyen (2014) examined the beliefs and practices of 188 university teachers of English in Hanoi, and found that they did not fully understand the notion; under 40% of them believed in their students' ability to take charge of their learning. Specifically, 85% believed they themselves were responsible for determining learning objectives, selecting instructional content, and assessing students' progress.

The works mentioned above have not revealed a sufficient understanding of how best to implement LA in the Vietnamese context. The study presented in this chapter, motivated by the study by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a, 2012b), attempts to add further contextual understanding to the concept of LA from which pedagogical implications could be suggested.

## The Present Study

### Research Questions and Methods

The study aimed to gain further insights into the beliefs held by Vietnamese university teachers of English regarding LA in language learning and their reported practices of promoting LA as well as perceived constraints or challenges to their practices in the higher education context. The study investigated the following questions:

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1. What does *learner autonomy* mean to Vietnamese university English language teachers?
2. To what extent do the teachers find it desirable and feasible to develop learner autonomy in their working contexts?
3. How and to what extent do they say they promote learner autonomy?
4. What factors do they perceive as constraints to implementing learner autonomy?

The study attempts to inform the implementation of LA by providing a deeper understanding of teachers' beliefs and practices of LA in the Vietnamese context; therefore, it mainly relied on the questionnaire and interview schedule designed and used by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b) for teachers of English in Oman. These data collection instruments were slightly adapted to suit the context of the present research. For the interviews, Vietnamese was used to reduce the possibility of miscommunication, and to elicit the teachers' conceptualizations and beliefs regarding LA, the equivalent Vietnamese term used was *tự học*. The interviews were then transcribed and translated by the author.

#### **Participants**

Table 1 shows that 84 teachers of English from six public universities, three in the central region and three in the south of Vietnam, volunteered to answer the questionnaire administered both online and *in situ* by means of chain and random sampling. The choices of sampling methods aimed to maximize representativeness. The respondents included 27 male teachers and 57 females, the qualifications they held varied from bachelor's degrees to doctorates, and their teaching experience ranged from five to more than 20 years.

**Table 1**  
***Demographics of the Questionnaire Respondents (N = 84)***

Variables		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	27	32.1%
	Female	57	67.9%
Qualification	Ph.D	3	3.6%
	M.A.	49	58.3%
	B.A.	32	38.1%
Teaching Experience (Years)	< 5	16	19.0%
	5-9	18	21.4%
	10-15	20	23.8%
	15-20	18	21.4%
	> 20	12	14.3%
Main Target Students	Non-English majors	20	23.8%
	English majors	64	76.2%

Seven participants subsequently volunteered to be interviewed. Of the seven, five held an MA degree and two held a BA degree in English teaching. Two were male, and five were female. Their experience ranged from five to 18 years. One of them had earned an MA abroad.

## Findings

### Teachers' Beliefs About Learner Autonomy

Table 2 shows that the teachers of English concurred with the psychological view ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = .583$ ) and the social view of LA ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = .520$ ). Their beliefs were less in line with the technical and political perspectives of LA ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = .565$ ;  $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = .449$ ). The table in the appendix further reveals their beliefs in detail. Psychologically, they believed that learning strategies and self-evaluation skills promote LA; 89.3% thought that “learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy” (Statement 13), while 82.1% believed that autonomous learners need to be able to self-evaluate (Statement 12). From the social perspective, over 83% of the teachers agreed that group work activities (Statement 10) and opportunities for learning from one another (Statement 9) contribute to the development of learner autonomy.

**Table 2**  
***Teachers' Beliefs About Learner Autonomy***

	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b><i>Min.</i></b>	<b><i>Max.</i></b>	<b><i>Mean</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>
Psychological view	84	2.25	5.00	4.05	.583
Technical view	84	2.00	4.80	3.65	.565
Social view	84	2.00	5.00	3.92	.520
Political view	84	2.40	4.60	3.72	.449

(1 = completely disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = unsure, 4 = agree, 5 = completely agree)

The teachers' view of LA as learner choices and decisions about what and how to learn in general was less strong. The majority (77.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that "autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn" (Statement 1), and 86.9% concurred with the idea of choices of learning activities as promoting LA (Statement 2). In addition, 61.9% and 77.4% of teachers believed that the choices of learning materials (Statement 3) and in what they learn (Statement 4) encourage LA.

The technical view of LA was split. Nearly 50% and 60% of the teachers stated that independent learning outside the classroom (Statement 5) and self-access to learning resources (Statement 6) respectively develop LA. On the other hand, 82% of them believed that independent study at a library promotes LA (Statement 7).

In the interviews, the teachers tended to report views related to the learning process which were both psychologically and socially driven. For example, two teachers said:

Learner autonomy is a process in which learners know what to learn, what goals they aim at, and how to evaluate their own learning. (Teacher 1)

Learner autonomy means the ability to learn by oneself. Apart from participating in class activities, they can learn by themselves and work together with a group. (Teacher 2)

### **Learner Autonomy and Related Factors**

Table 3 shows the relationship between LA and related factors. As indicated, the teachers were positive about the ability of both adults and children to develop LA, the potentiality of learners of all cultural backgrounds to develop LA, and the teacher's crucial role in fostering LA. They expressed agreement with the impact of LA on students' learning. However, the teachers were generally unsure about the

relationship between learner proficiency levels and the level of LA ( $M = 2.97, SD = .56$ ), and that between a learner-centered teaching approach and development of LA ( $M = 3.23, SD = .66$ ).

**Table 3**  
***Teachers' Beliefs About LA in Relation to Other Factors***

<b>Relationships</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
LA-Culture	2.00	4.67	3.42	.53
LA-Teacher role	2.50	4.50	3.44	.44
LA-Age	2.00	5.00	3.84	.62
LA-English proficiency	1.67	4.33	2.97	.56
LA-Learning achievements	2.33	5.00	4.02	.67
LA-Teaching approach	1.67	4.33	3.23	.66

(1 = completely disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = unsure, 4 = agree, 5 = completely agree)

Table 4 further outlines the teachers' beliefs about the impact of teaching approaches on LA. Nearly 74% strongly agreed or agreed with the idea that learner-centered teaching creates favourable conditions for LA to develop, whereas 34.6% strongly disagreed or disagreed with, and 25% were unsure about the rejection of a teacher-centered teaching style when LA is promoted. A relatively high proportion of teachers (47.6%) doubted that learner autonomy cannot develop when the teacher-centered approach is practiced, whereas 19% of them were undecided about this.



**Table 4**  
**Teachers' Beliefs About the Teaching Approach in Relation to LA by Percentage**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
LA implies that traditional teacher-led ways of teaching are rejected.	4.8	35.7	25	31	3.6
Learner-centred classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing LA.	23.8	50	17.9	8.3	0
LA cannot develop in teacher-centred classrooms.	2.4	31	19	32.1	15.5

All the interviewees agreed about the vital role of the teacher in fostering LA. Particularly, they stressed students' need for guidance and support in learning strategies, selection of learning materials, and instructions on how to self-regulate and manage their learning. Below are some examples from the interviews.

The teacher needs to set a good model, encourage students, and inspire them regularly. (Teacher 3)

In developing LA, the teacher accounts for 60% of responsibility. (Teacher 4)

The teacher needs to motivate them, and guide them to self-evaluate their own learning. (Teacher 5)

Concerning proficiency level, only three of the teachers interviewed contended that high proficiency students tend to be more autonomous than low-proficiency students, and that through exercising LA, these students had achieved better results.

### Desirability and Feasibility of Promoting Learner Autonomy

**Granting control.** Figure 1 indicates the teachers' general desire to grant students control of all aspects of learning and teaching ( $M =$  approx. 3.0). However, the feasibility of doing so was relatively low ( $M = 2.25-2.61$ ). Three of the aspects thought to be more feasible involved decisions about topics, materials for learning, and classroom activities.

However, students' participation in decision-making about teaching methods, assessment methods, and the learning objectives was viewed to be less feasible.

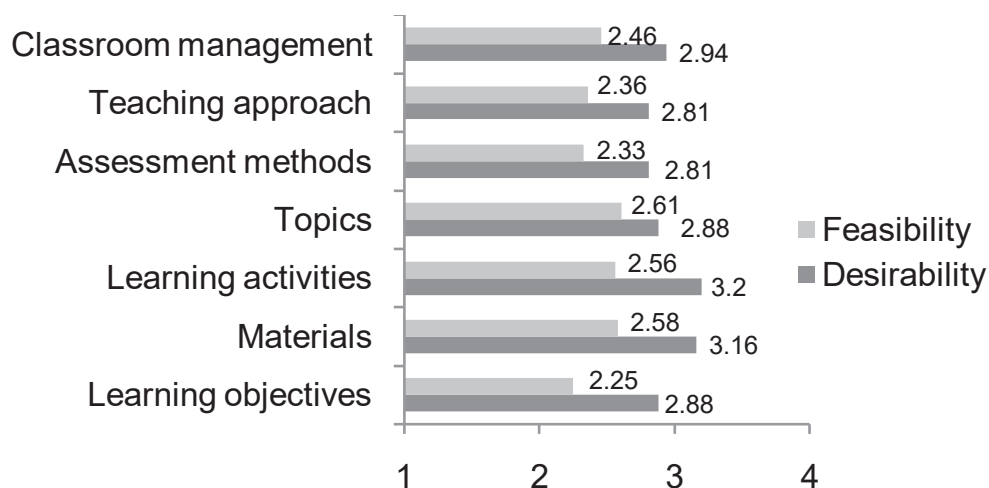


Figure 1. Desirability and feasibility of promoting LA (1 = not desirable / feasible, 4 = very desirable / feasible).

One interviewee, Teacher 3, reported that teachers should involve students in making decisions so that teaching meets students' needs, which in turn motivates them to study. Teacher 7 said, "Students should have a chance to take charge of their learning, [so they] can develop autonomy and creativity." The following explanations were provided for the feasibility of students' making decisions on learning objectives and materials.

The learning objectives derive from the curriculum framework which is top-down by nature. In fact, in class the students have no right to this choice, but they can choose learning materials for their own out-of-class study plan. (Teacher 6)

Due to students' passive attitude toward learning, when they are required to give their opinions, they do not know what to say and dare not give their own opinions. (Teacher 7)

Students have no sufficient knowledge and ability to make decisions and choices of learning objectives and materials, so if this were done, it would be only for the teacher's reference. (Teacher 5)

The last two comments are consistent with the teachers' perception of their students' autonomy reported in the questionnaire as shown in Table 5, where 57.3% thought that their students have a

fair degree of autonomy. Meanwhile, 20.2% were unsure, and 21.5% strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement.

**Table 5**  
**Teachers' Beliefs About Students' Level of Learner Autonomy and Their Reported Practice by Percentage**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
In general, the English students I teach most often at my institution have a fair degree of learner autonomy.	7.1	51.2	20.2	17.9	3.6
In general, in teaching English at my institution, I give my English majored students opportunities to develop learner autonomy.	66.7	28.5	0	2.4	2.4

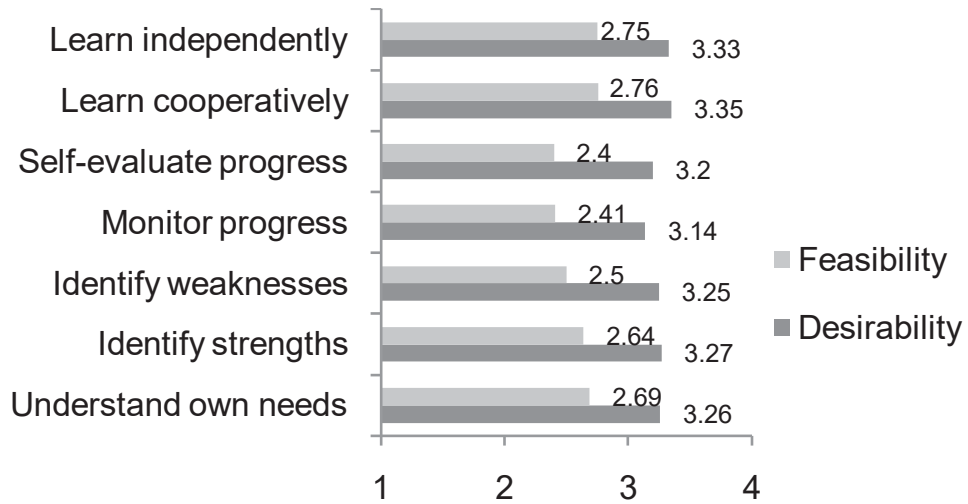
Findings from the interviews showed that students' choice of learning activities in the classroom was believed to be feasible for some reasons. Teacher 1 stated that it was "because learning activities are directly related to and desired by the students." Furthermore, participation in such decision-making "provides feedback to the teachers so that they can adapt teaching to their students' needs," said Teacher 2. Another reason was that students could choose discussion topics since "the teacher can flexibly add further related topics to satisfy the students' needs apart from the topics in the curriculum" (Teacher 4).

All the interviewees admitted that it was less likely that students would be involved in making decisions about teaching methods, assessment, learning objectives, and progress evaluation because the students would lack confidence in doing this. In addition, the curriculum and learning objectives, rather than teachers or students, determined the procedures and criteria for assessment and evaluation.

### Developing Students' Abilities for Autonomy

The findings revealed that skills for LA were perceived to be more desirable than they were feasible. Figure 2 shows teachers believe it is highly desirable for students to have LA skills, whereas the teachers felt it less likely that students would develop these skills in their context. The average feasibility scores ranged from 2.4 to 2.76; the aspects perceived as the most feasible are development of abilities to learn independently and cooperatively with peers ( $M > 2.7$ ), and the

items seen as the least feasible are self-monitoring and self-evaluation of learning progress ( $M < 2.5$ ).



*Figure 2.* Desirability and feasibility of developing skills for LA (1 = not desirable / feasible, 4 = very desirable / feasible).

### Teachers' Reported Practices of Developing Learner Autonomy

The majority of teachers reported on the questionnaire that they created opportunities for their students to develop LA skills (Table 5). Various methods of promoting LA were reported in the questionnaire as well, but the following four ways were dominant: assigning homework and checking; giving students the opportunity do projects and make presentations, or other group work; raising students' awareness of and encouraging LA; and teaching how-to-learn skills and guiding students to choose learning materials. Engaging students in making choices and decisions about curricular aspects was rarely reported by the teachers.

**Table 6**  
***Teachers' Reported Practices in Developing LA***

<b>How</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Times Reported</b>
<b>Assessment</b>	Self-evaluation with a checklist	2
	Peer evaluation	1
	Giving homework and checking (e.g., checking vocabulary, grammar, reading online, preparing topics that will be taught)	17
<b>Teaching Methods</b>	Project, presentation, and other group work	12
	Decision making (e.g., discussing objectives and methods of learning, assessment at the beginning of a course)	2
	Giving choice (e.g., choosing favourite topics for presentations)	2
	Creating an e-learning environment	1
<b>Teaching how-to-learn skills</b>	Teaching how to learn / guiding students to choose materials for self-study	6
	Raising awareness of learner autonomy (e.g., reminding students of the importance of English learning, and encouraging further self-study)	10
	Encouraging students to deepen learning (e.g., searching for information or knowledge related to lessons)	2
<b>Others</b>	Doing nothing	1

In the interviews, most of the teachers reported that they encouraged students to do further work on their own outside the classroom or participate in group work in class. However, only two teachers touched on the idea of involving students in making choices and negotiating with them on topics for learning and materials; two other teachers reported encouraging students to determine their learning goals, make learning plans, and learn outside class time by preparing lessons in advance and using the Internet for research.

### Factors Perceived to Influence LA Promotion

The interview data revealed three groups of factors related to teachers, students, and work context. Concerning the teacher-related factors, adherence to the idea of teacher-centeredness was perceived to hinder development of LA. For example, Teacher 2 said, "Not only students but also teachers still think the teacher plays the most important role in the classroom."

The high teaching load and related documentation work may have further prevented many teachers from paying closer attention to students' development of learner autonomy. All seven interviewed teachers expressed concern about directly checking whether the students actually learned outside the classroom and expected this work to be paid if it was to be done properly.

Regarding student-related factors, students' attitudes toward exam-oriented learning and their learning habits were a hindrance. Teacher 3 explained that many students studied simply to achieve high grades rather than furthering their knowledge and skills, so they adopted a safe approach in completing what was assigned rather than taking an active approach to deepen their learning. This relates to their learning habits established from prior school experience: The students were viewed as being unprepared for active learning because, as Teacher 2 acknowledged, "they were not given chances to do so during their school years, and they were influenced by the view of the teacher as an authority deserving respect and obedience."

The students' low entry level in English further complicated the implementation of LA. Teacher 4 attributed the low proficiency to the students' lack of awareness of autonomous learning. She said students with a higher level of proficiency would be more active in their study than lower-level ones. Students' lack of skills in time management in planning and implementing their study was also reported as causing difficulty to the teachers in fostering LA.

Contextual factors such as the curriculum policy were considered to be influential in implementing autonomous learning as well. Most of the teachers expressed their belief that assessment could be a crucial measure for them to encourage students to learn actively. Two teachers from one of the universities stressed that their institution allowed them autonomy in assessing students, which gave them more opportunities to encourage students to study outside the classroom to prepare for presentations or do assignments.

Overall, the data shows that despite acknowledging the value of LA and the desire to develop independent learning, most of the teachers seemed not to believe in their students' ability to be responsible for and control their own learning. Most reported creating opportunities for

students to develop LA through project work, presentations, discussion groups, yet they still believed that students' learning should be controlled by the teacher's regular inspection of homework. They rarely reported practices of making choices and negotiation as proposed in the literature as central to the concept of LA. Many factors were perceived to hinder the development of LA, including the teachers' beliefs in traditional teaching methods, their lack of trust in students' ability to learn autonomously, students' attitudes to learning, their learning habits established from prior schooling, and the workload undertaken by students.

### Discussion

Like many English teachers in other studies (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a, 2012b; Chan, 2003; Joshi, 2011), the Vietnamese English language teachers acknowledged the value of LA in language learning. However, their perception of the notion was driven by social and psychological perspectives, which focus on developing how-to-learn skills, self-monitoring and evaluating learning, and learning through cooperative group work. Their perception of LA in terms of making choices and decisions was less dominant than that of the teachers of English in Oman. This difference is probably due to the educational context. In Oman's Sultan Qaboos University Language Center, learner autonomy was clearly emphasized in the strategic educational goals, and support was provided in terms of facilities and resources for both teachers and learners. Alongside that, projects were built into courses as part of continuous assessment (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a), which could provide the stimulus for LA development. In contrast, the Vietnamese teachers in the study worked in institutions where the curriculum policy restricted them to some extent. Choices of educational materials and assessment were limited at some universities while teachers at others were granted more power to decide how to assess students' learning and to design their own teaching materials. In the study, some teachers reported using assessment to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning, although this was mainly in the form of quizzes and informal checking of homework (see Table 6).

Concurring with other research in Vietnam (T. N. Nguyen, 2014; T. V. Nguyen, 2011), this study found that the teachers showed a lack of trust in the ability of students to take ownership of their learning: the teachers saw themselves as the decision-makers in selecting and designing class activities and stated that their students lacked confidence in making decisions on their own learning process. This finding is consistent with reports of low self-confidence among

students in their ways of learning English (Van Loi, Chung, & Do, 2013).

Like Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b), the study additionally revealed a significant differentiation in teachers' judgments regarding the desirability and the feasibility in promoting the students' right to make decisions on the learning process and to develop self-learning skills related to autonomy. While expressing a relatively high level of desirability of enhancing LA, the Vietnamese teachers believed, as did those in Oman, that it was less feasible to allow students to participate in decisions related to curricular goals and assessment. This perception is possibly due to the teachers' lack of autonomy, their confidence in their students' ability, and the context which imposed a top-down curriculum like that of Vietnam.

In developing the capabilities for LA, this current research has shown similar findings as revealed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b). The majority of teachers firmly desire that their students develop LA skills such as setting goals, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, monitoring their learning, reflecting on and self-assessing learning outcomes. Nevertheless, compared to their Omani counterparts, they feel it is less feasible to develop such abilities in the Vietnamese students, especially the abilities of students to self-monitor and evaluate their progress, than the other skills. These findings seem consistent with the teachers' orientation toward the psychological view of LA.

However, from the teachers' viewpoint, students would need plenty of time to change their learning habits, especially to reduce reliance on their teachers so as to undertake independent learning. In fact, as argued in various studies in Vietnam, teaching methods which allow students to make choices of and self-direct their learning activities as well as self-assess their learning through reflection are effective for fostering autonomy (T. V. Nguyen, 2011; Trinh, 2005, 2010). Such practices, nonetheless, were rarely undertaken by the teachers in this study. This poses the question of their feasibility in this context.

Several important factors could contribute to shaping the teachers' beliefs and practices of LA. First, the teaching practice of many teachers has not changed towards a learner-centered style. Some teachers even assumed that it is the students' business to be aware of, active in, and responsible for their own learning (see Table 6, appendix). This reveals the teachers' insufficient awareness of the importance of their role in stimulating students to actively participate in learning (T. N. Nguyen, 2014; T. V. Nguyen, 2011). Despite the reported sentiments, few of the teachers in this study seem to have adopted a genuinely learner-centered approach.



The second factor relates to students' attitudes towards learning English, which could result from the effects of passive learning habits previously acquired in primary and secondary education. Probably because of this, most teachers reported lack of confidence in their students' capacity to take control of their learning, which in turn prevented them from granting students control. However, it has been noted that teachers may conceptualize autonomy simply as shifting power to students, which poses a potential threat to their authority (Benson & Voller, 1997). Consequently, they may have hesitated to hand control over to students, thereby restricting conditions for fostering autonomy (Breen & Mann, 1997, as cited in Benson, 2011).

Another contributing factor is the high workload for students that LA would entail. As expressed by most of the interviewed teachers, considerable pressure would be put on students if more responsibility were shifted to them through presentations, project work, or other group activities. Furthermore, the teachers' reluctance towards giving students more control may have been due to the current curriculum policy in which choice and decision-making are not encouraged.

To promote LA, teachers must initially be autonomous in their teaching (McGrath, 2000, as cited in Benson, 2011); however, institutional constraints can severely prevent teachers from shifting control to learners (Benson, 2011). Vietnamese teachers of English are to some extent constrained by curricular guidelines and assessment. Despite the numerous examples of successful practices reported within similar constraints (e.g., Dam, 1995, as cited in Palfreyman, 2003; Huttunen, 1988, as cited in Palfreyman, 2003; Trinh, 2010), these Vietnamese teachers' lack of awareness of how to develop LA, coordinated with their beliefs about teaching, could have played a role in their current beliefs and practices of LA.

A discourse of LA is also essential to the fostering of autonomy (Palfreyman, 2003). The absence of this discourse in effect may have led to inadequate emphasis on LA (Crabbe, 1993, as cited in Benson, 2011) in the contexts where this study was conducted. For example, the teachers at one of the universities in this study were pushed to change their teaching methods towards developing students' ability to undertake independent learning, but the university failed to provide a guideline of what it means and how it can be promoted. This lack of a common conceptual understanding and guidelines on how to foster LA may have also contributed to shaping the beliefs and practices of the teachers in this study.

### Local Implications

The study suggests the need to further develop Vietnamese teachers' beliefs regarding LA. To promote LA, firstly, there is a need to raise Vietnamese teachers' awareness of the concept. Local professional workshops to support teachers of English to better understand why and how to foster autonomy are essential so as to create a discourse of LA among them. Secondly, professional development should emphasize feasible measures to foster LA and especially give teachers greater opportunities to reflect on and amend their current beliefs and practices (see Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a). The misconception that students have to take full responsibility for their learning without the support of teachers should also be tackled. In addition to equipping students with study skills and teamwork skills through learning activities, teachers of English should aim to gradually hand control over to students. Teachers also need to be aware that it is the educational environment, not learners' inability that prevents them from undertaking autonomy (Trinh, 2005). Teacher autonomy in assessment, which emerged in the study, seems to have assisted some teachers in implementing LA. This suggests that when given more autonomy to decide their own methods of assessment for their classes, teachers may be more likely to implement measures to foster LA.

### Conclusion

Given the complexity and diversity of LA (Benson & Voller, 1997), this chapter has contributed further understanding of LA by capturing a picture of Vietnamese tertiary English teachers' beliefs and reported practices about the concept. Central to the chapter is the idea that no matter how universal the concept of LA is, the way it is interpreted and practiced is embedded in the sociocultural context and will therefore be better addressed by mediating with teachers' (and learners') beliefs situated in that particular context. Perhaps one of the approaches to making LA feasible is to enhance systematic support for both teachers and learners through professional development workshops and tutorials, and thus create a communal discourse of LA. As Benson (this volume) noted, "teachers' commitment to make a pedagogical experiment work can often be a major factor in its success." While this study concurs with other investigations into LA in Vietnam in several findings, it has revealed that the Vietnamese English teachers' view and practice of LA as choice and decision-making are lesser than ones driven by psychological and social processes, and such views are mediated by several factors. However, due to the small number of participants and universities, the findings are not generalizable. Further research, therefore, is necessary to gain further understanding

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of how LA is viewed and practiced in other contexts, and sampling should be carefully done so as to avoid what Benson (this volume) called the “consensus view.” Such research particularly can inquire into how teachers undergo change in their understanding of the concept, and how they foster learner autonomy. Narrative frames (see Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; Nguyen & Bygate, 2012) and reflections could be exploited in such research. Researching autonomy from the perspectives of learners would further offer insights into how best to implement learner autonomy in the context.

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## Appendix

### Statistics of Belief Statements about Learner Autonomy by View

<b>Views</b>	<b>Statements</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>DA</b>	<b>SD</b>
Political view	1. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	28.6	48.8	15.5	6.0	1.2
	2. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do.	19	67.9	9.5	3.6	0
	3. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.	7.1	54.8	23.8	13.1	1.2
	4. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.	15.5	61.9	15.5	7.1	0
Technical view	5. Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.	11.9	36.9	28.6	20.2	2.4
	6. Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access centre.	9.5	50	26.2	14.3	0
	7. Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy.	39.3	42.9	10.7	2.4	4.8
Social view	8. Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.	17.9	61.9	9.5	9.5	1.2
	9. Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.	31	56	8.3	4.8	0

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	10. Cooperative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy.	22.6	60.7	8.3	6	2.4
Psycho-logical view	11. The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.	23.8	46.4	21.4	8.3	0
	12. To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	32.1	50	13.1	4.8	0
	13. Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.	36.9	52.4	6.0	3.6	1.2
LA-learning effective-ness	14. Learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would.	36.9	41.7	16.7	4.8	0
	15. Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners.	25	34.5	26.2	11.9	2.4
	16. Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner.	52.4	33.3	8.3	3.6	2.4

Note: SA = strongly agree, A = agree, U = unsure, DA = disagree, SD = strongly disagree

## Chapter 2

### Developing Learner Autonomy: Chinese University EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practices

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Learner autonomy (LA) is a key goal for tertiary EFL learning in China, yet teachers' understanding of this concept has remained obscure. This study investigated 44 Chinese university EFL teachers' perceptions and practices about LA. Data were collected through a questionnaire, interviews and LA-focused workshops. The findings showed that teachers understood the basic features of LA and to some extent said they implemented LA in their practices, yet those who implemented it were inhibited by various contextual challenges regarding students, teachers, the institution, and Chinese culture. The LA-focused workshops were found beneficial in enhancing teachers' understanding of the notion as well as its practical applications. The study calls for further explorations of teachers' awareness of the cultural aspects of LA and the extent of contextual constraints. It proposes a continual teacher support mechanism in the form of a virtual teacher learning community.

#### Learner Autonomy in Chinese Education

This chapter describes a project exploring English teachers' practices and perceptions about developing learner autonomy (hereafter LA) in a Chinese university. English is a compulsory course in tertiary education across China, and learner autonomy is mandated as a key goal in curricular syllabuses for both English major and non-English major students (Ministry of Education, 2004; National Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board, 2000). In such contexts, various teaching reforms and research projects have been conducted regarding enhancing learner autonomy. However, studies of English teachers' understanding of the concept of LA have been as scarce in China as



elsewhere in the world (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a). The chapter starts with a brief literature review of learner autonomy research in China and follows with the research questions, setting, and participants as well as data collection procedures of the study. Findings are then presented and discussed based on which practical implications were suggested for promoting as well as researching LA in the Chinese context and beyond.

The concept of LA was first brought into the language education field in China as a key element of student-centered learning in 1985 (Du & Sun, 1986), yet research in this area did not develop until the turn of the century, when a number of Chinese scholars proposed LA as a Western concept of potential relevance to Chinese education (Hua, 2002; Pang, 2001; Wei, 2002). These works laid the contemporary LA knowledge base among Chinese language education academia, through which seminal Western concepts about LA became known, for example, Holec (1981), Dickinson (1987), Little (1991), Zimmerman and Schunk (1989), Benson and Voller (1997), and Benson (2011).

Although introduced as Western concept, LA has its origins in traditional Chinese culture as well as educational philosophy. Pang and Xue (2001) pointed out that the concept of self-instruction or self-discovery / acquisition was well-advocated and applied in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, which embraced such crucial elements for learning as goal-setting, thinking while learning, and being inquisitive and reflective. Xu and Zhu (2014) added that the essence of LA was also embedded in modern education theories; for example, Yu Ziyi's emphasis on the willingness for learning (Dong & Dong, 2008), Chen Heqin's maxim of "learning in doing" (Zhang & Dai, 2006, p. 15) and Ye Shengtao's vision of "to teach in order not to teach" (Qin, 2008, p. 3). Moreover, Chen Heqin and Ye Shengtao emphasized the teacher's roles as guide, supporter, and facilitator in genuine education (Qin, 2008; Zhang & Dai, 2006).

A few modern Chinese educators have provided their own interpretations of LA. Yu (2001) used the term *zì zhǔ xué xī* (autonomous learning) and defined it as learner-directed rather than directed by teachers or others. He elaborated the term from four dimensions - learners acting on initiative, independent learning prior to teachers' instruction, addressing individual differences, and whole-person education. Pang (2001) proposed horizontal and vertical perspectives of LA, the former emphasizing learners consciously making decisions on all aspects of their learning, and the latter on the dynamic and continual nature of such decision-making behaviors such as setting a goal, making a plan, monitoring progress and adjusting the plan (p. 37). Pang (2001) further highlighted four essential elements in LA,

comprising learners' agency, willingness for learning, knowing how to learn, and learning persistently.

A milestone of LA in Chinese language education was the release in 2004 of the national guideline for tertiary English education, entitled "College English Curriculum Requirements (trial)" (Ministry of Education, 2004). The Requirements stated explicitly the aim of the language teaching reform for more personalized approaches to learning and better learner autonomy (Ministry of Education, 2004). For the implementation of the reform, the Requirements highlighted the importance of changing teachers' classroom practice as well as their underpinning pedagogical beliefs and shifting the instructional control from teachers to students so as to foster students' capacity for language application and autonomous learning (Ministry of Education, 2004).

The release of the Requirements brought along a proliferation in LA-oriented teaching reforms and research after 2004. Firstly, conceptual discussion continued; for example, Xu (2007) defined LA in the Chinese context of the time as learners making their own plans, selecting their learning materials, monitoring the learning process, and assessing their own learning. Secondly, there has been a gradual increase in empirical studies of LA which have investigated such areas as approaches to LA, learners' awareness and beliefs, teachers' roles, and constraints and challenges for the development of LA (Ren, 2010). However, problems and limitations were detected in both the promotion of the idea and the corresponding research. Chen (2006, p. 32) warned against the "blind tendency" to rush into implementing LA, and Ren's (2010) review showed that the existing empirical studies largely depended on quantitative data such as that derived from experiments and surveys. Yin (2014) further pointed out that findings of some studies were hardly convincing; for example, some studies stated that experiments were conducted, yet no systematic analysis was demonstrated or specific data provided as sound evidence.

Teachers' understanding of the notion of LA has not yet received much attention in China. Despite the fact that LA research was a focal topic in Shu and Hua's (2009) review of the language education development in China in the past 60 years, teachers' understanding about LA was not identified either on their studied or their to-be-studied lists. As to empirical studies of this issue, a review of the key Chinese journals in the foreign language category showed no results, and Ding (2013) is the only study found in a wider search of all CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) journals. Ding (2013) examined university English teachers' cognition about LA based on 108 questionnaire responses and 16 interviews. Findings showed that the teachers generally understood and supported the concept, although

they had difficulties in implementing the idea due to various constraints in relation to the teachers themselves, students, and the institutions. Ding's (2013) study was an important contribution to the LA research in China in that it identified this unstudied area and provided some basic understanding of this issue. However, given the large English teaching community in China, one single study is necessarily insufficient to address this gap. The current study attempts to lessen the gap to a limited extent.

In summary, this review shows that: LA has deep origins in traditional culture as well as modern education philosophy in China; LA was recently introduced into the Chinese language education field primarily as a Western idea; LA was mandated as a key curriculum goal for Chinese tertiary English education, and this has resulted in the growth of LA research in China; and empirical studies on Chinese teachers' understanding of the concept of LA have been scarce.

### **The Present Study**

On the basis of the above review, this study investigated the following research questions:

1. How do a group of Chinese university EFL teachers perceive the notion of LA and its impact on language learning?
2. What practices do the teachers report regarding the development of LA in their classrooms?
3. How do the teachers perceive the desirability and feasibility of implementing LA in the given context?
4. How do LA-focused professional development workshops affect the teachers' perceptions and practices regarding the development of LA?

### **Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted in the Faculty of Foreign Languages of a national university (referred to as LGU) in northern China. Ethical approval was sought and gained from the faculty's Academic Committee and expressions of interest were solicited on the faculty's intranet. Forty-seven teachers, or approximately half of the English language teachers in the faculty, volunteered to participate in the project. Three were excluded for analysis due to incompleteness. All participants are Chinese nationals.

**Table 1**  
**Profile of Questionnaire Participants (n = 44)**

Gender	M	F			
	25.0%	75.0%			
Teaching experience (years)	0-4	5-9	10-14	15-19	20+
	0.0%	18.2%	47.7%	15.9%	18.2%
Qualification	diploma	BA	MA	PhD	
	0.0%	6.8%	90.9%	2.3%	
Type of students taught	English majors	Non-English majors			
	34.1%	65.9%			

### Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data was collected by four means: a questionnaire, interviews, LA-focused professional development workshops, and follow-up emails. Both the questionnaire and interview schedule adopted those of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b) with minor changes regarding the participants' profile information and contextual situations (see the Appendix to the editorial introduction to this volume). The questionnaire was translated as well as cross-checked by both researchers, and then piloted with colleagues. Delivery was conducted in a bilingual version both online and through hard copies, which generated a total number of 47 responses.

The interview participants comprised ten teachers, who were selected from the eighteen questionnaire respondents who had expressed interest in further participation, with consideration of the type of students they taught, years of teaching, and gender (see Table 2). The chosen interviewees approximately represented the overall composition of the questionnaire respondents. The interviews were conducted mainly in the Chinese language, as preferred by the interviewees, and by two means: face-to-face communication and QQ Voice Chat. The interviews were recorded, and summaries were provided afterwards for respondent validation. The recordings were stored, transcribed, and then imported into *NVivo 10* for analysis.

**Table 2**  
***Profile of Interview Participants***

Participants	Gender	Level of education	Years of teaching	Type of students taught
Xiao	F	MA	24	Non-English majors
Ling	F	MA	19	Non-English majors
Hong	F	MA	15	Non-English majors
Dong	M	MA	14	Non-English majors
Shun	M	MA	14	Non-English majors
Qing	F	MA	12	Non-English majors
Yuan	F	MA	8	Non-English majors
Mu	M	MA	14	English majors
Peng	F	MA	18	English majors
Mei	F	MA	7	Both

Following the interviews, four professional development workshops were organized with the ten teachers. The first two workshops focused on teachers' understanding of the concept of LA and its applications in the given context, and the last two concerned possible LA reflective practices as well as ideas for action research. In terms of the manner in which the workshops were conducted, while Workshops 1 and 2 were administered physically at LGU by the researchers, Workshops 3 and 4 encouraged autonomous and collaborative development, and videoed presentations, PowerPoint slides, and task worksheets were provided by the researchers. The working language throughout all workshops was English as the workshops were facilitated by a visiting British researcher. All the materials created for and used in the workshops were saved and collected. Follow-up emails were sent to elicit participants' feedback on these workshops.

### **Data Analysis**

The questionnaire results were analyzed initially through MS Excel. Analysis of the other data was conducted through *NVivo 10*, adopting a grounded approach (Charmaz, 2006) which went through a systematic process of coding, categorizing, and employing the constant comparative method. Triangulation was implemented within and across data from multiple sources.

### Findings

Table 3 presents the questionnaire results in relation to the understanding of the concept of LA in reference to the four aspects of LA raised by Benson (1997) and Oxford (2003).

**Table 3**  
***Teachers' Understanding of the Four Aspects of LA***

Aspects of LA	Indicator items	Mean
Psychological	11, 29, 32, 33, and 37	4.19
Political	4, 7, 14, 22, and 27	3.84
Social	16, 19, 25, and 28	4.10
Technical	2, 6, 21, and 31	3.89

As shown above, the psychological orientation was the most widely selected aspect, and the indicator items are those selected by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b, p. 14). However, as these authors did not specify which items indicated the other three dimensions, in the current study, the selection was based on the researchers' interpretation of the relevant items. Because the mean value of each aspect obviously depends on the items that are identified as specific indicators, it is difficult to make comparisons between their study and the present one in order to interpret LA from these three aspects.

The interview responses to the definition of LA did not reflect all the above dimensions. Two recurrent themes were learners learning on their initiative and taking control of various aspects of learning, from setting goals to assessing the learning outcomes. By the former, the teachers emphasized an active rather than passive learning attitude, and by the latter, they stressed the actual learning behaviors. Although in the questionnaire the social aspect of LA was the second most understood aspect, this was not reflected in the interviews. Rather, an individualistic view of LA was detected in that the word *zi ji* (literal translation: oneself or one's own) was used repeatedly by most teachers. Regarding the technical dimension, the main point raised was students' use of Internet resources for their learning. The quotations below from the interviews illustrated these points:

I think it's students having the ability to learn by themselves.  
(Peng)

I think LA is that learners take initiative for their own learning, not forced by teachers, responsible for his or her own learning, self-management, and self-decision-making. (Ling)

LA means that learners know their own aims, have their own learning methods, control their learning pace, and assess their own learning outcomes. (Mei)

LA means students are able to complete tasks independently, using various resources including Internet resources and knowing appropriate methods. (Xiao)

Regarding the impact of LA on language learning, the teachers' questionnaire responses were overwhelmingly positive. Specifically, 97.7% of the teachers agreed / strongly agreed on the positive effect of LA, and 95.5% believed that "LA allows language learners to learn more effectively." In the subsequent interviews, the teachers further stressed the significance of LA in general learning and lifelong personal development as well as in the fulfillment of individual needs and adaptation to changes. However, the data also showed that LA is not necessarily always perceived as essential for effective language learning; 18.2% disagreed / strongly disagreed that "individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners," and 15.9% were unsure.

### **Teachers' LA-Oriented Practices**

With regard to teachers' practices oriented towards LA, the majority of the teachers' questionnaire responses were positive: 88.6% felt they promoted LA with their students; 4.5% did not promote LA, and 6.8% were unsure. The responses to the open questions in the questionnaire and the follow-up interviews provided various examples of tasks and activities that the teachers used to foster LA; these are summarized as follows:

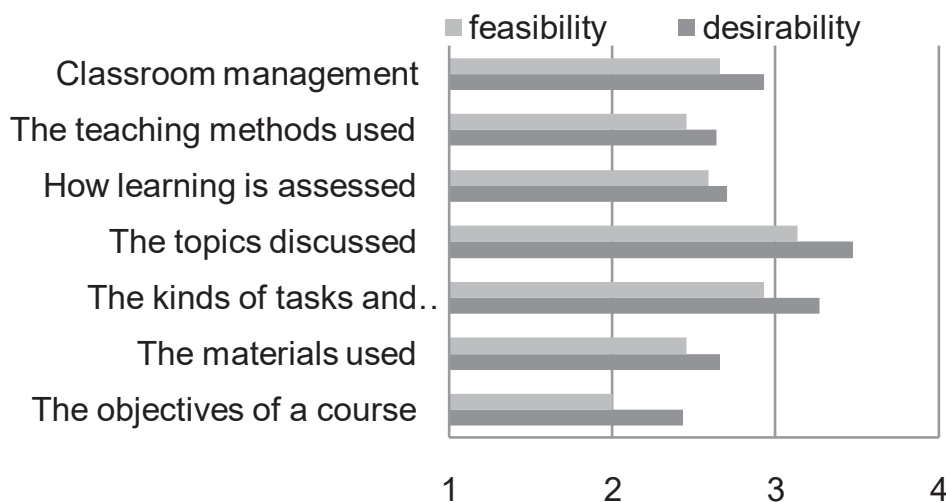
- getting students to research given topics in relation to classroom learning
- asking students to self-edit and / or peer-grade their writing
- using various forms of group work
- assigning students to teach textbook materials
- conducting unit quizzes
- assigning online work
- getting students to do free reading out of class and share in class
- organizing extracurricular activities (e.g., debates, speaking / singing / film dubbing contests, short plays)
- allowing opportunities for students to share learning experiences and methods
- recommending useful web sources and encouraging self-directed study
- talking to students about the importance of LA
- training students in autonomous learning strategies

Some teachers were more concerned with raising students' awareness of LA (e.g., talking to students about the importance of LA), while others cared more about the know-how of LA (e.g., training students in autonomous learning strategies), and some addressed autonomous learning behaviors (e.g., getting students to research given topics). Although the teachers claimed these tasks and activities were LA-oriented, the extent to which the teachers reported relinquishing control to students in these practices differed. Taking online learning as an example, the practice of recommending websites for self-directed learning seemed to allow more space for students' decision-making than getting students to do teacher-assigned online work did. In addition, data showed that although some teachers responded the same in the interview as in the questionnaire regarding the extent (e.g., agree / strongly agree) to which they provided opportunities for LA, their reported LA-oriented practices varied considerably in terms of quantity and variety, as well as depth. For example, Dong and Qing both said that they applied some practices to implement LA, yet Dong mainly just had students discuss given topics in class while Qing designed a variety of activities to accommodate students' individual needs within a semester as well as their developmental needs across semesters.

### **The Desirability and Feasibility of Promoting LA in LGU**

Figure 1 below shows the mean figures of the teachers' responses on the questionnaire about the desirability and feasibility of involving students in a range of language course decision making.

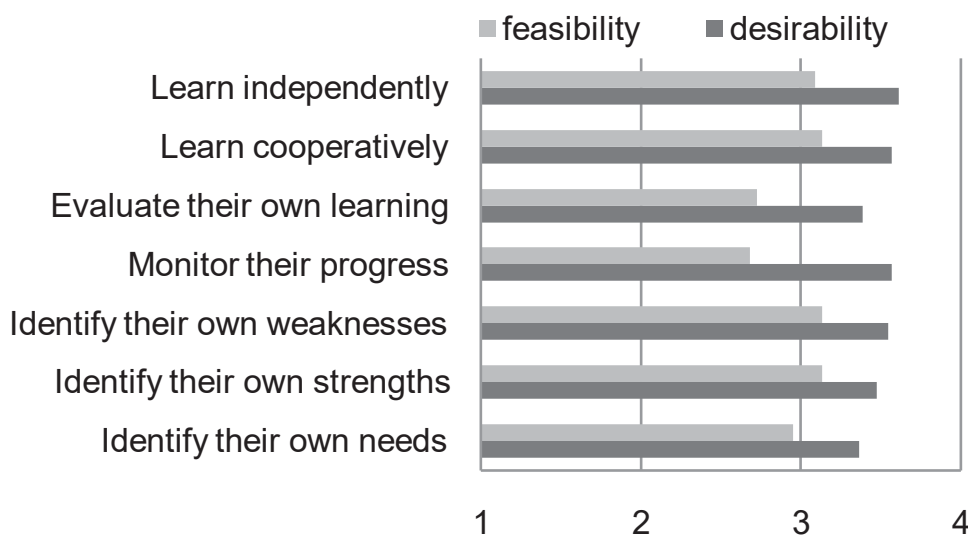




*Figure 1.* Desirability and feasibility of student involvement in decision making (1 = undesirable / unfeasible; 4 = very desirable / feasible)

Figure 1 reveals the general perception that all these ideas were more desirable than feasible, with the discussion topics and tasks and activities being the two strongest areas for students' decision-making in terms of both desirability and feasibility. On the other hand, the course objectives and teaching methods appeared to be the least desirable and feasible areas for students' decision-making.

Figure 2 below shows mean figures for the teachers' responses on the questionnaire regarding the desirability and feasibility of students having a series of autonomous learning skills.



*Figure 2.* Desirability and feasibility of learning to learn skills in students (1 = undesirable / unfeasible; 4 = very desirable / feasible)

Figure 2 shows an overall positive attitude of the teachers towards the desirability of students having all these skills. However, the correspondent feasibility of students having each skill was significantly lower, with monitoring and evaluating learning the two lowest.

The interview data revealed various constraints that affected the feasibility of promoting LA in LGU. These factors fell into four main categories involving students, teachers, the institution, and Chinese culture. Regarding students, a prominent issue shared among the teachers concerned their students' poor attitude towards English learning. The teachers reported that "many students, especially the large number of non-English majors, had very low motivation because they neither liked English nor viewed it useful for future development" (Mei). Consequently, and unsurprisingly, these students appeared "passive, aimless, and perfunctory" (Mei). In addition, many students showed "lack of general study skills, [e.g., poor time management], or had misbeliefs about language learning, [e.g., seeing language learning simply as memorizing vocabulary]" (Yuan).

In terms of the institutional factors, commonly identified issues included administrators' lack of understanding of LA or LA-encouraging policies, strictly-fixed syllabuses and regulations which limited teaching autonomy, large class sizes which hindered catering for individual needs, insufficient / user-unfriendly resources and facilities, as well as lack of teacher / student training opportunities for LA. While pointing out the various external factors above, the teachers also admitted internal hindrances with themselves involving both understanding the concept and practical skills for its implementation (Ling) as well as willingness to make and persevere in a long-term investment of extra time and energy demanded for good LA practices (Qing).

Noticeably, an issue was detected intertwining the three internal aspects mentioned above which pointed to Chinese cultural influences. A commonly-heard point was that "Chinese students are used to passively listening to teachers, being spoon-fed, and concentrating too much on exams" (Dong). This finding conflicted with the questionnaire result that showed high agreement (86.36%) with the statement that "LA can be achieved by learners of all cultural backgrounds." Also, the teachers held that "Chinese teachers are familiar with the traditional teacher-fronted approach, therefore often dominate the class unconsciously" (Xiao). Additionally, one teacher pointed out that "there exists a common concern among Chinese administrators for stability and secureness, which, at least to some extent, has inhibited the experimental nature of innovatory projects" (Mu).

### **Impact of the LA-Focused Professional Development Workshops**

Feedback collected both at the time of the workshops and from the follow-up emails showed that the workshops had a positive impact on teachers' understanding and practices about LA, as well as the extent of their research engagement in this regard.

Firstly, teachers' understanding about the concept was enhanced to some extent. Some teachers developed different ideas about LA from what they held before and some had deeper insights and more critical perceptions. For example, Mei wrote that

These workshops make me rethink what learner autonomy is. It does not just mean studying all by oneself, it's more about genuinely taking responsibility. Teachers must consider what roles they should play, [and] when and how to play the different roles. It's an ever-changing dynamic process.

Secondly, the workshops also contributed in a positive way to enhancing the teachers' practices of developing LA. Some admitted that they had better understanding about their existing practices, and some planned new actions or made modifications to their on-going implementation. For example, Qing commented that the workshops helped her understand her own practices as well as those of her colleagues, including LA-oriented strategies and contextual challenges. Yuan said "I learned that group division plays an important role in the effectiveness of group work, so next semester I will re-group my students, with more consideration about differences in a group." Hong wrote that "speaking is not the only way for presentation, and group-work is not just limited to speaking activities, and speaking is not the only way to share opinions." Peng decided to ask her students to write reflective journals for the next semester and she herself would do a reflective teaching journal.

Finally and most importantly, the workshops developed teachers' ideas of research engagement regarding LA, particularly in such aspects as awareness, confidence, research ideas and methodological considerations. The quotations below illustrated this point:

I used to just think about teaching, like a teaching machine, not having the awareness of linking my practice with doing research.  
(Qing)

Seeing some of what the research experts are doing is what I'm doing. This builds up my confidence to continue my minor research about LA. (Peng)

They provided me some primary knowledge about action research and reflective practice. I began to feel like I want to do one. (Ling)

Being more aware of the necessity of linking practice with research, some teachers developed new ideas about future research; for example, an action research on teachers' changing roles in the development of LA (Mei); a comparative study of developing LA in a national university and a provincial university (Qing); developing LA through students' reflective journals (Hong); improving teachers' LA-oriented practice by a reflective teaching journal (Peng). Some teachers made modifications to their on-going research projects. Furthermore, some teachers developed a more critical awareness of data collection methods. For example, Ling added interviews to supplement her previous survey study on promoting learner autonomy through formative assessments. She also became more cautious of the trustworthiness of the data when reading overwhelmingly positive feedback from her students.

### Discussions and Implications

The findings of the LGU teachers' general understanding of the concept of LA aligned with those prevalent in the existing LA literature (Benson, 2001, 2011) containing such key ideas as "learners taking responsibility or control" and "making decisions." The teachers' support for the four aspects of LA differed from Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012b) findings, with the social orientation more supported than the political in the former and an opposite result in the latter. While a possible reason for this disparity might be the different contexts in which these two studies were conducted, it could also be due - as mentioned above - to alternative questionnaire items being selected as indicators for each aspect.

Inconsistent findings arose from different data sources, for example, the mismatch between the questionnaire and the interviews regarding the social aspect, and the cultural influence on LA. These inconsistencies perhaps suggest that the teachers lacked a clear perception of these issues, but also point to the need for caution as to the reliability of the sole use of questionnaires to elicit teachers' beliefs. Further, the beliefs that the LGU teachers held about LA showed that LA was generally taken as a Western concept, with little indication of connection to Chinese educational philosophies embedded in traditional Chinese culture. This supported the concern that Shi and Zhou (2007) and Wu (2011) raised about a general tendency among Chinese EFL teachers to accept many Western concepts as authoritative without sufficient in-depth thinking about their origins

or connection to the local culture, and the need for the localization of Western theories.

Overall, the LGU teachers held a positive view of their practices of giving students opportunities for LA, and verbally provided various examples. However, due to the absence of observable evidence, the extent to which these practices were realized in actuality remained unknown. Regardless of this, the teachers' reported practices reflected some similar strategies as in other studies of teachers' LA practices (Al-Shaqsi, 2009; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012b), yet not much was seen as to raising students' awareness of LA or guiding them to reflect on learning. A gap was detected between the teachers' LA-encouraging practices and the beliefs they held; for example, there was more discussion than reported practices in such key areas as helping students to identify needs, set goals, or make plans. These findings suggest that while the teachers had a general understanding about the notion of LA, their pedagogical knowledge in relation to actual implementation needs to be further enhanced.

In comparison with the teachers' view of their LA-oriented practices, that of their students' ability to learn autonomously was less positive, and the students' limited ability to be autonomous learners was pointed out as a major challenge for the implementation of LA. These findings aligned with those of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b) and Ding (2013), but differed from the studies by Chan (2003) and Al-Shaqsi (2009), both of which held that teachers were generally positive about students' autonomous learning ability.

A certain degree of stereotyping did exist among some teachers that LA was hard to promote in the Chinese context. Although much has been discussed about the cultural appropriateness of LA (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003), and many have agreed that Chinese learners are no weaker than their Western correspondents (Zhang & Li, 2004), the cultural stereotype of Chinese students remains an issue which should be addressed.

Furthermore, various other hindrances for the development of LA were shared among the LGU teachers that were also found in other studies conducted in Asian contexts (Ding, 2013; Nakata, 2011). In reality, as no context is free of constraints at any time, the researchers concur with Benson (2007, 2011) in arguing that teachers should critically engage with situated constraints and re-conceptualize autonomy as a "useable" construct for the normal classroom condition.

In this volume, Benson raises the issues of "the personal relevance of learning and ownership of the language learned," and argues that "it is important that teachers who intend to foster autonomous learning attend to the personal relevance of the language that is being learned."

Bearing this in mind, perhaps some factors that the teachers claimed to be challenges in this study could well be turned into opportunities through which learners can be motivated and guided towards a more autonomous direction. For example, if passing exams and learning vocabulary and grammar are the meaningful choices and decisions relevant to students' own language learning, an important role that teachers can play is "guiding students towards resources and activities that will meet their personal learning goals" (Benson, this volume).

As Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a, 2012b) found, in the current study, the LA-focused professional development workshops enhanced, at least to some extent, teachers' understanding of the notion of LA as well as some specific operational skills. To monitor the progress of the workshops and ensure their completion, email contact with the participants was maintained during the following semester. This correspondence served four main functions: keeping the researcher-participant relationship warm; acknowledging ongoing participation and cooperation; seeking ongoing feedback, comments and advice; and offering further help and support for any subsequent LA-related classroom practices or action research. Regrettably, the teachers' enthusiasm for the discussion of the topic faded as time passed. While this was understandable in consideration of the teachers' normal busy schedules, a question arose regarding the extent to which the teachers could maintain their motivation for LA practices or innovation in their everyday classrooms. After further email discussions with some of the workshop teachers on this issue, a virtual teacher learning community (McGrath, 2000) was initiated and is developing. Further explanation of this virtual group is beyond the scope of this chapter.

### Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter presented a study of language teachers' beliefs and practices about developing LA in a Chinese university context. It answered four questions regarding teachers' understanding of the notion, its classroom implementation, the desirability and feasibility of promoting LA in the given context and the constraining factors, and LA-focused professional development workshops.

This was a small-scale case study, and the results cannot be generalized to the vastly diverse and complex educational context in China. Moreover, the lack of observed data for the teachers' classroom practices was a severe methodological limitation. Nevertheless, it was a detailed study of teachers' beliefs and reported practices about LA in that the investigation started with teachers' initial thinking about LA, went through the developmental journey of their engagement with LA both theoretically and practically, and eventually led them into further

thinking, practicing, and researching about LA. In this way, the study added to the existing LA research a picture of some Chinese university EFL teachers' engagement with this concept.

In addition, the study identified some methodological flaws with data collection and analysis, and made suggestions to remedy these for future research in this area. Furthermore, connections were built up between research and classroom practice about promoting LA through the professional development workshops. The connections are also to be strengthened through the proposed virtual community to create, explore, and maintain a spiral model of applying theories into practice in relation to the language teacher cognition research.

For bettering the implementation of LA, the study highlights the need for further enhancement of teachers' understanding of the concept, especially a critical, localized view of Western theories, the need for a changing attitude towards students' autonomous learning ability as well as towards the contextual challenges or constraints. To achieve this, continual teacher support is necessary and urgent.

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## Chapter 3

### Developing Autonomous Learners in Japan: Working with Teachers Through Professional Development

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Learner autonomy, commonly defined as learners taking responsibility for their own learning, is believed to improve motivation, engagement, and overall academic performance. However, the appropriateness of the concept has been contested in Asia, and the practices used for developing autonomy are considered to be highly contextualized. This paper reports on instructors' views regarding their students' readiness for autonomy, the practices used for developing learner autonomy, and the constraints on promoting learner autonomy in Japan. Data were collected and analyzed as English language and content university instructors discussed, reflected on, and promoted learner autonomy through a series of workshops, surveys, interviews, and curriculum development activities over two semesters. The results provide outlines for enhancing learner autonomy in Japan, while providing points of comparison with other Asian contexts. This paper, together with similar regional studies, can contribute to an overall theory of learner autonomy in Asia.

#### Learner Autonomy in Japan

Educational systems are culturally bound, and as a result, comparisons are often drawn between educational traditions and their impact on students, content, and methodologies in different countries. Japan has been subject to a significant amount of theorizing and comparison as the prototypical example of passive, harmonious Asian

culture in contrast to western cultures, often exemplified by the United States (Roesgaard, 1998). Discussions about education in Japan often begin with references to the culturally determined deference to authority and shyness or other such aspects of learner characteristics in Japan. Such characteristics are often deployed to explain the poor state of English proficiency in the country (Rundle, 2009; Stewart & Irie, 2012), which is evinced by Japan registering an average score which is consistently lower than that of most other countries in East and Southeast Asia for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (Educational Testing Service, 2015; Yoshida, 2009).

On the assumption that learner autonomy (LA) is rooted in western notions of individualism and freedom, much of the literature has tended to focus on the appropriateness of LA in Japan, or special forms of autonomy, such as reactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999). Another model suggested by a pioneer of LA in Japan is a continuum from weak pedagogies which assume that autonomy is a capacity that learners lack and must be trained in, to strong pedagogies which assume that learners are already somewhat autonomous and thus aim at “co-creating with students optimal conditions for the exercise of their own autonomy” (Smith, 2003, as cited in Benson, 2006, p. 24). Much of the scholarship in Japan on LA reviewed below tends to promote a strong pedagogy, mostly at the post-secondary level.

Similarly, most instructors who participated in this study at a private university in Tokyo, Japan conceptualized LA in terms suggesting strong pedagogies. However, over a series of workshops and interviews, they explored and discovered challenges to enhancing LA based not only on characteristics of their classrooms but also on their own attitudes. Through a process of collaborative dialogue, these instructors shared classroom-based activities, approaches, and conceptualizations of LA, and developed new perspectives as well.

Many accounts of Japanese post-secondary institutions paint a picture of disengaged students, free from high-stakes entrance examinations or any other academic pressures, and subject to the predominant transmission model of teaching, resulting in “schooling for silence” (Kelly, 1993; McVeigh, 2002, p. 96). Attributed to secondary school experience and / or groupist cultural orientation, post-secondary students are often reported to be passive rote-learners, unexpressive, uncritical, unable to generalize, and exam focused (McVeigh, 2002), with English language reduced to a puzzle to be solved in an exam, not a means of communication. To address such concerns, successive “courses of study,” top-down curriculum guidelines for K-12 from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports Science and Technology (MEXT), have aimed to shift traditional

grammar-translation instruction towards more communicative and student-centered approaches since the 1980s (Tahira, 2012). However, implementation of reforms has been severely constrained, most notably due to a backwash from a persistent focus on university entrance examinations throughout the secondary level (Aspinall, 2005; Rohlen, 1983; Stewart, 2009; Stewart & Irie, 2012), which stifles teacher autonomy, and thus LA (Nakata, 2011). Nevertheless, several vibrant networks aiming to promote LA in English language learning, predominantly in post-secondary contexts, have flourished.

The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) incorporates several special interest groups (SIGs) promoting LA approaches, the most prominent of which is the Learner Development SIG (LD SIG) (Barfield, 2014). Founding members started a newsletter in 1993 to share local and international ideas among practitioner-researchers in Japan (e.g., Aoki, 1994; Smith, 1994, 1995, 1997). Little and Dam (1998) elaborated on such ideas, which highlighted not individualism but rather interdependence and learning communities as foundations of LA, thus circumventing skepticism about the appropriateness of encouraging autonomy in Japan. They presented LA as a universal human drive for freedom, which in the classroom was freedom from teacher and curriculum constraints, and ultimately freedom to transcend limitations of personal heritage, that is, cultural and other expectations. Thus, they presented freedom and interdependence as traits that could provide the basis to form situationally appropriate classroom cultures where autonomy flourishes. Similarly, Aoki and Smith (1999) warned against deploying cultural stereotypes such as groupism to mask Japanese learners' aspirations for autonomy, emphasizing that LA was an educational goal, and any current incapacity of Japanese students should be considered transitional.

Shortly afterwards, a critical collaborative turn (Barfield, 2014) was marked by a major theory-building article by Murphey and Jacobs (2000), who emphasized autonomy as emerging from learner-centeredness achieved by collaboration among learners and teachers. The authors highlighted how cooperative learning hands responsibility to students for planning and carrying out their learning, encouraging positive interdependence and individual accountability. To address cultural and institutional contexts that may discourage students at first, they detail five movements. The first three, socialization (forming a community), dawning metacognition (reflecting on methods and collaboration), and initiating choice (selecting activities, assessment methods, roles) rely on constant communication. A consolidation period of expanding autonomy allows students to develop confidence at self-assessment and learning from near-peer role models, and is

finally followed by a move to critical collaborative autonomy, which involves critical analysis skills and assertively questioning ways of learning to avoid blind conformity to group norms.

Another milestone was the realization that teacher autonomy is a prerequisite for enabling learner autonomy, formulated as the “Shizuoka definition of teacher autonomy” (Barfield et al., 2002). A statement of possible characteristics of autonomous teachers rather than a definition (Smith, 2003), it begins:

Characterized by a recognition that teaching is always contextually situated, teacher autonomy is a continual process of inquiry into how teaching can best promote autonomous learning for learners. It involves understanding and making explicit the different constraints that a teacher may face, so that teachers can work collaboratively towards confronting constraints and transforming them into opportunities for change. (Barfield et al., 2002, p. 218)

In line with this definition, practitioner-researchers have published three collaborative anthologies detailing their inductive, exploratory efforts to develop autonomy among learners of English in Japan (Barfield & Nix, 2003; Irie & Stewart, 2012; Skier & Kohyama, 2006). These anthologies detailed how collaborative negotiation with students in the curriculum development process enhances a sense of ownership, satisfaction, and responsibility in language learning (Brown, 2012; Robertson, 2012; Stephenson & Kohyama, 2003). They also detailed critical reflection for self-evaluation (Miyahara, 2012; Mizuki, 2003; Murase, 2012), controlling learning processes (Mizuki, 2003; Murase, 2012), identifying strengths and weaknesses in language performance (Barfield, 2003; Skeates, 2012; Stephenson & Kohyama, 2003; Wakui, 2006), and reshaping approaches to language learning (Abe, 2003; Barfield, 2003; Mizuki, 2003). These approaches are often carried out in cycles of planning, evaluation, and reflection (Barfield, 2003; Graves & Vye, 2006; Nix, 2003; Rundle, 2012).

It should be stressed that these anthologies, however, did not pretend to identify generalizable lacks or problems in Japanese versions of autonomy and solutions that fit neatly into existing theoretical models. Rather, they documented various tensions and contradictions inherent in notions of autonomy that arise in very particular classrooms and institutions (Benson, 2003; Stewart & Irie, 2012), as practitioner-researchers explore their own interpretations of global and local practices (Kohyama & Skier, 2006). Above all, they are accounts of teachers creating spaces for developing the inherent

autonomy of Japanese students in contexts that many consider impervious to that goal.

## The Present Study

### Research Questions

Based on the review of the literature and consideration of the context, the following research questions were devised for the current project, which was undertaken with instructors (referring to both content and English language teachers at the tertiary level, regardless of academic rank) at a private university in Tokyo:

1. What is the instructors' understanding of learner autonomy?
2. What obstacles exist to the development of learner autonomy?
3. What is the impact of professional development workshops on the development of learner autonomy?

### Methodology

Data were collected through three major processes: distribution of an online questionnaire, only slightly adapted from that used by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012); two rounds of interviews; collection of notes, comments, and materials produced by instructors; and video tapes of two professional development workshops. The questionnaires, initial professional development workshop, and first round of interviews were completed by the end of the first semester of the academic year. Subsequent interviews were conducted during the second semester of the academic year, culminating in a second professional development workshop. Informed consent was collected from participants prior to completing the questionnaire, as well as prior to involvement and videotaping of professional development workshops and interview processes.

The initial workshop was scheduled and officially publicized by the university to the entire faculty body. All faculty members at the university were welcome to attend on a voluntary basis by signing up beforehand. Prospective workshop participants were requested to complete the online questionnaire dealing with their beliefs related to LA in their current teaching context when they signed up for the initial workshop. All participants completed the online questionnaire prior to the initial workshop. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and integrated into the content of the initial workshop; they also framed some of the questions used in the interviews.

The initial professional development workshop comprised 90 minutes of activities, based on activities similar to those presented in Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). The workshop was video-recorded to capture comments and ideas from the participants that were



integrated into the analysis of overall data. At the conclusion of the initial workshop, participants were informed that they could elect to be involved in the continuing research process, including subsequent interviews and discussions related to activities that they had developed and implemented in their courses, any obstacles that they had faced while doing so, and strategies employed to overcome these challenges.

The subsequent semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. The interview process was crucial in enabling participants to clarify any points related to the concept of learner autonomy, expand on their ideas expressed in the workshop about learner autonomy, and consider obstacles to enhancing it. The continuing participants were encouraged to provide concrete ideas of how they would be able to adapt activities in their classrooms to enhance learner autonomy during the subsequent semester. At the beginning of the second semester of the academic year, continuing participants were contacted, and short informal interviews were conducted to confirm that they were specifically thinking of developing autonomy enhancing activities for their students during the semester.

The final round of interviews was implemented near the end of the second semester of the academic year. During this final round, participants were asked to share their experiences of developing and implementing activities inspired by the workshops. In addition, they were asked to share their observations of any persistent obstacles, new obstacles that had emerged during the implementation process, and any strategies they had developed to overcome the obstacles they had faced.

Lastly, participants who seemed most enthusiastic in implementing learner autonomy enhancing activities were encouraged to present their ideas in the final professional development workshop, which was designed in a peer-sharing format to allow instructors to exchange ideas, experiences, and materials. Six of the workshop participants had attended the earlier workshop; however, there were an additional six participants who had not attended the first workshop and therefore had not completed the original questionnaire. These six participants attended the final workshop only as a professional development activity and were not included in the research. The discussions were facilitated by the researchers, but led by the participants who had volunteered to present their ideas. The workshop was videotaped to ensure clear analysis of instructions and experiences.

All interviews were transcribed prior to analysis and coded to identify recurring and consistent themes and statements made by participants.

## Results and Discussion

### Survey Data

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire prior to joining the first workshop. Sixteen faculty members from different departments, including four content instructors and twelve language educators completed the questionnaire and submitted their responses online. The instructors represented five national backgrounds: seven Japanese, five Americans, two British, one Filipino, and one Canadian. In terms of gender, eight male and eight female instructors participated in the survey. Instructors represented varying amounts of overall experience, ranging from up to four years in the profession ( $n = 5$ ) to 15 to 19 years ( $n = 7$ ), to over 20 years of experience ( $n = 4$ ). The majority of instructors had recently joined the private university in this study (within the last four years,  $n = 11$ ). All instructors held advanced degrees (master's,  $n = 11$ ; doctoral,  $n = 5$ ).

The responses on the questionnaire reflect an overall positive attitude to developing autonomy in the classroom. Of the instructors who completed the questionnaire, 14 indicated agreement or strong agreement with the statements that “learners of all ages can develop learner autonomy,” and learner autonomy can be promoted with both young and older learners. Likewise, all of the instructors disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that developing “learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners.”

Concerning the meaning of learner autonomy, the majority of instructors (over 80%) indicated agreement or strong agreement with statements indicating that autonomy includes the ability for learners to make choices about how they learn and what they learn, to choose their own learning materials, and to have some control over the activities they do. However, the instructors did not believe that learner autonomy excludes the involvement of the teacher, but rather that instructors continue to have a strong influence on supporting learner autonomy.

When asked about the influence of language proficiency on the development of learner autonomy, the instructors indicated that they disagreed with the idea that proficient language learners can develop learner autonomy more effectively than beginning learners. However, when asked a question that dealt with the overall effect of the level of English proficiency, the opinions of the instructors were not as clear-cut.

The instructors indicated that they believed that the process of developing learner autonomy was enhanced when learners were given opportunities to learn from each other. Helping learners understand how to learn effectively was seen as central to developing learner

autonomy, as was the learners' ability to monitor and evaluate their own learning. These beliefs echo Murphey and Jacobs' (2000) view that community building and dawning metacognition are the first steps towards autonomy. The instructors indicated that they also believed that motivation had an important impact on whether learners were able to develop learner autonomy. Overall, the instructors believed that learner autonomy had a positive effect on the level of success achieved by individual learners.

In many cases, the overall responses of the instructors did not indicate strong agreement or disagreement. For example, statements about relationships between learner autonomy and simply learning outside of the classroom or the impact of the level of learners' confidence did not result in clear overall responses from the instructors. Overall opinions were also unclear concerning the impact of the cultural backgrounds of learners, teacher-centered classrooms, cooperative group work activities, or the use of the Internet on the development of learner autonomy. In contrast, the instructors strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that learner autonomy is a western concept or that learner autonomy indicates that the learner would be completely independent of the teacher. These findings reflect those found among a previous, broader sample of teachers in Japan (Rundle, 2009).

Instructors involved in the first workshop were also asked about the desirability and feasibility of enhancing learner autonomy among students in their classrooms. In line with the results from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), instructors indicated that having students involved in choosing materials, topics, tasks and activities was highly desirable. There was less consensus among the instructors regarding the desirability of having students involved in setting the objectives of a course, making decisions about assessment procedures and teaching methods, and classroom management. When asked about the feasibility of enhancing learner autonomy in these areas, responses were similar: instructors indicated that students would most likely be able to be involved in choices of topics, tasks and activities to be used in the classroom, but less likely in other areas.

There was strong positive agreement among the instructors relating to the desirability of learners to be involved in all aspects of their learning. Regarding the feasibility of these same activities, the responses from the instructors remained positive, but were somewhat less decisive. Instructors indicated the most skepticism in terms of their learners' ability to evaluate their own learning. These views accord with Murphey and Jacobs' (2000) advice that reflecting on learning (dawning metacognition) and initiating choice are precursor

moves to the more demanding consolidation period of expanding autonomy, during which students need time to develop self-assessment and other higher order skills.

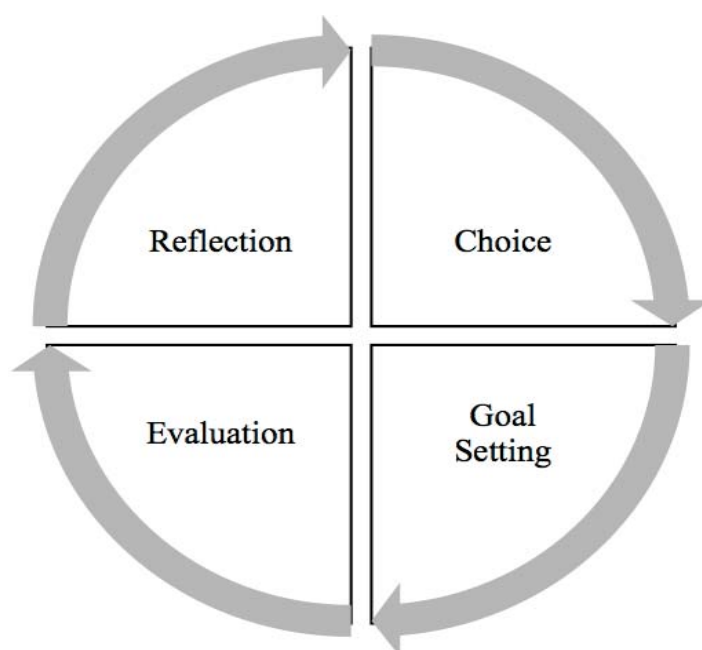
Regarding the current degree of learner autonomy exhibited by students at this particular university in Tokyo, the responses from instructors were mixed. Indeed, while most of the instructors indicated that they provided opportunities for their students to develop learner autonomy, they may not have been especially aware of their learners' behaviors and use of methods. This is because at the beginning of the project when the survey was conducted, few of the instructors were making use of journals or other tools for collaborative communication. These are central to not only developing, but also making instructors aware of, students' autonomous learning (Barfield, 2003; Murphey & Jacobs, 2000; Nix, 2003).

### Interview Data

After the initial workshop, three rounds of interviews were conducted with workshop participants who volunteered to continue in the study. The first set of interviews was completed during the later portion of the first semester of the academic year, shortly after the initial workshop, a second set of interviews was conducted at the beginning of the second semester, and a third set was conducted prior to the final workshop

The first set of interviews was conducted within two weeks after the initial workshop with 13 of the workshop participants who had elected to continue to participate in the study, including both content instructors ( $n = 2$ ) and English-language educators ( $n = 11$ ). The questions included in this first interview were quite broad, and asked the teachers to describe to what extent the initial workshop had been useful, whether what they had learned during the workshop could be implemented in their classes, and to expound on constraints to implementation that they believed they would face in their particular teaching context. During this first set of interviews, 12 of the 13 instructors interviewed indicated that the workshop had been useful for them. Regarding the overall concept of learner autonomy, the workshop provided an opportunity for the clarification of, or an introduction (or reintroduction) to a concept with which they may not have been very familiar. Eight of the English language educators indicated that the workshop had reminded them of the importance of promoting learner autonomy in their classrooms, which many of them were doing already, yet the workshop allowed them to reflect on and make their implementation more explicit. The introduction of an autonomy framework (Figure 1), based on choice, goal setting,

evaluation, and reflection, allowed instructors to analyze to what extent the activities they considered to enhance autonomy did in fact carry students through to the point of reflection and goal-setting. For many of these language educators, the workshop reinforced what they to some extent were already doing. Other instructors were skeptical of the desirability, or need, to implement autonomy-promoting activities in their classes, particularly in the case of classes with very low English-language proficiency students. Another theme that emerged in discussions and interviews was that the level of teacher autonomy had a direct connection to enhancing learner autonomy, even though none of the teachers were specifically aware of “the Shizuoka declaration” described above.



*Figure 1. Autonomy framework*

A majority of the instructors indicated that the sharing of ideas and specific activities during the workshop was particularly useful. This sharing activity allowed instructors to examine a variety of activities based on the autonomy framework and to recognize which elements of the framework were already included in their current activities, and which element(s) were missing or needed emphasis. Instructors were able to identify ways in which they could explicitly introduce choice, evaluation, goal setting, and reflection into existing activities without taking significant time to develop new activities. Ten of the 13 instructors were able to identify specific activities that they could implement in their courses during the following semester, although

some instructors continued to express concerns related to their ability to implement autonomy-enhancing activities in their classrooms.

Among the instructors who were involved in all interviews throughout this project, there was no distinction in their answers to interview questions based on nationality, educational background, or first language. This challenges the stereotype that Japanese teachers are more traditional, teacher-centered, and encourage autonomy less than non-Japanese teachers, at least at this university.

During the workshop and the first round of interviews, instructors were able to identify a number of obstacles to implementing activities to enhance learner autonomy in their classes. The most common obstacle identified was lack of teacher autonomy, based on a restrictive curriculum, a tight schedule of points that must be covered in a class, or the time allotted for a class in reference to the objectives that needed to be achieved. Student characteristics were also identified as obstacles, including low English-language proficiency, which inhibits the students' ability to understand explanations of the concept of autonomy and the rationale for specific activities and to plan and reflect in meaningful detail or accuracy. This was particularly the case in English language courses where the medium of instruction and communication with the teacher is primarily English. In addition, the maturity level and educational experience of students were also indicated as obstacles, as secondary education allows Japanese students little opportunity to make decisions about their learning process. Therefore, the instructors recognized a need to scaffold the process of how to set goals, evaluate learning, and reflect on the process for their students prior to asking them to engage in these activities. Related to this need were the cultural expectations of the teacher's role in the Japanese context, where it is generally accepted that the teacher sets goals and evaluates, not the student. These expectations may also influence how instructors see their own roles in the classroom, and / or how they are perceived by colleagues. The two content instructors who were interviewed also indicated that some class subjects were more conducive to the promotion of learner autonomy than others: introducing autonomy into a statistics class could be more challenging than in a language-learning environment or an economics class where projects could be utilized. Lastly, some instructors identified the instructors' perceptions, beliefs, and experience as potential obstacles to promoting autonomy in the classroom. Such beliefs may include being unsure of the concept of autonomy, not believing that such activities have value, or believing that his or her students are unable to engage in such activities.

The second round of interviews was conducted at the beginning of the second semester. The purpose of these interviews was to address any lingering questions from the previous workshop, review and clarify the autonomy framework (Figure 1) with the teachers involved, and confirm the teachers' continued involvement in the study. Teachers were clear on the content of the workshop and autonomy framework, and agreed to a third interview at the end of the second semester to report on the activities they had adapted and implemented as well as their experiences during the second semester. Research data were not collected during the second round of interviews.

The third round of interviews was conducted with 11 (content instructors:  $n = 2$ ; English-language educators:  $n = 9$ ) of the original 16 participants in the research. When asked about the learner autonomy enhancing activities that these instructors had implemented after participating in the initial workshop during the previous semester, the most common response was that the instructors allowed an increased level of choice for the students in their classes. This choice was manifested in different ways, including choosing topics and articles for discussion, vocabulary to be studied, or other materials to use in class. Instructors also reported that they had included activities with a self-assessment component in some cases. Adding time for learner reflection remained a challenge for some instructors, and goal setting was sometimes overlooked. Reflection and goal setting are important components of the framework, yet also the most unfamiliar to the teachers in the study; therefore, while the teachers experimented with implementing these components, more practice would be necessary to realize the full benefits of utilizing all aspects of the framework.

A majority of the instructors did report positive effects from implementing activities drawing from the autonomy framework. These included perceived increases in motivation, the ability of students to evaluate their own learning objectively and apply what they learned in the classroom to the outside world, and increased participation. In one case, in a content seminar course, this increased participation resulted in a more balanced interaction between the male and the female students in the class, when previously male students had dominated the discussions. One of the most significant outcomes of implementing these activities in classes was that instructors began reflecting on how their own perceptions shaped the extent to which their students were able to develop autonomy. One instructor stated that she "realized that I should do more with lower-level students. That was my own reflection." Through this reflection process, another instructor discovered that "the biggest barrier was my own teaching beliefs."

Many of the instructors again reported on the positive impact of the initial workshop, emphasizing the usefulness of the opportunity to share ideas and materials with their peers at the university. For other instructors, the workshop provided an opportunity to understand further the concept of learner autonomy, and how it can be developed through classroom activities. Other instructors indicated that their involvement in the workshop heightened their awareness of the importance of autonomy, and in some cases helped to reinforce what they had already been doing in their classes.

During this third round of interviews, some instructors expressed concern over the sustainability of developing the autonomy of their students. The instructors emphasized the need to carefully plan and allot sufficient time, to introduce the concept to their students along with the specific steps needed to carry out the learner autonomy enhancing activities. Some of the instructors also felt that once they stopped encouraging students to learn autonomously, the students would make no further progress as they were likely to move on to courses that did not embrace that approach.

The instructors also reported a number of persistent obstacles to developing the autonomy of their students. The most common challenge was now, in contrast to the lack of teacher autonomy reported in the first workshop, low English-language proficiency that resulted in difficulty in explaining learner autonomy to students in English. Low proficiency appeared to be closely associated with typically lower levels of motivation in general, and specifically related to English language courses, which are compulsory for all students at this university. Other instructors also pointed to cultural factors that contributed to the difficulty in implementing learner autonomy enhancing activities, including a lack of knowledge of the educational background of their students, the expectation of the teacher as a provider of knowledge, and the lack of confidence to communicate (being shy) on the part of some students. Still other instructors reiterated the difficulty of implementing new activities in a schedule or curriculum that was already crowded. This last point appears related to teacher autonomy, yet that expression was not used in this third set of interviews as it had been in the first interviews. A reason may be that discussions on applying the autonomy framework to existing activities in the first workshop and interviews made teachers aware that they did indeed have sufficient autonomy to promote learner autonomy without dramatically overhauling their current syllabi and activities. Nevertheless, the teachers did still feel that they had to cover excessive content.



Following the third set of interviews, the final workshop was held. The workshop centered on teachers presenting the activities and materials they had developed during the semester based on what had been learned in the initial workshop. Also, the presenting teachers discussed challenges they faced, strategies utilized to overcome these, and successes realized. A transcript of the video of the workshop was analyzed to identify key points discussed by the teachers. In general, the response to the presenting teachers was very positive, and many workshop participants emphasized the benefit of having teachers share their activities and experiences. All of the study participants indicated that involvement in the two-semester study had been beneficial in that they had gained a better understanding of the concept of autonomy and the autonomy framework. The workshops and process of implementing learner autonomy through activities in a variety of classes allowed instructors to reflect on both their students' abilities to learn autonomously, and how the instructors' personal beliefs affected the choices they were making in their classrooms related to these activities.

### Conclusion

The results of the workshops seem to show an impact on both instructors' understanding of the concept of learner autonomy and their willingness and ability to implement learner autonomy enhancing activities in their classrooms during the second semester. Nevertheless, there are persistent obstacles to this implementation process, most notably pre-determined course goals and the levels of motivation and English-language proficiency of the students. However, the majority of instructors involved in the two workshops were able to overcome many obstacles by emphasizing the importance of helping students to understand how to make choices, set goals, evaluate their own learning, and reflect on how to improve their learning process within the parameters of particular courses. As Benson (this volume) points out, for teachers, the relationship between theory and practice is important. This was also true for the participants in the current research in Japan: emphasis is placed on practice and how autonomy can be developed through sequences of activities that can support learners as they develop autonomy both in and beyond the classroom.

Reflection on the part of the instructors seemed to be the most important result from involvement in the workshop and attempts to include learner autonomy enhancing activities in the curriculum. Some instructors were able to realize that their skepticism regarding the development of the learner autonomy of their students was not so

much based on their students' abilities, but rather on their own beliefs, and how those beliefs shaped what they did in the classroom.

During the second workshop, one instructor noted that:

But still, the major constraints are time and my student so limited motivation, but what has significantly changed compared with the last semester is I think my own teaching belief. Because last semester, unconsciously I had a fear of implementing learner autonomy interventions because I thought some interventions would fail because of my students' proficiency level, but as I gradually scaffolded learner autonomy skills in my class, [the students] had started to be more autonomous, and they started to seek opportunities to practice English even outside [the] classroom . . .

By engaging in collaborative dialogue with colleagues, this instructor recognized local constraints and overcame them, as the Shizuoka definition (Barfield et al., 2002) describes. Overall, the workshops and implementation process of learner autonomy enhancing activities in their classrooms was well received by the instructors involved in this research project. In some cases, instructors requested a continuation of the workshops focusing on learner autonomy for those instructors to support each other as they implement these activities in their classes. Most importantly, the workshops provided a forum for instructors to share materials and ideas with their peers in a supportive, collegial environment.

Assisting with the development of the learner autonomy of students is a challenging process. Some obstacles persist, including skepticism on the part of instructors regarding their students' ability to develop learner autonomy and the difficulty of explaining a complex concept such as learner autonomy to students who have not yet achieved a moderate level of English-language proficiency. Providing opportunities for instructors to share experiences and materials that they have developed has proven to be one of the most significant benefits of providing professional development workshops emphasizing the development of learner autonomy. It seems clear that in order for instructors to create a learning environment where students can develop their learner autonomy, not only students but also instructors need to be provided with sufficient support.

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## Chapter 4

### Cambodian ELT Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding Language Learner Autonomy

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This study was a mixed-method research project about learner autonomy in English language teaching in Cambodia. It investigated teachers' beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy in one tertiary ELT institution in Phnom Penh, following Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012a, 2012b) baseline study. The findings are based on an analysis and interpretation of the data garnered from multiple data collection methods and sources: questionnaires (47 teachers), follow-up email interviews (7 teachers), and four professional development workshops (6 teachers). The findings reveal teachers' conceptualizations of learner autonomy and their reported practices of learner autonomy activities in their classrooms. Learner autonomy practices in this context are dependent upon the importance of teachers in preparing appropriate activities and providing instructions and guidance. The study underlines the importance of teachers taking the initiative to promote learning autonomy in English language teaching.

#### Learner Autonomy in Cambodia

Over the past decade, English language teaching in Cambodia has developed momentum. It has been integrated into secondary school curricula (Clayton, 2006; Neau, 2003; Pit & Roth, 2003) and more recently into those of primary schools (Kuch, 2013). The English language is now taught by Cambodian ELT teachers across the country, compared to two decades ago when it was mostly taught by native English-speaking expatriates (Moore & Bounchan, 2010). A number of research papers have been published on various aspects of ELT in Cambodia, but very few have focused on learner autonomy

(LA). Keuk and Tith's (2013) study explored students' retrospective accounts of learning in an English-medium-instruction undergraduate program at one tertiary institution in Phnom Penh. Their findings indicated that the students had employed a high degree of self-directed learning in order to achieve aims of the program.

The present study was undertaken to help contribute to a clear understanding of ELT teachers' conceptions of learner autonomy that could drive actual practices within classrooms. This chapter will first report teachers' beliefs and practices about learner autonomy informed by the questionnaire survey and email interviews. This is followed by a report of four professional development workshops in which participants considered more fully the implications of the previous findings and the extent to which they might be able to conduct action research projects to further explore how to implement LA projects in their classrooms. Finally, the implications of the findings of this study in relation to initiating and implementing LA will be discussed.

## The Present Study

### Context for the Project

This research project was undertaken at the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL) of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, a leading public university in Phnom Penh which has two English language programs: non-degree programs managed by the English Language Support Unit (ELSU), and degree-level programs managed by the Department of English (DoE). The former provides English language teaching (i.e., General English and English for Academic Purposes) to students majoring in various fields other than English. The latter provides three English-major degrees: an MA in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages); a B.Ed in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language); and a BA in English for Work Skills. According to the Student Information Booklet (Royal University of Phnom Penh Department of English, 2014, p. 3), one of the department's missions is to promote "life-long independent learning." The present research project was undertaken to explore the beliefs and practices of learner autonomy of teachers from both the ELSU and the DoE.



### Research Questions

This project sought to address the following research questions:

1. How do these Cambodian ELT teachers perceive LA?
2. To what extent does LA contribute to learning at this institution?
3. To what extent do the teachers feel their students are autonomous?
4. How desirable and feasible do they feel it is to promote LA?
5. What constraints do they face in practicing LA?
6. To what extent are they ready to undertake action) research into LA?

### Methodology

This research project was set in two phases. Phase 1 involved the teacher participants in conceptualizing LA by responding to a slightly modified version of Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012a) baseline questionnaire. The follow-up email interviews in Phase 2 were employed three months after the questionnaires were administered to elicit the teachers' opinions about LA in their own words and retrospective descriptions of their own classroom practices that they believed helped students become autonomous learners. The follow-up interviews to collect these data were conducted by email because the researchers were overseas at the time. Phase 2 further involved the participants in four professional development (PD) workshops. The questionnaires, follow-up interviews and PD workshops were conducted in English. Table 1 briefly describes the four PD workshops.

**Table 1**  
***Learner Autonomy Professional Development Workshops (adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012b, p. 287)***

Workshop	Topic	Goals
1	What is LA?	To involve teachers in defining LA in a way that reflects their own context.
2	LA practices in my context	To enable teachers to learn about LA practices from their colleagues.
3	Implementing LA	To introduce teachers to a theoretical framework to describe LA; to involve teachers in using the framework to analyze activities to promote LA.
4	Developing a strategy for promoting LA	To introduce teachers to different types of methods for data collection and engage them in developing a strategy, i.e., action research, that promotes LA in classrooms.

## Participants

Forty-seven of the 70 full-time teachers who received the expression of interest agreed to participate in the project. Of these 47 teachers, 35 were from the DoE and 12 were from the ELSU. Table 2 displays the participants' educational qualifications and Table 3 the extent of their teaching experience.

**Table 2**  
***Participants' Educational Qualifications***

Level of Education	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Certificate	1	2.1
Bachelor (TEFL)	11	23.4
Masters	34	72.3
Doctorate	1	2.1
Total	47	99.9

**Table 3**  
***Participants' Years of Teaching Experience***

Number of years	Number of Teachers	Percentage
0-4	13	27.7
5-9	16	34.0
10-14	11	23.4
15-19	5	10.6
20-24	1	2.1
No response	1	2.1
Total	47	99.9

Among the teachers who stated in the questionnaire that they would participate in further phases of the study (i.e., follow-up interviews and / or professional development workshops), seven joined in the follow-up email interviews, and six participated in the PD workshops (one withdrew from the study during the workshops).

## Results

The findings on each research question are briefly reported below. The data that support the analysis were first drawn from the teachers' responses to the questionnaire, and then from the follow-up email interviews and PD workshops.

### Research Question I: Teachers' Conceptions of LA

In the questionnaire responses, 83.0% of the teachers viewed learner autonomy as learners' ability in making decisions about how they learn; 55.3% of the teachers acknowledged the important role played by teachers in promoting and developing LA, and the same percentage also disagreed that LA could take place without teachers. These perceptions were supported by the teachers' views in the follow-up email interviews and the PD workshops.

It's the students' choices in terms of the amount of time spent, mode / method of study and research, the amount of effort, specific topics of assignment / research, etc. in order to fulfill the requirement(s) of a language learning course. (T12)

[Learners'] self-consciousness about the needs to study a foreign language. The learners know exactly what and when to learn. They learn with a clear purpose and high motivation. (T39)

Autonomy in language learning means students take full responsibility for their own learning. The learning is independent. (T8)

[I]t is the ability to be responsible for and take care of his own learning. (T14)

[A]n independent journey that the students take, choosing material from sources / on topics of interest to the students themselves that gives them opportunity to encounter new language . . . (T35)

LA means students can learn independently with less support from the teacher. (T1)

LA means ability of students to take charge of their own pace and progress of learning. Students need to be fully aware of their own challenges and strive to come up with solutions to those challenges. (T32)

LA is the ability of students to choose their own way of learning with some guidance / scaffolding for a purpose of improving their learning. (T42)

LA means the ability to take control of their own learning, of what and how to learn with guidance and support from the teachers. (T19)

### Research Question 2: The Extent that LA Contributes to Learning

When asked about the benefits of LA for language learning, the teachers who participated in the follow-up interviews and PD workshops perceived that LA has a positive effect on successful language learning. Teachers 8, 12, and 39 stated the achievements of LA practices within their classrooms. Such achievements comprise learners' self-checking of meanings of words in the materials, self-researching for completing the assigned tasks (e.g., assignments, presentations, and projects), and self-organizing the activities:

Most tasks assigned here, e.g., presentation or assignments, require students to work a lot on their own beyond classrooms. Therefore, to a plausible extent, our students take full responsibility for their own learning. (T8)

In this academic year, I let my students conduct three small group projects . . . The students show quite a high degree of autonomy in terms of defining topics, selecting scenes for drama performances, setting up research questions, writing scripts for the performances, conducting interviews, and shooting video clips . . . Some students mentioned in the program evaluation that they really enjoyed these activities. (T12)

In my essay and research classes, some of the [students] came up with possible topics depending on their subject areas. They had time to work on their topic part by part; they brought their parts to class and shared [their parts] with other students to proof read and edit. (T39)

### Research Question 3: The Extent of Student Autonomy

The teachers were asked to respond to a statement in the questionnaire as to whether or not the students they teach English to at their institution have a fair degree of learner autonomy. The result shows almost half the teachers (48.9%) agreed with the statement. Just over one-third (34%) disagreed with the statement, and 17% were unsure. None of the teachers either strongly agreed or strongly disagreed that their students have a fair degree of autonomy.

The teachers also believed that it is possible to promote LA with both young language learners and adults regardless their levels of

language proficiency (89.4%) and with students with different cultural backgrounds (78.8%). They strongly disagreed that learner autonomy is not suited to non-Western learners (93.7%). However, the teachers viewed learners with high English proficiency as likely to be more autonomous than those with low English proficiency. The great majority of teachers also perceived that confident (91.5%) and motivated (97.9%) language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not confident and motivated. These views are evident through some teachers' reports of their actual practices of LA in classrooms of students with high levels of English proficiency, such as Teacher 8's (English for International Business), Teacher 12's (juniors), and Teacher 39's (Essay and Research). More details about these teachers' practices are provided in the quotations for Research Question 2.

Drawing from the questionnaire data, the teachers considered that to effectively promote LA in classrooms meant to involve learners in decision-making about what to learn (87.2%), what activities to do (83%), what learning materials to use (73.9%), and how learning is assessed (61.7%). Additionally, in the teachers' view, to become autonomous, learners need to develop their ability to evaluate and monitor their own learning (95.8%). Despite this, almost all the activities reported to promote LA practices were organized by teachers. For example, Teacher 12 stated:

There was no involvement from the students in setting up the course outline (curriculum). The assessments were agreed upon among lecturers teaching the same subjects . . . I decided most of the learning activities. (T12)

However, he also said he discussed some LA-oriented activities with his students and adopted some of their suggestions, especially those related to assessments and learning activities:

I also discussed with students over the appropriateness of the activities and considered the proposed assessments. Some certain activities were adopted and the original assessments may be modified. (T12)

In the PD workshops, the participants were asked to provide examples of activities that they did to promote LA practices. The most commonly reported activities engaged students in decision-making and taking responsibility for learning (e.g., free-topic activities, group-learning activities, outside-class learning activities). The participants

said that they also gave advice on self-learning (i.e., creating and following schedules for learning at home, taking additional activities for learning such as reading and listening to the radio in English), and suggested sources for outside class research.

#### **Research Question 4: The Desirability and Feasibility of LA**

In the questionnaires, the teachers were asked to decide how desirable and feasible they felt it was to promote LA by rating 14 items as undesirable / unfeasible; slightly undesirable / unfeasible; quite desirable / feasible; and very desirable / feasible. In this report, a combination of the “quite desirable / feasible” and “very desirable / feasible” was applied. There are seven items about learner involvement in decisions and seven items about LA abilities.

The responses indicated that in promoting LA in their classrooms, the teachers desired to involve learners in the topics discussed (80.9%), the kinds of tasks and activities they do (74.5%), the materials used (70.2%), the teaching methods used (68%), the objectives of a course (61.7%), the assessment of learning (59.6%), and classroom management (55.3%). On the other hand, the items that the teachers perceived as most feasible to involve learners in LA included the topics discussed (74.4%) and the kinds of tasks and activities they do (72.3%). The following were considered less feasible: student involvement in choosing the materials used (61.7%); the teaching methods used (51%); the objectives of a course (46.9%); classroom management (49%); and the assessment of learning (42.5%).

The responses also show that the teachers believed that it was desirable for the learners to have the capability for monitoring their own learning progress (87.2%), learning independently (85.1%), learning cooperatively (82.9%), identifying their own weaknesses (80.8%), evaluating their own progress (80.8%), identifying their own strengths (76.6%), and identifying their own needs (74.4%). The teachers considered it less feasible than desirable for their students to be able to learn cooperatively (74.5%), identify their own strengths (63.9%), identify their own weaknesses (61.7%), learn independently (61.7%), monitor their progress (59.6%), identify their own needs (51.0%), and evaluate their own learning (50.1%).

In the PD workshops, the teachers were also asked to discuss more fully the desirable and feasible items that they thought could help promote LA. The item viewed as being most realistic to do in their contexts was evaluating what has been learnt. Defining the pace of learning, selecting the method and techniques, and choosing learning materials were considered to be less realistic. However, when asked whether they desired to involve their students in certain course

decisions, the teachers did not seem to wish to allow their students to be involved in making decisions, especially about objectives and assessment, followed by classroom management and teaching methods. The participants reported that their students could be involved in decision-making regarding the selection of topics, activities, and materials.

In relation to the teachers' practice of LA activities in their classrooms, in the questionnaire, the teachers were asked to respond whether they provided their students with opportunities to develop learner autonomy.

The results indicate that an overwhelming majority of teachers agreed (76.6%) or strongly agreed (17.0%) that they provided their students with opportunities to practice and develop learner autonomy in class.

The teachers were also asked to consider 20 practices suggested by Borg and Al-Busaidi that might promote LA in classrooms, and then state the practices that they did in their own classrooms. Of the 20 practices, those most often mentioned by the participants included:

- Encouraging students to go the extra mile and not be afraid to make mistakes
  - Asking them to find out about certain topics and be ready to discuss them in the next lesson
  - Negotiating with students on deadlines for assignments, topics for presentations and speaking
  - Talking to them regularly about why we are doing what we are doing and the bigger picture
  - Telling them that knowledge is always available . . . and what are needed are the incentive and the method to find it
  - Promoting LA through independent learning projects
  - Encouraging peer assessments at classroom level
- (adapted from Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012b, p.37)

The teachers' reported endorsement of such LA practices is also evident in the data from the follow-up email interviews (see the commentary on Research Question 1).

### **Research Question 5: Constraints to Practicing LA**

The constraints that the participants reported in relation to LA can be classified into learner, teacher, and institutional factors. Learner factors include their lack of experience of LA, inability to use resources, limited English proficiency, and excessive reliance on teachers. Teacher factors include their own lack of autonomy and their need to adhere to

the prescribed curriculum, syllabus, and materials. Institutional factors were related to a lack of resources and time for promoting LA and space for LA within the curriculum. These points are well illustrated in the follow-up email interview with Teacher 12. She stated that it was difficult to undertake a real LA practice in classrooms within a formal educational setting in which preset curricula (including materials) were enforced. She also viewed the nature of teaching and learning (i.e., traditional teaching and learning) as a compelling challenge in implementing LA:

Based on my understanding, in a formal educational context / program with a preset curriculum or syllabus, it is hard for 'real' autonomy to take place . . . other challenging factors could be the nature of teaching and learning. To be autonomous learners, students need necessary skills in order to carry out their own learning at their own pace and within their own interest to reach their own goals. However, most of the [institute's] students appear to be used to the traditional way of teaching and learning – teachers as leaders and decision-makers; and students as followers executing the teachers' commands. (T12)

#### **Research Question 6: Teachers' Readiness for Action Research**

This section reports the data garnered from PD Workshop 4. It first explores the teachers' conceptualizations of research and of collaborative action research in particular. Then it reports the teachers' plans to undertake research projects to explore LA in classrooms.

**Teachers' conceptions of the nature of research.** Following the lead of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b), in the fourth workshop the teachers were asked to provide their opinions about ten possible research scenarios by categorizing each one as "definitely research," "probably research," or "definitely not research" (see Appendix).

The results from the five participants show that Scenarios D (5 participants), B (4), F (3), and J (3) were viewed as "definitely research"; Scenarios A (4), E (4), H (4), and I (4) were viewed as "probably research"; and Scenarios C (5) and G (3) were viewed as "definitely not research". Such attitudes yield some important issues of concern. First of all, the teachers' conceptualizations of research were influenced by quantitative characteristics, i.e., questionnaire, large sampling, statistics, and experimenting with new teaching methods. Publishing an article about the work in an academic journal was also one fundamental characteristic that the teacher participants used to determine scenarios as "research." Moreover, the teachers' conceptualizations could possibly be influenced by a lack of



understanding of the nature of research. Almost all of the teachers viewed teachers' actions for improving teaching practices in classrooms as "probably research." For example, Scenario A (teacher's reflection of teaching practice), Scenario E (teacher's peer observation), and Scenario H (teacher's self-evaluation of a course) were only viewed as "probably research." The teachers' opinions about these scenarios were probably based on discounting the value of qualitative data (Scenarios E and I), small sampling (Scenario H), and personal reflections (Scenarios A, E, and H). They unanimously agreed that preparing and writing a course work assignment (Scenario C) was "definitely not research."

**Teachers' conceptions of collaborative action research.** This workshop also asked the teachers to provide their opinions about benefits and challenges of undertaking collaborative action research. With regard to the benefits, the teachers commonly considered a number of attributes: sharing information, ideas, and solutions to problems; saving time for undertaking research activities; sustaining motivation along the research journey; reducing work load; developing communication and more critical reflection; and having opportunities to learn from each other. The challenges in undertaking collaborative action research that the teachers discussed were related to group variability factors. For example, the teachers stated that collaborative action research involves different individual teachers with different topics, ideas, and interests as well as different research backgrounds and research disciplinary knowledge. The teachers also pointed out that disagreements, miscommunication, and mistrust could possibly occur when teachers conduct joint action research. To deal with the challenges, the teachers suggested that a group of collaborative action research teachers should be formed on the basis of similar interests, educational backgrounds, clear responsibilities and tasks carried by members, clear decision-making by members, and regular meetings to discuss and keep track of research activities undertaken by each member.

**Teachers' planning for LA research projects.** PD Workshops 3 and 4 aimed to encourage the teachers to plan LA research projects within their own classrooms. The teachers were guided with a number of tasks, beginning with eliciting issues about LA that would be worth investigating, forming research questions, and selecting appropriate data collection procedures. The teachers raised three important issues that they thought would be worth investigating in order to promote LA practices in their classrooms: (1) developing and sustaining learners' motivation; (2) the effectiveness of and the constraints in practicing peer-editing in essay-writing classes; and (3) why learners

do not want to read materials at home. The teachers further formed preliminary research questions and discussed appropriate data collection procedures. The teachers were encouraged to undertake their research projects after these workshops.

### Discussion

This research project followed Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012a, 2012b) baseline research, which investigated teachers' beliefs and practices regarding LA in the Language Centre of the Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. The findings of the current study reveal that in this specific context, Cambodian ELT teachers held similar beliefs and reported similar practices regarding learner autonomy to those of the ELT teachers in the Oman context.

By applying multiple data collection procedures, this study has provided credible information to help discern these teachers' beliefs and reported practices about learner autonomy. The teachers who reported that they practiced LA activities in classrooms emphasized the effectiveness of LA to promote English language learning. Nonetheless, not all teachers aimed to promote learner autonomy in their teaching.

The study has highlighted some important issues of concern. First and foremost, in current English language teaching at the institute, in which teachers need to complete prescribed curricula and materials, a desirable degree of learner autonomy might be difficult to put into practice. The study shows the teachers' perception that there was a lack of institutional attention towards encouraging teachers to operationalize learner autonomy activities, or to provide any clear guidelines in this respect.

In addition, the nature of teaching and learning in this context (i.e., traditional pedagogy, seeing teaching as knowledge transmission) is most likely to impede LA practices. In this respect, Teacher 8, in his follow-up email interview, suggested training students with LA strategies:

Independent learning needs to be instilled in students. Students should be taught to develop the skills of learner autonomy in class in the first place. Then teachers set tasks that require students to do more on their own. That is to say, [the tasks designed for students to do are] managed with little supervision from teachers. (T8)

Finally, the teachers' discussions in PD Workshop 4 indicated that they currently lacked adequate knowledge and skills needed to plan

and undertake research activities. Despite this, they showed willingness to learn more about (collaborative) action research and suggested a number of issues that could be investigated. The enthusiasm shown by these participants contrasts with Moore's (2011, p. 341) observation that "Cambodian TESOL professionals are curious about understanding research but not particularly interested in doing research." To the extent that the workshop teachers represent the wider community in the ELSU and the DoE, the institution's policy-makers could adopt a practical mechanism to encourage and support teachers to undertake LA research projects.

### **Limitations**

This research project has a number of limitations, especially related to methodological perspectives. First, the study aimed to garner information related to teachers' beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy from 70 teachers at the institute, but only 47 teachers responded to the questionnaires. Secondly, only seven teachers participated in the follow-up email interviews, and six joined the professional development workshops. This constraint has reduced the volume of data and inevitably has an impact on the validity and reliability of the data analysis and interpretation. Thirdly, while these teachers' perceptions were elicited by questionnaire and interview and fully discussed in the workshops, at no time were their reported practices actually observed to validate their claims. Nonetheless, the findings, limited though they are, do shed light on teachers' perspectives on key aspects of learner autonomy. Further research involving a wider sample and including observational study is recommended both at this institution and in relatable ELT contexts elsewhere in Cambodia.

### **Conclusion**

The study reveals that the majority of Cambodian ELT teachers in this study conceptualized learner autonomy as learners' ability to make decisions about, and take responsibility for, their learning. Teachers were perceived to play a vital role in promoting learner autonomy within classrooms. Most teachers reported their active practices of learner autonomy in classrooms, and such practices tended to be prepared by teachers, but independently completed by learners. The teachers' perceptions and reported practices of learner autonomy activities reported in this study have opened up the possibility for the institution in which they work, and indeed relatable contexts, to encourage, support, and perhaps initiate action research projects by their staff. Such projects could explore the potential for developing LA

among their students and identify ways of overcoming constraints to the effective implementation of appropriate strategies.

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Appendix  
Learner Autonomy Professional Development Workshop 4  
(Borg, 2006)

Task 1: Scenarios for Classroom Research

Consider each of the ten scenarios below, and decide whether each is:

1. Definitely research    2. Possibly research    3. Definitely not research

- A. A teacher noticed that an activity she used in class did not work well. She thought about this after the lesson and made some notes in her diary. She tried something different in the next lesson. This time the activity was more successful.
- B. A teacher read about a new approach to teaching writing and decided to try it out in his class over a period of two weeks. He video recorded some of his lessons and collected samples of learners' written work. He analysed this information then presented the results to his colleagues at a staff meeting.
- C. A teacher was doing an MA course. She read several books and articles about grammar teaching then wrote an essay of 6000 words in which she discussed the main points in those readings.
- D. A university lecturer gave a questionnaire about the use of computers in language teaching to 500 teachers. Statistics were used to analyse the questionnaires. The lecturer wrote an article about the work in an academic journal.
- E. Two teachers were both interested in discipline. They observed each other's lessons once a week for three months and made notes about how they controlled the classes. They discussed their notes and wrote a short article about what they learned for the newsletter of the national language teachers' association.
- F. To find out which of two methods for teaching vocabulary was more effective, a teacher first tested two classes. Then for four weeks she taught vocabulary to each class using a different method. After that, she tested both groups again and compared the results to the first test. She decided to use the method which worked best in her own teaching.

- G. A headmaster met every teacher individually and asked them about their working conditions. They had made notes about the teachers' answers. He used his notes to write a report which is submitted to the Ministry of Education.
- H. Mid-way through a course, a teacher gave the class of 30 students a feedback form. The next day, five students handed in the completed forms. The teacher read these and used the information to decide what to do in the second part of the course.
- I. A teacher trainer asked his trainees to write an essay about ways of motivating teenage learners of English. After reading the assignments, the trainer decided to write an article on the trainees' ideas about motivation. He submitted his article to a professional journal.
- J. The Head of the English Department wanted to know what teachers thought of the new coursebook. She gave all teachers a questionnaire to complete, studied their responses, then presented the results at a staff meeting.

## Chapter 5

### Perceptions of Learner Autonomy in English Language Education in Brunei Darussalam

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This chapter investigates English language teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy (LA) in terms of concept and practice in the higher education sector of Brunei Darussalam. This sector includes universities as well as technical and vocational colleges, which are defined as post-secondary institutions of higher learning. Given this mix, the English teachers involved in this study therefore teach a range of courses or modules that can be defined as "English courses" which aim at improving the students' communication skills in English. With about 40 teachers involved in the three stages (survey, workshop, and focus group), an interesting range of views was obtained that could be said to represent Brunei's English tertiary language education sector. The predominant view is that LA is important in L2 learning, but there are challenges that need to be overcome.

#### Learner Autonomy in the Bruneian Context

The new national curriculum, the "Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21" (National Education System for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; SPN21), is meant to promote independent, self-regulated, and critical learning as well as creativity (Ministry of Education, 2012). However, very little research has been conducted on learner autonomy (LA) in Brunei. Of note, Littlewood (2001) conducted a cross-cultural study in English language by comparing classroom practices and perspectives in eleven countries including Brunei, China, Japan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, South Korea, Malaysia, and Thailand. Interestingly, Spain, Finland and Germany were also included in this study to compare Asian and European students' practices. However the focus of this paper was not



specifically on LA, and the Bruneian sample only involved 39 students compared to much larger samples from other countries. The study did investigate aspects of LA such as student attitudes towards working in groups and found that most participants in all the countries involved would like to see themselves as active in the classroom learning process. The study also found that most of the participants had a positive attitude towards co-operating in groups to achieve common goals. The main finding of Littlewood's (2001) study was that the differences in the means of "whole countries" and "whole cultures" are considerably less than the range of variation between individuals within each country or culture. It is possible to extrapolate from this that Bruneian students' attitudes towards those aspects of learner autonomy may be more or less similar to those of counterparts in other countries.

Other studies by Petra (2014), Dhindsa and Khadija-Mohd-Salleh (2009), and Bankowski (1999) make brief references to "independent learning" in Brunei either in general terms or in very specific science education contexts. So other than Littlewood's (2001) study, there is no known specific or comprehensive study on LA in L2 learning in Brunei. This supports Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012a) claim of a lack of attention to teachers' beliefs about LA as a topic of research.

The paucity of research on LA in Brunei underlines the importance of replicating Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012a) work to address their original research questions:

1. What does *learner autonomy* mean to English language teachers involved in this study?
2. To what extent, according to the teachers, does LA contribute to L2 learning?
3. To what extent do teachers feel their learners are autonomous?
4. How desirable and feasible do teachers feel it is to promote LA?
5. To what extent do teachers say they actually promote LA?
6. What challenges do teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?

### Methodology

Between January and June 2014, Borg and Al-Busaidi's questionnaire (2012a) was slightly adapted to meet the specific context in Brunei and distributed to all English language and communication teachers and tutors in the Higher Education (HE) sector of Brunei Darussalam. Permission was sought from the relevant authorities in the Ministry of Education (MoE), who supplied the names of all the teachers and tutors working in universities, technical and vocational colleges (TVCs), or other institutions of higher learning

under the MoE. The survey was intended to help identify general patterns of perceptions of LA across English language and communication teachers in the HE sector in Brunei. Out of 52 teachers who were emailed, 32 responded to the questionnaire within the time given. The questionnaire was followed up in September 2014 with a professional development session in the form of a two-day workshop, which involved about 18 participants, some of whom were actually from secondary schools, but were interested in sharing their ideas and learning more about learner autonomy. The workshop was designed to introduce to the participants established conceptualizations of LA, against which their own understanding of LA could be, and was, compared. The third stage in data collection was a focus group discussion with six Bruneian teachers, specifically from the higher education sector, who had attended the workshop in Stage 2. The purpose of this discussion was to seek their views on the general patterns that had emerged in the questionnaire survey, as well as to find out if and how their own views on the concept of learner autonomy had changed since attending the workshop. This study therefore follows Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012b) suggestion to generate localized research that feeds into professional development work.

### Context

All of the teachers in the study by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a, 2012b) worked at the same university language center in Oman. In the present context, teachers from various local institutions participated. At Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), where the medium of instruction is English, the English language staff teach a course named Communications Skills for Academic Purposes to students from disparate disciplines. On the other hand, for colleagues at the Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA), where the medium of instruction is primarily Malay and Arabic, the focus of the English courses there are to teach it as a second language (TESL). At the Institute of Technology of Brunei (ITB), in which all instruction is conducted through the medium of English, the English courses deal with Academic English, with a strong emphasis on technical discourse. There is also a difference between the universities and the colleges / institutions in the higher education sector in terms of admissions or entry requirements. University students normally will have gone through about two years of study for the UK Advanced Level (A-Level) General Certificate of Education (GCE), whereas TVCs typically absorb students who have studied UK GCE Ordinary (O-Level) qualifications only and have chosen not to go on to A-Level study. This then implies an inherent difference between students within the same

HE sector: University students will have had two extra years of full-time instruction in English prior to enrolment. Nevertheless, whether the students go to university or to a TVC, they will all have completed full-time primary and secondary education up to the O-Level with English as the main medium of instruction.

### Questionnaire Participants

Out of the 32 questionnaire respondents (14 male and 8 female), twelve were Bruneian, six were British, four were Indian, while there were two each from Canada, Malaysia and Pakistan. Four other respondents were of other citizenship. Their highest qualifications ranged from doctorates ( $n = 10$ ), master's ( $n = 18$ ) and bachelor's ( $n = 4$ ). In terms of length of teaching, 12 had more than 25 years' experience, four had 15-19 years' experience, six had 10-14 years' experience, six with 5-9 years teaching experience, and four had 0-4 years' experience. Therefore it can be summarized that the respondents of the survey were mainly experienced English language teachers. Two teachers categorized the courses they taught as "General English," for example, General Certificate in Education (GCE), General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE), and International General Certificate in Education (IGCSE) English courses; 12 identified their courses as EAP, for example, Communication Skills; and 18 categorized their courses as ESP, such as English for Technical Education and English for Sciences.

### Survey Results

Similar to Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012a) findings in Oman, the Bruneian teachers held a range of beliefs about the meaning of LA. A majority of respondents (81%) believed that LA has a positive effect on L2 learning success, while only 63% agreed or strongly agreed that LA allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would. In relation to this, 25% were unsure.

The teachers were also asked about the extent to which they believed that their students could be involved in certain course-related decisions. In the Oman study (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012b, p. 15), the teachers were more positive about the desirability of such student involvement than its feasibility. However, the teachers in Brunei were more pessimistic about both, as shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**  
***Teachers' Beliefs about Student Decision-Making***

	Slightly desirable / Undesirable	Slightly feasible / Unfeasible
Learners are involved in decisions about the teaching methods used	56%	81%
Learners are involved in decisions about how learning is assessed	63%	81%
Learners are involved in decisions about the objectives of a course	56%	75%

A substantial number of teachers indicated that the items above are “undesirable” and “slightly desirable,” and a larger percentage who indicated that the items are “unfeasible” and “slightly feasible.” This raises doubt about whether teachers are ready to share control of the teaching and learning process and / or whether the process of teaching is seen to be predetermined by an imposed curriculum. This interpretation of the role of the teacher and of the curriculum may be occurring at the expense of learner autonomy.

Likewise in the following cases, when it comes to teachers' views of their students' capabilities, what teachers desired appears to be incongruent with their assessment of feasibility (Table 2):

**Table 2**  
***Teachers' Beliefs About Student Capabilities***

	Very desirable / Quite desirable	Slightly feasible / Unfeasible
Learners have the ability to identify their own needs	88%	56%
Learners have the ability to identify their own strengths	81%	50%
Learners have the ability to evaluate their own learning	81%	51%
Learners have the ability to learn independently	81%	50%

The discovery of a gap between desirability and feasibility resonates with a key finding of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a) that “teachers were more positive about the desirability of student

involvement than they were about its feasibility” (p. 286). It suggests a lack of confidence among the teachers which could perhaps be related to their perceptions of the quality of their students or reflect their approach to teaching.

The survey also included two open-ended questions where the respondents reported their own classroom practices. From their own perspectives, when asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “In general, the students I teach English most often to have a fair degree of learner autonomy,” 31.25% did not think so, while 56.25% did (though none “strongly agreed” in their response), and 12.5% were unsure. Some of the descriptions of learner autonomy practices by those who believed that their students “have a fair degree of learner autonomy” are as follows:

They have choice on tasks to be completed, they have access to special materials I design for them (e.g. error analysis of marked assignments; rewarding students to act on teacher feedback on assignment) to improve weaknesses, they are given access to tools to help them learn if they want to use them (e.g. corpus access). They can work in groups or pairs or individually for assignments and class exercises. But they don't have control over the syllabus as it is prescribed so they can't follow their own path in the class . . . exams do play a part in wash back on what is taught and what students want to learn. (T2)

They are able and willing to give their own views on their preferred learning styles and strategies. (T3)

The activities set are such that they have a choice to choose a topic and to do research. (T15)

These statements reinforce the idea that LA is perceived as the provision of some extent of choice or freedom to students. Another group of teachers felt that because their students were at university, they should automatically take to the ethos of autonomous learning assumed to prevail in higher education.

These are university students, so they're expected to have a certain degree of autonomy. (T8)

To come to a university and to be a student here, the students need a degree of learner autonomy. Spoon-feeding no longer exists. (T9)

The following teacher believed that learner autonomy is related to students' linguistic abilities:

I'm agreeing only for the students who have a high level of proficiency in the language. I doubt that those who have a low level of proficiency [can be autonomous]. (T14)

Those teachers who did not believe their students were autonomous provided the following reasons:

From experience, students are always asking for reassurance whether they are on the right track or not, and often they are not. Their comments are always, "I am confused". They are always asking for guidance, sometimes, they ask guidance on how to guide them. Therefore, I find that their learner autonomy is rather weak. (T11)

If not instructed specifically, they will not perform tasks. Most are not independent readers. (T16)

T13 believed that there is a lack of understanding or awareness of the concept and practice of learner autonomy at the institutional level:

The term Learner Autonomy is gaining momentum and becoming popular recently. It has not yet been fully recognized and established well in learning, especially a foreign language in those institutions where I have been engaged in teaching. (T13).

This teacher also commented on the present situation in his specific context:

Not only the students but also a majority of instructors are not fairly well aware of it. Hence the environment is not fully ready to apply it at great length. The process has started and will take quite some time to shift the attention to student centered learning. (T13)

Others also reported institutional factors that hinder the practice of LA in terms of matching content to perceived student needs:

Students learning English language as communication skills have to follow modules which have been set from on high by [university] senior management. So I doubt whether there can be autonomy. In the previous system, teacher had more responsibility and ability to change. Now, there does not seem to be much, but I no longer teach such language courses, so I am not sure. (T4)

They have little awareness of using the “autonomy” in the first place. Even if they do have awareness, they have to follow a set time table decided by the authorities. (T6)

In general the need to set a module outline etc. before the course is even taught for the first time restricts learner autonomy. You can't change a module according to the students' wishes if it has to be approved by higher authority beforehand. (T20)

Despite these reports of systemic failures to encourage LA, T12 believed that there was a possibility for change at their institution:

Most of them are active participants in our virtual classes, participating in discussions at their own will without me having to prompt them, or attaching any marks to participation in discussions. They are also getting better at finding their own information and independent reading. Last semester, they balked at the idea of having to read up on their own and discussing them in class. This semester however they come to class prepared with discussion points and questions to ask. (T12)

It remains unclear how this change was achieved, or indeed what instigated it, though it can be assumed that the change was a response to the teacher's active application of LA principles in the classes.

T13 saw LA from a wider perspective, and believed that changes were afoot with the change in the national curriculum:

The pattern of teaching learning English is changing very fast because of the advancement in technology, IT revolution and spread of business beyond boundaries. This is followed by new developments and innovations in the use and teaching learning of English. Brunei Darussalam has already taken a step towards it by implementing the SPN21 from July 2012. Hence the ground has been prepared to meet the new issues and challenges posed by the new system of education especially in relation to lifelong learning skills. (T13)

However, despite the apprehension among teachers about their students being autonomous, 26 teachers claimed to give their students “opportunities to develop autonomy,” while the remaining respondents were all unsure. No one said they did not do this. Those who claimed to do this provided the following explanations:

In teaching ESP courses I would take into account as far as possible some degree of learner autonomy. For example, I have allowed individual students to focus on areas they wanted to improve. I have also built a whole course around topics chosen by student groups. This was a PBL course where student groups chose the problems to be solved by the other students. (T3)

I believe that learner autonomy is very important especially in higher education. In all my lessons I will always give opportunity for students to develop their learner autonomy by giving activities / exercises that will allow them to search / learn independently. However, at this stage, I still feel that they need guidance on how to develop learner autonomy, therefore taking class time to ensure / reassure that their methods of achieving learner autonomy is on the right track. Activities such as reading an excerpt / looking at a situation or website and asking students to form as many questions of their interests. Giving them a problem-solution situation, where students are to find its problem or its solution. (T11)



I think curiosity and the joy of discovery are the cornerstones of learner autonomy. I try to nurture this within my students. They keep me on my toes, in continuously trying to find materials and approaches that are interesting and relevant to them. I encourage them to ask questions and frame tasks in class as “problems we have to solve.” I encourage students to be curious beyond the classroom borders. “Show and tell” is an activity that has worked very well in my class. Students reacted positively to sharing about things they know about, materials they encounter in their daily lives or texts from other subjects. (T12)

Students are motivated and facilitated to perform the task given to them in a group. They are asked to interact with each other, with other groups or with [the] teacher to share information and to apply it to perform the task. They . . . browse [the] internet using their mobile to go to . . . bring in the outside world to perform their task. The leader of each group is then asked to [explain] how they have performed the task. At the close of the task, the instructor provides [a] final comment and feedback. (T13)

It is interesting to note the teachers’ eagerness to explain in detail how they believed they encouraged LA. Members of the group who indicated their uncertainty about their own LA practices wrote the following:

[It is] true to an extent [that they encourage LA themselves], but pressure from the overall teaching load makes it easier to conform to traditional “transmission” and teacher-centered modes which do not promote autonomy. However, I try to set assignments where students have choices in terms of how to complete them and do not have to “find the correct answer.” (T3)

I do try to develop learner autonomy when necessary. (T9)

T3’s statement alludes to the institutional factors identified by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a) which act as constraints on the promotion of LA. What is apparent in these statements by T3 and T9 is their uncertainty about whether they have been successful in their attempts to implement LA.

In both open-ended questions in the survey, there is some ambiguity in terms of what is meant by “a fair degree” of autonomy, and what is meant by “opportunities to develop.” Do the students take the opportunities, and do they learn from them? These questions are open to interpretation, where teachers can use different measures and different definitions. But as found by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a) in their study, it can be surmised from these survey data that teachers in Bruneian schools were positive about and supportive of LA in English language learning. It is no surprise either that LA is primarily conceptualized as the provision of choice to the students, as the data above suggest.

These findings from the survey were presented to and responses were invited from members of the focus group in the third stage of this study. These findings are discussed below.

### **Professional Development Workshop**

All of the 52 teachers who had been sent the questionnaire survey were invited to attend the workshop. Only 15 teachers eventually attended, some of whom had not responded to the survey. It is important to note as well that three of the workshop participants were from secondary schools, to which the invitation had been extended.

As the facilitator explained the key concepts of LA, general agreement was observed among the participants: they believed LA should be encouraged, but controlled. Teachers from TVCs noted some contextual differences from the universities. The students in TVCs were seen to differ slightly in their attitude towards and abilities in English language usage. However, rather than being a data-collection stage, the workshop was designed to inform the participants of the various definitions and conceptualizations of learner autonomy. The participants were also provided with strategies to promote LA, which they could apply in their own classes.

The participants' reflections were obtained during the focus group session held a few months later. This period was to give the teachers some time to return to class to practice what they had learnt during the workshop and to reflect on any possible changes.

### **Findings from the Focus Group Discussion**

A small group of six workshop participants were invited in January 2015 to participate in a focus group discussion. Three represented the TVCs, while the others represented two universities. To provide a local perspective on LA in HE, the participants selected were Bruneian by citizenship, taught at a higher education institution, and had attended the LA workshop. The purpose of the discussion was to reflect on the

ideas of LA presented to them in earlier stages, and to see whether the time that had elapsed had allowed new ideas to gain ground and come into effect. The six teachers are represented here as T33 to T38.

### **Reflections on the Usefulness of the Workshop**

In general, the participating teachers held positive views about the professional development session. When asked if they found the workshop useful the following comments were received:

Yes, discussing with others gave me the opportunity to share teaching methods on how to promote or increase LA. (T34)

Yes, especially in discovering that there are many factors involved in defining how “autonomous” a learner is, and how educators have different perceptions of LA (influenced by their own learning background, culture, institutional culture, etc.). (T35)

Yes, but it will only be fully effective if given the chance to work in an environment that fully supports attempts of LA. (T33)

Yes, it has given insight on LA and how we are going to implement and practice LA in schools. (T37)

Yes, but it’s nothing new to me personally. (T36)

While T36 displayed self-confidence in his understanding and practice of LA, he was in agreement with the other teachers on the usefulness of the workshop. On the other hand, T33 noted realization that LA could only be effective when the right conditions are in place for it to work. This can be inferred as the need for infrastructural changes in the education system (i.e., overall implementation and practice of learner autonomy through the new Brunei national curriculum).

### **Reactions to Survey Result Patterns**

The teachers were asked to comment on survey respondents’ apparent agreement with LA principles and practices.

Good to know whether respondents respond with their belief of what is ideal or did they respond with what they actually do or practice? (T33)

[This] reflects their beliefs about LA. But it may not necessarily be what they practice. It could also be because respondents have varying understanding of the concepts described in the statements. (T35)

These teachers seem to suggest that the survey respondents agreed with LA in general because they held an idealized view of it, which may not in fact be an accurate reflection of their actual LA practices. As T38 noted, "There were inconsistencies in their responses." These idealistic views of LA in practice could only be possible "if conditions allow" (T36), which echoes the point made by T33 and T35 during the post-workshop reflection (noted above).

In discussing whether LA is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone, the teachers argued that in their own classes, these opportunities come in the form of cooperative work / pair work or individual work. The TVC teachers stated that in the vocational system, pair work tends to be the preferred practice.

Given that 26 (87.5%) of the questionnaire respondents agreed with involving learners in deciding what they would be taught, the focus group members questioned whether those who agreed did so based on their experience with LA, or whether this was merely what they believed. Teachers also questioned whether the Brunei education system would allow the involvement of learners in decisions even if it could promote LA. T36 called this "wishful thinking." T33 suggested that the prescribed Scheme of Work is already restrictive and would not make room for learners' involvement in the setting of the syllabus. Given this restriction, the teachers suggested that learners can be involved in suggesting the classroom activities that they would enjoy or in making known their preferred "assessment methods" and "order of teaching" (T35).

On the issue of whether LA can or cannot be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms, the focus group teachers felt that the term "teacher-centered" could be interpreted in various ways, as with the term *learner autonomy*. T34 commented that it could refer to the "extent to which teachers apply" control in the classroom. T36 asked whether "teacher-centered" meant the same thing to learners as it did to teachers. T33 highlighted that "working alone" does not necessarily mean "working independently," while T34 and T38 asked to what extent "working alone" should be allowed or indeed if it was beneficial. T36 asked whether "learning alone" means "learning without the teacher's help or indeed without anybody's help." The teachers debated whether "learning how to learn is key to developing LA." T35 argued if

indeed “learning to learn is key to LA,” then it should be a prominent feature in higher education. This was supported by T36 who said that this “skill” is necessary for learners to be “autonomous.”

### **Reflections on Professional Development**

When asked whether the ideas presented during the workshop matched their own understanding and / or practices of LA, the following comments were recorded:

Yes, they did. However, questions regarding the different definitions of LA do raise other questions on what / how others interpret it. Mine was simply “independent learning,” but now the [workshop] has made me question the importance of teacher presence. (T33)

Pretty much, the only difference was that I never actually saw the role of the educator as being so vital until it was highlighted in the workshop. (T38)

Yes, I’ve read and attended previous workshops about LA and the workshop presented nothing new. (T36)

These comments suggest that on the whole, the ideas presented during the workshop were not unfamiliar concepts to these teachers, and that their pre-conceived notions and classroom practices matched, or resembled to a large extent, those presented and discussed in the workshop. Nevertheless, all the teachers in the focus group reported that the workshop had led to some reflection, such as:

You start to think about whether you actually promote LA. (T38)

I believe in LA more – [it is] workable and feasible in schools. (T36)

I got a better understanding of LA. (T34)

It made me question if there is, if any, a compromise of “freedom” or “control” level(s) in the classroom to develop / promote LA. It is possible that the LA I have promoted in my classes may only work on only small populations of students. (T33)

These statements suggest that the teacher's ideas on LA have been either re-affirmed, reinforced, or at the very least, re-evaluated. Such reflective thinking is certainly encouraged as good practice in teaching. Meanwhile, in terms of their classroom practices, the teachers also noted some positive changes:

I am more aware of my teaching methods, finding strategies on how to allow or enhance LA to my students. (T34)

It's getting better and better. The students showed positive attitudes towards LA. They learn freely (around the skills area) - students get to choose their topics. (T37)

It will perhaps change how I want my students to choose their own learning. (T33)

I self-monitor now more than before even though I am embarrassed to admit that I haven't actually started recording self-evaluations. (T38)

In the comments above, teachers indicate that since the workshop their classroom practices have improved or changed to some extent, or as in the case of T33, may change. It is heartening to note the enthusiasm among these teachers to put LA theory into practice. Even more impressive is that T36, who commented LA is "workable and feasible in schools," may have expanded an understanding of LA to other domains of learning outside the scope of merely L2 learning.

### Reflection

Phil Benson in this volume draws attention to three findings reported by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b). First, LA is seen to involve learners in making choices. In addition, uncertainty exists about just how autonomous learners are, and how this can be measured. Finally, there is no consensus on what it is possible for students to achieve. These findings are replicated in the current study. Within the context of the higher education sector in Brunei, it can be argued that although there may be slight variations in the interpretations of LA, on the whole there is strong support for it as it is seen as a positive ability for learners in general to achieve. Given that the focus under study is on L2 learning, and that the respondents and participants of this study are English language teachers, LA is seen as a useful quality in an L2 learner. Bruneian teachers are cognizant of the institutional and learner factors that may limit, restrict, or even prevent LA development and

that even if teachers were supportive (as they evidently are), the promotion of the concept of LA and its practice are, at best, difficult.

It would appear that teachers involved in the various stages of this study have their own interpretations of the concept LA which they subsequently translate into their respective practices in their classrooms and learning institutions. These interpretations are in the main not too different from the definitions of LA found in the literature. It would be interesting to find out more about these teachers' beliefs of LA, and to observe to what extent these beliefs are actually put into practice. In the case of Brunei, this study could be extended to investigate these dimensions at all levels of the education system and to identify additional factors that present challenges to the promotion of LA.

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## Chapter 6

### **Thai Teachers' Beliefs in Developing Learner Autonomy: L2 Education in Thai Universities**

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This case study investigates teachers' beliefs regarding learner autonomy (LA) development from 35 Thai EFL teachers at university level. The data was collected in two phases: first, from questionnaires and online (written) interviews; second, from four workshops on professional development as forums for focus group discussions. This paper discusses the implications of the teacher attitudes and professional experiences in six main aspects: their understanding of LA; the contribution of LA to L2 learning; the desirability and feasibility in promoting LA; their attitudes towards their students' LA; their roles in promoting LA; and the challenges they face in helping their students become autonomous. Overall, findings suggest the participants were knowledgeable and had positive attitudes towards this learning trait / competency. Paradoxically, however, owing to prevailing Thai culture of dependency in teaching / learning practices and institutional constraints, they insisted great effort needs to be put into effect from both top-down directives and bottom-up initiatives to overcome practical challenges for changes to promote LA in Thai students, in particular in the context of L2 education.

#### **Learner Autonomy in Thailand**

In all levels of education, a learner's awareness of the importance of personal decision-making and the ability to regulate his / her learning behaviors has been considered as one of the fundamental factors for success not only in school but beyond (Benson, 2008, 2011). Thus, suggested strategies to develop learner autonomy have been included in language textbooks (Little, 2007) and teacher education curricula in many countries (e.g., Morrison, 2008; Vieira, 2009; Wang & Ma, 2009), regardless of how well teacher education on this learning trait has been established (Jiménez Raya, 2009).

However, in the case of Thailand, few studies have revealed some aspects of implementing learner autonomy (LA) in L2 education, for instance, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Moreover, as reported elsewhere by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a, 2012b), what EFL teachers believe about LA and how they develop LA in their students has not been investigated: this is also true as far as Thailand is concerned. Thus, this study aims to explore Thai teachers' beliefs as well as common instructional practices on the topic, especially in an EFL learning context.

With the increasing role of English as a major international language, the introduction of EFL education was mandated at Grade 5 in Thai school curricula in the early 1990s. More recently, it has begun in lower grades. Although a definite policy on English language education was not described in the National Education Act in 1999, some basic ideas were noted in the Ministry's guiding principles related to promoting the development of LA. These included enhancing a learner's aesthetic and creative learning style and ability in using English language efficiently for effective communication. In addition, integrating English language learning and knowledge in other disciplines has been encouraged to prepare learners for higher education and future careers (Ministry of Education, 2001, as cited in Darasawang & Watson Todd, 2012).

However, bringing principles into practice has presented challenges due to various factors such as limited hours of classroom practice, large class sizes, grammar-based and test-driven instruction, and teaching materials simply focusing on non-transferable knowledge that promotes only lower-level analytical thinking (Watson Todd, 2008). In addition, most teachers still have a dominant transmission and controlling role in classroom learning activities (Sanprasert, 2010). Breaking from this tradition to a more learner-centered approach tends to raise students' negative perception that they are neglected in classrooms (Bunnag, 2000, as cited in Darasawang & Watson Todd, 2012). In sum, the combination of these factors has tended to result in less active and effective learning.

Nevertheless, some efforts have been made to change the traditional roles of Thai teachers and students in classrooms, and observations regarding the successful outcomes of these efforts have been documented. From the review of the following studies (i.e., Prapinwong, 2011; Sanprasert, 2010; Watson Todd, 1996), overall, three major themes (and relevant studies) related to the major inquiry of this study have been selected to illustrate a general background of this local EFL educational context.

First, regarding the notion of *teachers' and learners' roles* in promoting LA, the study of Watson Todd (1996), focusing on the *power relationships* between teachers and students, has clearly portrayed these relationships in typical Thai EFL classrooms. He investigated how Thai teachers at a leading university prepared students to engage in autonomous learning. His observation in six classrooms focused on the power relationships between teachers and students in various aspects (e.g., classroom talking time, the nature of teacher talk, teacher's control over content and students' input, students' preparedness before engaging in self-access learning). He concluded that power and control in classrooms were still in teachers' hands and the level of preparedness for autonomous learning was still limited: students appeared to have insufficient "requisite skills, knowledge and strategies" (p. 232) for learner autonomy.

Second, since the *sense of authority* is a core theme in developing this learning ability, it is interesting to learn about Thai learners' views, especially those of university EFL students, on this attribute. Sanprasert's study (2010) has lent a positive picture on this aspect. She reported more positive findings in her investigation into whether and to what extent the integration of a course management system (CMS) into a traditional classroom approach had an impact on the development of learner autonomy in a university Foundation English class. She noted that to eliminate the teacher's role as knowledge transmitter and students' passive learning habits, autonomous learning skills need to be trained and promoted in classrooms. This instructional strategy appeared to promote the students' willingness to be autonomous learners: apparently, after becoming more familiar with the transfer of authority in decision-making from the teacher to students, they became more positive and confident and independent in this new learning atmosphere. In addition to improving their English language skills, the students developed better awareness of the importance of setting goals, planning for more self-access learning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning process. Although their perception towards the teacher's traditional role as a provider did not change significantly, they became more positive in the teacher's new role as a facilitator.

Lastly, in developing learning efficiency in these modern days, it is inevitable that role of technology is prominent. Thus, the review explored studies that focused on the theme *to what extent the use of technology can enhance LA development*, especially in the context of EFL learning in Thai universities. For instance, a study by Prapinwong (2011) revealed how attempts to use technology, especially the Internet,

could enhance Thai students' autonomous learning. The case study explored how the use of *WebQuests* (the web-based lessons, available in the U.S. academic network, that are aligned to U.S. state and national standards; see more details on [WebQuest.Org](http://WebQuest.Org)) in a reading course could benefit the teacher and students. In summary, findings indicated that teaching and learning English language through *WebQuests* was motivating to both the teacher and students: this autonomous learning facilitated by technology could help broaden learners' perspectives and promote independent and collaborative learning. However, some constraints were noted, including issues on the appropriate level of intervention in the curriculum, feasible means of assessment, and the need for teacher and student training in applying the tool constructively.

In conclusion, this brief review of previous studies especially focusing on the local context of Thailand seems to suggest that the implementation of LA development in this EFL educational context has mainly been in an emerging phase. Although positive aspects can be perceived, more research is needed to bring deeper insights into the phenomenon. In particular, as aforementioned, teachers' beliefs and reported practices regarding LA have not yet been revealed, and these are the focus of the present study.

## The Present Study

### Setting and Participants

A total of 35 Thai English language teachers from four leading public and private universities in Bangkok volunteered to participate in the survey. All participants were working at departments offering English language education for both English-majored and non-English-majored students, and their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 35 years. The courses they were teaching ranged from Foundation English Courses to the advanced courses of graduate school. Ten of the 35 participants provided their responses to online (written) interviews.

### Research Questions

The research questions below were used to guide the project that aimed to apply the framework of Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012a, 2012b) study to explore teachers' beliefs and practices regarding LA development in language learning in the context of Thai universities. Data were collected by survey, interviews, and professional development workshops adapting instruments and procedures devised by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a, 2012b).

1. What does learner autonomy mean to Thai EFL teachers at the university level?
2. To what extent, according to Thai teachers, does LA contribute to L2 learning?
3. How desirable and feasible do Thai teachers feel it is to promote learner autonomy?
4. To what extent do Thai teachers feel their learners are autonomous?
5. To what extent do Thai teachers say they actually promote learner autonomy?
6. What challenges do Thai teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?

### **Survey and Interviews**

The main purpose of this study was to elicit Thai teachers' beliefs about LA to provide a broader picture of this perspective and thus expand the original work of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a, 2012b). Thus, the two main instruments used in this study were the questionnaire adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b) and a structured interview for further investigation. The first five research questions were included in the questionnaire; the sixth question and expanding points from the preceding survey questions were probed in the interviews. Data collection was mainly administered via e-mail for several reasons. First, both instruments were easier to operate online than dealing with participants face-to-face due to time and logistical constraints. Secondly, as competent English language users, all participants were able to efficiently express their thoughts in English. Thirdly, and more importantly, given an opportunity to think thoroughly about the survey and interview questions, the participants would be able to produce in-depth reflections on the discussed topics, which would help ensure the credibility of the data. It is also the case that the researcher could take more time to consider points raised in these interviews than would have been possible in face-to-face meetings.

### **Professional Development Workshops**

Four workshops were conducted to follow-up the survey, the main objective being to bridge the participants' existing attitudes and beliefs (i.e., their understanding as well as experience in promoting autonomous learning) and new perspectives they would gain through collaborative interaction in the workshops. It was hoped that gaining shared understandings and visions would enhance a constructive atmosphere for how LA might be developed in the participants' specific contexts. The discussions and spoken comments on related

topics from the input sessions and the associated worksheets were audio-recorded. The main points derived from these data were summarized and triangulated with the findings from the preceding surveys and interviews.

### Data Analysis

Four procedures of content analysis (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were applied. First, all descriptive statistical results were analyzed and classified via SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to address the first five questions according to the four perspectives of LA—psychological, political, social, and technical—as suggested by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a, 2012b). Secondly, the open-ended responses in the questionnaires on the topic “Your Learners and Your Teaching,” and additional views gained from the interviews, were analyzed and common ideas were summarized; these also included the findings addressing the sixth question. Thirdly, reflections gained from focus group discussions in the four workshops and the written comments drawn from the workshop worksheets were summarized and triangulated with findings of the preceding investigation. Finally, more conceptual meanings and implications emerged from the preceding analyses to permit a rich interpretation of the findings of the study.

### Survey Results

#### Research Question 1: What Does Learner Autonomy Mean To Thai EFL Teachers At The University Level?

Considering the four previously-mentioned perspectives, the results of the survey suggest that for these Thai teachers, psychological and political factors are stronger attributes to LA, while social and technical factors can play a supportive role. The teachers' reactions to the given 37 statements related to the topic Learner Autonomy in the questionnaire indicated that they viewed LA as primarily oriented to psychological perspectives (76.5% agreed and 23.5% strongly agreed), followed by political (76.5% agreed and 11.8% strongly agreed); social (79.4% agreed and 2.9% strongly agreed); and technical (61.8% agreed and 14.7% strongly agreed) perspectives respectively. Interestingly, the strong impact of psychological attributes on fostering LA was also reported from the views of the teachers in Borg and Al-Busaidi's study (2012a, 2012b). This implies that they believed that a learner's personal willingness and motivation and awareness of his / her freedom to learn influence his / her LA development. In this study, although the participants perceived a low influence from social reinforcement, it still

implies that they do not limit the sense of autonomous learning to doing it alone. They also acknowledged that employing technology to bridge learning in and beyond the classroom not only expands students' knowledge but also enhances their life-long autonomous learning skills.

### **Research Question 2: To What Extent, According To Thai Teachers, Does LA Contribute To L2 Learning?**

Three broad views connecting LA and L2 learning were evidenced in line with the teachers' common view reported in Borg and Al-Busaidi's study (2012a, 2012b) that LA is an important factor of success in L2 learning. In this study, most teachers showed strong belief in the interrelationship between LA and L2 learning performance (76.5% agreed and 5.9% strongly agreed). They considered that an autonomous learner has high potential to become a successful L2 learner. Likewise, the participants believed that a more proficient L2 learner can develop to be an autonomous learner better than a less proficient one. They also perceived self-confidence in an L2 performance enhances LA development (50% agreed and 20.6% strongly agreed). However, these teachers did not consider L2 learners' ages and / or years of their learning experience to be important in developing LA (50% disagreed, and 41.2% were unsure about the connection).

### **Research Question 3: How Desirable And Feasible Do Thai Teachers Feel It Is To Promote Learner Autonomy?**

Surprisingly, although these teachers believed that their students' ability and freedom in making learning decisions was an important attribute to LA (as reported above), their overall reactions indicated their uncertainty in bringing what they believed into effective practice. To illustrate, their responses to the statement "Learners are involved in decisions about . . . [various aspects of learning activities]" revealed a somewhat contradictory perception (38.2% responded quite desirable / feasible; 47.1% slightly desirable / feasible; and 14.7% undesirable / unfeasible). Also, their uncertain reaction to the statement "Learners have ability to . . . [perform autonomous learning in various aspects effectively]" was evident as 64.7% reflected it was quite desirable that students have these learning skills; however, only 14.7% of them were positive in regard to the feasibility of developing the skills. These contradictory views seem to imply some challenges in bringing theoretical knowledge of the teachers into practice. Some observations related to this issue are discussed in more detail in the responses to Questions 4 and 5.

#### Research Question 4: To What Extent Do Thai Teachers Feel Their Learners Are Autonomous?

There were various responses to the survey item that asked the participants whether, in general, the students they taught most often had fair degree of autonomy. The results showed that 40.6% agreed or strongly agreed, while 28.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed; almost one third (31.2%) were unsure. Despite the slightly higher percentage of positive views, the negative and uncertain attitudes about LA in their students were quite remarkable. This seems to indicate that autonomous learning attributes do not manifest themselves in students of English in Thai universities. Interestingly, the positive perceptions were mainly revealed by teachers whose students were majored in the English language, while the majority of teachers who taught non-English majored students revealed more negative perceptions. The former could observe their students' ability to identify their needs, eagerness in learning engagement in and beyond the classroom, and willingness to take responsibility in both independent and cooperative learning activities. While motivation was considered as a prominent factor for the English majored students' active learning behavior, the lack of this attribute was reported as a major factor hindering the LA development and successful English language performance of most non-English majors. In a response to this survey question, one teacher stated:

For English-majored students, it is easier for them to develop learner autonomy. Most of them are highly motivated and they are quite capable of reflecting on their own learning. Though the tasks are designed by the teacher, students have interest in the topics and have tried to think beyond what has been discussed in class; hence, the teacher needs to open up for learners' freedom of learning. (KU-5a)

Another teacher (KU-3a) noted that the subject of the course played an important role in promoting LA. Learning activities in a course that focuses on integrated communicative skills can promote engagement in autonomous learning quite well, especially among students with advanced English language proficiency. On the other hand, teachers of non-English majored students described their students as passive learners. One common observation was that their students normally preferred a passive and spoon-feeding learning atmosphere in which they could mostly rely on their teachers: they tended to follow the teacher's explanations and instructions with little engagement in analytical thinking.



### **Research Question 5: To What Extent Do Thai Teachers Say They Actually Promote Learner Autonomy?**

Although most teachers agreed that LA should be promoted in their students (71.9% agree and 6.2% strongly agree), and they have reported some instructional strategies to enhance autonomous learning, most of them still voiced their concern in bringing their belief into practice due to certain administrative / institutional constraints. Despite a certain degree of their satisfaction in observable LA attributes among the English-majored students, most teachers insisted they wished to see the non-English majored students, who generally lack motivation and confidence in learning English, become more aware of its essence and able to develop self-directed skills in goal setting, self-monitoring, and evaluation. A range of activities they had tried to integrate in their courses included, for example, having the students decide their own topics of lessons, types of materials they wanted to study, their projects, and the sources of information they wanted to access for their learning tasks. Those who were positive in implementing LA activities noted these activities not only develop autonomy among the students but also develop teachers' skills in designing tasks.

However, various constraints in promoting LA in their teaching situations were also reported. First, most of the courses were more product (rather than process) oriented with excessive content. Another burden was the rigidity of exam-oriented syllabuses. Other constraints included the large size of classes with heterogeneous groups of students, limited opportunities for learner-centered activities, and shortages of technological facilities. In conclusion, despite reported evidence of various limited interventions to promote LA, institutional regulations and conventions hindered more fully developed strategies.

### **Interview Findings**

More questions related to issues reported in the questionnaire responses were asked in the follow-up (written) interviews. Overall, the responses indicated three major views. First, a lack of real purpose in learning English leads to inefficiency in goal-setting. As a result, Thai students appeared to be passive and rarely gave opinions in English language classes. With low motivation, they would learn only when forced to do it. A common picture of these students was described by one interviewee:

There are no [real] short-term goals . . . Thai learners do not have much chance in using the language . . . They do not see the immediate needs to improve their language skills . . . While passing the course tends to be their short-term goal . . . the exams are rarely related to the use of language in real everyday life . . . Thus they become less motivated. (KU- 7a)

Second, despite increasing awareness of the current important role of English for international communication in this regional context (i.e., the emergence of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015), most Thai students still lack a strong desire to prepare themselves to improve their English language ability. One interviewee reflected as follows:

Most of them desire to improve their English as they know its importance, especially regarding Thailand becoming [a member of] AEC in 2015. Anyway, very few of them try hard enough to improve English . . . They would like someone to facilitate, guide or even control their learning. (KMUTT-1a)

Another respondent wrote

In the past . . . I had problems persuading them to realize the importance of studying English, but nowadays I do not have that problem because most of them seem to be fully aware of its importance. But LA is another story. Even though English is important, learners still expect to study it only in formal classroom instruction rather than learning it within a self-study mode. (KU-14a)

The third view focused on Thai students' decision-making, self-monitoring and evaluation skills. There were different opinions regarding the learners' skills. One teacher noted "I think learners who choose to study the language by themselves tend to have the abilities to monitor and evaluate their learning" (KU-7a). Another teacher also observed that some confident students who were keen on choosing their learning activities would be more in control of their learning performance; they made a good effort to complete their tasks, and were finally able to improve their English language skills. His reflection below depicted a typical picture of this type of student:

Some students who really want to improve their English normally seek whatever opportunities to learn when possible without waiting for teachers to guide them. They always take part in any activities both inside and outside the university to improve English no matter they will get any extra scores stipulated in the course. They even use English in their communication via social networks like Facebook and the like. (KMUTT-1a)

In contrast, one reason that self-monitoring and evaluation skills were not commonly observed in Thai students could be that the students were unaware of some of the key skills:

Some of my students are responsible for learning independently and cooperatively. They can also identify their own needs, but they can't monitor their progress or evaluate their own learning. I think it is because they don't think it is important to do [so] or sometimes they don't even realize about that. (DPU-1a)

#### **Research Question 6: What Challenges Do Thai Teachers Face In Helping Their Learners To Become More Autonomous?**

The interview included two questions asking about challenges Thai teachers face in helping their students to be autonomous learners. The findings reveal that because of a Thai social value of having respect and, thus, reliance on their superiors, Thai students are not intuitively autonomous or independent. This social value appears to lead Thai students to overly rely on their teachers in most learning activities. In general, they are accustomed to a spoon-feeding teaching style. Two comments illustrate this perception: one teacher commented "Most students are not comfortable or confident enough to take charge of their own learning without the teacher mapping out specifically what they need to do and what they need to know" (KU-1a); another teacher voiced the need of changing this culturally-bound dependent learning style:

Most Thai youngsters are not trained to be autonomous. They are familiar with having someone telling them what to do, how to learn or even when to learn. We need to do a lot of training and particularly changing their attitudes towards learning. . . . I believe that if they are autonomous learners they can certainly achieve their learning goals, i.e., mastering language skills and become proficient language users in the long run. The problem is that most of them are not real autonomous learners. They are just fake autonomous learners who only want to improve language but do not attain sufficient attributes to learn on their own. (KMUTT-1a)

Another Thai social value—that of adherence to group norms—was also reported to inhibit the students' sense of autonomous learning. One teacher commented:

This value the group-norms. [The students] tend to do things in group such as waiting for friends so that they can grab something to eat or enrolling the same courses with a group of close friends. I think this way of thinking influences learner autonomy. (KU- 9a)

Despite these challenges, these teachers said they would not give up their attempts to develop autonomy in their students. Four major strategies they reported using to help develop LA in their students included: first, raising awareness of the important role of English language in communication and advantages of learning the language for better opportunities in their future careers; second, raising awareness of the long-term need for autonomous learning; third, engaging students in more task-based and self-directed learning activities in and beyond the classroom; lastly, providing positive feedback on students' efforts in such a way as to encourage independent decision-making.

### Workshop Data

The four workshops were conducted as a follow-up forum for reviewing, brainstorming, and promoting research on LA based on local conceptualizations and needs. Topics of the first and second workshops included defining learner autonomy and LA development in local contexts of English language education in Thailand (e.g., learners' responsibilities, giving learner's choices, involving learners, factors influencing LA, teachers' roles in developing LA, and constraints to LA development); the third and fourth workshops focused on LA

strategies, teaching approaches and strategies, and teacher / action research on LA. Guidance was provided by input sessions and handouts based on various related constructs and research methodology. Eleven teachers from those who had responded to the preceding survey were able to attend the workshops and took part in the focus group discussions.

Most attitudes revealed here corresponded with those expressed in the survey and interviews. Workshop participants learned from each other that the potential for LA is largely determined by various environmental factors affecting their instructional decisions. Moreover, the teachers emphasized that effort to raise awareness of the essence of LA needs to be seriously executed, and explicit benefits of autonomous learning approach should be clearly explained to the students. The negative Thai convention of spoon-feeding teaching and dependent learning that impedes LA development should be restrained although it may take time for the robust change to occur. The issues of institutional constraints hindering implementations of LA development were also repeated. The participants noted that institutional policies of English language education causing constraints in curriculum designs need to be reconsidered. They asserted that more effective teaching strategies to nurture their students to become more autonomous need be implemented. These included more intervention of task-based learning activities; activities to promote a learner's self-confidence; responsibilities; and initiatives and self-directed monitoring and evaluating skills. Although it would take time for both teachers and students to change their habits, the participants were certain that LA development in their students could eventually be established with more effort, proper guidance, and systematic and continuing practice.

Questions of how to address the issues and implement effective instructional approaches and strategies to promote an autonomous learning environment in this cultural context were brought to the participants' attention. Primarily based on the increasing mutual understanding of the related aspects of learner autonomy shared in this professional development forum, the teachers asserted that the top-down directives (e.g., policies / principles in curriculum or course management) and the bottom-up initiatives (e.g., teaching / learning activities at classroom level) should be well-tuned so that the gap between the desirability and feasibility of the construct can be reduced.

In addition, the participants' interest in doing research on LA development focused on some aspects of local needs. These included teachers' knowledge of effective curriculum design and instructional methods / strategies to enhance autonomous learning, understanding

of appropriate means of assessing autonomous learning in relation to L2 competence, and the know-how of employing technology to assist autonomous learning in and beyond the classroom. In addition, they noted the need to have greater knowledge of their students' attitudes toward autonomous learning and their level of preparedness in this respect. All in all, the workshops should mark the beginning of more collaborative efforts to develop LA in these teachers' EFL students and concrete steps to reduce institutional and curricular constraints.

### Discussion

This study presents the beliefs of some EFL teachers in Thai universities regarding LA development, and its overall findings will now be discussed in terms of four main pedagogical implications.

Firstly, the teachers' perceptions on various attributes to LA indicate their fundamental understanding of this multidimensional construct, leading to their positive attitudes towards the need to promote the development of this learning capacity. Overall, their definitions of LA are in line with those found among the teachers in Borg and Al-Busaidi's study (2012a, 2012b), which (as Benson remarks in the overview chapter of this book) mainly include a learner's awareness of freedom and responsibility in decision-making as well as ability to control his / her learning process and performance purposefully. Benson notes that LA skills are generic skills of learning to learn. In this regard, the teachers in this study asserted that awareness-raising and more concrete intervention of metacognitive skills (i.e., goal setting, planning, problem-solving, self-monitoring and evaluation [Benson, 2001]) need to be integrated in English language learning activities to foster LA both in the classroom and beyond. In sum, this indicates that teachers' perception is that LA is a scholarly trait to enhance a learner's success / efficacy and, vice versa, a learner's success / efficacy is a fundamental factor influencing LA development. Thus, among other priorities, this professional perspective should be cultivated in all teachers including those in L2 (e.g., EFL) educational contexts. This has implications for professional development programs, both pre- and in-service.

Secondly, as reported in Borg and Al-Busaidi's study (2012a, 2012b), psychological attributes are perceived as playing a prominent role in grounding LA. In addition, this study suggests that psychological and political factors (e.g., personal willingness / motivation and decision-making on learning choices respectively) among Thai learners are relatively influenced by social traditions. Most importantly, with their conventional belief in the value of dependency / reliance on their superiors, Thai EFL learners commonly appear to handover their

ownership in learning processes to their teachers without any negative attitudes of losing self-authority. Regarding this issue, Benson explains that developing the learners' ownership grounded from their skills in decision-making is important to establishing LA. Unfortunately, being influenced by the said culture leads learners to be passive and less motivated to achieve the learning goals. Moreover, being overly reliant learners, they tend to be unaware of the real meanings (as Benson refers to as the "what" and "what for") of their learning processes and performance, especially for their lifelong benefit.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that to promote optimal LA enthusiasm in any learner, it is imperative for teachers to steadfastly ensure that their students value the sense of ownership of their learning endeavors. This growing intuition would help them eventually step out from the past shadow of the world of dependency and become aware that teacher's role is as a facilitator instead of a spoon-feeder or an entire provider (Sanprasert, 2010). Although this attitude to learning may be common in Western educational societies, strong efforts are needed for such a change to occur in societies such as Thailand's which place a high value on respect for seniority and teacher dependency.

Thirdly, as noted in this study, among others, implementing collaborative learning (e.g., Smith & Ushioda, 2009) can be considered an important strategy to establish learners' confidence and motivation in developing and controlling their autonomous learning process. Engaging students in learning activities in which they can gradually develop decision-making skills, freedom, and responsibility, the sense of ownership would be eventually attained. Strategically developing collaborative learning should assist in eliminating, or at least reducing, the teacher-dependent learning culture of Thailand.

Lastly, considering the challenges of LA development from the institutional perspective, this study suggests that institutional policies and principles largely account for the extent to which this learning capacity can be fostered. Thus, educational policy makers and practitioners (e.g., program developers, managers, teachers) need to seriously consider together how the top-down directives and bottom-up initiatives can be radically or finely-tuned to help reduce the gap between positive theoretical views and actual instructional practices, which Benson in his overview chapter remarks on as the "complexity between beliefs and practice." Above all, when the issue of social values comes into play, appropriate socio-cultural strategies, and not merely managerial directives, will need to be carefully designed and executed.

The findings in this study derived from reflections of teachers from only a small number of universities in the country. Though the voices

heard in this study can be highly trusted as all the participants appeared to be attentive in participating in the survey, interviews, and group discussions, many other voices of Thai teachers are still unheard. Also, factors found to hinder or promote LA among the Thai university students of the participants represented here might be only to a certain extent applicable to those in other EFL contexts. However, this small scale study should provide some useful professional insights to L2 educators elsewhere.

### Conclusion

In summary, this study presents and discusses the beliefs regarding learner autonomy (LA) development of some Thai university teachers. Overall, the findings suggest that these teachers were well aware of and valued the scholarly trait of learner autonomy. They noted that various environmental factors influence the development of LA, and this affects their teaching practices.

In addition, they believed that the development of LA and ability in L2 learning are interrelated. Nonetheless, they viewed that considerable efforts are needed to enhance the development of LA among Thai university learners due to the fact that they are generally dependent owing to the common Thai social attitude of dependency or reliance in the superiors. They also insisted that institutional constraints appeared to hinder this scholarly competence. Thus, to deal with this learning and instructional issue, students' as well as teachers' strong awareness of the importance of LA needs to be seriously promoted. Also, lifelong autonomous learning habits are to be nurtured continuously. Moreover, mutual understanding and collaborative and well-tuned effort from both top-down curriculum policies and bottom-up initiatives should help reduce the impediments to developing LA in the Thai EFL educational context.

Last but not least, the voices of the local teachers reported in this study lead to some recommendation for further research. Apart from the need to investigate the beliefs of a larger number of university teachers in Thailand, it would also be highly desirable to observe the actual (rather than merely reported) practices of developing LA in university EFL classes. There is also a need to investigate factors beyond the classroom. For instance, a study on how to apply appropriate socio-cultural instructional strategies in designing L2 learning activities to overcome the issues of "dependency culture" should be useful. Also, a study on classroom management strategies to establish effective bridging between roles of facilitators and independent learners to promote LA in each educational setting may be another interesting investigation.



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## Chapter 7

### Learner Autonomy: English Language Teachers' Beliefs and Practices in the Philippines

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The study upon which this chapter is based is premised on the importance of teachers' views about learner autonomy, an area in the literature which has not been given sufficient attention by scholars. This paper points to teacher respondents' informed skepticism towards learner autonomy. The reason for their skepticism is that learner autonomy is always set against the backdrop of educational infrastructures and cultural norms which are largely beyond the control of the teachers. At the same time, the teachers also embrace the potential of learner autonomy to transform learners' lives. This paper concludes with a note on the situatedness of learner autonomy – that is, it is a range of conditioned practices enacted within institutional and sociocultural infrastructures.

This chapter examines language learner autonomy in the Philippines, and more specifically, teachers' views about and attitudes towards it. The purpose is to examine the beliefs about learner autonomy of teachers at an English-medium tertiary institution in urban Manila. Thus, the chapter is organized around three sections: first, a brief discussion of research on learner autonomy in the Philippines; second, a description of research design and tools; and third, an analysis and evaluation of key findings from the questionnaire

and the interviews. Teacher perceptions about learner autonomy in the Philippines reveals teachers' awareness of the huge potential of learner autonomy to significantly shape learners' learning, but they also point to the situated nature of both its practice and nature.

### Learner Autonomy in the Philippines

Autonomy in language learning has not yet been extensively studied in the Philippines. Thus, it is no surprise that research investigations into what teachers think about language learner autonomy are limited, concurring with the international trend (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a, 2012b). Where learner autonomy is investigated, it is typically set against the backdrop of the essentially top-down educational provision, leadership, and management in the country; insofar as the Philippines is concerned, "decision making emanates from the center and the top, resulting in a system that is oriented toward control rather than support and toward activities rather than results" (Behrman, Deolalikar, & Soon, 2002, p. 41). Other than this tendency, learner autonomy also finds its way in the research literature indirectly, such as when researchers investigate language learner anxieties where specific learner strategies are deemed as examples of autonomous learning (Lucas, Miraflores, & Go, 2011), provision of distance education programs where autonomy is implicated in e-learning issues (Soekartawi, Haryono, & Librero, 2002), or the harnessing of facilitation skills among language and communication teachers which can then help develop global citizenship and autonomy among learners (Navera, 2007). Therefore, although decentralization initiatives have been undertaken at all levels of education in recent years (de Guzman, 2007), learner autonomy is broadly understood as a range of everyday cultural-institutional strategies that make specific contexts of teaching and learning meaningful and appropriate in the midst of an essentially standardized curriculum and, as mentioned above, top-down educational provision (Behrman, Deolalikar, & Soon, 2002; Bernardo, 1999; Zeegers, 2012).

The Philippine education system has not been oblivious to the need for learners to take ownership over their own learning. Since the 1986 People Power revolution, which ousted the Marcos dictatorial regime and replaced it with the democratic government of President Corazon C. Aquino, the education sector has seen significant changes in the way teaching and learning are viewed. Inquiry teaching, for example, has been increasingly described as one of the integrative modes of instruction in the country as it is seen as "empowering the learner to construct his [sic] own knowledge with the guidance of the teacher" (de Guzman, 2004, p. 231). However, such awareness of learner

ownership and autonomy continues to be relatively incidental compared to other educational aims and has been quite vaguely articulated. For example, in de Guzman's (2004) summative list of 25 major indicators of functional literacy which have developed through the years, learner autonomy is not explicitly mentioned, although one can possibly make the link between it and "sense of responsibility," one of the sub-indicators under "self-development" (de Guzman, 2004, p. 233).

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that sweeping changes in the Philippine educational landscape today could have an impact on how the concept of autonomy would be enacted in the years to come. The country has recently shifted to a K-12 system to meet the demands of the economic integration of member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 2015. Consequently, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has recently shifted to an outcomes-based education framework which provides educational institutions with the autonomy to formulate international, national, and institutional outcomes-based goals. One of the key features of this framework is an endorsement of the learner as central to curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation (Commission on Higher Education, 2014). Thus, while it still remains to be seen how educational institutions will respond to the challenges of this new scheme, the strong message concerning the explicitly learner-driven curriculum opens up new lenses of understanding, investigating aspects of the curriculum which could facilitate more efficient language learning. If curricular issues continue to gravitate towards the learner, it is possible that learner autonomy will feature more prominently in pedagogic (and even political) discourse in the next few years.

The representative work found in the current literature is significant in that all of it employs an interpretive lens in examining the unique conditions of practicing language teacher-learner autonomy. Such work unpacks the complex nature of teaching and learning in the country, precisely because the learner-centeredness of the Philippine education curriculum which continues to be part of the "hermeneutics of the potential," and not yet the "hermeneutics of the actual" (de Guzman, 2004, p. 223). It must be noted though that, in the Philippines at least, conceptualizations of autonomy in education implicate both teacher and learner autonomy. There will be a clearer appreciation of learner autonomy dimensions and issues in the country if they are juxtaposed with work on teacher autonomy.

For example, Perfecto's (2012) investigation on contextual factors in teacher decision-making examines the processes teachers go through when instructional decisions are made. Moreover, it examines

the influence of contextual factors in coping with the problems brought about by constraints in the teaching-learning process. Perfecto's work describes the structuring of decision-making by teachers whose activities are generally dictated by state-mandated curricula and syllabi. Educational programs are implemented in a top-down fashion, and this prevents teachers from practicing more effective instructional decisions when their material conditions are considered.

On the other hand, Zambrano (2007) examines the relationship between teachers' educational and self-efficacy beliefs, and potential in undertaking activities that develop creative thinking. Data analysis reveals that the greater work experience teachers have, the greater potential they have in formulating strategies in teaching divergent thinking among their learners. This increased potential can be attributed to the confidence instilled by their experiences in the classroom leading to less dependence on pre-planned lessons. This potential points to one aspect of creative space in teaching which can be harnessed to address top-down curricular practices: to engage experienced teachers more seriously in promoting learner autonomy and in training younger ones in teaching divergent thinking.

Plata's (2013) work expands the trajectory in understanding and unpacking the nature of teacher autonomy in the Philippines. Tracing different levels of participation in developing outcomes and activities for aligning the curricula to the goals of a university, Plata shows that even when decision-making operates at an institutional level, nuances in interpretation and practice of different stakeholders reveal layers of involvement that may either promote or limit the autonomy of teachers. Through participant observation and examination of documents, Plata argues that to achieve the effective alignment of educational outcomes with institutional goals, broad and collaborative system-wide initiatives should be implemented to assure maximum participation among different members of the university.

On the other hand, with regard to learner autonomy, Tan's (2011) investigation of critical thinking among students identifies spaces of collision and synergy at intersections between autonomy and resistance to autonomy. By using learning logs of students, Tan shows that while they have varying interpretations of topics, greater societal issues figure prominently in their engagement with lessons. This leads to the notion of autonomy as a negotiated learning phenomenon, because while teachers provide the learning environment for critical thinking at different levels, students pursue varying avenues for engaging inputs. On the other hand, Nunez (2014) questions the role of autonomy in the context of media literacy. For him, the notion of

autonomy may be confined to the teacher's decisions in implementing lessons in media literacy leading to pre-determined inputs for engagement. The same can be said of the work of Valdez (2012) on actualizing critical pedagogy in Philippine classrooms. With the use of poster essays in dealing with issues on labor migration, Valdez found that learners utilize different forms of media to articulate conflicting views of the phenomenon which are historically and socio-politically conditioned. However, while critical pedagogy can indeed help students become autonomous learners, he asks whether practitioners have the autonomy to actualize criticality in different educational activities.

What is seen above are two related strands of broad themes emerging from Filipino scholars' engagement with teacher and learner autonomy. First, practicing autonomy on the part of teachers is closely tied with the material, cultural, and political conditions of schools and the larger community. Autonomy, or what Holliday (2003) calls "social autonomy," is enacted with varying degrees of intensity as teachers find creative ways of coping with the demands of a top-down system and the actual realities in their classes (large class sizes, varying degrees of abilities and motivations of learners, educational policies and practices of the institution). Second, autonomy is closely tied with teachers' and students' capacity to create spaces for engagement in terms of negotiating classroom practices which are deemed beneficial for both parties. In these respects, there is a noticeable gap in research in the area of learner autonomy: while it is important to identify the unique infrastructures of teaching and learning in the country which constrain and facilitate language learner autonomy, it is also important to investigate teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. In a sense, this bridges the gap between work on teacher autonomy and work on learner autonomy. Indeed, how do Filipino teachers view language learner autonomy? Could the specific configurations of teaching and learning have an impact on the teachers' beliefs as well? And to what extent do teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy constrain or facilitate learner autonomy? These questions help justify the current research on teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy, an area of research identified by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a, 2012b) as thus far sparsely investigated in learner autonomy research.

## The Present Study

### Setting

The research site is a Department of English in an institution of higher learning in urban Manila. The choice for the university was based on the following: first, it is a Catholic university, one of the many

of its kind in the country, and especially in Metro Manila, the capital city; second, it is co-educational; and third, it services the academic needs of students who belong to a cross-section of Philippine society, although most of them come from the middle to the upper socio-economic classes. It is assumed that the university has relatively easier access to academic resources as compared to institutions which are poorly funded and sited in rural areas, especially the international literature on learner autonomy and its implications for teaching. Thus, while situated within a particular culture of teaching and learning, the teachers could offer interesting insights into the complex (perhaps conflicted?) nature of their beliefs about learner autonomy. Under the Department of English is a Language Centre which caters to the needs of foreign students who intend to develop their proficiency skills in English, either oral or written. The centre offers short non-credit courses to users of English as a foreign language (EFL) who may have no knowledge of English, or who have basic, intermediate, or advanced proficiency levels. Some of the instructors who teach in the Language Centre are also part-time instructors of the department.

### **Methodology and Participants**

For the data collection, 50 instructors of the Department, including the Language Centre, participated in the survey conducted in the first term of the 2014-2015 school year. The study adapted the questionnaire survey developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b), and used non-probability sampling. Using the Likert scale with five potential choices (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012b), the attitudes of the respondents to a series of 37 statements were measured. The questionnaires were administered immediately after a general meeting of the Department, the attendees of which willingly answered the survey (see Table 1).



**Table 1**  
***Basic Information about Survey Respondents***

Gender	Female	72%
	Male	28%
Highest educational attainment	Ph.D.	18%
	MA	68%
	BA	14%
ELT experience	0-4 years	12%
	5-9 years	22%
	10-14 years	30%
	15 years and above	36%
Length of service in current institution	0-4 years	52%
	5-9 years	24%
	10-14 years	12%
	15 years and above	12%
Experience at Language Centre	With experience	24%
	Without experience	76%

Based on the findings of the survey questionnaire, a two-day workshop was conducted for teachers from the Department of English and the Language Centre. Fifteen teachers participated on the first day and twelve on the second.

Six of those who answered the questionnaire were also interviewed to probe deeper into their understanding of learner autonomy. The teachers' individual questionnaire responses were then used as prompts to elicit much more detailed views and beliefs about language learner autonomy in the specific Philippine context of each teacher. The study also adapted the interview questions developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b). This common framework of questions was modified for each interview based on what the teacher answered in the survey (i.e., whether he or she agreed or disagreed with a specific statement). The six face-to-face interviews took place after the workshop within a period of two weeks with each interview lasting for around 30-45 minutes. All six teachers agreed to have the interviews audio-recorded.

Only a few study participants teach major courses in the degree programs in English offered by the College of Education (BSE in English) and by the Faculty of Arts and Letters (BA in English

Language Studies). Likewise, some of the participants who teach in the Language Centre are full-time faculty of the Department of English who are willing to teach in the Centre when the need arises. The majority of those who teach in the Language Centre are hired as part-timers who teach on a per project basis.

## Findings and Discussion

### Questionnaire Results

English language teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. Of the 37 questionnaire statements, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements, as shown in Table 2. The teacher-respondents believed that learner autonomy can be achieved with the various activities that can be employed in the classroom by the teacher to teach students lifelong learning.

**Table 2**  
***Learner Autonomy Statements with Majority Agree / Strongly Agree Responses***

Responses ( <i>N</i> = 50)	Frequency
3. Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.	24
4. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	26
7. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.	25
13. Learner autonomy can be achieved by learners of all cultural backgrounds.	26
16. Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.	23
19. Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.	22
28. Learner-centred classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy.	23
29. Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.	28
32. The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.	24
33. Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.	25
35. The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy.	26
36. Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner.	30
37. To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	32

Table 3 shows concepts that the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with:

**Table 3**  
***Learner Autonomy Statements with Majority Disagree / Strongly Disagree Responses***

Responses ( <i>N</i> = 50)	Frequency
8. Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher.	23
9. It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners.	22
20. Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners.	34
23. Learner autonomy is a concept which is not suited to non-Western learners.	27
24. Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher.	31
26. Promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners.	19

With these responses, it can be noted that the teachers are aware that it is a misconception that with learner autonomy, students are free and unmonitored. It does not mean that they study on their own without any intervention from the teacher. While the learners are taught to be independent and become decision-makers later on, the process that they undergo is critical in that the teacher, while empowering the students to govern their learning, should also guide the students in developing responsibility for their learning process, thereby adding to the sense of responsibility of the learner.

**Desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy.** The striking feedback noted in the study is that the majority of the 50 participants found it very desirable that learners be involved about the materials used in a course, the kind of tasks and activities they do, the topics discussed, how learning is assessed, the teaching methods used, and classroom management. Likewise, the participants found it very desirable that the learners be involved in the identification of their own needs, strengths, weaknesses, and monitor their progress, evaluate their own learning, and learn cooperatively and independently. It can be pointed out then that the teachers felt that they should neutralize their power in the classroom and instead become less authoritative in dictating what the students need and should do in the classroom.

As regards feasibility of learner autonomy, the results seem to match those indicated above, all of which are quite feasible from the

second to the last variable in terms of involvement in decisions. The same is true with the second part, yielding results which are quite feasible for almost all variables.

**Perceptions on learners and teaching.** It is interesting to note that in this section, most of the teachers agreed that their students have a fair degree of learner autonomy and that they give their students opportunities to develop learner autonomy. For both statements, at least 35 teachers perceive that their students do, to some extent at least, practice learner autonomy.

### **Workshop Findings**

There was no empirical study done on the effectiveness of the workshop so it is not possible to provide evidence of its success. What follow are general reflections on the conduct of the workshop.

The participants seemed to agree that learner autonomy happens when learners choose the activities they do, decide on ways on how they can learn, and find out on their own for what reason they learn. In general, they came to realize that promoting learner autonomy involves the following: allowing the learners to discover the ways they learn best; involving them in interesting activities, e.g., surfing the Internet for sources, reading magazines, and letting them take charge of their own learning; and changing the traditional role of a teacher (i.e., learners swap places with the teacher) by critically developing the art of negotiation and emphasizing the significance of self-assessment. However, the teachers also argued that certain constraints prevent them from developing learner autonomy in the classroom. One constraint is the learners' lack of experience of autonomous learning, perhaps because of their being reliant on teachers and their reluctance to develop a sense of responsibility for the outcome of their learning. Other constraints include the use of prescribed curricula and materials and the teachers' limited autonomy to do what they want, i.e., determine the knowledge, skills, and content they teach to students, use other relevant texts or modify instructional approaches in presenting lessons, and allow the students to choose tasks consistent with their personal goals and interests.

### **Interview Findings**

The second phase of the research consisted of follow-up interviews with the six English language teachers who had completed the survey questionnaire and volunteered to further discuss their views on language learner autonomy. The interviewees were asked to give their definition of learner autonomy. All of them viewed learner autonomy as the exercise of learners' responsibility and capacity to learn on their

own through the guidance of teachers. The following statement from one of the interviewees is representative of the sample:

Learner autonomy has something to do with letting the learners go about setting their goals, knowing what their learning outcomes would be, having a hand on materials that they're going to use . . . So it's, the students now is not just a passive recipient of learning but has a partnership with the teachers. The teacher doesn't necessarily lose the reign of the class, but, you know, there's a partnership with the learner. (T6)

Consequently, interviewees generally considered an autonomous language learner as having at least one of the following attributes: independence, motivation, and perceptiveness.

The teacher respondents expressed generally positive views about the effect of learner autonomy on language learning, especially in motivating students to take an active approach to learning and in letting them explore other learning opportunities. As another respondent explained:

You learn when you're ready. You learn when you're happy. So, if a learner is autonomous enough, and the learner is motivated and can direct him or herself, there's a greater chance for learning because the tendency is you will gravitate towards that area where you are weak at or where you're interested in. So if you are motivated at something, and on your own, autonomous, and you know, you learn about it. (T1)

It is interesting to note that while the interviewees had variegated access to the concept of learner autonomy—from when they underwent training to become teachers to when they were interviewed for this study—it is clear that the concept was not easily recognizable to them. One respondent (T2) said that learner autonomy “is not something that we usually mentioned or talk about,” while T6 stated that because the culture of learning which treats students as passive recipients of knowledge, the introduction of the idea of learner autonomy was “such a new thing that your question is – how do you go about it? How much freedom should I give my students? How much, how much authority should I lose?” Another respondent (T5) admitted that she only came across the term when she agreed to be part of this study:

It made me think and realize learner autonomy is not really a label that I grew up with. I mean, it wasn't something that was consciously taught to me, or when I took up MA or even my undergrad. Actually, I only encountered it in your study. What the idea brought to my consciousness was then I became . . . I came to understand that it was not really something new, probably, just delayed. (T5)

In terms of decision-making, the interviewees expressed informed skepticism about the feasibility and desirability of learner involvement in formulating the objective of a course, preparing the materials to be used, and conceptualizing the kinds of tasks and activities learners do, and the like. In particular, the interviewees pointed out the following scenarios that may affect their decisions as regards learner involvement: prescribed curricula and instructional materials, culture and context of learning (e.g., passive learners being spoon-fed), and school policies. For example, one participant claimed that:

I don't know if it's cultural but if you're in an Asian environment, the tendency is just to accept it . . . I have never encountered a situation also where students themselves would like to add a certain objective because that would entail more work. (T1)

Another showed similar ambivalence towards the deployment of learner autonomy in Philippine classrooms on institutional and cultural grounds:

I don't know if it's the school culture or the Philippine education culture in general where students or a big number of students grew up probably getting used to being spoon-fed, being told every school work they need to do . . . and just following, really, just sticking to the rules . . . (T2)

Nevertheless, all interviewees were positive about their learners' capability to identify their own needs, strengths, and weaknesses, monitor their progress, evaluate their own learning; and the like:

I feel in some instances that they have the ability. They just need to be encouraged, or they need to be assured that it's okay for them to make certain decisions on their own . . . there are certain adjustments that need to be made on the students [part] and also on the part of the teacher. (T4)

Despite acknowledging the difficulty of operationalizing it in Philippine classroom contexts because of institutional and cultural constraints, the interviewees believe that their students are capable of autonomous learning. In fact, they provided examples from their own experiences of how learner autonomy has been operationalized, whether or not they were fully conscious that they were indeed deploying the concept in their daily work. They showed flexibility in their classes depending on the nature of the work or lesson at hand. For example,

there are also occasions when I lessen the authority coming from me. They can discuss on their own. Like when you use the jigsaw strategy, I group them into four, divide the work into four parts. Number one has part one, two, three, and four. And then, they will go around [to] find people of the same topic, discuss about it, then go back to their original [group], so they can teach one another. My role will be to clarify later on. (T1)

However, aside from broad cultural factors, the interviewees also expressed their views about particular institutional and cultural factors that hinder learner autonomy in classrooms in their institution. These include prescribed curricula and instructional materials, departmental culture and policies, exam-based teaching and learning, class size, and lack of training regarding learner autonomy. T3, for example, argued that “there is an overemphasis on prescribed texts,” a point that is shared by other interviewees as well; thus, the same teacher incisively pointed out that learner autonomy is tightly linked with teacher autonomy. Teachers must confront the challenge of prescribed texts and prescribed teaching methods because learner autonomy will not happen “if the teacher himself is not autonomous . . .” (T1). Additionally, the interviewees highlighted the role of school-based culture in mediating teachers' and learners' attitudes towards—and effective use of—strategies that promote learner autonomy. On the one hand, T6 observed that “not everybody is comfortable with the idea” because students “might feel that you're not really teaching, you're not doing your job.” On the other hand, according to T4, the university essentially continues to “promote exam-based teaching,” thus it causes a washback effect on teaching: “We have to teach this way because this is the kind of exam that we are going to give later on.”

Given these constraints, but also given that the interviewees likewise strongly acknowledge the role of learner autonomy in promoting more effective learning, the interviewees saw themselves as



“the guide or facilitator in the learning process, providing tiered activities, being an advocate of learner autonomy, and being open-minded in dealing with students” (T1). This is a point articulated by other interviewees as well, with another respondent adding that “You have to be there physically. You have to be there in the planning stage. You have to be there . . .” (T2). With regard to how their institution could promote learner autonomy, the following recommendations surfaced in the interviews: tailoring instructional materials, especially textbooks, to the different areas of specialization and interests; retooling of teachers’ ideas as to what strategies can be used to develop learner autonomy among students; arriving at a consensus of what learner autonomy is; constant monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of learner autonomy; and reducing the class size.

I guess, they [school administrators] have to trust us more. Well, I guess they trust us more, but then, in certain points only. I think so, like the choosing of reading materials. Like, I taught literature. So I was also given a textbook, and I felt limited also with all those reading materials. They were very good materials, but I felt that there could also be more changing of knowledge if my students had a chance to bring the reading materials themselves, right? This is what I want to read! Exciting, right?  
(T2)

### Conclusion

One thing that the present study has found is that teachers are keenly aware of the situated nature of learner autonomy in the Philippines. It affirms past and recent work in this area because of the respondents’ strong belief that learner autonomy—including whether or not teachers can deploy strategies that promote it—works against educational infrastructures and cultural norms which are largely beyond their control. Learner autonomy in this sense is viewed less as structurally induced by “learning situations” (Benson, 2006, p. 22). However, the teachers’ informed skepticism about learner autonomy is mitigated by their genuine acknowledgement its role in facilitating effective learning and their deployment of classroom strategies which promote learner autonomy, although they did not always know the term existed. This is an important point to make because one of the complications in the study of teachers’ beliefs about learner autonomy, as discussed in the overview for this volume by Phil Benson, is how to know whether such beliefs are mediated by the teachers’ familiarity with the international academic literature or by their own culturally- and institutionally-shaped understanding and operationalization of the

concept of learner autonomy. The current study concurs with one of the major findings of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a), stating that teachers hold firmly on to the belief that learner autonomy “involved learners in having the freedom and / or ability to make choices and decisions” (p. 286). However, the question of how they came to think of learner autonomy in this way remains unclear. Some teachers in this study have been exposed to communicative language teaching; thus, this exposure may have been where they came across the term *learner autonomy*. However, the interviews also reveal that other teachers had not encountered the term prior to the study. In future studies of teacher beliefs about learner autonomy, it would help if such a complication in the data be unpacked to provide a much more nuanced understanding of such beliefs.

In the end, this investigation into Filipino teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy has added another textured layer of research to the area, one that explores learner autonomy from the point-of-view of the teachers. Significantly aided by the workshops, such an investigation has led participant teachers to a more reflective desire to revisit their own assumptions about learner autonomy and eventually operationalize it more systematically in their own classrooms. As T1 said:

The teacher has every role in promoting learner autonomy because it is the teacher's role. You don't get . . . you don't smother them [students]. You don't hold . . . handle them for their whole life. They have to . . . sometimes you have to throw them in the water and let them swim. The role of the teacher in promoting autonomy is one, respecting who they are.

In the researchers' view, the current study reveals the crossroads of the changing educational landscape in the Philippines. T1 also succinctly captures this point with the following statement:

It's a time for change right now, so we really have OBTL [Outcomes-Based Teaching and Learning]. We have OBE [Outcomes-Based Education], K-12, etc. And it's the best time to retool teachers, that these are the strategies.

As stated in the beginning of this paper, curricular revisions across the country are currently underway, and one of the core concerns is how to reposition the learner at the centre of curriculum development. However, if learners are to develop autonomous language learning skills, teachers should do so too. As one respondent asserted above,

teachers and learners are—or should be—partners in learning. After all, “Pedagogy is only possible through teachers’ implementation and influence” (Almonte-Acosta, 2011, p. 175).

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## Chapter 8

### Teachers' Beliefs About Learner Autonomy and Its Implementation in Indonesian EFL Settings

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In Indonesian educational circles, learner autonomy (LA) has not been well promoted as one of the main goals of the teaching and learning process. Most practitioners are hardly familiar with the term *learner autonomy*. However, LA is a vital factor in accomplishing successful teaching and learning outcomes to handle existing educational problems. Practice suggests that Indonesian students do not demonstrate a high degree of autonomy. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate teachers' beliefs regarding LA and their practices in the classroom. In the present study, teachers from the junior secondary school to the tertiary level were surveyed to elicit their definitions of LA, the rationale for promoting it, and the possible constraints to its implementation. Some of the respondents were also involved in focus groups during two workshops to further examine their beliefs about LA. The teachers' beliefs about LA were categorized into technical, psychological, political, and sociocultural perspectives, and their attitudes towards developing LA among their learners in terms of desirability and / or feasibility. It was also found that these workshops contributed to enhancing the teachers' belief about LA.

For the past three decades, the concept of autonomy and the associated concepts of independent, self-directed, and self-regulated learning have become more significant in many educational settings. These concepts have been viewed as fundamental components of good teaching and learning (Benson & Huang, 2008). In line with these concepts, in British, Australian, and American cultures, people value self-reliant students and promote learner autonomy (LA) as a foundation for teaching and learning outcomes (Harmer, 2007).

However, in the Indonesian context, studies on LA are scarcely found in the literature. It has been pointed out (Lengkanawati, 2014a)

that in the language classrooms in Indonesia, oftentimes teachers handle large classes of about 40 to 50 students. With such big classes, development of higher order thinking skills among students becomes a very difficult task. According to the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) results (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Arora, 2012, p. 462), Indonesian students rank lowest among those from ASEAN countries listed in the report in their ability to go “beyond the solution of routine problems to encompass unfamiliar situations, complex contexts, and multi-step problems” (Mullis et al., 2012, p. 140), which seems achievable only for learners who have acquired some degree of autonomy. Therefore, there should be a change in the teaching and learning process paradigms from just transferring knowledge by the teacher to the learners finding needed information by themselves.

In addition to the problems mentioned above, LA in the Indonesian context has not been well understood or sufficiently utilized as a tool for effective teaching and learning. In response to this situation, it is crucial to conduct research related to how LA is perceived by teachers, and the extent to which they consider their students to be autonomous. More specifically, it is necessary to explore what beliefs teachers have regarding LA principles, what LA aspects are desired among their learners, and whether teachers consider it feasible to implement LA practices in the Indonesian classroom.

### Learner Autonomy in Indonesian Studies

Lengkanawati (1997) indicated that autonomy was not yet common among Indonesian students in her research conducted in two cultural settings. In contrast to the Australian students involved in her study, most of the Indonesian students confessed that they only studied before a test and they just waited for the teachers to tell them to do so. On a somewhat different plane, Dardjowidjojo (2001) emphasized that LA theories stressed the roles of second language learners as active participants and the teachers as facilitators in the teaching-learning process. However, he argued that these roles may work very well in Western contexts but not in Indonesian contexts as the standard norm in the Indonesian culture for good conduct are “the principles of total obedience, the unquestioning mind, the concept of elders-know-all, and the belief that teachers can do no wrong” (Dardjowidjojo, 2001, p. 309).

Autonomous learners have been defined as those who “are actively and creatively involved—as a manifestation of their positive attitudes towards themselves as learners and towards language learning activities—in the process of planning, conducting and evaluating the



learning process they encounter” (Mistar, 2001, p. 91). Mistar concluded that students in a higher education institution in his study “acquired some degrees of autonomy because metacognitive strategies requires them to independently make plans for their own learning activities . . .” (2001, p. 88).

In a somewhat similar vein, Setiyadi (2001), in a study involving university students in Lampung, found that when compared with unsuccessful learners, successful learners among the subjects utilized more metacognitive strategies involving “self-awareness to plan and direct, monitor, evaluate or correct” (p. 19)—strong indicators of LA traits. Likewise, Rusli and Soegiharto (2001) conducted a study of personality factors involving senior secondary school students in social science, mathematics, and natural science classes to investigate whether field-dependent learners and field-independent learners were different in their achievement. They found that field-independent learners had better achievement in learning English than field-dependent learners.

Suharmanto (2003) affirmed that the implementation of learner autonomy could be one of the solutions to improve the quality of Indonesian students. Sadtono (1976) and Diptoadi, Teopilus, and Tedjasukmana (2002), both as cited by Suharmanto (2003), asserted that the success of Indonesian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners had to do with the learners’ autonomy to a certain extent.

In the most recent national curriculum (Nuh, 2013), the teaching and learning process is expected to support students in learning how to learn by finding information by themselves. In addition, problem-solving activities are to be utilized in the teaching and learning process. This implies that autonomous learning is now considered to be fundamental to implement in the teaching and learning process. At a somewhat more practical classroom level, Jufri (2012) conducted research employing an autonomous vocabulary learning strategy through lexically based tasks and found that it was effective in improving the junior high school students’ vocabulary mastery.

Autonomous learning is enhanced by utilizing learning strategies. Lengkanawati (2014a) confirmed that in the Indonesian contexts, autonomous learning could be used for classroom activities. In a survey involving 42 university students studying in an Indonesian university of education, Lengkanawati (2014b) found that both language learning strategies (LLS) and autonomy were significantly correlated to the students’ proficiency levels.

A similar finding was reported by Miyartawan, Latief, and Suharmanto (2013), who conducted a correlational study on autonomous learning and English proficiency involving 120 university

students. The results of comparing two questionnaires and students' GPA in English proficiency indicated that LA and English proficiency had a strong, positive, and significant correlation. Kemala (2014) involved 63 high school students to identify the characteristics of autonomous learners, learning strategies applied by such learners, and factors influencing them in learning English. It was found that there were only eleven students who were categorized as autonomous learners.

The findings of the study conducted by Tabiati (2014) show that the autonomy of EFL university learners in reading was influenced by internal factors such as confidence in overcoming reading problems, motivation to emulate a well-known person, motivation to please parents, and motivation to win in competition among peers; and external factors such as praise from parents, deadlines set by Reading lecturers, and helping peers.

In sum, in the Indonesian context, students' learning activities tended to be teacher-triggered; therefore, a mood of pessimism seems to exist as to the feasibility of implementing LA. It was found as well that only a relatively small portion of Indonesian school students could be considered autonomous learners. In this respect, the current state of the art of LA in the Indonesian context needed to be investigated, especially as regards teachers' belief in LA and their teaching practices that could accommodate LA principles.

### The Present Study

Adapting the procedures of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a, 2012b), the present study employed a descriptive analytical approach as its design and an interpretive analysis of qualitative data. The study sought to shed light on teachers' beliefs about LA and the extent to which it was desirable and / or feasible to promote specific approaches to LA in their specific Indonesian contexts. The different beliefs about learner autonomy before and after a series of professional development workshops were also compared to see whether there were any changes of attitude toward the concept and familiarity of learner autonomy. The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What are the teachers' beliefs in learner autonomy (LA)?
2. What are the teachers' self-reported practices which accommodate LA principles?
3. What are the teachers' beliefs in the feasibility of implementing LA in their teaching?
4. To what extent could LA training contribute to developing teachers' beliefs in LA?

This study involved Indonesian English teachers of English who were currently pursuing advanced degrees. They had various backgrounds culturally and geographically: most of the participants were from Java and the rest were from five other provinces in Indonesia. The majority of the participants had at least four years of experience of teaching at different levels of the educational system. To gain the data needed, the questionnaire designed and applied by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a; 2012b) was slightly modified to meet the purpose of the study. About 60 invitations and questionnaires were distributed by e-mail to the potential respondents and 58 teachers registered and returned the filled out LA questionnaires. After the subsequent workshops, it was found that 10 participants were no longer teaching. Therefore, only questionnaire data from the 48 practicing participants were analyzed. All the questionnaire items were analyzed using descriptive statistics to calculate frequency counts and percentages. To examine how much learner autonomy training could contribute to the respondents' beliefs about learner autonomy, the relationships between variables, and the differences among them were also calculated.

Professional development workshops took place over two days in September 2014 using some materials adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b) and other specially-prepared print and video resources. They were intended to reactivate the 58 participants' knowledge and experience of learner autonomy and to provide input on how to develop and promote learner autonomy in their own contexts. The recordings of the focus group discussions (FGDs) were transcribed and analyzed to identify the information needed to address the research questions: how the participants perceived the concepts of learner autonomy, what their beliefs about LA were, whether they actually had been implementing LA, their opinion about the desirability and feasibility of implementing LA in their classes, and how much LA workshops had contributed to their beliefs about LA.

### **Questionnaire: Results and Discussion**

#### **Beliefs about LA**

In this study, the questionnaire items were divided into the four categories identified by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b): technical, political, psychological and social. The technical perspectives include items which focus on learning facilities such as use of the library, internet and self-access center. The items on learning related to such factors as age, confidence, learning effectiveness, motivation, and learner-centeredness are grouped into the psychological perspectives. Political perspectives include items that have to do with opportunities,

choices, decisions, freedom, and teacher-centeredness. The socio-cultural category has to do with cultural backgrounds, collaboration, and western / non-western issues. The questionnaires were administered twice: in the early part of the study and after completion of the professional development workshops.

The results of the first administration of the questionnaire reveal an interesting landscape of what the in-service teachers participating in the study believed regarding LA. As to the technical outlook, the majority agreed or strongly agreed that learner autonomy could be developed through independent study in the library (75.1%), learning outside the classroom (66.6%), independent work in a self-access center (62.5%), and out of class tasks involving use of the internet (91.7%). However, when triggered by a statement that learner autonomy means learning without a teacher, the majority (58.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. This means that they still recognized the teacher's role in enhancing learner autonomy to bring about a more effective learning activity. Another statement with the same substance, that total independence from the teacher is required for learner autonomy to take place, was disagreed / strongly disagreed with by precisely the same percentage of the teachers (58.3%). Since the teachers believed that they play an important role in developing LA, the data indicated that a majority of teachers did not believe that LA meant learning without a teacher.

Learners of all ages were believed to have the capacity of developing autonomy (64.6%). It is interesting that quite a high proportion of the respondents (41.6%) strongly disagreed or disagreed that difficulty that could take place when promoting learner autonomy among proficient language learners as compared to beginners. They also agreed or strongly agreed that learners with any level of language proficiency could develop autonomy in learning, by adopting a learner-centered approach to teaching (89.6%), which in turn contributed to success as language learners (93.8%). Being autonomous has something to do with the ability of the learners in assessing their own learning (87.5%). A similar note can be seen in these psychological perspectives as in the technical ones: almost half (48%) said they would reject traditional teacher-led ways of teaching and most (70.9%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher." Statistically detailed information as regards the psychological perspectives of these teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy can be seen in Lengkanawati (forthcoming).

As mentioned earlier, these political perspectives basically underline the significance of nurturing the learners' rights, different

from what commonly takes place in the traditional classroom. Most of the teachers (62.6%) believed that regular opportunities for task completion could promote learner autonomy. They also agreed or strongly agreed that learners making choices about how they learned (93.8%) and what activities they do (85.4%), and involving them to decide what to learn (81.3%) could promote learner autonomy. In the area of learning assessment, more than half of the teachers (52.1%) believed that learners should be involved in deciding how their learning would be assessed.

As regards the socio-cultural perspectives, 85% of the teachers believed that different cultural backgrounds did not affect learner autonomy. When they were confronted with the statement that learner autonomy is not suited for non-Western learners, a high proportion of the teachers (60.4%) indicated their disagreement or strong disagreement. Sharing through learning from one another was believed by the majority of the teachers (91.7%) to have to take place in the classroom when learner autonomy was to be promoted. It was also found that cooperative group work activities were believed by 91.7% of the teachers to support the development of LA.

When the data were disaggregated based on the levels of educational institutions where the respondents taught, the junior secondary school (JSS) and senior secondary school (SSS) teachers indicated stronger LA beliefs than the tertiary teachers. None of the tertiary teachers scored above 4.00 out of a possible 5.00 in the technical, psychological, and sociocultural perspectives of LA beliefs as compared to 7.69% of JSS and SSS teachers entered in this above-4.00 category. As to the political perspectives of LA beliefs, 27.1% of all the respondents fell into the above-4.00 category, of which 84.7% were JSS and SSS teachers. Awareness of LA seemed to be better among JSS and SSS teachers than tertiary teachers, among others probably due to more frequent professional training conducted for the secondary school teachers, which may have underlined the importance of LA development.

### **Desirability and Feasibility**

Regarding the desirability and feasibility of involving learners in making decisions, the item with the highest percentage of desirability was discussing the topic with the students (40.6%), whereas the item with the highest percentage of undesirability was how learning is assessed (18.8%). In terms of feasibility in applying these concepts, the responses were very constant. The respondents reported that the most feasible idea was involving students in deciding the topic discussed (25%) and the most unfeasible one was involving students in

discussing how learning is assessed (31.3%). There was a division of opinion about whether the students should be given the right to decide course objectives: although those who thought this would be feasible were more than 50%, almost as many (46.9%) believed that it was unfeasible or only slightly so.

The majority of the teachers (81.3%) believed that involving learners to decide about the materials used was desirable, and 68.8% also believed that it was a feasible classroom activity to promote LA. Involving learners to make decisions in choosing the materials was considered by only a very small number of teachers as undesirable (6.3%) and unfeasible (12.5%). A somewhat similar belief was indicated by the teachers as regards learners' involvement in selecting the kinds of tasks and activities they do. This activity was considered by the majority of the teachers as both desirable (62.5%) and feasible (68.8%). It is interesting to see here that more teachers considered it feasible than desirable.

As to desirability and feasibility, there were four other areas introduced to the teachers in this study: topics, assessment, teaching methods, and classroom management. Quite a high proportion of the teachers believed that decisions about the topics to be discussed in the classroom should be made by the learners: it was considered desirable (87.5%) as well as feasible (78.1%). However, learner involvement in how learning is assessed was believed to be undesirable by 18.8% and just slightly desirable by 21.9% of the participants. Nevertheless, quite a good portion believed that it was feasible (46.9%).

Unlike assessment, teaching methods seem to be considered a more open area for negotiation between teachers and learners. Involving learners to make decisions about teaching methods was considered desirable by 75% of the teachers. The percentage of teachers who agreed it was feasible, however, was much smaller (40.6%), which could mean that there might be room for learners to negotiate the teaching methods to be used, but the teachers still share some reservations about whether this could be realized, considering probably the knowledge and ability of the learners as regards available alternative teaching methods to select. The classroom management issue has a different landscape in terms of involving the learners to decide and of its feasibility. The majority (53.2%) believed that decisions about classroom management should be made with the involvement of the learners, and this is also considered feasible by 71.9% of the teachers.

### **The Learners' Capacity**

The teachers in the study were also asked about their beliefs regarding the learners' ability in actualizing their learner autonomy and capacity to learn cooperatively and independently. The majority (84.4%) of the teachers believed that the learners' ability to identify their own needs was desirable, and more than half of them (59.4%) believed that it was feasible. As regards strengths and weaknesses in identification by the learners, identifying their own strengths was considered desirable (80.7%) and feasible (59.4%), whereas identifying their own weaknesses was considered desirable (81.3%) and feasible (65.7%). Thus, the ability of the learners in identifying their needs, strengths, and weaknesses was considered as a desirable aspect of learner autonomy, and at the same time believed by most teachers as feasible.

By the same token, the learners' ability to monitor their own progress was considered desirable (75.1%) and feasible (53.2%). A slightly different outlook was the learners' ability to evaluate their own learning, as both its desirability (40.6%) and feasibility (43.8%) are perceived by fewer than half of the teachers. This could be looked at as an indicator that most teachers still believed that assessment was their territory, not the learners'. The last two domains of learner capacity, learning cooperatively and independently, were believed by most teachers to be as might be expected: desirable and feasible. The overwhelming majority (87.5%) of the teachers believed their students were able to learn cooperatively, and this particular capacity was believed by 71.3% of the teachers to be also feasible for classroom activities. In addition, the learners were expected by the majority of the teachers (78.2%) to possess the ability to learn independently although the teachers still believed that assessment was their authority, and independent learning was believed to be a feasible feature of learner autonomy to take place in the classroom (50.0%).

### **Professional Development Workshops: Findings and Discussion**

On the first day of the workshops, the discussions, conducted in English, dealt with what was meant by learner autonomy by providing the participants with different tasks relevant to learner autonomy in classroom practices. The roles of the teacher were also discussed. On the second day, the focus was on how to promote learner autonomy and the possible classroom practices that could help learners become autonomous. There were significant changes in beliefs before and after the two workshops. For example, the beliefs about the statements regarding independent study in the library, independent work in a self-

access center, and use of the Internet to promote learner autonomy were significantly different. Lengkanawati (forthcoming) provides a somewhat more detailed overall picture of how the items regarding learner autonomy with technical, psychological, political, and socio-cultural perspectives received different responses before and after the professional development focus group discussions. The technical perspectives include items which focus on facilities of learning such as use of the library, Internet, and self-access center, whereas such factors as age, confidence, learning effectiveness, motivation, and learner-centeredness are grouped into the psychological perspectives. Political perspectives include items that have to do with opportunities, choices, decisions, freedom, and teacher-centeredness, and sociocultural vantage points have to do with cultural backgrounds, collaboration, and western / non-western issues. Findings tended to reflect a conducive atmosphere for developing learner autonomy.

With reference to data gathered from focus group discussions (FGDs) during the workshops, the respondents believed that it was hard to promote LA in Indonesian classrooms because teachers tended to dominate the teaching-learning process. Some of the respondents confessed that they did not have any idea how to encourage students to become autonomous learners, especially in junior high schools. This uncertainty was due especially to larger classes and to the (wide) range and heterogeneity of the students' competencies. The teachers indicated this when asked their opinion about whether the following LA definition could guide their work in their particular work settings: "the ability to take charge of one's learning . . . to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (Holec, as cited by Cotterall, 2008, p. 110). The following statements are the opinions of the JSS teachers in one of the FGDs:

First of all it's good for the students but in junior high school it is problematic. (T-01)

It's hard to apply the process of learning . . . , so it needs the teacher scaffolding. (T-02)

In my context [school], the students do not have a contribution in making decision what they should learn. (T-03)

With regard to accommodating LA in the participants' classroom practices, among the five LA characteristics—determining objectives, defining the pace of learning, selecting methods and techniques, choosing learning materials, and evaluating what has been learned—



only the last two characteristics were reported as having been implemented in their JSS settings. The teachers in this group stated that:

Students involved quite well in choosing learning materials by browsing from the Internet. (T-02)

In my school, the students do a little evaluating at the post activity stage. (T-04)

For a simple material, the students can choose the material. (T-04)

Ask the students to do the [a simple] project in one semester . . . Problem Based Learning can promote LA. (T-02)

From their discussions in the workshops, it could be concluded that most of the teachers believed that in determining objectives, defining the pace of learning, and selecting methods and techniques, students still needed the teachers' guidance. When they were asked whether LA was promoted when their learners were involved in decision-making, the responses tended to depend upon what level they were teaching. JSS teachers said that it would be hard to apply these features in their school. Slightly different from these teachers, SSS teachers said that learners were not able to exercise their own choices. Both groups of teachers believed the students still needed teachers' help and that almost all of the students were dependent on the teachers. Most participants indicated that it was hard for teachers to involve learners in the decisions about what to learn since all the materials had been laid out in the curriculum and the teachers had to cover all these materials.

However, it was revealed during the FGDs that the participants still had a slight chance to promote LA in the Indonesian SSS, as the students could make choices about how they learned, which in turn could promote LA. The tertiary teachers among the respondents had slightly different views from JSS as well as SSS teachers. Most of them said that students could determine the objective, define the pace, select the method and techniques of learning, choose their own materials, and evaluate what had been learned, but that this all would depend on the students' needs and proficiency levels.

As regards constraints that could prevent the teachers from developing learner autonomy in the classroom, respondents during the FGDs indicated that out of the 12 adverse factors identified in Borg and

Al-Busaidi's (2012b, p. 19) list, the following obstacles were considered potentially problematic: limited space and time in the curriculum, learners' lack of experience of autonomous learning, a lack of incentive among learners, learners' focus on passing examinations, and learners' limited proficiency in English. However, these teachers were confident about LA resources for both teachers and learners, and they were not unduly worried about prescribed curricula and materials, as the current curriculum coverage is not as heavy as the previous one.

In the focus group discussions, the teachers were also asked to identify activities that they could do in their classes to promote learner autonomy. They responded by identifying, among others, classroom activities such as motivating students to find their own answers to a given question. They also said that to encourage the students to be more responsible for what they are expected to do in their classes, they asked students to use the Internet and then share the information thus gained in group work, or to browse the needed resources in completing the assignments in the library to bring back to the classroom in the upcoming class sessions. In order to gain some practical significance from the workshops, the teachers were also asked to redefine what learner autonomy was in reference to their own everyday teaching activities. Many of the teachers underlined the importance of developing learning autonomy characterized by learner responsibility in completing tasks and assignments for their classes and with options available for them to choose in how learning activities to be carried out.

During the FGDs, the teachers responded to the question of how LA could be promoted by insisting that learners should be given choices in the kind of activity they did, and this aligned with the findings in the survey. Data from the first survey questionnaire indicated that the teachers were confident about the feasibility of developing learners' ability to identify their own needs, strengths and weaknesses. However, the FGD participants acknowledged that learners' lack of experience of autonomous learning was one of the potential constraints, and ways to overcome this and other constraints were considered. In brief, results from the FGDs constitute more detailed and specific classroom activities that could help the teachers in implementing what they had indicated as desirable in the questionnaire.

A more positive perception regarding LA was shown by the teachers after the FGD. This is especially indicated by the increase of their strong agreement regarding their technological, psychological, political, and sociocultural perspectives. As to the technological perspectives of the belief in LA, before the FGD only 7.3% of the teachers strongly agreed with them as compared to 43.8% after the

FGD. Regarding the psychological perspectives, 16.7% of the teachers strongly agreed in the beginning and the percentage changed to 46.9% with strong agreement after the FGD. A relatively better perception of the teachers was also shown as regards the political perspectives of belief in LA from 14.9% to 57.2%. A change to a better perception after the FGD (45.3%) as compared to that before FGD (12.8%) can also be seen in the teachers' beliefs in LA from the sociocultural perspectives.

### Conclusion

As mentioned above, when compared to those from neighbouring ASEAN countries, Indonesian students rank lowest, in terms of higher order abilities other than handling day-to-day problems. Higher order abilities can only be reached by learners with sufficient learner autonomy. New teaching-learning paradigms need to be adopted at our schools by avoiding practices utilizing the spoon-feeding principle. Strong encouragement from existing rules and regulations as well as from policy-makers and school leaders is a must for autonomy to be nurtured and developed in daily school life, as studies reported earlier in this chapter have indicated that in the Indonesian contexts learner autonomy is a necessity and has a significant impact on EFL learning. Quite a few interesting findings have been revealed in this study, especially regarding Indonesian teachers' beliefs about LA, their teaching practices that support LA, the desirability and feasibility of implementing the these practices, and how LA training could contribute to LA beliefs. The following issues conclude this report.

The teachers in the present study believed that autonomy should be nurtured among learners and that learner autonomy should not be translated as learning without a teacher. This is basically in line with what Benson has indicated in this volume regarding the two seemingly complementary approaches to LA: learning outside the classroom independently of teachers and emphasis on learners' control over their own learning without precluding classroom teaching. As to choices and decisions by learners, the teachers believed that LA could be promoted through learners' making choices about how they learn and what activities they do, and through involving them in these choices. In the FGDs, many of the teachers revealed that they did provide students with freedom for what and how to learn; however, very often the question of what to learn is left unattended in practice: as Benson points out in the overview of this book, such issues are "often settled at the level of curriculum planning and course writing." This could to a certain extent be harmful to the learning process as "the personal relevance of learning and ownership of the language learned" (Benson, this volume) is somewhat deterred.

The teachers in this study indicated more positive views about the desirability than the feasibility of LA principles, similar to one of the key findings reported by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a, 2012b). The Indonesian teachers tended to have some reservations about the feasibility of teachers and learners negotiating the conduct of the lessons. This was due probably to their belief that their students did not have sufficient knowledge about appropriate methodological alternatives. In this respect, Benson in this volume has made it clear that “choices and decision-making are not the be-all-and-end-all of pedagogies” for LA, as there are other equally significant factors to attend to, such as considering feedback from students, supporting facilities for the learning process, and learning outcomes.

LA training proved to enhance the teachers' beliefs about LA, as shown in the findings above. Constraints that could prevent teachers from developing learner autonomy include limited time allotted in their curriculum, students' lack of autonomous learning experience, too much focus on examinations, and certainly students' limited proficiency in English. In dealing with the constraints, the teachers revealed that they did have access to various resources which could be beneficial in the hands of committed teachers. The key here is commitment: as acknowledged by Benson in this volume, commitment from the teachers to make a pedagogical task work could become a major factor in its success.

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## Afterword

### A Dynamic Metacognitive Systems Perspective on Language Learner Autonomy

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#### A Dynamic Metacognitive Systems Perspective

It has been 40 years since Rubin (1975, p. 41) and Stern and associates (Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978, p. xii; Stern, 1975, p. 304) heralded research into “good language learners.” Despite criticisms against language learning / learner strategy (LLS) research (e.g., Ellis, 1994; Rees-Miller, 1993; Tseng, Dörnyei & Schmitt, 2006), responses are equally vehement. Such interactions are significant for re-examining LLS research to advance the field (Chamot & Rubin, 1994; Cohen, 2007; Gao, 2007; Rose, 2012). To a great extent, LLS research has come to terms with the status quo it enjoys today (Cohen & Griffith, 2015; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Grenfell & Macaro, 2007). Nonetheless, of all these discussions, one key element, metacognition, which is so crucial to the construct of LLS as well as to learner autonomy, has not been fully brought to the fore in relation to learner autonomy (cf. Murray, 2011). For learners to be autonomous, or more specifically to take charge of their learning, they need to be equipped with a sound metacognitive knowledge that relates to their understanding about themselves, learning tasks, and strategies for realizing their goals towards language learning success (Flavell, 1979; Wenden, 1998; Zhang, 2010a).

Metacognition is often referred to as a range of beliefs, thinkings, understandings, behaviours, and strategies for current and future actions which are subject to social, contextual, and cultural modifications as and when the location where the learning enterprise takes place changes (Flavell, 1979, see also Wenden, 1998; Zhang, 2001a). Learners’ metacognitive knowledge systems are not static. They are complex and dynamic; therefore, it is imperative that they be understood explicitly as continuously changing and adapting in accordance with the time, location, task, and many other variables that are dependent upon learners’ choices and are determined by their decision-making as well (Zhang, 2010b). Such change and adaptation

are to be enacted upon by learners and induced by the learning tasks, task environments, and sociocultural-sociopolitical contexts where learning takes place in its “situated” locales (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In order to be autonomous in language learning, learners need to learn to be strategic in handling learning tasks, with an ultimate aim of “taking control” of their learning. Such moves towards becoming strategic learners are guided by their metacognition. Their deliberations on the what, when, where, why, and how in the language learning process are often closely related to their metacognitive knowledge stores; accordingly, they make decisions and take actions appropriately.

Dynamic systems usually have many different types of elements or variables at different levels, as is the case for the dynamic metacognitive systems. These different types of elements or variables are interlinked, and interact, with each other, and they also change constantly in time. From this perspective, an individual L2 learner is a dynamic system consisting of cognitive variables such as intentionality, working memory, intelligence, motivation, aptitude, and L1 and L2 knowledge. These cognitive variables are also related to the social system, including the degree of exposure to the L2, maturity, level of education, and the environment or context with which the individual interacts (de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007, pp. 7-8). The context of language learning necessarily embraces the cognitive context (e.g., working memory or intentionality, as mentioned above), the social context (e.g., educational system, relationships with other learners and the teacher), the physical environment, the pedagogical context (e.g., the task, materials, and ways of teaching and learning), and the sociopolitical environment, just to name a few (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008b). Consequently, language learning is actually a series of situated events and “an embodied action” (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008a, p. 108). In the learner’s engagement with the learning task, learning is “an iterative process [that] works both within the individual and between individuals at the social level” (de Bot et al., 2007, p. 11). It is these dynamic aspects of how language learners perceive themselves, learning tasks, and learning processes, and how they value others’ views of them and how they complete the learning tasks in specific learning environments (learning inside as well as outside classrooms; see Nunan & Richards, 2015) that constitute the essential nature of a dynamic systems perspective on metacognition and hence to learner autonomy (see Zhang, 2001a; Zhang & Zhang, 2013; Zheng, 2012).



### Strategy Deployment and Learner Autonomy

Effective and flexible deployment of LLSs for achieving learning goals is typical of learners who show strong autonomy in language learning (Macaro, 2008). In the existing LLS classification systems, metacognition is frequently mentioned (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2011; see Zhang, 2003, for a summary). Research also shows that general LLSs and strategies in relation to learning specific skills such as listening, speaking, reading, vocabulary, grammar, and writing are essential building blocks of students' metacognitive knowledge systems. However, the specific nature of each individual language skill requires different and yet related metacognitive knowledge and strategies. In fact, as early as 1977, Gagné (1977) postulated that strategies are "skills by means of which learners regulate their own internal processes of attending, learning, remembering, and thinking" (p. 35). Evidently, this statement already refers to learner autonomy and metacognition to some extent.

Essential to promoting strategic learning is a serious consideration of the cultural practices and beliefs that both learners and teachers hold about language learning and learner autonomy. Foundational to such an understanding is students' metacognition about language learning (Zhang, 2008), including various factors related to effective learning (their thinking about learning and LLSs, and themselves as learning agents), because learning is a "situated activity", in which learners can gain "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29; see also Gieve & Clark, 2005; Zhang, 2010b). Developing learner autonomy through teacher scaffolding exactly fits well with this understanding. Canagarajah (2007) postulates that it is necessary to nestle and reframe a cognitive view of language acquisition within a socially-embedded system so that these commonly used constructs are not treated in isolation but in osmosis so that they are understood "in a more socially embedded, interactionally open, and ecologically situated manner" (p. 936). Language learners' developmental trajectories towards autonomy need to be taken into serious consideration when their language development and related metacognitive knowledge systems are examined in light of this sociocultural understanding for the purpose of promoting learner autonomy.

More significantly, the interactive relationship between self-regulated or self-directed learning (Kaplan, 2008) (and, of course, by inference, learner autonomy) and metacognition indicates that learners can draw on their metacognitive knowledge to make decisions and take charge of their learning towards higher proficiency in the target language (Cotterall & Murray, 2009). All the reports in this volume are closely linked to specific cultural and educational realities of these countries, which are in fact evolving constantly.

### Revisiting Definitions of Learner Autonomy

Defining learner autonomy is crucial to our classroom positioning of who we are. If we recall, we will find, in some chronological sequence, that Holec (1981, p. 3) thought that autonomy is “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning.” Little (1991) stressed learners’ control over their own cognitive processes. Benson (2006, p. 33) maintained that “control is a question of collective decision-making rather than individual choice.” He further posited that autonomy is an attitude and capacity to exert control over learning. Given that all these definitions are offered by scholars with a Western educational background and that learner autonomy is much a Western notion closely associated with individualism and freedom (Benson, 2011), it is time that research be conducted to find out if learner autonomy is suitable in non-Western settings such as Asia, as was previously discussed in the literature (e.g., Littlewood, 1999). Benson (this volume) states that:

After more than forty years of research and practice on autonomy in language learning and teaching, we are beginning to see a more widespread acceptance of learner autonomy is both a desirable characteristic of language learners and an important consideration in the practice of language teaching.

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) posited that “the extent to and manner in which learner autonomy is promoted in language classrooms will be influenced by teachers’ beliefs about what autonomy actually is, its desirability and feasibility” (p. 6). This is indeed a very broad statement. As pointed out by Nunan (1997), autonomy in the language classroom is a matter of degree instead of it being a binary phenomenon. Cultural contexts might be a defining factor (see Little, 2007).

Benson (2003) proposed five useful guidelines for fostering autonomy in language classrooms. In his understanding, teachers need to: 1) be actively involved in students’ learning; 2) provide options and resources; 3) offer choices and decision-making opportunities; 4) support learners; and 5) encourage reflection. Such a proposal also goes well with the tenets in the self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985), where intrinsic motivation is fostered by environmental factors and is a prerequisite for students to become autonomous. Autonomy support comes from everyone around learners, including their friends, classmates, teachers, mentors, and parents or guardians. As Núñez, Fernández, León, and Grijalvo (2015, p. 191) posited, promoting choice, minimizing pressure to perform tasks, and encouraging initiatives are what autonomy support is about, because “autonomy support is the interpersonal behavior teachers provide

during instruction to identify, nurture, and build students' inner motivational resources" (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; see also Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Ushioda, 2011).

Some latest research findings do point to the power of teacher support for learners' decision to take charge of their own learning. Although not specifically focusing on language teaching and teaching, Núñez et al. (2015) found that

if teachers promote choice, minimize pressure to perform tasks in a certain way, and encourage initiative, in contrast to a controlling environment, characterized by deadlines, external rewards, or potential punishments, they will provide students with interesting experiences that are full of excitement and positive energy. (p. 191)

Lai's (2015) survey data from 160 foreign language learners revealed similar patterns in relation to technology use in language learning. Lai reported that affection, capacity, and behaviour support are types of teacher support and that "affection support influenced learner self-directed technology use through strengthened perceived usefulness, and that capacity support and behaviour support influenced learner self-directed technology use through enhanced facilitating conditions and computer self-efficacy" (p. 74). In other words, all this has much to do with learners' metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive experiences, as well as the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the two enacted upon by learners for achieving the goals (Cotterall & Murray, 2009; Gao & Zhang, 2011).

### **Studies in This Volume**

The studies in the book are organised such that all the country reports are based mainly on data collected through a questionnaire (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012) and interviews. Such an organisation makes the comparison much easier. As the chapters have already shown, the findings from these countries share more parallels than differences in terms of how teachers' conceptualisations are linked to their pedagogical practices.

As Barnard and Li's introduction to this book clearly informs us, the phenomenon of learner autonomy has not been well researched in relation to Asian EFL contexts, despite many teachers talking about it or writing about it without sufficient data. Therefore, the timeliness of this volume in filling the existing gap in the literature is immensely significant. It goes without saying that it is very appropriate to collectively investigate, in one edited volume, how teachers of different ethnicities and nationalities working in Asia conceptualise learner

autonomy, whether they are willing to implement it, what challenges they will face if they are, and whether they will become ready when professional development opportunities are provided. Following this plan, Benson's overview chapter, "Language learner autonomy: Exploring teachers' perspectives on theory and practice," serves a good purpose of laying a solid theoretical foundation for the ensuing chapters to build on their individual studies.

Nguyen's chapter, "Learner autonomy in Vietnam: Insights from English language teachers' beliefs and practices," is an appropriate addition to the already emerging area of great interest in Vietnam. For example, in discussing issues facing the implementation of learner autonomy in Vietnam, Nguyen cites Duong (2011, p. 12) as noting that, "learner autonomy continues to be a very vague concept and theory in current Vietnamese education." Therefore, the findings from Nguyen's study of 84 EFL teachers from six public universities will help clarify the myths and doubts about learner autonomy among Vietnamese EFL teachers, because they indicate that teachers were aware of the differences between desirability and feasibility. Moving towards autonomy is what language education should aim to achieve, and making an effort to help learners to become autonomous learners is desirable, but whether it is feasible is shrouded with challenges inherent in cultural traditions and constrained by many other local conditions.

Wang and Wang's report, "Developing learner autonomy: Chinese university EFL teachers' perceptions and practices," was based on English teachers in a non-national-key university in northern China. Their findings show that these Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy resemble those reported in Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) study. Interestingly, however, the interview responses to the definition of learner autonomy did not reflect all the dimensions built into Borg and Al-Busaidi's questionnaire.

Stroupe, Rundle, and Tomita's chapter, "Developing autonomous learners in Japan: Working with teachers through professional development," is a little more theoretical than the rest of the chapters. For their initial workshop, the authors developed a framework with choice, goal setting, evaluation, and reflection as essential components in autonomy-enhancing activities for learners. Given that in the Japanese education system examinations take the centre stage (e.g., the national entrance examination for university study; see Stewart & Irie, 2012), implementing learner autonomy at the university level, necessarily comes with some challenges, as in other Asian countries. Their interview data suggest, that limited class time and prescribed curriculums that have to be executed within a tight timeframe were possible constraints on developing learner autonomy.

Keuk and Heng report findings from 47 teachers of English, in “Cambodian ELT teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding language learner autonomy.” Through multiple data sources, they found that most Cambodian EFL teachers in their study had their own understandings about learner autonomy. Such understandings might refer to learners’ ability in making decisions about, and taking responsibility for, their learning. Most of these teachers thought that promoting learner autonomy would benefit students. They also seemed to be more actively engaged in encouraging and practising learner autonomy through activity-based approaches to help learners to become independent.

Haji-Othman and Wood’s “Perceptions of learner autonomy in English language education in Brunei Darussalam” analysed responses from 32 questionnaire respondents who were of different nationalities. They uncovered similar findings as those reported in Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). What is interesting, though, is that although of different ethnic backgrounds or nationalities, 81.25% of the respondents believed that learner autonomy would facilitate L2 learning success, with 62.5% endorsing the view that learner autonomy would expedite language learning.

Tapinta’s “Thai teachers’ beliefs in developing learner autonomy: L2 education in Thai universities” was based on questionnaires and online (written) interviews with a sample of Thai university EFL teachers. She found her questionnaire respondents were well aware of the concept of learner autonomy and interested in developing students into autonomous learners. Similar to other authors, again, her findings also suggest that Thai culture and institutional constraints restricted the implementation of learner autonomy. Teacher interviews also suggest that Thai students were not intuitively autonomous or independent because they were influenced by a social value of dependency commonly observed in Thailand. These findings echo well what Watson Todd (1996, p. 232, cited by Tapinta) reported: namely, the teacher was still the person that controlled the classroom dynamics and the degree of students’ readiness for autonomous learning was restricted due to their lack of “requisite skills, knowledge and strategies” (see also Darasawang & Watson Todd, 2012).

Rañosa-Madrurnio, Tarrayo, Tupas, and Valdez found somewhat similar patterns as what most authors have reported so far in their chapter, “Learner autonomy: English language teachers’ beliefs and practices in the Philippines.” Their findings show “the teacher respondents’ informed skepticism towards learner autonomy . . . [is because] learner autonomy is always set against the backdrop of educational infrastructures and cultural norms which are largely beyond the control of the teachers.” Meanwhile, teachers were not

resistant to learner autonomy and instead they saw “the potential of learner autonomy to transform learners’ lives.” The authors conclude that learner autonomy should be better understood in its situatedness, which is contingent upon policies and regulations of particular institutions as well as sociocultural infrastructures.

Turning to Indonesia, Lengkanawati focuses on “Teachers’ beliefs about learner autonomy and its implementation in Indonesian EFL settings.” Somewhat differently from the other reports in this volume, Lengkanawati found that EFL teachers and other stakeholders were not familiar with the term *learner autonomy*. Reviewing the available literature on learner autonomy, especially how scholars assumed how learner autonomy might be understood and implemented, particularly challenges in its implementation, Lengkanawati cites Dardjowidjojo (2001), who argued that the Western concept “the role of learners as active participants and the teachers as facilitators in the teaching learning process” would not work well in Indonesian contexts. Fostering learner autonomy could encounter difficulties because Indonesian culture tends not to encourage student autonomy in classroom situations. Nevertheless, following her survey of university and high school teachers’ attitudes, Lengkanawati’s teacher professional development workshops with a focus on learner autonomy showed positive results. By involving 58 teachers and talking about learner autonomy and strategies for developing and promoting it, she reported that those teachers’ perspectives changed through such a workshop. Inevitably, to these teachers, learner autonomy without teachers was not possible. This is actually not surprising at all, because real learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher does not care about students. It is a question of the degree to which responsibility can be released to them.

### Some Reflections and Conclusion

From all the country reports, it is discernible that developing high levels of learner autonomy is desirable but sometimes unfeasible due to many cultural and contextual constraints. The responsibility seems to rest on the shoulders of EFL teachers, whose professional preparation, willingness to engage learners, and concrete actions taken to implement learner autonomy initiatives become ever more crucial to the success in any attempt to develop learner autonomy. It is also evident that learner autonomy has been widely practised in the West, but has only been gradually taking root in some institutions or in some smaller cosmos such as specific classrooms or departments, but not across the entire educational system. In fact, the extent to which language learners are encouraged to develop into autonomous learners

differs inter-individually and intra-individually across smaller cosmos and countries. If learner autonomy is regarded as a universal competence that all learners should aim to achieve, contemporary experiences as reported in the chapters in this book show some kind of parallels and diversity. Evidently, in this world of internationalisation (Byram, 2012), learner autonomy is one of the key competences that any successful learner should possess.

Over 2,500 years ago, the Chinese sage, Confucius, said, “give a man a fish, and he finishes it in a day; teach him to fish, and he has fish all his life time.” This common quotation is a testimony that Chinese culture does encourage students to learn to be independent. But somehow, a paradoxical situation seems to be repeating itself. Students want independence, but at the same time they want the guidance they need in order to feel secure about what they are endeavouring to achieve. Such a situation might point to what was discussed by Benson in his overview chapter in this book, as well as other scholars (e.g., Little, 2007; Nunan, 1997), that learner development is actually a continuum, or in their expression, a degree. The concept of autonomy is not binary, as I have discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

Therefore, teachers’ understanding of learner autonomy and the way they practise it are in effect an embodiment of the sociocultural conditioning on developing learner autonomy. As part of their metacognitive knowledge mediated by their metacognitive experiences, teachers’ beliefs about learner autonomy need to be understood in their specific sociocultural context. In order to implement learner autonomy successfully in specific contexts in Asia, teachers might need to work collaboratively towards independence by negotiating personalised curricula for students and practising what they believe in. Such concerted effort can be combined with other available teacher professional development programmes that will enable these teachers to think differently for benefitting their students in improving language proficiencies and competencies. Doing so will stimulate teachers’ thinking about what learner autonomy entails, the benefit students get, and possible impact on life-long learning (see also Yashima, 2013). After all, as Gao (2013) posited, a crucial link between agency and autonomy can be established using “reflexive and reflective thinking” (p. 191).

The reports in this book were conceptualised in such a way that similar research methods were employed for easy comparison. Indeed, this has turned out to be the case in the end. What I would like to suggest is that we explore how teacher autonomy and learner autonomy develop hand in hand, and we can do so by employing other less commonly used methods among colleagues whose main thrust of interest is in language learner autonomy. Two methods have come to

my mind. They are all introspective in nature, but a bit different in practice: Think-aloud protocol analysis and stimulated recall. These two methods might be able to offer us new information about individual differences that are otherwise undetectable through the use of a questionnaire such as the one adopted for use in all the studies in this book.

Think-aloud protocol analysis is a method that allows subjects to verbalise their thoughts or thinking processes while they are completing a learning task. Human working memory is typically short, so things tend to be forgotten if the time interval between the task completion event and the recall is too distant. The shorter the interval, the more details subjects can recall about what has happened (Ericsson & Simon, 1993). Because of our working memory constraint, verbalisation of thought processes that involve a longer duration does not usually lead to a recollection of accurate details (Ericsson, 2002; Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Ericsson & Moxley, 2010). So, in examining what language learners do and how they develop autonomy, a relevant use of this research tool is to invite them to talk about what activities they do every day and why they are interested in being involved in them. Given the large numbers of studies using this research tool in the field of foreign / second language education (e.g., Gu, Hu, & Zhang, 2005; Smagorinsky, Daigle, O'Donnell-Allen, & Bynum, 2010; Zhang, 2001b), it should be a useful means for gathering data on how learners develop (or do not want to develop) autonomy.

However, this kind of concurrent think-aloud is not easy to implement in situations where subjects all participate in one event as a group. That is why stimulated recall as a research method was recommended to complement the concurrent think-aloud method (see Gass & Mackey, 2015). As the name of the method indicates, in order to help subjects to retrieve the information, the researcher needs to provide some kind of stimulus that will enable or help the subjects to recall what has just happened. The stimulus can be in different forms. Typically, when a lesson or language learning episode is recorded or videotaped, and if the purpose is to find out what the student thinks, then the tape can be played to him to help him think about what his thinking processes were when the event was taking place.

If these tools are used in researching language learner autonomy, and with the wisdom gathered over the last 40 years in the field of language learner autonomy, I anticipate that richer and thicker data about individuals' (both teachers and students) decision-making processes will be made available for us to reflect upon the mammoth that we call language learner autonomy. Using these methods will also potentially uncover many of the unobservable cognitive processes that are shaped by the sociocultural contexts in which students learn a



foreign language; they will equally usefully better understand how our students as dynamic systems themselves develop autonomy and take charge of their own learning through metacognitive manoeuvring.

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The language learning and teaching context in the Asian region is as varied and complex as the countries encompassed in this part of the world. Each context is defined by the history and culture of each specific country and the region as a whole and the language policies and languages involved, including a myriad of local, indigenous, colonial, and “global” languages.

In response to the ever-changing and challenging linguistic landscape in this area, in 2010, IDP Education (Cambodia) established the fully peer-reviewed online journal *Language Education in Asia* as a forum to highlight and exchange research and insights into language education in this dynamic region.

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