EFL Teachers' Strategies and Challenges in Promoting High School Students' Autonomy in Vocabulary Learning A Qualitative Study

Nguyen Thi Thuy Linh and Phuong Hoang Yen

ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy is now regarded as a desirable objective in language teaching. The movement towards learner-centered approaches has resulted in more emphasis on the benefits of learner autonomy in the success of language education. The objective of the study was to identify ELT teachers' strategies and challenges in promoting EFL high school students' autonomy in vocabulary learning. A qualitative interview was undertaken to seek the results. The findings of this study revealed that English language teachers frequently promoted autonomous learners in their classrooms. They usually implemented different teaching strategies, which can be categorized into three groups including involving students in a student-centered atmosphere; playing various roles in the classroom; and equipping students with the strategies to learn vocabulary. Additionally, the results demonstrated that teachers faced challenges such as learners' lack of independent learning abilities, rules and regulations implemented in schools, and teachers' lack of fundamental ways to promote autonomous learning. Teachers, students, school stakeholders, and curriculum designers can all benefit from the findings. Finally, it is hoped that the proposed pedagogical implications will contribute to the innovation of promoting learner autonomy in vocabulary learning in the context of high school in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam.

Keywords: Challenges, Learner Autonomy, Strategies, Vocabulary Learning.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy is defined as a learner's readiness and competence in taking accountability for suggesting, implementing, monitoring, and assessing his/her learning in cooperation with, and without support from the teacher (Benson, 2007). The significance of learner autonomy in language learning has been proved in several studies. It not only enhances the learner's motivation but also leads to more effective learning (Jiao, 2005). However, the effectiveness of promoting learner autonomy in teaching still has many limitations, especially in vocabulary learning.

Vocabulary is central to English language teaching because, without sufficient vocabulary, students cannot understand others or express their ideas. Wilkins (1972) claimed that "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". Vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in every area of communication including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Vocabulary enhancement plays a core role in improving language capacity and learner autonomy in vocabulary learning is indispensable for success in language learning.

However, ELT teachers in high school are facing difficulties in enhancing their learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning. The challenges of promoting learner autonomy in learning vocabulary are immense, and developing effective strategies is critical. After realizing the importance of learner autonomy and vocabulary learning, I recognize that it is important to conduct a study to address the challenges that ELT teachers face when promoting EFL high school students' autonomy in learning vocabulary. This study comes up with the strategies the teachers' practice to enhance learner autonomy in learning vocabulary as well. The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What strategies do EFL high school teachers employ for promoting students' autonomy in vocabulary learning?
2. What challenges do EFL high school teachers face in promoting students' autonomy in vocabulary learning?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Learner Autonomy

From the end of the 20th century, learner autonomy (LA) had been used successfully in teaching foreign and second languages worldwide. Learner autonomy is considered one of

the prominent factors in creating meaningful learning. It has been defined in a number of ways

Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.4). Gathercole (1990) described autonomy as "when the learner is willing to and capable of taking charge of his own learning". 'Independence' plays an important role, which means learners should have been able to choose their own goals as well as materials, resources, methods, and tasks. According to Gathercole, learner autonomy is concerned with the investigation of why, what, and how learners are able to learn independently.

Little (1991) stands at the same pole and defines LA as a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. He continues to state that it implies but does not require, that the learner establish a certain psychological relationship to the process and substance of his learning. The learner's ability for autonomy will be seen in both how he or she learns and how he or she applies what has been learned in larger situations.

In general, current definitions of LA are not universally accepted by scholars around the world. It, however, unanimously includes (1) students' control and responsibility for their own learning, both in terms of what they learn and how they learn it (2) students' ability to direct their own learning and willingness to set learning plans/objectives (3) developing an independent, proactive approach to their studies by choosing methods, strategies, resources to perform learning actions with and without instructor assistance (4) evaluating/self-assessing learning processes and outcomes.

B. Vocabulary Learning and Learner Autonomy

Hornby (1995) defined vocabulary in three senses that cover a) the total number of the words which make up a language; b) all the words known to a person or used in a particular book, subject, etc; and c) a list of words with their meaning.

Cameron (2001) believes that knowing about a word entails understanding its form (how it sounds and is spelled, as well as the grammatical alterations that can be made to it); its meaning (conceptual substance and its relationship to other words and concepts); and its application (how it is used) (patterns of occurrence with other words).

In fact, Schmitt (2008) has explained that vocabulary learning is essential as it is a vital indication of language proficiency. Particularly, Nation (2001) described the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use as complementary. That is, knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and, conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge. The importance of vocabulary was noted by Richards and Renandya (2002) believing that vocabulary is important in foreign language acquisition and competency because it influences how effectively learners speak, listen, read, and write.

Vocabulary is one of the most pivotal components of language learning and teaching of a foreign language since it affords learners of the language access to all forms of oral and written communication of the word (Moeller et al.,2009). In other words, English language acquisition requires the skills to perceive, understand the language, and communicate using words and sentences (Ellis, 1994) and vocabulary development is at the heart of English language acquisition.

C. EFL Teachers and Autonomy in Vocabulary Learning

Learner autonomy in English emphasizes the learner's authority over his learning; however, this does not imply that learners should complete the task on their own. Because the development of language ability requires a considerable deal of communication, Aoki (2000) pointed out that the basis of learner autonomy in SLA is learners' beneficial dependence on one another. It is impossible to improve language communicative skills without the collaboration of the learners and the surrounding language environment.

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

Teachers play a larger role in education than students in traditional language teaching. However, because the decision of incorporating autonomy in language learning usually comes from the teacher, autonomy fostering depends essentially on the teachers' redefinition of their own role (Hill, 1994). As opposed to the traditional role of teachers, in a learner-centered, communicative, and autonomous classroom, the teacher's role should transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered, with the learner at the center of the program (Yan, 2012). Therefore, in promoting EFL students' autonomy in vocabulary learning, one of the most important factors to master the language, teachers also perform various roles in the classroom.

D. Strategies in Promoting EFL Students' Autonomy in Vocabulary Learning

Researchers have come up with potential strategies that assist to promote EFL students' autonomy in vocabulary learning.

First, one of the most efficient strategies to boost learner autonomy in the classroom is to engage students in a student-centered environment where teachers may value their creativity, contributions, and self-evaluation. (Hargreaves, 2014; Li, 2015; Yeung, 2016; Kassem, 2019).

Second, Teachers who want to encourage student autonomy in the classroom should take on a variety of responsibilities. A shift in teaching practices is necessary for a student-centered approach. The teacher can no longer set the sole direction for the class's activities and subject matter. Teachers must take into account the needs and expectations of their students and be flexible when these things change over the course of the semester. (Conklin, 2013).

Last but not least, learners must be taught how to learn vocabulary, constantly refer to their learning objectives, and evaluate their progress. Continuous goal-setting and self-monitoring are excellent techniques to boost self-efficacy and raise learners' confidence in their capacity to achieve a certain objective. (Bandura, 2012).

Besides promoting excitement in learning vocabulary in class, teachers also implement certain strategies to promote autonomy in vocabulary learning of students when they get home. Teachers commonly employ strategies like "provide homework", "apply IT," "offer points to encourage", and "use vocabulary notebook".

Many of the participants have a practice of giving students homework. For every class and student level, there is a different set of assignments. For instance, students are instructed to use newly learned words to create sentences that will help them comprehend how to use those words (Teachers 1, 2), and telling stories using the words they have learned (Teacher 2, 5), and fill in the blanks with new words or identify synonyms and antonyms (Teacher 1, 3, 5).

"Students need to find at least 10 words in each unit. And they will write down the meaning, make sentences with those words." (T1, line No. 41-43)

Second, participants said that they make an effort to utilize information technology. Free websites where teachers can design and assign assignments to students are widely searched and used. They claim that these sites help strengthen the habit of improving vocabulary outside of the classroom. Among them are "Azota", and "moodle".They also utilize social media platforms like "Zalo".

"I also create my own homework resources on Moodle, where my students can keep working on assignments and get quick feedback" (T6, line No 573-575).

Additionally, teachers support their pupils' active learning by giving out rewards and bonus points (T1, 3, 5, 6); having students join the "English club"(T5), or keeping an "English vocabulary notebook"(T1, T6) which encourages ongoing vocabulary development.

"There is an English club in my school…The club has a new question every two days, …Due a month, a quarter, a semester, the student with the most points will be awarded plus points, and incentive gifts" (T5, line 450-452)

B. Challenges in promoting learner autonomy in vocabulary learning

Participants demonstrated promoting learner autonomy in vocabulary learning as "find it hard", and "challenging". Participants expressed their thoughts as follows:

"I find it hard to improve learner autonomy in vocabulary learning". (T6, line No 585)

Analysis of the teacher interview data showed that participants reported major challenges connected with the teachers, the students, and the institutes.

First, EFL teachers found it difficult to promote learner autonomy because they lacked appropriate materials. In fact, teachers found themselves with no or few resources to improve student autonomy because of the unavailability of materials, according to the interviews.

"I don't seem to have any particular forums or channels where I can learn how to enhance my students' autonomy because they aren't available. I'll have to actively explore more but I

don't know many websites to visit frequently." (T4, line No 362-264)

Besides, teachers claimed that they lack of time to deliver various activities which can greatly improve learner autonomy in vocabulary learning.

"I have little time to expand vocabulary for students. Spending most of the time in class spreading the lesson, I presented self-study sites, but I didn't have time to remind students or verify if they were following me or not" (T2, line No. 167-159).

Furthermore, teachers were not confident that they have known the suitable strategies to promote students' autonomy.

"I've often wondered how to increase students' autonomy. …, I can't seem to come up with a solution that works for every student. I have been a high school teacher for seven years, yet I still don't feel confident in claiming that I have been successful in raising students' levels of autonomy." (T2, line No. 144-147).

Analysis of the challenges from the learners in promoting learner autonomy in vocabulary learning, the results show that there are a number of challenges named "mixed level of students", "students' lack of motivation", "different learning styles", "different background knowledge", "students' inactiveness".

First, learner characteristics and their learning background are also a source of challenges for promoting learner autonomy in vocabulary learning, according to the interviewed teachers.

"…students' background knowledge could make it more difficult to promote learner autonomy" (T3, line No. 174-176).

Second, another challenge in promoting learner autonomy in vocabulary learning from the students is "students' studying plans".

"Students have their own studying plans and career orientation, so it is a problem to enhance learner autonomy in learning English" (T2, line No. 168-170).

Moreover, being put under various kinds of pressure: time, exam, etc make students hard to develop their learning autonomy in English learning in general, and in vocabulary learning in particular.

"Students have many subjects to take care of, so learning English is somewhat limited in terms of time"(T1, line No. 65-66).

Besides, the teachers demonstrated that the students are not guided in a detailed way on how to develop learning autonomy, and how to learn vocabulary effectively. Therefore, the students give up practicing learning autonomy in vocabulary learning.

"…students don't know how to learn effectively at home. Some students are not confident because they think English is difficult" (T6, line No.653-655).

Difficulties from institutes were pointed out in the interviews. Participants illustrated that current instructional time made it hard to promote learner autonomy in vocabulary learning.

"Teachers need to organize a lot of activities in class if they want to build learner autonomy. However, teachers do not have enough time in class to achieve that." (T3, line No. 265-268).

Through the interview, teachers realized that they could not improve the autonomy of learners in the classroom environment with different levels and backgrounds.

"Students' previous experiences play a very important role in their learning. If students are used to teachers being the ones providing vocabulary, or learning vocabulary just stops with knowing the meaning, teachers face many difficulties to promote autonomy in vocabulary learning" (T1, line No. 76-79).

Additionally, due to the large class sizes and frequent noise in the classrooms, teachers have found it difficult to increase student autonomy. As a result, they struggle to have equal access to all of the students.

"The class is crowded, and the teacher cannot have enough time to set aside time to promote learner autonomy. If students do not actively ask the teacher, it is also difficult for the teacher to reach all of them." (T2, line No. 193-196).

One of the challenges from institutes is that they do not offer many seminars and training sessions for teachers on the topic of improving students' autonomy. This leads to teachers being confused when implementing learning autonomy enhancement for students.

"Schools rarely have training sessions on this topic…" (T3, line No.299-230).
"I don't seem to have much particular forums or channels where I can learn how to enhance my students' autonomy"(T4, line 397-400).

As clearly seen in the excerpts, participants acknowledged the undeniable strategies and used them in their teaching contexts. The responses in the interviews highlighted the strategies that teachers use in promoting learner autonomy: involving students in a student-centered atmosphere, playing various roles in the classroom; and equipping students with the strategies to learn vocabulary. The challenges mostly come from three factors, which were emphasized in the interviews, including teachers, students themselves, and the institutions.

V. DISCUSSION

The results of strategies coincide with the previous scholars' views. The results indicated that, particularly in vocabulary learning, integrating students in a student-centered environment can support learner autonomy. This discovery is consistent with the findings of earlier research (Hargreaves, 2014; Li, 2015; Yeung, 2016; Kassem, 2019). Additionally, teachers should take on a variety of roles in the

classroom to increase students' autonomy in vocabulary learning. Teachers ought to reconsider their responsibilities in the classroom and promote student involvement in educational pursuits. In fact, this viewpoint on learner autonomy is in perfect agreement with that of the earlier authors. According to several academics, instructors play a variety of roles in the classroom (Hill, 1994; Riley, 1997; Voller, 1997; Garner & Miller, 1999; He, 2003; Xu, 2007; Yan, 2012). Last but not least, equipping students with the strategies to learn vocabulary, go back to their learning goals, and assess their progress is believed to be integral in enhancing learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning. According to Bandura (2012), learners need to be trained on the ways how to learn vocabulary effectively, reflect on their learning goals and assess their learning. Most importantly, as students continue to learn outside of the classroom without the teacher's direct supervision, it becomes apparent that they have autonomy in their learning. Teachers, therefore, must offer resources, learning strategies, and opportunities for students to evaluate their own learning.

Second, after careful synthesis and analysis, the challenges are classified into challenges from three main factors including teachers, students, and institutes. These challenges strengthen the credibility of previous studies. Numerous difficulties are supposedly brought on by the teachers themselves. They acknowledge that they are not sufficiently confident in their capacity to help students become better self-learners because they are unsure about their strategy. This is consistent with the arguments made in the literature review (Alibakhshi, 2015; Wiraningsih & Santosa, 2020). Furthermore, teachers agreed that they did not have much time, the main reason being that they felt hindered by the full curriculum. Indeed, teachers, according to Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), felt constrained by a fixed curriculum that had centrally determined content and assessment. Participants also mentioned difficulties brought on by the students. The results showed that low or mixed language proficiency, a lack of student initiative, a lack of interest in the subject, pressure from a demanding curriculum, and a lack of motivation are the main problems. As Almusharraf (2018) mentioned in his study, the fact that learners are unmotivated, reliant on teachers, and have little English language proficiency is challenging. Moreover, the teachers expressed that the curriculum, the assessment policies, and the large and mixed size of the class bring problems when promoting learner autonomy in vocabulary learning which are grouped into challenges from the institutes. This result is consistent with earlier research, particularly Alibakhshi's (2015), who believed working with institutions and policymakers is the main challenge for teachers in helping students become autonomous.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study was primarily conducted to identify ELT teachers' strategies in promoting EFL high school students' autonomy in vocabulary learning. Besides, this research attempts to find out the challenges that ELT high school teachers employ in promoting EFL students' autonomy in vocabulary learning.

The results highlighted that teachers frequently improved their learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning. Analysis of

the strategies of teachers in promoting learner autonomy in vocabulary learning demonstrated that teachers use a lot of strategies named "involving students in a student-centered atmosphere", "playing various roles in the classroom"; and "equipping students with the strategies to learn vocabulary". No matter what strategies teachers employ to improve their students' capacity for autonomy in general and vocabulary learning in particular, it makes students love English and understand the necessity of English is the key to success.

The findings from the interviews showed that teachers encounter a variety of problems that come from their own institutes, their pupils, and themselves. The findings showed that teachers had to deal with issues such as students' inability to learn independently, rules and restrictions put in place in schools, and teachers' lack of basic strategies to encourage independent learning.

APPENDIX

Interview Forms
Teacher Interview Questions
(1) Demographic Information: name, age.
(2) Educational and career Information: degree(s), reason(s) for teaching the English language, years of teaching experiences, and years of teaching in high school.
Part 1: Strategies in promoting learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning
Question 1: What are the strategies you use to promote learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning?
Question 2. For you, what are the roles of the teachers in the classroom when promoting learner autonomy in vocabulary learning?
Question 3. How do you encourage students to continue studying vocabulary outside the class?
Question 4. Are there sources you employ to update strategies in promoting learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning? If yes, what are they?
Part 2: Challenges in promoting learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning
Question 1. What are your challenges in promoting learners' autonomy in vocabulary teaching?
Question 2. Do the institution's policies make it difficult for you to promote learners' autonomy in vocabulary teaching? If yes, what are these?
Question 3. Each student has his or his way of learning English. Are there any aspects related to students that make it hard to foster their autonomy in vocabulary teaching?

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