Promoting Learner Autonomy in Competence-Based General Education Curriculum in Vietnam: High School Teachers' Beliefs

Thi Thanh Huyen Phan[*]
An Giang University- Vietnam National University HoChiMinh City
An Giang, Vietnam

Abstract. Learner autonomy has recently been adopted as a desirable educational goal in many countries and a dominant topic in teaching and learning English. Despite numerous studies on the initiatives to foster learner autonomy in various contexts, little research has explored how high school teachers interpret and foster their students' autonomy, especially in relation to the new competence-based curriculum for general education in Vietnam. This paper aimed to address this gap by investing teachers' beliefs related to learner autonomy using a mixed-methods approach. It drew on data derived from a *Likert*-scale questionnaire with 71 high school teachers and individual interviews with five teachers of various subjects in a province in the south of Vietnam. The data were analyzed using *SPSS* software and qualitative thematic analysis. The findings indicated that teachers were well aware of the importance of learner autonomy and its significance in Vietnamese education. They generally took positive beliefs toward learner autonomy, but also expressed some reservations about its feasibility in classroom practice. Despite these challenges, teachers generally believed that they provided various learning opportunities and practices of this competence. This study presented a preliminary investigation into high school teachers' beliefs about promoting LA in the new competence-based curriculum, which can be a useful resource for researchers and educators in the field. However, the study was small in scope and lacked generality. Future research could thus recruit more participants from various backgrounds and geographical regions or delve deeper into how various factors interact to shape teachers' practices.

Keywords: beliefs; competence-based; general education curriculum; high school teachers; learner autonomy

---

[*] Corresponding author: *Thi Thanh Huyen Phan, ptthuyen@agu.edu.vn*

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy (LA) has recently received substantial attention in the educational literature. Initially introduced by Holec (1981), it has been broadly accepted as a desirable educational goal in many countries (Markic (2014). This paper delves into LA's relevance within Vietnam's general education, particularly in relation to the new competence-based curriculum, first implemented throughout Vietnam in the school year 2020–2021. This new general education curriculum, also referred to as GEC 2018, has marked a cornerstone in Vietnamese general education. It evolved from the traditional content-based approach focusing heavily on rote learning, memorizing knowledge and central roles of the teacher (Nguyen et al., 2022) to competence-based curriculum with a learner-centered approach. The new curriculum would reduce theory, enhance practice and applying knowledge to real-life learning activities, and increase formative assessment instead of focusing primarily on summative pencil-and-paper examinations. This shift emphasizes competency, student-centered learning and holistic student development, by aiming at developing students' qualities and competences that combining their physical and mental development, and thus endorsing their best potential (MOET, 2018; Nguyen, 2017). Within this evolving educational framework, LA plays a central role, as it is mandated for all subject teachers to integrate into learning activities. In other words, teachers of all subjects, who are central to this transformation, must crucially foster LA through educational activities in and outside the classroom. This important role of the teacher in LA development has been substantiated in the literature (Aoki, 2002; Barfield et al., 2007; Dam, 2003; Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014; Lin & Reinders, 2019; Phan & Hamid, 2017). It is also agreed that to successfully facilitate this competence, teachers could be autonomous themselves, as reflected in their beliefs and teaching practices (Little, 1991; Voller, 2014).

Although various studies in Vietnamese education focus on how teachers foster LA in English language learning (Duong, 2014; Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014; Nguyen & Habók, 2020), these studies include little research into the beliefs of teachers teaching subjects other than English in high school. In addition, it has been substantiated in the literature that teachers' beliefs significantly impact their understanding of a policy, particularly the new curriculum in this context and, in turn, their teaching practices (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Tran et al., 2021). Given Vietnam's traditionally teacher-centric education, and the top-down policy making and implementation influenced by Confucian heritage (Nguyen et al., 2020; Nhat et al., 2018), the shift toward LA may pose individual and pedagogical challenges to teachers. This little attention to beliefs of different subject teachers about LA provided the theoretical motivation for this investigation into how high school teachers interpret and foster LA.

This paper thus sought to address these gap by investigating teachers' beliefs about LA regarding the new educational goal of fostering student autonomy in the competence-based curriculum in Vietnamese high schools. This study was informed by the previous studies in the field of LA and teachers' beliefs about LA (Benson, 2011, 2013; Holec, 1981; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Nguyen & Habók, 2022). We drew on data from questionnaires and

interviews with different subject teachers of Grade 10 from six high schools in a Mekong Delta province in Vietnam. It aimed to provide insights on how high school teachers interpret LA and facilitate it in their lessons and what support they need to better nurture their students' autonomy and self-study in school settings. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What does 'learner autonomy' mean to Grade 10 teachers in a Mekong Delta province in Vietnam?
2. How desirable and feasible do the teachers believe it is to promote learner autonomy in relation to the new general education curriculum?
3. To what extent do teachers think they really support autonomous learning?

2. Literature Review
2.1. Definition of LA
LA has drawn educators and researchers' interest over the last few decades. Although LA has been defined in different ways (Benson, 2007; Benson & Lamb, 2020; Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1996; Oxford, 2015; Sinclair, 2000; Murray, 2020), Holec's (1981, p. 3) definition of autonomy as learners' "capacity to take charge of their own learning" is often quoted in the literature. In addition, Benson's (2013) interpretation of this construct as students' control over their learning process is also commonly accepted. This ability consists of five essential components, namely, setting learning objectives, determining content and progression, choosing learning methods, monitoring the acquisition process, and evaluating knowledge acquired (Holec, 1981). LA becomes manifest when learners make decisions at various stages of their learning. While the literature has subsequently related this concept with terms such as self-study, learner-centeredness, independent learning or critical thinking (Benson, 2007; Little, 2003), consensus remains that LA is multifaceted, changeable, and acquired through education and practice (Aoki, 2002; Benson, 2011; Littlewood, 1996, 1999).

2.2. LA in Vietnam's New General Education Curriculum 2018
Vietnamese education has been frequently reformed to enhance the quality of the human resources in that they are competent to adapt to the changes and dynamics of nature and society, and to ensure sustainable development (Nguyen, 2017). The government had particularly recognized the limitations of the content-based curriculum approach that focused heavily on transmitting theoretical and isolated knowledge to learners rather than offering them learning opportunities to understand and solve problems and make their own decisions (Nhat et al., 2018). A competence-based approach was introduced, highlighting learners' central role in their learning process instead of a traditional model of teachers as knowledge deliverers and learners as knowledge receivers (Nguyen et al., 2022). LA was explicitly stated as a desirable goal in GEC 2018 (MOET, 2018) although it was implicitly introduced into Vietnam's education under different concepts, such as, self-study, learner-centeredness and independence against the backdrop of both external forces and internal pressures to reform the education system (Phan & Hamid, 2017).

The content-based general education program, first launched in 2006, was being applied for grades 4, 5, 8, 9, 11 and 12 while our study was being carried out.

Meanwhile, other grades (grades 1, 2, 3, 6, 7 & 10) were operating according to the GEC 2018. The new curriculum will be applied to grades 4, 8 and 11 by 2024 and will completely replace the content-based program by 2025. The GEC 2018 was expected to reform K-12 education so that it focuses more on practicing and applying knowledge to both real life and on extra-curricular activities (MOET, 2018). This approach aims to create an active learning environment and develop five qualities and 10 core competences for K-12 students (see MOET, 2018; Nguyen, 2017).

Among the competencies targeted in the GEC 2018, autonomy and self-learning should particularly be addressed in all academic subjects and activities. In other words, these subjects and activities in school should contribute to forming and developing this common competence, as required in the 2018 GEC. This new curriculum was thus built to improve practicing and applying knowledge to real life in education in that it would focus on social activities, extra-curricular activities, and scientific research. By integrating various science subjects into one at the junior high levels, the 2018 GEC contains fewer subjects than those of the 2006 curriculum (Nguyen et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2022). Moreover, regarding subject contents, the structure of knowledge units is replaced with the topics that are close to real life. For example, senior high students can select learning topics and elective subjects in sciences and arts.

Besides improving curriculum topics, the new curriculum focuses also on renovating methods of teaching and learning in two ways: first, teachers are no longer knowledge deliverers but become facilitators and instructors of the learning process to help learner advance targeted qualities and competences; and second, teachers are encouraged to apply various teaching methods and increase practical and experiential activities to build students' competency. In addition, teachers are granted more autonomy in deciding suitable formative assessment methods that correspond to curriculum objectives, students' levels, and specific conditions. Students are expected to play a more active role in participating in the lessons and applying what they have learnt in practice.

Despite these improved aspects in the 2018 GEC, teachers have faced many challenges in implementing this new curriculum (Ho & Dimmock, 2023). Although they were offered regular professional development in implementing the new curriculum and teaching supported by new text books, their classroom practices revealed only partial evidence of change, despite their acceptance of the new policy goals. Therefore, to ensure that LA is integrated in all subjects at school, it is important to understand how teachers interpret the nature of LA and to what extent they think they can promote it in classroom practices.

2.3. Teachers' Beliefs in Relation to Promoting LA
Besides the first component of the theoretical background in LA (see above), this study is also informed by research in teachers' beliefs about LA because what teachers think and believe significantly shapes their teaching practices and consequently the educational experiences that learners encounter (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Pajares, 1992). In other words, to what extent and how LA is

facilitated by teachers will depend on their beliefs about the nature of autonomy and how much teachers desire to promote LA and to what extent they believe LA can be achieved in the classroom.

The literature investigates teachers' beliefs regarding LA, by exploring various aspects within this broad concept (Balcikanli, 2010; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Camilleri, 1999; Chan, 2003). For example, a questionnaire-based study was conducted with 328 teachers in various European contexts to investigate the extent to which they believed learners should be involved in making decisions about different learning activities (Camilleri, 1999). However, this study did not clearly mention the subject areas within which these teacher participants taught. The findings show that they were generally positive about involving learners in activities, such as desk arrangement and self-assessment but less positive about learner involvement in textbook selection and scheduling.

Chan (2003) studied teachers' perceptions and their language teaching practices related to LA in Hong Kong university. The study examined teachers' views on their roles, students' decision-making abilities, the influence of LA on teaching, and both teachers' and students' attitudes towards LA. While results showed positive attitudes and awareness of LA among teachers, they maintained a clear view of their own responsibilities and were hesitant to relinquish control to students.

Balcikanli (2010) explored pre-service teachers' beliefs about LA in Turkish education by covering areas like student involvement in classroom management, homework and assessment. This study found that whereas student teachers felt positively about and clearly understood LA, they encountered obstacles with teacher-centric teaching approach, fixed schedules, and high teacher authority.

Al-Shaqsi (2009) used a specific questionnaire with 120 English teachers in Omani state schools to examine what they believed about autonomous learners, learners' abilities, and strategies for promoting autonomy. Most teachers viewed their students' autonomy positively, though the extent of these positive views was not explored. Moreover, some suggestions for promoting autonomy were not clearly linked to pedagogical activities.

Also conducted in Omani contexts, an influential study by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) explored the critical aspects of teachers' beliefs about LA, by delving into the views of English language teachers in a university-language center. They found that teachers in Oman held a wide range of beliefs related to LA and had diverse opinions about how to foster autonomy in the classroom. These findings emphasized the importance of understanding the changes of teachers' beliefs and how these beliefs impacted classroom practices. However, their study showed low reliability of the scales to denote teacher perspectives on different orientations of autonomy, namely technical, psychological, sociocultural and political. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) provided a valuable base for further research in the field, by contributing to the ongoing exploration of the intersection between teachers'

beliefs, classroom practices, and the promotion of LA in diverse educational contexts.

In brief, research into teachers' beliefs of LA revealed positive views about LA and promoting it in classrooms. They considered it to be a desirable goal in education and a competence-enhancing learning process. However, this research did not explore teachers from various subject areas, focusing mostly on English language teachers. Little has been known about what LA means to high school teachers teaching mathematics, and social or natural sciences for example. This is a significant gap given that teachers' beliefs determine how they teach and how they seek to facilitate LA in the classroom. Our research within Vietnamese education aimed to bridge this gap by investigating the views of different subject teachers about LA regarding the new competence-based curriculum in high school. We begin by exploring their deeper beliefs and examining how these beliefs influence how LA is promoted in the classroom.

3. Methodology
3.1. Research Design
This study employed mixed research methods to answer its research questions: they consist of quantitative and qualitative methods to explore high-school teacher beliefs about promoting student autonomy within the new competence-based curriculum in Vietnam, by combining individual interview data with numerical data from the questionnaires (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The mixed-method design of this study was suitable to explore the multifaceted and changeable nature of LA (e.g., Benson, 2007; Holec, 1981) and what teachers believe about it (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012), as mentioned in our literature review. The first component of the literature about LA in education guided the exploration of how LA could be fostered according to the effect factors on its development. The second component concerning teachers' beliefs guided how the study rationalized teachers' beliefs about what autonomy entails, and its desirability and feasibility in the classroom.

3.2. Research Context and Participants
The fieldwork for the research was conducted from February 2023 to May 2023, in six high schools in a Mekong Delta province in Vietnam, where the new competence-based curriculum was carried out at Grade 10 on a national scale. Before commencing the study, we gained permission from a Vietnamese university and gatekeepers at the provincial department of education and training. The study focused on the teachers who were teaching Grade 10 while it was being conducted. The six high schools were located in different geographical areas of the province and represented various conditions pertaining to teaching, learning and students' entry levels at Year 10.

In the first research phase, we sent an invitation letter to administrators and teachers in these six high schools. This invitation informed them of our research purposes, assured them of confidentiality and anonymity, and linked them to a *Google Forms* questionnaire. Those who agreed to participate in the questionnaire

would follow the link's instructions about completing the online form. We received voluntary answers from 71 full-time teachers (42 females and 29 males) of different subjects from all six schools (see section 4.1 for the detailed demographic information). The teachers were teaching mathematics, Vietnamese language and literature, English, natural sciences, social sciences, and career exploration activities. This allowed them to meaningfully evaluate what they believed and practiced in classroom. From the 71 survey respondents, five teachers were randomly chosen for the second research stage, namely, the individual interview, to provide more insights into their beliefs and viewpoints about LA, based on their consent, availability and academic disciplines.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed about the study's objectives and had the opportunity to review the questionnaire before providing their responses. They were also assured that their personal data would be treated with complete confidentiality.

3.2. Data Collection Instruments

The data collection instruments involved a *Likert*-scale questionnaire, adopted with permission from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), and individual interviews with high school teachers. The questionnaire, consisting of four sections, aimed to explore the teachers' beliefs about LA. Section 1 consisted of 32 Likert scale item, originally designed to address specific concepts relating to LA, but the Cronbach alpha of the scales to denote the perspectives about autonomy was low, as mentioned in the literature reviewed. This approach was thus abandoned in this study. Instead, this first section of the questionnaire was used to explore what teachers thought LA actually entails. Section 2 entailed four scales with seven items each that sought teachers' opinions on the feasibility and desirability of students' being able, and sufficiently involved to make decisions in various courses in schools. Section 3, comprising five items, examined how autonomous the teachers believed their students were, to what extent the teachers fostered LA in their teaching, their underlying reasons for doing so, and what they believed about the success of professional development activities on implementing GEC 2018. The last section focused on teachers' demographic information, that is, age, gender, year of teaching experiences, and teaching subjects. While most questionnaire items were closed using the *Likert* scale, Section 3 employed open-ended questions. Teachers were asked to elaborate on LA and exemplify how they facilitated LA in their teaching if they had indicated so previously. These open-ended questions could produce substantial qualitative data, to complement the quantitative data collected elsewhere, and guide and supplement the qualitative individual interviews.

After the questionnaire, individual interviews were used to gather in-depth data with five teachers because interviews or qualitative data collection methods generally allow for an understanding of "the meaning that the participants hold about the problem, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers express in the literature" (Creswell, 2009, p.175). Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. We chose semi-structured because they are flexible and more beneficial than unstructured ones in gathering

standardized data from participants that could offer greater depth than scripted structured interviews (Gall et al., 2007). Applied to this present study, the semi-structured interviews with the high school teachers allowed us to collect standardized, but in-depth, data about how they elaborated and enabled LA and what support they needed in keeping with their personal histories, their individual academic subject areas, and school curricula. All interviews were done in Vietnamese and audio recorded. Interview protocols, together with notes, were used to guide and keep records of the interviews.

Before the actual data collection, a pilot test of the data collection instruments was conducted. The questionnaire and interview protocols were first sent to three co-researchers to check their comprehensibility, usefulness and validity. Some changes regarding word choices and expression were made to the questions more intelligible to participants. The questionnaire was then piloted with five teachers and interview protocol was tested with two teachers drawn from the non-participant high schools in the province. Feedback about these instruments was satisfactory, so no changes were made.

3.3. Data Analysis
The data from the close-ended questionnaire were analyzed using *SPSS* software for descriptive statistics derived from frequency counts and percentages for each question. The descriptive analysis was presented and discussed with the four co-researchers of a larger project to validate the data and generate reliable findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). On the other hand, the open-ended questionnaire responses and interview data, once transcribed, were analyzed thematically (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Initially, this involved reading thoroughly to identify dominant issues and organize them into broader categories. Inductive analysis was then applied to discern emergent patterns of themes related to teachers' beliefs about LA and facilitating it in classrooms. Within our mixed-methods approach, data analysis also involved comparing questionnaire and interview data. This helped to validate conclusions based on both quantitative and qualitative perspectives, so we could exemplify quantitative findings qualitatively. The process of analyzing data and validating findings was checked by, and discussed with, two researchers in the same field. This comprehensive approach of triangulating data from different sources aimed to provide us with a meaningful and trustworthy understanding of teachers' responses to specific questionnaire items.

4. Findings and Discussion
4.1. Demographic Information
An overview of the teacher participants' characteristics regarding experience, qualifications and subject areas is illustrated in tables 1 and 2. Nearly 47 percent of them had 15 to 19 years of teaching experience, followed by almost 24% from 10 to 14 years and 14% with nine years or fewer. The rest of the participants had more than 19 years of teaching experience. Just over 28 percent held a Master's while most participants had received a bachelor's degree in a teacher education program. The teachers worked with 10th graders in the subjects: Vietnamese

language and literature, mathematics, English, social sciences, natural sciences, and career exploration activities.

Table 1. Years of teaching experience in schools

Years	n	Percentage
0–4	5	7.0
5–9	5	7.0
10–14	17	23.9
15–19	33	46.5
20–24	7	9.9
25+	4	5.6
Total	71	100.0

Table 2. Subject areas teaching in Grade 10

Subjects	n	Percentage
Vietnamese language and literature	17	23.9
Mathematics	21	29.6
English	8	11.3
Social sciences	9	12.6
Natural sciences	14	19.7
Career exploration activities	1	1.4
Others	1	1.4
Total	71	100.0

4.2. Teachers' Beliefs about LA

The descriptive statistics of the results from Section 1 of the questionnaire (Table 3) show moderate to high levels of agreement (or disagreement in four cases), with the mean scores for most statements falling in the range of 3 to 4.25. Generally, teachers perceived LA positively. In other words, most teachers grasped the essence of this ability among students and how autonomy becomes evident in classroom activities, thus aligning with the literature and Vietnam's GEC 2018 standards.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Beliefs about LA

Item number	Questions	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
10	Autonomy helps students learn more effectively.	71	1	5	4.25	0.626
31	Students' autonomy positively impacts their success in learning.	71	1	5	4.25	0.626
14	LA is developed through activities that provide opportunities for learners to learn from each other.	71	1	5	4.21	0.607
17	LA is developed by activities encouraging students to work together.	71	1	5	4.20	0.624
24	Learning how to learn is the key to developing LA.	71	1	5	4.20	0.646

9	Confident learners are more likely to develop autonomy than less confident learners.	71	1	5	4.18	0.743
23	A student-centered classroom creates ideal conditions for developing LA.	71	3	5	4.17	0.478
28	Students with learning motivation are more likely to develop autonomy than students without learning motivation.	71	1	5	4.17	0.609
30	Teachers play an important role in supporting students' autonomy.	71	1	5	4.17	0.697
32	To become more autonomous, students need to develop the ability to self-assess their learning.	71	1	5	4.14	0.639
8	Autonomy can be developed for both young and high school students.	71	1	5	4.04	0.764
27	The focus of autonomous learning is that students have the ability to self-monitor their learning.	71	2	5	4.01	0.521
7	Developing autonomous learning for below-average students is more challenging than for more advanced students.	71	2	5	3.94	0.773
12	LA is developed when students have choices in the types of learning activities in the classroom.	71	1	5	3.94	0.715
26	After-school tasks that require students to use the Internet help promote autonomy.	71	2	5	3.89	0.688
1	Learner autonomy (LA) is developed through teachers' frequently creating opportunities for learners to complete tasks on their own.	71	1	5	3.77	0.848
2	LA means that learners can choose their own learning methods.	71	2	5	3.75	0.906
16	LA cannot be developed without the help of teachers.	71	1	5	3.73	1.055
3	Individuals lacking autonomy seem to lack the ability to learn effectively.	71	1	5	3.68	0.922
5	To develop students' autonomy, teachers need to create conditions for students to decide what content to learn.	71	1	5	3.68	0.982
19	Learner autonomy is developed when students are free to decide how to assess their own learning.	71	1	5	3.38	0.962
25	Learning to work independently is the focus of developing LA.	71	1	5	3.37	1.003
22	LA is developed when students can choose their learning materials.	71	2	5	3.34	0.925
4	LA can be most effectively developed through learning outside the classroom.	71	2	5	3.32	0.982

13	LA cannot be developed in traditional classrooms where teachers play a central role.	71	1	5	3.21	1.027
29	The academic level of students does not affect their ability to develop autonomy.	71	1	5	3.20	1.009
18	LA is developed by working independently outside the classroom.	71	2	5	3.18	0.946
11	The economic, cultural, and social conditions of students' families do not affect students' LA development.	71	1	5	3.08	1.079
15	LA implies rejecting the traditional teaching methods of teachers.	71	1	5	2.37	0.989
6	LA means that learning does not require a teacher.	71	1	5	2.32	0.807
21	LA requires students to be completely independent of teachers.	71	1	5	2.25	0.806
20	The proactive nature of learners is not suitable for Vietnamese students.	71	1	5	2.11	0.964

Notes: The question items were arranged according to their mean from the highest to lowest.

The analysis of collective responses collected through the questionnaire showed prevalent elements from the teachers' shared beliefs about LA:
- It is seen to facilitate success in learning in schools.
- Learner motivation correlates positively with their potential to achieve autonomy.
- Self-reflection skills, encompassing learners' ability to learn how to learn, self-monitor, and self-evaluate, are deemed crucial for autonomy.
- Independent study is viewed as positively contributing to LA development, while recognizing the significance of working with and learning from peers and teachers is also emphasized.
- The teacher particularly plays a prominent role in promoting LA and learner-centred classrooms are favourable to developing LA.

Statistical analyses also showed that teachers' responses to the 32 items in Section 1 of the questionnaire slightly varied according to years of teaching experience, qualifications or subjects, or geographical locations. On the one hand, such differences in each teacher' responses about LA indicated various interpretations and beliefs of this complicated concept and diverse ways to facilitate it in classrooms, which has been documented in the literature (e.g., Borg & Alshumaimeri , 2019; Ho & Dimmock, 2023). On the other hand, the insignificant discrepancies among the teacher participants suggested that this might result from top-down procedures of policy implementation in a highly centralized education system like Vietnam, which often dictated roles and requirements to policy implementers regardless of their personal or local contexts (e.g., Nhat et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2021).

In additional to the quantitative findings, the interview data also supported the widespread prevalence of teacher beliefs about LA. Following are some examples.

The ability to identify learning tasks independently, to utilize and select information for lessons, to complete assigned learning tasks on time, and be able to correct mistakes to continually improve oneself. (Teacher of English)

Students are allowed to choose their favorite subjects. (Teacher of math)

It is students' willingness or voluntary in identifying and carrying out learning tasks and responsibilities. (Teacher of geography)
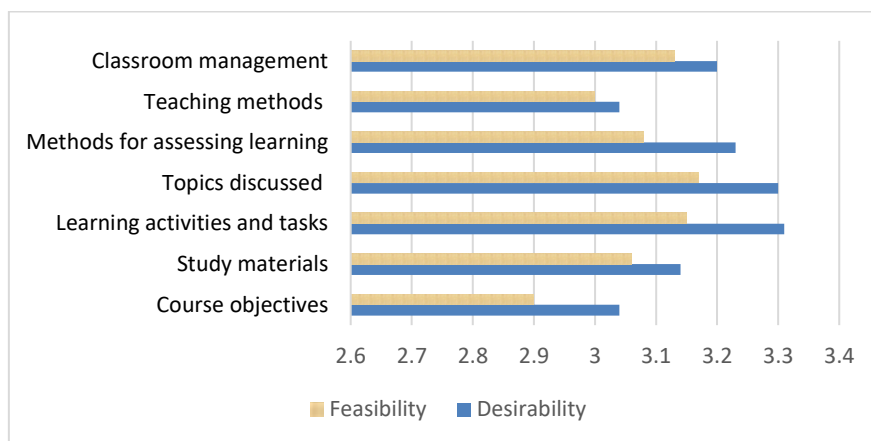
LA is understood as the ability be self-aware and proactive in learning and in exploring and mastering knowledge with the teacher's guidance. This ability is demonstrated when students acquire knowledge and also learn the methods of learning simultaneously. (Teacher of Vietnamese language and literature)

LA….is manifested through defining learning goals accurately, planning and carrying out learning strategies, and assessing and adjusting learning. (Teacher of chemistry)

These findings align with established perspectives on LA in the literature (e.g., Benson, 2007; Oxford, 2015). When explaining observable indicators of students' autonomy and outlining methods to foster autonomy, the teacher participants consistently expressed concerns about learner independence, willingness and choices. Independence and willingness were often linked to psychological attributes such as motivation and engagement, while choices pertained to the degree to which students could participate in decision making about their learning (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981). The results also indicate that a high degree of LA or proactive autonomy (Smith, 2003) is impractical in most participants' high schools because of such constraints as curricular obligations, insufficient facilities, or students' lack of previous practices of autonomous learning (discussed later in this paper). However, the shared perspectives among teachers highlighted the significance of fostering autonomous learning skills, willingness, and engagement in students, laying the foundation for valuable competence-based educational experiences.

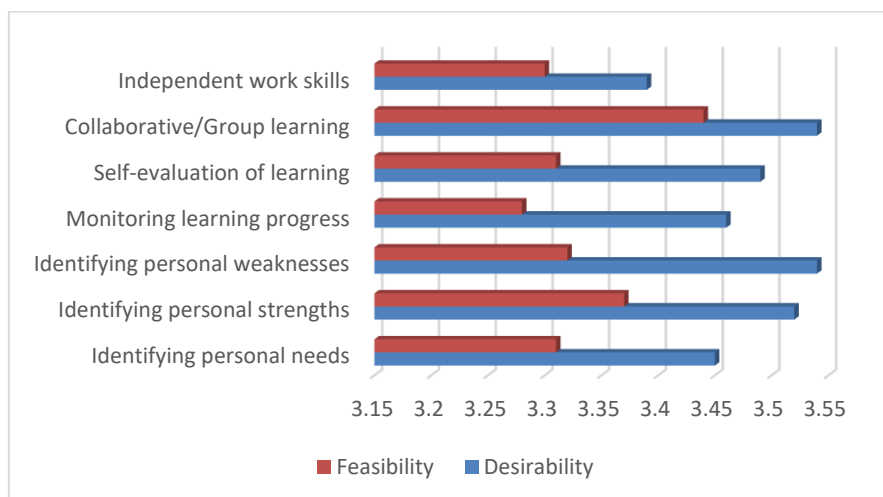**4.3. Desirability and Feasibility of LA**
Section 2 of the questionnaire focused on two important aspects. The first pertained to the teachers' perspectives on the desirability and practicality of involving learners in controlling the courses in schools. Figure 1 provides a summary of the teachers' responses, indicating a consistent pattern in how teachers expressed more positivity regarding the desirability of student involvement than its feasibility across all cases with internal reliability using Cronbach's alpha over 0.88.

Figure 1. Desirability and feasibility of involving learners in decisions about courses
(Notes: 1 = undesirable/unfeasible; 2 = slightly desirable;
3 = quite desirable; 4 = very desirable/feasible)

The figure showed that teachers could involve students in choosing or controlling, to certain extents, topics discussed, learning activities and tasks, and classroom management activities. However, it was reported that to involve students in making decisions about course objectives and teaching methods were both least desirable and feasible. This might partly result from mandatory courses with five fixed sets of textbooks in the GEC 2018, one of which was chosen for each grade level and applied to all schools in a province, by a provincial committee of government officers, educational administrators, and teachers (MOET, 2020). Consequently, teachers and students had little control over the course objectives and textbooks in the classroom. The teacher participants also felt less desirable to give students some control over teaching methods partly because of sociocultural influences in Vietnam that emphasize a traditional teaching approach and a central role of teachers as knowledge deliverers (Ngo, 2019; Nhat at al., 2023; Phan & Hamid, 2017). The teachers had experienced these influences as learners and as teachers for a long period of time before the GEC 2018. The participants might thus find it difficult to accept changing roles of teachers and learner, not to mention the feasibility of doing so in the classroom. The second aspect involved teachers' opinions about the desirability and feasibility of various abilities in students, commonly recognized as indicators of LA. Figure 2 summarizes the responses, revealing consistently higher desirability ratings (desirability Cronbach = 0.93, feasibility Cronbach = 0.88). This figure suggests that, while teachers were positive about fostering autonomous learning, their enthusiasm diminished considerably when it came to translating these dispositions into practice.

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

In response to the second research question, a substantial gap emerged between teachers' perceived desirability about LA and their beliefs in its practical feasibility. This gap, evident in some previous studies (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019), reflects the common tension between beliefs and implementation challenges. For example, the challenge in implementing LA reported by the teachers in our research consisted of large classes (over 40 students on average), mandatory intensive curriculum, limited class time, and especially students' lack of previous training of autonomous learning. Indeed, the new competence-based curriculum for Grade 10 were implemented for the first time while our research was being undertaken and the content-based curriculum did not emphasize autonomous learning practices. Grade 10 students might have thus experienced little practice on autonomous learning strategies that were targeted in new curriculum at the primary and middle school levels. However, rather than emphasizing conflicting beliefs or mismatches between theory and practice, we suggest viewing teachers' cognitions as complex systems of competing forces that shape their actions. It also provides knowledge about how these factors influence teachers' beliefs of LA.

4.4. Teachers' Beliefs about Promoting LA
In the questionnaire, teachers were also asked to express the extent to which they agreed with the statement that their 10th graders studying in the new competence-based program had a fair degree of LA. By using the Vietnamese words, *khá tốt*, to describe the degree of students' autonomy, we expected that teachers interpreted it as satisfactory or above average level. The results revealed intriguing findings: 19.7% of the teachers disagreed that their students were autonomous, 29.6% were unsure, and 50.7% agreed. Out of the 36 teachers who agreed, 26 provided explanations why they estimated their students' autonomy at a fair level, which focused mostly on students' preparation for lessons and active participation in learning activities. Five teachers reported that completing homework or assignments indicated LA. While it is agreed that LA can be made part of desirable classroom behaviours and that learners could act independently

of the teacher's direction, some may deliberately perform such behaviours for better grades in the classroom, as Benson (2007) has observed. Notably, the teachers wrote that student autonomy was demonstrated and maximized with teacher guidance and that many of their students needed much more practice of autonomy, required by the competence-based program. However, due to time and curriculum constrains, the teachers could not spend much class time on autonomous learning strategies in class, leaving students having to practice them outside the classroom. Those teachers who disagreed or were unsure with the statement often related students' low autonomy degree to their low motivation, disengagement and poor academic performance, insufficient support from families and schools, and students' disadvantaged backgrounds such as low socio-economic status and ethnic minority.

Almost 90% of the teachers believed that they offered learners chances to develop LA in their courses, while approximately 11% were unsure or disagreed. The questionnaire also requested the teacher participants to illustrate how they promoted students' autonomy. Accordingly, 66 answers from the teachers were generated into three general categories of strategies that the teachers used to promote autonomy in their courses (see Table 4). They were: encouraging independent learning strategies through individual work or group work, working outside class and student presentations; giving students some control over lesson contents or learning activities; and providing teacher support whenever students need it.

Table 4. Autonomy promoting strategies reported by teachers

Main category	Sub-category
Encourage independent learning strategies	Individual work
	Pair/group/project work
	Work outside class
	Student presentations
Give students control over lesson contents or learning strategies	Giving students opportunities to practice learner autonomy
	Giving students choice
	Peer assessment and feedback
	Self-assessment
	Encouraging motivation and student engagement
Provide teacher support	Guidance and instruction
	Teacher assessment and feedback
	Organizing autonomy supportive activities

The respondents who fell into the disagreement or unsure category provided no reasons or simply wrote that they did not want to put more pressure on students. However, a general theme can be identified from the teachers' explanations is that they often faced some challenges in facilitating LA. Three teachers mentioned that they did try but failed. A teacher of social sciences wrote, for instance:

> *At the beginning of the school year, I dedicated a session to guide students on self-studying, preparing for new lessons, and being autonomous in learning. However, the reality did not meet my*

expectations because many students in my class are quite passive and reluctant. (Teacher of social sciences)

This teacher's statement suggests that she was aware of the importance of autonomous learning to students' success in schools and tried to guide them through the learning strategies. The use of terms, "passive" and "reluctant", indicates that, despite the guidance provided, many students in the social sciences class did not actively engage or demonstrate a willingness to take initiative in their own learning. However, this teacher might believe that autonomy can be taught to students. In reality, it should be facilitated regularly (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Camilleri, 1999). Consequently, autonomy facilitating strategies should be integrated into classroom teaching because one-off event is insufficient to help students develop autonomous learning skills.

5. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research
This study surveyed 71 teachers from six high schools, which was quite a small sample compared to the extensive population of over 3000 teachers from 54 schools in the province. However, as mentioned earlier in this paper, our research aimed to provide insightful understanding of the teachers' beliefs about LA rather than to generalize the findings. Therefore, a combination of descriptive statistics with 71 respondents from various backgrounds and content analysis of qualitative data was suitable to reach the research aim. This project has thus presented a preliminary investigation into high school teachers' beliefs about promoting LA in the new competence-based curriculum. Future studies could recruit more participants to generalize the findings or widen the research scope by including a broader geography of the Mekong Delta to improve the comprehensiveness and reliability of the results. Researchers could also delve deeper into how various elements, such as teachers' beliefs about LA, student factors, curricula, assessment, institutional policy, and professional identity, interact to shape teachers' actions and emphasize the complex interplay of these elements.

6. Conclusions
This paper has demonstrated that the ways high school teachers in Vietnam interpret LA align with what has been substantiated in the literature and GEC's 2018 guidelines. While teachers believe positively in involving students in making decisions or developing autonomous learning skills, they are less certain about the possibility of doing so, especially because of numerous curricular requirements, little class time, and students' lack of previous experiences with autonomous learning strategies. This gap between teachers' beliefs and practice in enabling LA indicates teachers' various understandings of complicated, multifaceted concept of LA and different pedagogical practices to promote it in classrooms. It also illustrates the mismatches in policy making and implementation in a highly centralized system like Vietnam's general education. Although teachers report some dominant challenges in integrating LA into their lessons, they generally feel that they provide various opportunities to students to practice autonomy in the classroom. The research highlights that high school teachers need to acknowledge the supportive roles of the teacher in enabling LA especially when learners' levels of autonomy remain low. Teacher professional

development programs thus should not only provide high school teachers with the content knowledge, but also offer them skills and resources to develop their own autonomy to well support their students' autonomy. This also opens up issues about how to assess LA and document its evidence among learners since GEC 2018 established it as a policy goal but gave teachers vague guidelines for assessing it.

7. Funding

8. References

Al-Shaqsi, T. S. (2009). Teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. In S. Borg (Ed.), *Researching English language teaching and teacher development in Oman* (pp. 157-165). Ministry of Education, Oman.

Aoki, N. (2002). Aspects of teacher autonomy: capacity, freedom, and responsibility. In P. Benson, & S. Toogood (Eds.), *Learner Autonomy 7: Challenges to research and practice* (pp. 110-124). Authentik.

Balçıkanlı, C. (2010). Learner autonomy in language learning: Student teachers' beliefs. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(1), 90-103. doi: https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2010v35n1.8

Barfield, A., Brown, S. H., & Little, D. (Eds.). (2007). *Reconstructing autonomy in language education: Inquiry and innovation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Benson, P. (2007). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 40(01), 21–40. doi:10.1017/S0261444806003958

Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.

Benson, P. (2013). Learner autonomy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(4), 839-843. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43267936

Benson, P., & Lamb, T. (2020). Autonomy in the age of multilingualism. In M. J. Raya & F. Vieira, (Ed.), *Autonomy in Language Education* (pp. 74-88). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429261336-7

Borg, S., & Al-Busaidi, S. (2012). Teachers' beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy. *ELT Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccr065

Borg, S., & Alshumaimeri, Y. (2019). Language learner autonomy in a tertiary context: Teachers' beliefs and practices. *Language Teaching Research*, 23(1), 9-38. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168817725

Camilleri, G. (1999). Learner autonomy: The teachers'views. http://archive.ecml.at/documents/pubCamilleriG_E.pdf

Chan, V. (2003). Autonomous language learning: The teachers' perspectives. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8, 33–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/1356251032000052311

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (3rd* ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Dam, L. (2003). Developing learner autonomy: The teacher's responsibility. In D. Little, J. Ridley, & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom: Teacher, learner, curriculum and assessment* (pp. 126–150). Authentik.

Duong, B. H., & DeJaeghere, J. (2022). *From student-centered to competency-based reform: Exploring teachers' perspective of meaningful participation* (Vol. 22, p. 089). RISE Working Paper Series. https://doi.org/10.35489/bsg-rise-wp_2022/089

Duong, T.M. (2014). EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy and their classroom practices: A case study. *International Journal of Education and Management Engineering*, *4*, 9–17

Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2007*). Educational research: An introduction* (8th ed.). Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Pergamon Press.

Ho, L. & Dimmock, C. (2023). Changing teachers' beliefs and practices towards learner-centred education: experiences and lessons from Vietnam's education system reforms. *Practice*. https://doi.org/10.1080/25783858.2023.2177191

Humphreys, G., & Wyatt, M. (2014). Helping Vietnamese university learners to become more autonomous. *ELT Journal*, *68*(1), 52–63. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cct056

Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy 1. Definitions, issues and problems*. Authentik.

Little, D. (2003). Learner autonomy in the foreign language clasroom: Taking account of all the roles and agencies involved in secondary education. In D. Little, J. Ridley, & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom: Teacher, learner, curriculum and assessment* (pp. 3–5). Authentik.

Littlewood, W. (1996). "Autonomy": An anatomy and a framework. *System*, *24*(4), 427–435.

Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, *20*(1), 71–94.

Lin, L., & Reinders, H. (2019). Students' and teachers' readiness for autonomy: Beliefs and practices in developing autonomy in the Chinese context. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, *20*, 69-89. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-018-9564-3

Markic, S. (2014). Heterogeneity: Challenge and/or opportunity in science education? *Sisyphus, Journal of Education, 2*(2), 32-47. https://doi.org/10.12973/eurasia.2014.1082a

Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). (2018). *Circular No. 32/2018/TT-BGDDT dated 26/12/2018 on promulgation of the new general education curriculum*. https://moet.gov.vn/vanban/vanban/Pages/chi-tiet-van-ban.aspx?ItemID=1301

Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). (2020). *Circular No. 32/2018/TT-BGDĐT dated 26/8/2020 on textbook selection in general education institutions.* https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/default.aspx?pageid=27160&docid=200890

Murray, G. (2020). Learner autonomy and Holec's model: A complexity perspective. In M. J. Raya & F. Vieira (Eds), *Autonomy in language education: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 89-102). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429261336-8

Ngo, V. T. H. (2019). The implementation of critical thinking in Vietnamese primary school moral education classes. *Issues in Educational Research, 29*(3), 732-755. https://doi.org/10.33422/educationconf.2019.03.109

Nguyen, C. H., Pham, H. T. T., & Pham, H. T. (2022). Renovation in curriculum design and training programs for teacher education in Vietnam. In: Khine, M.S., Liu, Y. (Eds) *Handbook of research on teacher education: Innovations and practices in Asia* (pp. 811-825). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-9785-2_41

Nguyen, V. H., Nguyen, V. B. H., Vu, T. M. H., Hoang, T. K. H., & Nguyen, T. M. N. (2020). Vietnamese Education System and Teacher Training: Focusing on Science Education, *Asia-Pacific Science Education*, *6*(1), 179-206. https://doi.org/10.1163/23641177-bja10001

Nguyen, M. T. (2017). Learners' quality and competence-based reform of general education program. *Vietnam Journal of Education*, *1*(1), 1-6.

Nguyen, S. V. & Habók, A. (2020). Non-English-major students' perceptions of learner autonomy and factors influencing learner autonomy in Vietnam. *Relay Journal*, *3*(1), 122-139. https://doi.org/10.37237/relay/030110

Nguyen, S. V., & Habók, A. (2022). Non-English major students' perceptions of aspects of their autonomous language learning. *Language Learning in Higher Education*, *12*(1), 231-253. https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2022-2044

Nhat, H. T., Lien, N. T., Tinh, N. T., Hang, N. V. T. & Trang, N. T. (2018). The development of critical thinking for students in Vietnamese Schools: From policies to practices. *American Journal of Educational Research, 6*(5), 431-435. https://doi.org/10.12691/education-6-5-10

Oxford, R.L. (2015). Expanded perspectives on autonomous learners. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, 9,* 58–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2014.995765

Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of educational research*, *62*(3), 307-332. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543062003307

Pham, K. T., Ha, X. V., Tran, N. H., & Nguyen, Y. T. X. (2023). Curriculum reform in Vietnam: primary teachers' views, experiences, and challenges. *Education 3-13*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2162829

Phan, T. T. H., & Hamid, M. O. (2017). Learner autonomy in foreign language policies in Vietnamese universities: An exploration of teacher agency from a sociocultural perspective. *Current Issues in Language Planning, 18*(1), 39-56. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2016.1201231

Sinclair, B. (2000). Learner autonomy: The next phase. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath, & T. Lamb (Eds.), *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions* (pp. 4–14). Longman

Smith, R. (2003). Pedagogy for autonomy as (becoming-) appropriate methodology. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives* (pp. 129–146). Palgrave Macmillan.

Tran, N. G., Ha, X. V., & Tran, N. H. (2021). EFL Reformed Curriculum in Vietnam: An Understanding of Teachers' Cognitions and Classroom Practices. *RELC Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882211043670

Voller, P. (2014). Does the teacher have a role in autonomous language learning? In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning* (pp. 98–113). Longman. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315842172-9