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CONSTRUCTING A PROPOSED PORTFOLIO-BASED LEARNER AUTONOMY DEVELOPMENT MODEL FOR EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

Within the changing landscape of English teaching in the 21ˢᵗ century, language education in Asia tends to provide learners with more freedom to take control over their learning than before, i.e., learner autonomy is taken into great consideration. Alongside this tendency, this paper aims to propose a model to develop learner autonomy through a portfolio for EFL learners. Specifically, a portfolio-based learner autonomy development (PLAD) model with an elaborate description of learners' and teachers' roles is presented so that EFL teachers can apply the PLAD model in their writing classes. Some implications and recommendations for future research are also included. It is hoped that this paper may provide EFL teachers with a different perspective toward promoting learner autonomy within an EFL context.

Keywords*: learner autonomy, a portfolio, a proposed model, EFL writing*

1. Introduction

The concept of learner autonomy originated from the 1960s, and its importance toward language learning has been confirmed because of positive results found in a big number of studies. Within language education in Asian context, aspects of learner autonomy have been exclusively studied and gradually applied in education systems inasmuch as advocates of learner autonomy believe that it plays an important role for life-long learning. As the host of the 47th SEAMEO Council Conference held in Hanoi from 19th to 21st March, 2013, Vietnam created the policy forum named '*Lifelong Learning: Vision and Policy'* in which experiences and perspectives on the implementation of lifelong learning in Southeast Asia and other regions were proposed. Furthermore, the memorandum of agreement on the foundation of new SEAMEO centre was officially signed by Vietnamese Minister of Education and Training and Director of SEAMEO Secretariat at the conference. The centre is located in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam under the name '*SEAMEO Centre on Lifelong Learning'* (SEAMEO CELL).

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However, Asian learners are exposed as individuals whose learning styles and references are based on the values of collectivism, conformity, and respect for authority (Benson, Chik, & Lim, 2003). Some studies regarding learner autonomy in Asian contexts further indicate that Asian learners possess reactive autonomy in which learners organize the resources autonomously to achieve the goals, but they cannot be responsible for their own learning such as setting their goals, selecting how to learn, and reflecting on what s/he has acquired like those who have proactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999). In the context of Vietnam, Grammar-Translation method, Direct method, and Audio-Lingual method have dominated the national education system for a long time. In foreign language education, Grammar-Translation method, Direct method, and Audio-Lingual method are viewed as the traditional methods or teacher-centred teaching methods where the teacher is the authority in a classroom, the teacher directs the class activities, or the teacher provides students with a good model for imitation (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). That is, the teacher plays a role as a knowledge provider, a leader, a feedback giver, an evaluator, or even an authoritarian in a classroom, whereas students are expected to be good listeners and imitators. This dominant teacher-centred teaching style is strongly influenced

by the perception amongst Vietnamese intellectuals in the feudal period that their teacher was only lower than was the king. Consequently, EFL Vietnamese students have not got opportunities to gain communicative purposes in the target language. Inevitably, autonomous learning cannot be promoted in such a language learning and teaching context since students have no rights to make decisions about their learning.

Regarding learning tools for promoting learner autonomy, it is believed that a portfolio can "provide a tangible way of making sense of past and present experiences, putting learning in context, and capturing and displaying the learning that has taken place" (Jone & Shelton, 2011, p. 5). More importantly, a portfolio is identified as a powerful educational tool that helps students develop an ability to take charge of their learning.

Aside from autonomy-related aspects, writing skill deserves mentioning in this paper. The skill of writing in a foreign or second language is not easy for acquisition though it requires special attention in all education systems. However, it is supposed that writing skill becomes less difficult than students and teachers assume if both of them can grasp the purpose of writing activities, adapt these activities and make decisions about activities best suit them.

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Then this paper focuses predominantly on constructing a model for the development of learner autonomy through a portfolio in an EFL writing context.

2. Literature review

In order to construct a portfolio-based learner autonomy development model, it is necessary to review the concept of learner autonomy and the characteristics of portfolios.

The concept of learner autonomy

According to Rivers and Golonka (2009), learner autonomy is referred to as an ability to manage learning process independently and actively. It is associated with a sense of responsibility (Dickinson, 1987; Macaro, 1997; Scharle & Szabó, 2000). As Benson (2001) argues, the self-management ability and sense of responsibility are two of three elements of the nature of autonomy, namely learning management, cognitive process, and learning content as he

defines learner autonomy as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (p. 47). Learning content is separately discussed as a third vital element in autonomous learning since it is believed that if a learner can control learning methods but not learning content, they may fail to be a fully autonomous learner. Due to its sufficiency and generality, Benson's (2001) definition is viewed as an operational definition for the paper.

As far as aspects of learner autonomy in language learning are concerned, Littlewood (1997) presents a model with three aspects of autonomy: (1) 'autonomy as a communicator', (2) 'autonomy as a learner', and (3) 'autonomy as a person' that are elaborated by six additional factors placed around these types as displayed in Figure 1.
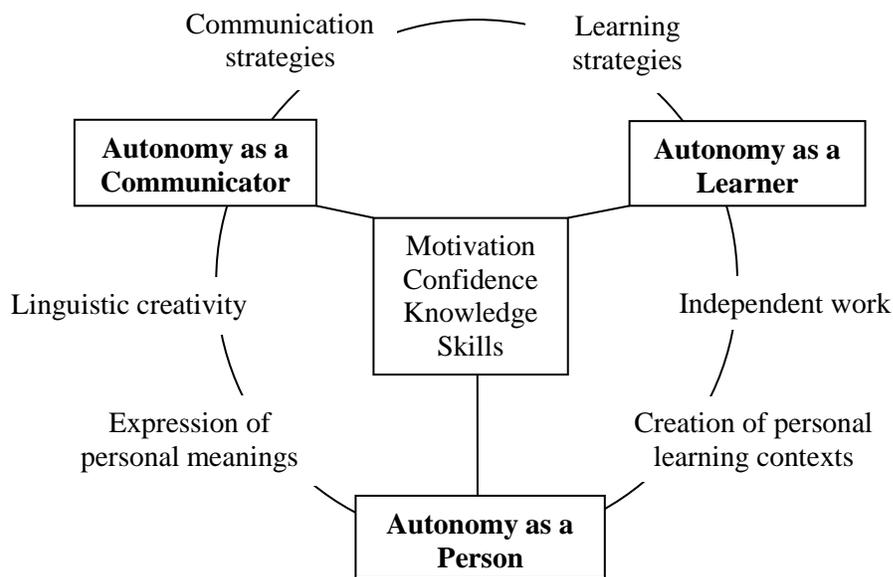

Communication strategies — Learning strategies

Autonomy as a Communicator   **Autonomy as a Learner**

Motivation Confidence Knowledge Skills

Linguistic creativity   Independent work

Expression of personal meanings   Creation of personal learning contexts

Autonomy as a Person

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Figure 1. A framework for developing autonomy in foreign language learning (Littlewood,1997, p. 83)

The purpose of 'autonomy as a communicator' is to help learners to develop an ability to deal with languages independently. In order to demonstrate their independence as communicators, they need to use language creatively or appropriate strategies for communicating meanings in specific situations. The focus of 'autonomy as a learner' is on helping students to develop an ability to take responsibility for their own learning as independent learners. It depends on an ability to work independently and an ability to use appropriate learning

strategies both inside and outside the classroom. As for 'autonomy as a person', students are able to develop an ability to communicate and learn independently. In foreign language learning, when students can express personal meanings and create personal learning contexts, it means that they act as independent individuals. According to Littlewood (1997), a language teacher's task is to help students to develop confidence, motivation, knowledge, and skills in order that they can communicate independently, learn independently, and become independent individuals.

Likewise, Macaro (2008) determines three dimensions of L2 autonomy: (1) 'autonomy of language competence', (2) 'autonomy of language learning competence', and (3) 'autonomy of learner choice'. The first refers to an ability to use communication strategies appropriately in an L2 situation. The second is about the ability to use learning strategies (i.e., cognitive and metacognitive strategies) effectively. The last reflects control over either the language to be learned or the goal and purpose of that learning.

While Littlewood (1997) and Macaro (2008) focus more on language acquisition than capacities to develop learner autonomy, Benson (2001) puts a great emphasis on capacities that learners are required to achieve for autonomous learning. He claims, "[a]utonomy also implies that self-management and control over cognitive processes should involve decisions concerning the content of learning" (p. 50). Learning content is separately discussed as a third vital element in autonomous learning since it is believed that if a learner can control learning activities but not learning content, they may fail to be a fully autonomous learner. Accordingly, Benson's (2001) model of learner autonomy shown in Figure 2 includes three levels of control over learning management, control over cognitive process, and control over learning content. Control over learning management refers to self-management of learning in which learners are assumed to manage the planning, organization, and evaluation of their learning with learning strategies. Control over cognitive process is understood as psychology of learning consisting of attention or awareness, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge. Control over learning content "involves the learner in social interactions regarding the right to determine and implement their own learning goals" (ibid., p. 102). Hence, it requires teachers and education authorities to create situational contexts where learners are encouraged to make decisions about their learning content. Learners are also required to develop their capacities to participate in negotiation for the right to self-determine their learning.

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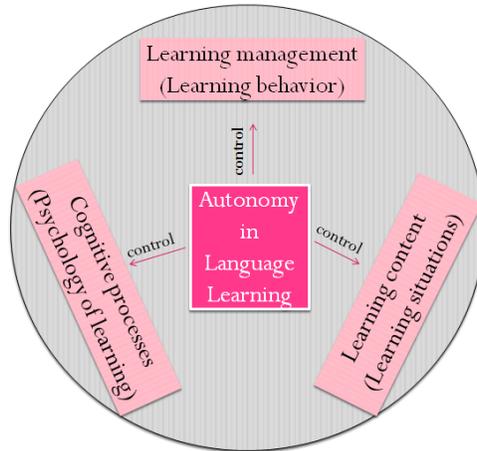
Figure 2. Defining autonomy: The capacity to take control over learning (Benson, 2001, p. 47)

In conclusion, to become autonomous learners, they should possess the ability to make decisions concerning management and organization of their learning, the ability to take responsibility for their own learning, and the ability to take control over learning content. Accordingly, the present study relies primarily on Benson's (2001) definition because it is assumed to be the combination of the other definitions.

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Portfolios

A portfolio that is viewed as "a purposeful collection of learner work that exhibits the learner's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas" (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991, p. 60) is generally employed as a learning and assessment tool in this paper to show the development of learner autonomy. Thus, a brief review of characteristics of a portfolio is necessary.

Regarding the characteristics of a portfolio, O'Malley and Pierce (1996) describe essential elements of a portfolio in lieu of the provision of a clear definition since they argue that there is no specific definition of portfolios appropriate for every context. The key elements in a portfolio including samples of learner work, learner self-assessment, and clearly stated criteria should be discussed. The first element involves 'learner work samples'. It is known that most of the portfolios contain samples of learner work showing the development of learners' ability over time. The samples can be writing samples, audio or videotapes, mathematics problems, social

studies reports, or science experiments. As noted earlier, portfolios may vary from one context to another, yet they all are used as systematic collections of learner work. Therefore, the systematic collections need to be planned as carefully as do instructional goals, materials, and activities. That is, a teacher and learners need to determine not only the process that helps to evaluate learners' progress but also the system in which all information is collected and shared with learners and their parents, other teachers, and administrators. The second element concerns 'learner self-assessment'. A portfolio is not simply an assessment tool of learner work conducted by a teacher, but rather a self-assessment tool whereby learners can monitor their own progress and take responsibility for their learning to achieve the predetermined goals. Three kinds of self-assessment employed in a portfolio are documentation, comparison, and integration. In documentation, learners are asked to give a justification for the selected items in the portfolio. In comparison, the current piece of writing is compared with the previous ones in terms of improvements. In integration, the use of the portfolio is to provide examples of their writing development or their independence as a learner. The third element is 'clearly stated criteria'. Learners need to know how and by what criteria their work will be evaluated. Hence, learners should get involved in discussing criteria and in goal setting. In portfolio assessment, criteria can be established for the selection of pieces of writing in the portfolio and for the judgment of these pieces.

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In another sense, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) introduce nine following elements of portfolios, of which four elements: collection, reflection and self-assessment, selection, and delayed evaluation are considered relevant to the development of learner autonomy or learner-centred control in a course.

(1) A portfolio is a *collection* of more than one writing piece.

(2) It enables the writer to display a *range* of the written works according to genres, purposes, and audiences.

(3) It has *context richness* as it reflects the learning context which determines the contents of the portfolio and demonstrates what the writer has accomplished within that context.

(4) A characteristic teachers and learners find useful is *delayed evaluation* as it provides the writer with opportunities to revise the written work before the final evaluation is given.

(5) It involves selecting writing pieces. *Selection* gives the writer a chance to choose the optimal pieces to submit for judgment. This means that the writer is put the control over learning into his/ her hands. Thus, selection can promote self-assessment.

(6) Characteristics of collection, range, and context richness are usually under the teacher's control, yet delayed evaluation and selection offer opportunities for *student-centered control* that can be exercised when learners can choose the best writing piece that meet the evaluation criteria and revise them before putting them into the portfolio.

(7) One of the most important characteristics of a portfolio is *reflection and self-assessment*. The writer reflects on their own work and is usually required to produce reflective writing about their writing process and development and how the portfolio represents that development.

(8) It provides a means for measuring *growth along specific parameters* such as linguistics, or organizational skills, or argument development.

(9) It also provides a means for measuring *development over time*. Learners can exhibit and emphasize their development in the way that the teacher may not anticipate or specify.

In summary, a portfolio which is seen as an organized collection of learner work samples showing the learning progress over time is developed and predominantly assessed by learners themselves through clearly predetermined criteria with the help of the teacher. A portfolio is characterized by nine elements: collection, range, context richness, delayed evaluation, selection, student-centered control, reflection and self-assessment, growth along specific parameters, development over time.

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3. Construction of the PLAD model

The portfolio-based model for developing learner autonomy in an EFL writing context is constructed based on the aforementioned theoretical background and the adaption of the conceptual model of self-regulated learning in the context of portfolio assessment by Lam (2013) and Huitt's (2003) model of teaching/learning process.

Lam's (2013) conceptual model is composed of nine steps as follows:

(1) Portfolio tasks are first introduced to learners in an academic writing course.

(2) Learners endeavor to equip themselves with text and strategy knowledge and willingness (i.e., confidence, motivation, beliefs, etc.) to take the course.

(3) Learners will set learning goals.

(4) Learners choose the composing strategies to perform different portfolio tasks.

(5) Learners self-assess their writing to see whether or not writing performance and composing strategies reach the predetermined goals.

(6) Learners self-monitor their progress by means of internal feedback (i.e., they will collect, reflect, and select writing products which best represent their writing ability throughout the portfolio process).

(7) It concerns internal feedback that requires learners to decide the best drafts that are put in portfolios for judgment.

(8) The drafts selected and put in portfolios are assessed by peers and/or the teacher. The external feedback refers to either linguistic assistance from peers and/or the teacher or the resources found by the learners (e.g., use of dictionaries, library search, and printed and online reference materials).

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(9) Delayed evaluation in which learners can incorporate internal feedback and external feedback into their drafts, and formative feedback provides learners with an opportunity to look back on the steps one through four.

With reference to teaching/learning process, Huitt (2003) proposes a model consisting of four components: context (i.e., all factors outside the classroom which may influence the teaching and learning), input (i.e., what learners and teachers bring into classroom process), classroom process (i.e., the teacher's and learners' behavior in a classroom), and output (i.e., measures of learners' learning). According to Huitt (2003), output is the most important category because when output objectives are identified, it probably influences other components. For example, if the outcome focuses on high scores for a standardized test (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL or

TOEIC), explicit or clear instruction should be provided; however, if the desired outcome is learner independence, open instruction is better choice.

In addition to the adaptation of the aforementioned models, this model is supplemented with other components of learner autonomy such as creating a study plan and selecting resources. In order for readers to get more understanding of the model, its specific steps are described below (see Figure 3). It is important to note that the arrows reflect the process of this model from the first step, '*portfolio tasks,*' to the last step, '*summative evaluation*'. The double arrows refer to the interrelation between self-monitoring and other processes through learners' internal feedback.
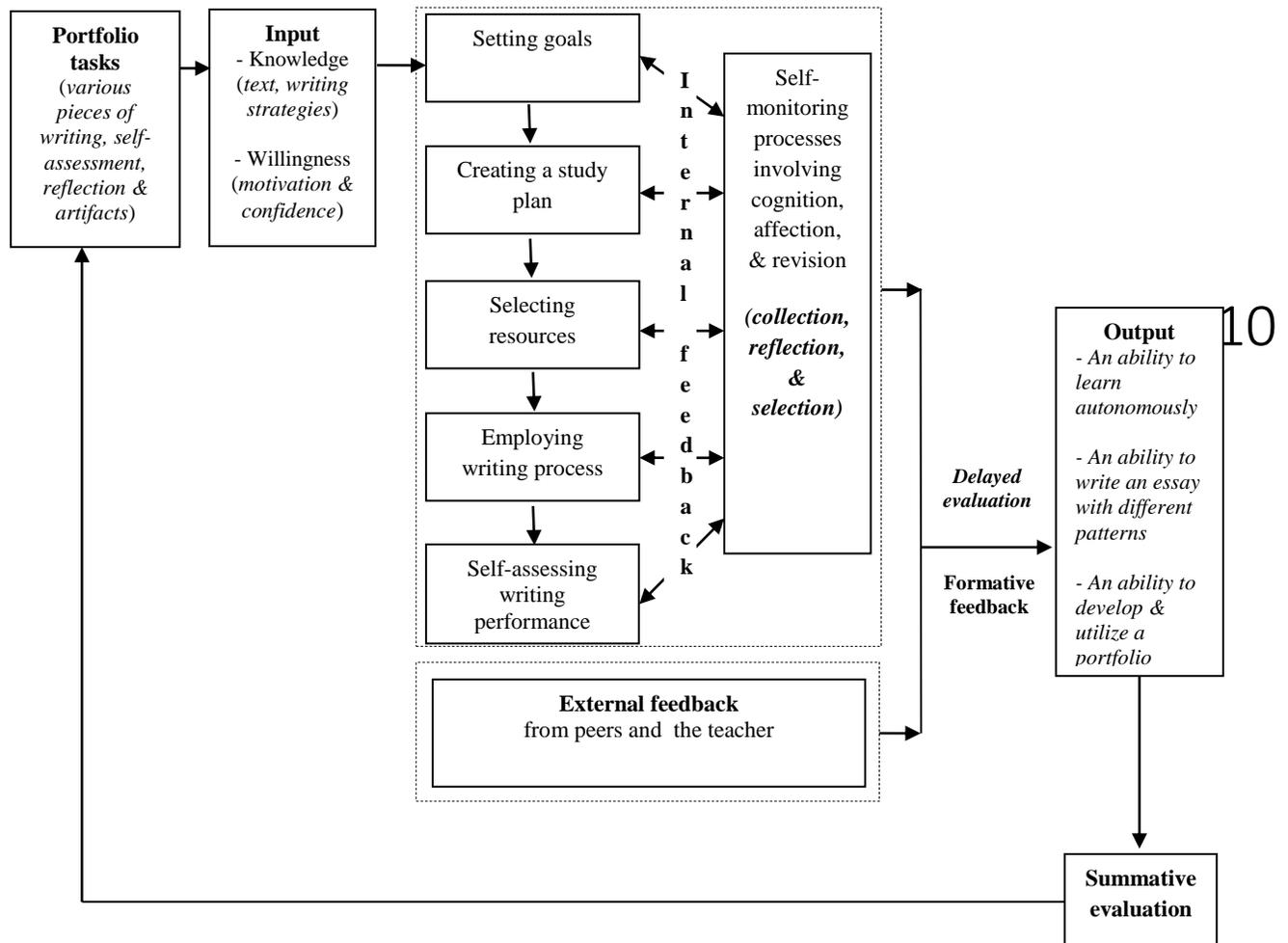

Figure 3. The portfolio-based learner autonomy development (PLAD) model in an EFL writing course

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(1) Portfolio tasks

The portfolio tasks in a writing course include various pieces of writing, self-assessment, reflection, and artifacts.

(2) Input

Learners have to equip themselves with the ability involving knowledge of text and writing strategies as well as the willingness concerning motivation and confidence because learner autonomy refers that learners are "actively involved in their own learning process" (Nunan & Lamb, 1996, p. 9). That is to say, learners need to get involved in decision-making process.

(3) Setting goals

There are two types of learning goals set by learners: long-term and short-term. The long-term goals address what learners expect to achieve throughout the writing course, whereas the short-term goals focus on what they expect to achieve in each unit. Specifically, learners first analyze their language needs and choose writing strategies that they desire to employ in their writing tasks. They then set their long-term goals to see the overall picture of what they were going to achieve after the course. Finally, they set the short-term goals for each unit.

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(4) Creating a study plan

Based upon the learning goals, learners create a study plan so that they can be aware of time management and learning activities. For each unit, they identify their short-term learning goals, estimate time to achieve these goals, kind of activities, and ways to implement tasks determined in learning goals.

(5) Selecting learning materials

Apart from the textbook, learners are encouraged to explore other resources and freely choose materials supporting their writing tasks with the following steps. Learners first decide the purpose of a writing task. Then they look for materials with the teacher's guide from various

sources such as the Internet, newspapers, academic writing, grammar references, dictionaries and so on. Lastly, they work in pair or group to share the information they find out and discuss some points they intend to practice in the writing task.

(6) Employing writing process

There has been a debate on the process of writing teaching; thus, the following steps of the writing process were adapted from the writing process models made by previous researchers (e.g., Brookes & Grundy, 1991; Curry & Hewings, 2003; Tribble, 1996). The writing process consists of six steps: (1) *prewriting* (i.e., learners brainstorm ideas, i.e., they collect ideas from the materials relating to a topic); (2) *planning* (i.e., learners make an outline for an essay); (3) *drafting* (i.e., learners produce the first draft by means of the ideas gathered in prewriting); (4) reflecting (i.e., after the first draft, learners take time to reflect on their own writing with editor's checklist available in the textbook); (5) revising (i.e., learners revise their own writing with the help of the external feedback from peers and/or the teacher); and (6) editing (i.e., a range of issues, namely ideas, language use, vocabulary, organization, and mechanics needs editing.

(7) Self-assessing writing performance

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Learners self-grade their writing pieces using the writing assessment rubric after they finish the writing process presented in step *(6)*. Based on this assessment, it is expected that they are able to identify their actual writing performance and further see whether their writing pieces meet the predetermined learning goals and have improvements compared to the previous writing pieces.

(8) Self-monitoring learning process

Self-monitoring can be deemed as the ability to take control over cognitive process, one of the three elements of learner autonomy. Reflection belonging to the cognitive process is emphasized in relation to the development of learner autonomy. Learners reflect on their learning achievements and put reflections in the portfolio.

(9) External feedback from peers/teacher

Learners gives feedback to their peers' written work for each unit in class. Besides reviewing the written work with the use of editor's checklist, they give comments on the written work based on the suggested questions such as *'What do you like about the paper?', 'What facts or ideas can be added to the paper?', 'What changes can be made to improve the paper?'*. After that, learners have a discussion about each other's reviews. Provided that they have any questions during the discussion, they can ask the teacher for help or counseling. The teacher plays a role as a coordinator who collects learners' pieces of writing and distributes them to their peers.

(10) Delayed evaluation and Formative feedback

Delayed evaluation offers learners opportunities to review the written work before summative evaluation. Formative feedback done by learners involved reviewing the portfolio tasks and the learning goals

(11) Output

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Given the activities provided during the learner training, learners are assumed to possess an ability to learn autonomously, an ability to write different types of essays (e.g., grasping rhetorical focus and language focus of each type), and an ability to develop and utilize a portfolio.   .

(12) Summative evaluation

The last step is summative evaluation conducted by the teacher. In this sense, the teacher is supposed to evaluate learners' learning outcome through their portfolios after the learner training to see the effectiveness of the training. After the summative feedback, learners practice further; therefore, the new learning cycle starts again.

4. Pedagogical implications

Based on the activities and responsibilities that are included in the conceptual PLAD model, involved agents are required to take different roles in order to make the learner autonomy development possible and successful.

EFL learners

EFL learners should actively take control over their own learning. They first need to change attitudes of autonomous learning. That is, they should believe in autonomous learning for its own sake. In fact, the findings of this study demonstrate that learners' awareness plays a fundamental role in developing learner autonomy. That is, if learners are willing to learn autonomously, they gain the first level of learner autonomy (Nunan, 1997). They then equip themselves with sufficient knowledge and skills of learner autonomy, i.e., they know how to set learning goals, how to create a study plan, how to write reflection, etc. to become autonomous learners. At the highest level of learner autonomy, according to Nunan (1997), a learner can work absolutely independently of their teacher as a teacher and even a researcher beyond the classroom. Lastly, they should confidently get involved in making decisions related to the learning process, such as learning content, learning methods, learning activities, and so on.

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Teachers

EFL teachers should be trained regarding learner autonomy and the PLAD model. To ensure that EFL teachers are competent in carrying out their work in an autonomous classroom, they first need to be clear about the characteristics and benefits of learner autonomy. After that, they have to possess necessary skills to help their learners to be autonomous learners.

EFL teachers should also be prepared to facilitate learning environment. First, an interrelationship between EFL teachers and learners should be created. To this end, teacher role in an autonomous language classroom needs to be changed, i.e., there should be a shift in terms of teacher role from a leader and a knowledge provider to a guide, a mentor, and a resource. Additionally, pressure-free learning environment in which EFL learners feel free to interact with their teacher should be promoted. In terms of personality, therefore, an EFL teacher should be

friendly, enthusiastic, considerate, etc. In respect of teaching practices, it is recommended that EFL teachers should positively react to learners' mistakes or misunderstanding, i.e., trying not to demotivate learners, and EFL teachers ought not to put much pressure on learners, especially pressure of grades. Finally, freedom to make decisions on their own learning issues needs to be provided to EFL learners.

Administrators

In order to raise their awareness and improve their knowledge of learner autonomy, professional development courses, seminars, or conferences regarding learner autonomy and the PLAD model should be offered to EFL teachers. Since then, they are confidently able to apply it into their classrooms.

Facilities should be improved to increase learner motivation in learning. The findings show that inconvenient learning condition in this context partly influences their autonomous learning. As far as learning resources are concerned, the self-access center located in the university library should be open regularly with the available Wi-fi so that EFL learners have a learning environment to learn autonomously. The library service should also be improved. In order to facilitate looking for and choosing learning materials, specifically, there should be more books and articles relating to English language studies, English magazines and newspapers, English movies, etc. In essence, online service system (e.g., e-database, e-books, and e-reference) should be constructed and firmly operated to meet EFL learners in the context of 21st century English language education.

Another important issue concerns learning program. That is, curriculum in terms of learning content, materials, allotted time, and especially assessment should be open. EFL learners should have freedom to choose what they wish to learn instead of strictly following the fixed learning content. The textbook should serve as a guideline which provides learners with a basic knowledge. Then EFL learners search for any kinds of materials that support the content in the textbook. Importantly, EFL teachers have rights to skip or supplement the content of the textbook if it is not important to them. To ensure the appropriateness of learners' decisions on learning content, there should be a discussion with their teacher. In lieu of focusing on teacher

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assessment, moreover, EFL teachers should be encouraged and provided opportunities to assess their learning performance on their own. The results of this study indicate that it is lack of confidence in language proficiency and assessment skill that hinders them from self-assessing their writing pieces. If self-assessment is frequently conducted as a task in a language classroom, however, learners may not have an inferiority complex about their ability.

5. Conclusion

The portfolio-based model for developing learner autonomy in an EFL writing context is proposed by virtue of the adaptation of Lam's (2013) conceptual model of self-regulated learning and Huitt's (2003) model of teaching/learning process and the review of theoretical background concerning the concept of learner autonomy and portfolios. This model functions as a conceptual framework for further research that places an emphasis on the promotion of LA in EFL contexts in general and in the Vietnamese EFL context in particular. Hence, future research may take the application of this model which provides an essential procedure for EFL teachers in a real writing class in different EFL contexts into account to investigate the effectiveness of the model. Further, it is recommended that the model should be used in other classes regarding macro skills, e.g., speaking, listening, reading, etc. with some adjustments made by EFL teachers.

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