INVESTIGATING UNIVERSITY LECTURERS’ ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNER AUTONOMY IN THE EFL CONTEXT IN VIETNAM

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Statement of Originality

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Abstract

In language learning, students’ competence can be improved if they reflect on their learning processes and become more autonomous in their behaviour. A dilemma facing educational reformers in Vietnam, as in other Asian contexts, is how to encourage students to become more independent in their studies. Since 2005, the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam has included students’ ability to learn independently as one of its national education objectives.

While there has been a considerable focus on foreign language learners and ways in which they can become more autonomous, there has been less attention on the teachers of foreign language students. Given that teachers play a central role in helping their students to be more autonomous, especially in a Confucian heritage culture like Vietnam, teachers’ attitudes towards learner autonomy should be investigated.

This study investigates Vietnamese lecturers’ attitudes towards learner autonomy in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The study used a mixed method approach to data collection, consisting of a quantitative survey of 262 EFL lecturers, individual interviews with 28 English lecturers, and classroom observations of 20 lecturers in five universities in Hanoi, Vietnam. The study was designed to examine how lecturers perceived the concept of learner autonomy, their attitudes towards learner autonomy, and the extent to which they encouraged learner autonomy in their classrooms.

The analysis of the data indicated that lecturers held generally positive attitudes towards learner autonomy. Most agreed that it was their responsibility to develop autonomy in their students. However, little evidence of learner autonomy emerged during the
classroom observation phase. Lecturers pointed to a number of factors that restricted the level of learner autonomy in their classes. These factors included the physical impediments of large classes, heavy teaching workloads, and inadequate resources. There were psychological factors at work as well, particularly a cultural context in which teachers are revered and students defer to them.

The study finishes with a set of recommendations for Vietnamese policymakers, higher education institutions, EFL lecturing staff, university students, and schools for ways to enhance learner autonomy in English language classrooms.
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