Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Learner Autonomy: A Case Study in Vietnam

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Abstract. This paper discusses learner autonomy (LA), which has recently been adopted as an important educational goal in the new competence-based curriculum for general education in Vietnam. Despite numerous studies on the initiatives to foster LA in various contexts, more research is needed to substantiate the literature on how pre-service teachers interpret and practice LA so that they could better reach the educational goal of fostering student autonomy in school settings. Drawing on data from surveys and interviews with pre-service teachers from Years 1 to 4 across seven disciplines of teacher education programs, the findings of our case study indicate that teacher education programs in Vietnam may prepare pre-service teachers to enact their autonomy in learning to some extent. Nevertheless, such programs need to provide to-be teachers with opportunities to actually control their learning in university settings so that they might better assist school students to develop their own independent learning and self-study. This paper thus concludes by raising two points concerning pedagogical obligation that pre-service teachers and teacher trainers should be aware of: first, that student autonomy relies substantially on teachers being supportive and flexible in devising learning activities; and second, that teacher education programs should equip pre-service teachers with sufficient knowledge, skills and resources to develop their own autonomy to enable their future students' independence.

Keywords: learner autonomy; perceptions; practices; pre-service teachers; teacher education

1. Introduction
Learner autonomy (LA) has been widely recognized and accepted as an important general educational goal in many countries globally, notably when related to language learning (Benson & Lamb, 2020; Febriyanti, 2021; Little, 2022; Little et al., 2017; Raya & Vieira, 2020; Lin & Reinders, 2019; Yu, 2020). Vietnam is no

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exception. Vietnamese general education has recently switched from the traditional content-based approach to a new competence-based curriculum, aiming at developing students' qualities and competences and their combined physical and mental development, and thus endorsing students' best potential (MOET, 2018; Nguyen, 2017; Prime Minister, 2015). This new general education curriculum is also referred to as GEC 2018. Among the 10 competences described in the program, LA is required to be addressed by all subject content. In other words, teachers in charge of each subject in the new curriculum have to enable student autonomy as a policy objective.

Various studies in Vietnamese contexts focus on teacher or student roles in fostering and developing LA or language teachers' and students' perceptions about LA (Ho & Dimmock, 2023; Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014; Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen & Habók, 2020; Ngo & Luu, 2023; Phan, 2024; Yen et al., 2024). However, little research has explored the perceptions and practices of pre-service teachers. To guarantee successful implementation of an education reform in the long term, pre-service teacher education programs have to be part of the reform as well as professional development activities for in-service teachers (Hoang & Nguyen, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2020). This paper seeks to address this gap by investigating pre-service teachers' interpretation and practices of LA in relation to the educational goal of fostering student autonomy, drawing on data from surveys and interviews with pre-service teachers in a public university in the south of Vietnam. It aims to provide insight into how future teachers experience LA in their learning paths at university and what they need from pre-service teacher education programs to better enable their future students' independence in school settings.

2. Literature Review
Although LA has been conceptualized in varying ways, it is broadly understood as students' ability to take responsibility or control of their own learning (Benson, 2011; Benson & Lamb, 2020; Holec, 1981; Little, 2003, 2022; Littlewood, 1996; Murray, 2020; Oxford, 2015). This ability entails such essential features as setting learning objectives, defining learning content and progression, choosing learning methods, monitoring the procedure of acquisition, and evaluating knowledge acquired. LA becomes manifest when learners take control of, and make decisions at, successive stages of the learning process. The literature indicates that various terms have been used to refer to LA, such as self-study, critical thinking, learner-centeredness, or independent learning (Febriyanti, 2021; Little, 2022; Little et al., 2017). It is, however, generally accepted that this multi-dimensional competence is not innate but is learned and develops only through practice (Aoki, 2002; Raya & Vieira, 2020). It is considered as matter of degree although may not develop in a linear direction from a lower to a higher level (Febriyanti, 2021; Little, 2022; Littlewood, 1996, 1999). Hence, the primary role of the teacher should be to provide necessary knowledge and skill and, most importantly, to create opportunities for learners to construct their autonomy in learning (Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014; Lin & Reinders, 2019; Phan & Hamid, 2017). Teachers who want to promote LA must first possess this quality themselves, which should be reflected in their personal beliefs and teaching methods (Balçıkanlı, 2010; Kaymakamoğlu,

2017; Nguyen, 2022; Voller, 2014). LA involves providing students with opportunities for self-reflection, encouraging them to set their own learning goals, and creating an environment that fosters independent thinking and self-motivation. Teachers being role models is greatly important to developing learners because this capacity is formed and nurtured mainly through educational activities guided by teachers (Aoki, 2002; Dam, 2003; Little et al, 2017; Lin & Reinders, 2019; Marzuki & Indrawati, 2023; Raya & Vieira, 2020). This means that teachers who lack autonomy in their teaching may not successfully help students become autonomous, and that teacher autonomy is a prerequisite for LA. It is thus crucial for pre-service and in-service teacher education programs to grant both prospective and current teachers with sufficient skills, support and autonomy so they can help learners take control of their own learning.

Teacher education in Vietnam can be delivered in two different forms: pre-service and in-service teacher programs, which respectively refer to teaching programs at university for teacher-to-be students and professional development activities for teachers working in schools. This paper focuses only on pre-service (or initial) teacher education. In the past, programs for pre-service teacher training in Vietnam had to follow curriculum frameworks issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). More autonomy has lately been granted to universities, allowing them to develop and revise their own teaching training programs with MOET's approval. Overall, each higher education institution may have different practices and policies that result in different quality of future teachers (Pham et al., 2020; Pham & Nguyen, 2020).

The education system in Vietnam has recently undertaken renovations, by focusing on improving the quality of teacher education and increasing the number of well-trained teachers. This includes initiatives to advance the curriculum and assessment of pre-service teacher education programs. In particular, Vietnamese universities have to upgrade their programs and develop suitable strategy to provide high-quality teacher training to guarantee a comprehensive education reform (Hoang & Nguyen, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2020; Nhat et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2020). Approximately 114 higher education institutions are offering teacher training programs in Vietnam, following either the parallel or the consecutive model. The former, implemented in most Vietnamese universities, means that subject-specific content knowledge and knowledge and skills of pedagogy are provided to students simultaneously. In the latter model, which is more popular internationally, students are first provided with basic scientific knowledge, and followed by pedagogical knowledge and skills (Pham et al., 2020; Pham & Nguyen, 2020).

Initial teacher education programs in Vietnam typically entail combining coursework and practical training, and are designed to prepare future teachers to successfully educate students within the Vietnamese educational system. Typically, pre-service teacher education programs in Vietnam, offered at universities and colleges throughout the country, last for four years and may be divided into three parts: (i) the general academic unit comprises such subjects as philosophy, foreign languages, educational psychology, and Vietnamese practice;

(ii) the specialized academic unit focuses on subject-specific content knowledge and learning theory applied to subject teaching methods; and (iii) training for the pedagogical profession consists of students' micro-teaching practice at universities and teaching practicum in schools, where future teachers work alongside experienced ones in a real classroom setting.

Although the literature shows extensive research into students and teachers' beliefs, and innovations in fostering LA (Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen & Habók, 2020; Ngo & Luu, 2023; Vu, 2021; Yen et al., 2024), studies about how pre-service teachers perceive and practice LA remain few. Little attention has been paid to the ways future teachers understand the concept of LA and how they practice their autonomy in the settings of teacher education programs. Moreover, examining more critically how pre-service teachers perceive their role in developing students' autonomous learning in relation to the new requirements of GEC 2018 also remains understudied. Consequently, pertaining to the under-researched context of Vietnamese higher education, more insightful evidence needs to be gathered to substantiate how Vietnamese pre-service teachers interpret LA and how they practice it in classroom activities within initial teacher education programs.

This paper seeks to understand and describe how pre-service teachers interpret and practice LA in relation to the educational goal of fostering student autonomy in school settings. To do so, we draw on data from surveys and interviews with pre-service teachers from Years 1 to 4 across seven disciplines of teacher education programs: Chemistry, Mathematics, English, Geography, History, Vietnamese Language and Literature, and Political Teacher Education at the University of Education (UE, a pseudonym) in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam.

This study aimed to answer two research questions:
1. What does 'learner autonomy' mean to pre-service teachers at UE?
2. How do pre-service teachers develop and practice their autonomy in their teacher education program at UE?

3. Methodology
3.1. Research Design and Participants
To answer the above research questions, we used an exploratory case study design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), deploying a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to explore pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices about LA. The case study research is suited to analyzing a contemporary phenomenon within its natural settings, allowing researchers to describe and explore the individual perceptions and practices temporally bounded in a specific context (Cohen et al., 2018). It was thus suitable to explore the multifaceted and changeable nature of LA (Little, 2022), taking into account pre-service teachers' past experiences, professional training, classroom practice, and other contextual factors. Using both a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews in the case study allows findings to be generalized and LA practice to be explored comprehensively as it occurs within a Vietnamese university.

The fieldwork for the research was conducted from November 2021 to September 2022 in UE, a small public university in the South of Vietnam. In the first research phase, we recruited 420 full-time pre-service teachers (137 males, 279 females, and four preferred not to say) across seven academic disciplines of four-year teacher education programs to participate in an online survey using stratified sampling based on voluntary participation. These seven disciplines were listed at the end of Section 2 and in Table 1. The quantitative sample size was calculated with 97% confidence level, a 5% error margin, and a 50% response distribution (see Table 1). From the 420 survey respondents, 14 prospective teachers were randomly chosen for individual interviews, 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 withdraw from the study at any time. They were also assured that their personal data would be treated with complete confidentiality.

Table 1. Participants in different years of study by academic disciplines

| Academic disciplines | Year of study at the university | | | | |
	Year 1 N=178	Year 2 N=97	Year 3 N=53	Year 4 N=92	Total Count
Geography Teacher Education	5	8	11	16	40 (9.5%)
Political Teacher Education	11	12	0	14	37 (8.8%)
Chemistry Teacher Education	35	12	7	11	65 (15.5%)
History Teacher Education	8	3	3	7	21 (5.0%)
English Language Teacher Education	39	21	12	10	82 (19.5%)
Math Teacher Education	63	23	11	17	114 (27.1%)
Vietnamese Language and Literature Teacher Education	17	18	9	17	61 (14.5%)
Total	**178**	**97**	**53**	**92**	**420 (100%)**

3.2. Data collection tools and analysis

Two data collection instruments were used in the present study: a questionnaire adapted from Nguyen and Habók (2020) and Chan et al. (2002) and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire for the online survey consisted of two parts. Part A included information related to demographic data such as age, gender, year of study at the university, and academic program. Part B was set to explore participants' perspectives about LA (13 items) and their practices of LA (8 items). The questionnaire was piloted with 10 pre-service teachers. Minor changes were made to word choice and sentence structures to make the questionnaire content more consistent and intelligible.

To explore the future teachers' views about LA in depth, we conducted a semi-structured interview with each of 14 pre-service teachers after the online survey because such interviews are suitable for gathering research information about human experience and perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Semi-structured interviews enabled us to collect standardized but in-depth data on how teachers-to-be perceived and prepared for LA as related to their personal histories and the broader contexts of their academic disciplines and school curriculum. The interview consisted of 17 questions focusing on three sections. The first asked

about participants' interpretation of LA and its manifestation in their classes. The second focused on autonomous learning strategies or techniques they used or tried to develop. The third section explored their challenges in practicing LA in learning and support needed to overcome the problems perceived by students. Each interview averaged 40 minutes with all being done in Vietnamese and audio recorded. Interview protocols were used to keep records of the interview details together with comments and notes.

Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics while data obtained from individual interviews with prospective teachers were analyzed using content analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Two co-researchers initially read the interview transcriptions thoroughly to identify words, themes and concepts related to the topic under research and then organized them into broader categories, which were later checked by the rest of the research team. The process of analyzing data and validating findings was also checked by a researcher in the same field. Questionnaire and interview data were also compared to help validate the conclusions and exemplify quantitative findings qualitatively. Such a comprehensive approach enabled a more meaningful and trustworthy understanding of pre-service teachers' responses to specific questionnaire items.

4. Findings and Discussion
4.1. Pre-service teachers' perception about learner autonomy
The findings show that most pre-service students perceived LA as the competence to control themselves, including control their own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in the learning process, which could be demonstrated in learners' ability to be self-disciplined and act suitably in various situations. The results from the student questionnaire indicate that most prospective teachers understood the nature of self-control capacity and how autonomy manifested itself in accordance with what has generally been recognized in the literature and Vietnam's GEC 2018. However, a small proportion, approximately at 2.6%, remained confused about what LA conveys and how it becomes manifested in various contexts (See Table 2).

Table 2. Behaviors of an autonomous learner

Behaviors	Learners (n = 420)	Percentage (%)
Control oneself	4	0.95
Control one's thoughts and emotion	2	0.48
Control one's behaviour in learning process	5	1.19
Control one's thoughts, emotion, behaviors and oneself	409	97.38

This lack of correct understanding may negatively impact the promotion of LA as well as student learning outcomes once these pre-service teachers start their career in high schools, they may need their teachers' attention to help them clarify the

confusion. Nevertheless, over three quarters of the confused students were in their first or second year in their training programs and might lack opportunities to develop their understanding about LA, particularly when they came from remote high schools in the Mekong Delta where traditional teacher-centered methods were still popular in most classrooms (Nhat et al., 2018).

Besides these simple descriptive statistics, in-depth interviews with future teachers provide insightful understanding of what they perceived and how they practiced LA. For example, a third year student of English Teacher Education explained:

> *Autonomy is one's willingness to take control in all activities in his or her life and study. Autonomous learning mean that learners are responsible to search material, monitor learning process, and explore the knowledge that the textbooks do not offer. (Interview, S11, English Teacher Education major, Year 3)*

This prospective teacher believed that the program or teachers could not provide all the information a learner was interested in. So, if future teachers wanted to perform well academically and excel in their future career as a teacher, they had to determine the necessary areas for self-study, outside the provided content in the textbooks and training program. They would need to look for materials and control their learning process with an elevated level of discipline (Little, 2022). Other interviewees expressed similar beliefs that LA reflected the learners' ability to be responsible for their learning, with minimal or even without their teachers' presence. In particular, S4, a fourth-year student in the Math Teacher Education program stated: "I have failed many times in autonomous learning. From such experiences, I recognized how learning in high school differed from learning at university level where student autonomy plays a very significant role." What S4 shared in the interview indicates her experience and effort in learning how she should control her learning. The teacher however did not seem to appear, or have any significant roles, in her experiences. She practiced and developed her autonomy on her own, without the teacher's contribution. She added:

> *LA means a learner' ability to define her learning responsibilities, to set her learning objectives, employ appropriate learning methods, monitor her learning activities using self-evaluation or feedback from teachers and peers, and actively search for support or solutions to overcome any challenges in her study. (Interview, S4, Math Teacher Education major, Year 4)*

This future teacher assumed that an autonomous learner should be able to set learning goals, choose suitable methods and materials, and monitor and evaluate learning activities. She also said that, although the process of building and developing LA would require significant effort from learners, they could always seek help from their teachers and peers. Another future teacher of Math similarly perceived that LA involved learners' responsibility to understand and practice this competence.

> *I have always been well aware of my duties at University and of the importance of self-control. Therefore, I always try my best in learning to accumulate knowledge and practice and develop self-control to be*

> *independent in learning and logical thinking. (Interview, S1, Math Teacher Education major, Year 4)*

Despite LA's being explained and interpreted varyingly, pre-service teachers' perceptions about this concept accords with how the literature defines it both globally and in Vietnam (e.g., Benson, 2007; Febriyanti, 2021; Ho & Dimmock, 2023; Little, 2022; Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen & Habók, 2020; Raya & Vieira, 2020; Vu, 2021; Yen et al., 2024). Thus, the prospective teachers understood LA as a learner's competence or ability to control his or her own learning, which consists mainly of control over their own thoughts, emotions and behaviors in the learning process. Such multi-dimensional competence could be demonstrated in learners' ability to be self-disciplined and act fittingly in various situations or, as Benson (2011) states, in their ability to make decisions at distinct stages of the learning process. That is, when they decide on the objectives and choose appropriate methods, to monitor and evaluate the learning process (Ho & Dimmock, 2023; Little et al., 2017; Murray, 2020; Nguyen & Habók, 2020). The participants also used various terms to refer to LA in the interviews such as learner independence, self-study, or self-control, as documented in the literature (Benson, 2007; Little, 2003, 2022; Raya & Vieira, 2020).

Notably, the interviews and surveys show that most future teachers perceived LA to involve almost no significant presence of the teacher. Such understanding of LA suggests a higher level of autonomy or proactive autonomy when students are able to control their learning processes with little interference of the teacher or others (Febriyanti, 2021; Little, 2022). The student participants however needed the teacher's support in developing this competence. They were confused with the ways to build up and develop their autonomy even though they correctly interpreted this concept. On the one hand, such confusion reveals that the prospective teachers were not ready to take complete control of their learning, which may result from Vietnam's traditionally teacher-centric education, influenced by Confucian heritage (Nguyen et al., 2020; Nhat et al., 2018). On the other hand, their confusion highlights the important role of the teacher in nurturing LA (Little et al, 2017; Raya & Vieira, 2020) as well as the significance of fostering autonomous learning strategies in teacher education programs, laying the foundation for valuable educational experiences for teachers-to-be so that such experiences would positively impact their future teaching practices (Vázquez, 2018).

4.2. Pre-service teachers' practice of autonomy
Although pre-service teachers' various interpretations of LA reflect what occurs in the literature (see this paper's preceding section), their practices indicate that many future teachers continue to need teacher support to develop and nurture their autonomous learning. The findings from our survey showed that most future teachers often attended classes, completed all learning tasks assigned by teachers, and were able to learn from, and correct their mistakes in the learning process. However, just over half the participants believed they were active, creative and dynamic learners (see Table 3).

Table 3. Pre-service teachers' behaviors in autonomous learning

Activities	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Regularly attend classes on time	316	75.2
Willingly complete all learning assignments	349	83.1
Be active, creative in improving one's knowledge and skills	252	60.0
Draw lessons from and correct mistakes in learning process	347	82.6

The table shows that most student participants (n = 83.1%) knew how to develop autonomy in learning through practicing self-discipline to successfully complete learning tasks followed by their monitoring and evaluating the learning process (n = 82.6%). More than two thirds of the pre-service teachers also attended classes to make the most out of the lessons, while just 60% of them believed that they were dynamic, active and willing to take control of their learning. This indicates that pre-service teachers had some level of autonomy in learning in that they behaved suitably when completing learning assignments and monitoring learning activities. Many participants though did not reach a high level of LA because they were inactive in exploring knowledge, only completing prescribed tasks or responsibilities. Instead, learners with a higher level of autonomy should demonstrate their understanding of learning objectives and self-confidence in many learning activities. This deficiency is confirmed in how they responded when asked to report on the skills and competencies they often exercised to develop LA within various stages of the learning process (see Table 4).

Table 4. Pre-serviced teachers' autonomy exercised in various activities

Areas of exercising LA	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Ability to set learning goals, tasks and plans	337	80.2
Ability to collect and analyze learning information	312	74.3
Ability to monitor learning process	254	60.5
Ability to self-evaluate learning process	229	54.5
Ability to adapt and adjust learning activities	201	47.9

Table 4 shows how our research data ranks, in descending order both in frequency and percentage, the extent to which pre-service teachers are able to exercise the five areas of their expertise associated with their autonomy. The highest percentage (i.e., 80.2%) applies to practicing the learning objectives, tasks and plans, before collecting and analyzing learning information (i.e., 74.3%). The next two, namely, the ability to monitor the learning process (i.e., 60.5%), and self-assessing their ability to self-evaluate (i.e., 54.5%), applied to over half the

participants. The lowest percentage applies to learners' being able to adapt and adjust to learning activities (i.e., 47.9%). This shows that many pre-service teachers have not yet become basically competent enough to exercise their autonomy, particularly in self-evaluating and adjusting learning activities. In other words, about half of the participants might possess a lower level of autonomy, in that they would probably need more teacher guidance in how to foster and exercise a higher degree of autonomy in learning.

A closer look at how the pre-service teachers exercised their autonomy in adjusting learning activities shows that most were confident in changing learning activities. That is, except for when they need to specifically plan to overcome their weaknesses in the learning process during four years at UE, which was the least common activity, at only 4.3% (see Table 5). This suggests that learners may be less likely to proactively address areas in which they struggle. Another focal feature from Table 5 is that first- to third-year teacher education majors regularly practiced self-reporting learning result, keeping learning journals, and defining their strengths and weaknesses. The fourth year majors however did not focus much on both keeping learning journals or planning specific changes to overcome their weaknesses.

Table 5. Pre-serviced teachers' autonomy in adjusting learning activities

Adjustment of learning activities	Years of study at the university				Total
	1 (N=178)	2 (N=97)	3 (N=53)	4 (N=92)	(N=420)
Make a self-report of learning results	46 (25.8%)	27 (27.8%)	19 (35.8%)	33 (35.9%)	125 (29.8%)
Keep regular entries in a learning journal	56 (31.5%)	33 (34.0%)	16 (30.2%)	15 (16.3%)	120 (28.6%)
Define strengths and weaknesses	65 (36.5%)	35 (36.1%)	16 (30.2%)	41 (44.6%)	157 (37.4%)
Plan specific changes to overcome weaknesses	11 (6.2%)	2 (2.1%)	2 (3.8%)	3 (3.3%)	18 (4.3%)

Findings illustrated in this table indicate that, although most engaged in some form of autonomous learning, pre-service teachers at EU remained confused about what to do to practice and improve their autonomy. The first year pre-service teachers seemed to be more confident to adjust learning activities while others were less interested. Such ability should instead be possessed by learners if their autonomy in learning is considered at a higher level (Little, 2022, Yen et al., 2024). Overall, the table provides some insight into how future teachers at UE adjusted their learning activities according to their years of study. Although evidence showed some autonomous learning, there may be room for more proactive approaches to addressing these to-be teachers' weaknesses.

Findings from the individual interviews support the above results. For example, a future teacher of Math said:

> *I always go through the lesson before each class and take note of the important points. If there's something I don't understand, I'll ask [the teacher]. For Math, I find many practical exercises and try to do them all. Before the exam, I will review each chapter and practice again and again*

to be well-prepared. (Interview, S4, Math Teacher Education major, Year 4)

This reflects S4's autonomy in several ways. First, she experienced learning independently and showed her willingness to take charge of it and reflect on her experiences. She actively sought and used resources to improve her own understanding. S4 indeed took responsibility for her learning by previewing the lesson before class, taking notes, seeking clarification when necessary, and practicing through practical exercises. She also emphasized the importance of self-control in learning, recognizing that personal effort and discipline are crucial for success in university-level learning. This suggests that S4 developed a sense of agency and independence in her approach to learning, taking an active role in learning, and using various strategies to develop her understanding and performance. Another future teacher of Geography stated:

Before class, I will preview the lesson and prepare answers for the questions [or assignments] so that when I am in the class, it is easier for me to understand the lesson and probably ask the teacher to explain any unclear points…I set the goal to graduate with excellence. (Interview, S2, Geography Teacher Education major, Year 3)

This suggests that S2 was responsible for her learning to some extent and found ways to improve how she understood the learning material. She also mentioned her objective of graduating with excellence and working her way toward it. This indicates a sense of personal motivation and proactive autonomy (Nguyen & Habók, 2020; Raya & Vieira, 2020; Smith, 2003) when learners are able to set learning goals, select suitable methods and evaluate the learning process. Such form of LA can lead to greater engagement, motivation, and success in academic pursuits.

There are some subject areas where the teacher cannot provide sufficient information, such as famous authors in literature. By self-study, I will learn more the document, read more articles about those authors, so that I can understand deeply and understand the problem thoroughly and it will serve my future job as a teacher. I can find many resources from electronic newspapers, books, specialized books of the library or textbooks in similar programs of other universities. (Interview, S7, Vietnamese Language and Literature Teacher Education, Year 3)

This evidence demonstrates that S7 took the initiative to seek out additional resources to increase how he understood the subject matter, thus identifying that gaps might lie in the information provided by the teacher. He also employed specific strategies to supplement his learning, such as using electronic newspapers, books, specialized library resources, and textbooks from other universities. He did so because he believed it would benefit his teaching future. Such an approach to learning indicates that this pre-service teacher's autonomy in learning was high (Benson & Lamb, 2020). Educators and teacher education programs should foster this kind of LA among future teachers to prepare them for successful careers in teaching.

The results of in-depth interviews with representatives of students from seven disciplines of teacher education have shown that students' autonomous activities consist primarily of previewing lessons before going to class, searching information related to the content of the lessons, and completing assignments. In other words, the lessons in the curriculum inform their learning activities. This type of autonomy may be classified as reactive, that is, a lower level of LA compared with a full level of proactive autonomy (Nguyen & Habók, 2020; Raya & Vieira, 2020; Smith, 2003; Yen et al., 2024). It nonetheless suggests that pre-service teachers at UE possessed and regularly practiced autonomy in learning. The teacher trainer plays an important role in fostering future teachers' autonomous learning strategies so that they can gradually assume greater control over their learning (Little et al, 2017; Raya & Vieira, 2020).

5. Conclusions and Implications

This case study has demonstrated that teacher education programs in Vietnam can partially prepare pre-service teachers to take charge of their learning. However, providing them with opportunities to exercise control over their own learning in university settings is also important. This would enable them to better assist school students to develop their own independence and self-study skills. Our study highlights that pre-service teachers need to understand that student autonomy depends on teachers being supportive and adaptable during learning activities when learners' level of autonomy remain constrained. Once learners reach a higher level of autonomy or can perform proactive autonomy, their dependence on teachers would decrease. Teacher education programs thus should not only provide pre-service teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills and resources to develop their autonomy, but also enable teacher educators to support future teachers well. This can be achieved through providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to exercise control over their own learning to equip them with sufficient knowledge, skills and resources to develop their autonomy. By doing so, teacher education programs can better prepare pre-service teachers to be successful educators in their future career. While this present research is small in scope, it provides some initial generalization and insightful understanding about how pre-service teachers perceive LA and exercise their autonomy in the initial teacher training, temporally bounded in a Vietnamese university. We recommend that future research focuses on a larger sample size with more diverse disciplines and background so findings are more generalizable. A mixed-methods approach could be used to offer a more detailed view about the complexities of pre-service teachers' perceptions and practices about LA. Later studies could focus on future teachers' perspectives about LA, complementing teacher trainers' standpoints, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the teacher training.

6. Funding

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