# Has teacher autonomy gone MIA? A qualitative study of views from EFL teachers in Vietnamese universities

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This study examined the degree of teacher autonomy that Vietnamese university English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers have in selecting their own courses, as well as their perceptions of their freedom, or lack thereof, in course selection and course allocation. Using self-determination theory as a theoretical framework, this study found that Vietnamese EFL teachers had little say in what courses were allocated to them to teach. Rather, the courses were assigned to them by their leaders or course coordinators. The analysis of participating teachers' (N=20) responses in semi-structured interviews revealed that participants were ambivalent in relation to the course allocation process. Some teachers preferred their leaders to assign courses to them, while others were not happy with the course allocation but chose to compromise; there was also a group of teachers who were disappointed with the course allocation process and would prefer to select their own courses. The study concludes that teachers' need for autonomy varies between individuals. The findings also support the application of self-determination theory in investigating teacher autonomy.

## Introduction

Teacher autonomy is increasingly becoming an essential factor in the field of education as well as in second language teaching and learning. Much of the research has shown that teachers' capacity for professional autonomous actions is linked to positive educational outcomes, such as teachers' autonomy-supportive styles and behaviours (Assor et al., 2002; Pelletier et al., 2002; Reeve, 2009; Roth, 2014), teachers' intrinsic motivation (Chirkov et al., 2003; Klaeijsen et al., 2018; Korthagen & Evelein, 2016; Roth, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2006, 2017), and teachers' job satisfaction (MacBeath, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). Because of its vital roles, various attempts have been made to promote teacher empowerment and to reduce constraints on teachers (Gore, 2000; Blase & Blase, 1994; Parker, 2015; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Short, 1994).

However, complete freedom of teachers' actions over different domains of teaching seems to be an unrealistic educational reform goal. Teaching is not just what happens in classroom between teachers and students. Rather, teachers are expected to comply with curriculum guidelines, rules, and regulations of the education system (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). Previous research suggests that the mandated use of strict curriculum and teaching resources, the pressures of the examination system, and bureaucratic overreach can increase external constraints on teacher autonomy and agency (Benson, 2010; Ebersold et al., 2019; Gao, 2018; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2020; Öztürk, 2011; Wilches, 2007; Yan, 2012). However, far too little attention has been paid to individual and cultural differences in shaping teachers' senses of autonomy, freedom, and control in teaching (Erss, 2018; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014).

Using self-determination theory as the theoretical framework, the current study examines teachers' perceived need for autonomy and their need satisfaction in teaching English language in the tertiary sector in Vietnam. The Vietnamese higher education context is particularly interesting, because the Vietnamese education system is strongly affected by Confucian philosophy, which places high values on social order and involves high-power distance (McHale, 2002; Nguyen, 2016). Working in a high-power distance culture, Vietnamese teachers might experience more constraints and less freedom than their peers in Western contexts. Also, few studies have investigated the nature of teacher autonomy in Vietnamese higher education context. The current study has employed the conceptualisation of teacher autonomy as self-endorsement (Ryan & Deci, 2017) instead of autonomy as freedom from external control (Smith, 2001), which has been widely used in the literature. The acronym MIA, missing in action, draws attention to the most important finding in this research, viz., the relative lack of teacher autonomy among university of EFL teachers in Vietnam. This has allowed the study to generate fresh insights into teacher autonomy in a collectivist culture and to extend the application of self-determination theory to non-Western contexts. The following research questions will be addressed in this paper:

• How do Vietnamese university EFL teachers perceive their autonomy in selecting courses to teach?
• To what extent can the conceptualisation of autonomy as self-endorsement in self-determination theory explain EFL teachers' autonomy in the Vietnamese higher education context?

## The conceptualisation of autonomy

The conceptualisation and functions of autonomy have been at the centre of much research and scientific debate (Chirkov, 2009; Jang et al., 2010; Muller & Louw, 2004; Nalipay et al., 2020; Roth et al., 2007a; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005; Vlachopoulos et al., 2013; Yamauchi & Tanaka, 1998). Autonomy has commonly been conceptualised as independence, which has been dominantly used to examine individual autonomy in different disciplines of psychology, including psychoanalysis, developmental, evolutionary and cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1968; Mahler, 1972; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz, 2006). This conceptualisation reflects the separateness of an individual from others, which can be found in freedom of choice of goals and acting indepedently (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz, 2006). Being viewed through a self lens, autonomy as independence is often labeled as a Westen product because its independence and individualist characteristics primarily focus on the experience of self or self-reliance in activities (Kagitcibasi, 2005). With this point of view, an individual might feel ultimately autonomous when being able to act or make a choice without the presence of external interference.

When placing the focus on self and individual independence, the construct of autonomy is more likely to be relevant to individualists rather than to collectivists (Iyengar & DeVoe, 2003; Oishi et al., 1999; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009). Independent functioning seems to

conflict with the spirit of collectivism and harmonious relationships of members in collectivist culture (Chen et al., 2013). Ryan and Deci (2006) criticised that conceptualising autonomy based on cutural values might imply that "Asians or collectivists have no need for autonomy" (p. 1558). To resolve the definitional confusion and functional limits of autonomy across cultures, Deci and Ryan (2000) defined autonomy as one of three basic psychological needs - autonomy, competence and relatedness within self-determination theory (SDT).

According to SDT, the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs is considered as universal and essential for individuals' growth, integrity and psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Connell, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2017). *Need for competence* refers to the need to attain desired goals and sense of mastery when individuals interact with the social environment in order to express and develop their capacities. *Need for relatedness* implies the feeling of being cared for, caring for, being respected by, and interacting with significant others. *Need for autonomy* is about the experience of volition, freedom of choice and personal causation in an action. When the need for autonomy is satisfied, people act with a strong sense of voluntariness, curiosity and interest rather than being pushed by external forces (Chen et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

However, the need for autonomy in SDT is not equivalent to independence (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1968; Mahler, 1972; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz, 2006), rather, people may be autonomously or heteronomously dependent, interdependent or independent from the contexts (Ryan & Lynch, 1989). In SDT, need for autonomy concerns about the degree of self-endorsement that is "the extent to which people experience their behaviour as volitional or fully self-endorsed, rather than being coerced, compelled, or seduced by forces external to the self" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 97). For example, autonomous individuals can be dependent on others, and actively seek help and support from others if they value the involvement of others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In a study on adolescents' autonomy in family decision making in China, Chen et al. (2013) found that Chinese adolescents preferred following their parents' decisions or taking parents' opinions into consideration because they believed that their parents were knowledgeable and had a greater capacity to make a better decision than they did.

Several studies have shown that a high level of self-endorsement is positively correlated to the satisfaction of needs for competence and relatedness (Chirkov et al., 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000b, 2011; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005), which promotes psychological growth and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For instance, Levesque et al. (2004) used SDT to investigate German and American university students' perceptions of autonomy and competence in their studies, finding that students in both educational settings reported high levels of perceived autonomy with self-endorsement functioning and competence. Students also reported a low level of social pressures and high levels of well-being during their undergraduate programs.

## Teacher autonomy

Teacher autonomy refers to "freedom from control by others over professional action or development" (Smith, 2001, p. 3). This concept has been extensively used to examine teacher autonomy in teaching and other institutional duties (McGrath, 2000; Pearson & Hall, 1993; Short, 1994; Strong & Yoshida, 2014; Tahirsylaj, 2019). Such freedom can be found in teachers' capacities to make their own choices or to determine their work processes (Blase & Kirby, 2000). However, Wermke and Höstfält (2014) argued that teacher autonomy might not be equivalent to the freedom or absence of external constraints because teaching is framed within the school contexts and the national rules and regulations. It seems infeasible to allow teachers' complete freedom to act or to make their own decisions. Wermke and Höstfält (2014) suggested that research on teacher autonomy should focus on various aspects of teacher autonomy, for example the extent to which teachers feel having extended or restricted autonomy in their teaching as well as in dealing with institutional-related issues. In other words, teacher autonomy in part depends on the autonomy-supportive contexts that teachers were provided. These concepts of teacher autonomy correspond to the satisfaction and frustration of teachers' need for autonomy within SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It can be suggested that teachers' perception of extended autonomy coincides with their perceived satisfaction of need for autonomy. In contrast, teachers' feeling restricted in making decisions for their professional responsibilities could be a source of frustration of teachers' need for autonomy.

The literature of teacher autonomy commonly focuses upon the extent to which teachers can exercise their control and decision-making over four distinct dimensions, including teaching and assessment, classroom management, professional development, and school functioning (Wermke et al., 2019; Wilches, 2007). It has been widely recognised in different educational contexts that teachers enjoy greater autonomy dealing with classroom issues but report little or no involvement in curriculum development and administrative issues, for example planning and developing curriculum, scheduling, task allocation and resource distribution (Fleming, 1998; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2020; Nguyen & Walkinshaw, 2018; Öztürk, 2011; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Siuty et al., 2016; Wermke et al., 2019; Yan, 2012). So far, however, there has been little discussion about individual differences in teachers' perceptions of extended or restricted autonomy at either classroom or beyond classroom levels. Do teachers always report unfavourable perceptions and negative reactions towards restrictions of their autonomy at work? This question might be answered by the self-determination theory, which conceptualises the need for autonomy as the level of self-endorsement rather than feeling being in control or having the capacity to act independently.

## The present study

### The Vietnamese higher education context

Research on teachers' autonomy in English language teaching at the higher education level in Vietnam is still limited. Recent research conducted by Nguyen and Walkinshaw (2018)

found that Vietnamese EFL teachers reported a high level of classroom-based autonomy, including freedom in organising their lesson plans and teaching methods, dealing with student-related issues within the classroom, setting learning spaces, scheduling teaching timetables, and designing learning assessments. However, teachers indicated that their broader institutional autonomy was limited. For example, teachers had to follow a strict curriculum and use mandated teaching materials without making any contribution or changes to these resources. The findings of Nguyen and Walkinshaw's study are not surprising, because teachers' lack of autonomy and involvement in departmental decision-making is commonly reported in the literature (Fleming, 1998; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2020; Nguyen & Walkinshaw, 2018; Öztürk, 2011; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Siuty et al., 2016; Wermke et al., 2019; Yan, 2012) and in a high-power distance context like Vietnam (Truong, Hallinger & Sanga, 2017).

The Confucian norms of social order and high power distance have a profound impact on the social structures and education system of Vietnam (McHale, 2002). In a high power-distance culture, the power is distributed unequally and decisions are often made by the superiors (Hofstede, 2001). Subordinates also show their respect to the authority by being obedient and following superiors' decisions without any doubt. Most importantly, individuals in high power distance society accept the inequality of power distribution with personal conviction rather than feeling coerced to do so. Subordinates also demonstrate a high level of trust and support to their superiors (Chen & Aryee, 2007) and "tend to perceive that they are heavily dependent on the authority" (Wei et al., 2017, p. 14). In the Vietnamese educational context, power is held by school leaders who have the ultimate right to make decisions at both macro and micro levels (Hallinger & Truong, 2016; Hoang & Truong, 2016; Truong & Hallinger, 2017). School leaders not only report high expectations of their subordinates' obedience, but they sometimes also use their position of power "to impose their will or viewpoints on staff to move in a particular direction" (Truong & Hallinger, 2017, p. 10).

With the influence of high-power distance culture, it is supposed that Vietnamese university EFL teachers have little opportunity to make decisions on their teaching responsibilities. However, it is still not well understood whether teachers' lack of freedom or autonomy in departmental decision-making does make teachers feel compelled and frustrated concerning their need for autonomy.

## Method

This paper is part of a larger project examining Vietnamese university EFL teachers' motivation. Drawing on self-determination theory, the project aims to explore teachers' motivation to teach English as a foreign language at the tertiary level in Vietnam, teachers' basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and their need satisfaction. Data reported in this paper were drawn from the interview data collected for the larger project. This paper focuses on examining Vietnamese EFL teachers' sense of autonomy regarding the selection of courses to teach at their universities.

The current study employed a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews as the data collection instrument. Regarded as the "favoured digging tool" of social study (Benney & Hughes, 1956, p. 137), the interview allows researchers to collect rich and robust data, yielding a profound understanding of teachers' freedom in EFL teaching at the tertiary level in Vietnam and their thoughts and feelings of that freedom, researchers will be able to describe and demonstrate these complicated phenomenon clearly and plainly (Brown, 2014). Moreover, the semi-structured interview is suitable for the exploratory purposes of the current study as issues related to teacher autonomy in the Vietnamese higher education context have not been dealt with in depth.

## Participants

Data was gathered from in-depth interviews with 20 EFL teachers from 11 universities across Vietnam. The participating teachers were selected based on their availability and accessibility. Teachers' English language teaching experience ranged from 2 to 37 years. More than half of the participating teachers were working in metropolitan areas (60%). The number of teachers working for private universities was slightly higher than those working for public universities (55% and 45% respectively). Only six of the participating teachers were teaching both English for special purposes (ESP) and general English (GE) courses, 14 teachers were teaching ESP courses only. To preserve individual participants' anonymity, their names were changed to pseudonyms.

## Data collection and analysis

Data collection occurred during October to December 2018. After getting permission from the 11 universities, resident EFL teachers were contacted via email to invite them to participate in the study. Teachers indicating a willingness to participate in the study were approached to schedule interviewing times and venues. The interviews took place in meeting or seminar rooms of the institutions where the participants were working. The first researcher had also conducted privacy and safety checks to ensure that participants felt confident and comfortable during the interviews. All interviews were conducted in-person and in Vietnamese – the mother tongue of participants. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher first explained the purposes of the study, the interview process, teachers' rights, benefits, and risks when participating in the study, how interview data would be stored and used, and the confidentiality of teachers and their responses. Teachers were also notified that their responses would be audio recorded and teachers could withdraw their participation at any time. Teachers who agreed to participate were asked to sign a consent form before the interview commenced.

The six-step thematic analysis method suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse interview data. First, the interviews were transcribed and translated from Vietnamese into English by the researcher, who holds a Bachelor's degree in English Language. Before open coding, the participating teachers were invited to review the interview transcript and double-check the accuracy of the data. Then, *NVivo* software

version 10 was used to generate initial codes and identify the main themes of data. Three themes related to Vietnamese university EFL teacher's types of autonomy emerged. These themes were generated on the basis on teachers' perceptions of their control and decision-making over course selection.

## Results

All teachers in the current study indicated that they were not given an opportunity to select which courses they would teach. Rather, their leaders and course coordinators allocated courses to teachers. Nearly half of the teachers (n = 9) commented that they were not intellectually engaged with the courses that they were required to teach. In other words, these teachers did not have a desire to make a decision of course(s) that they would teach. Tu explained: "Course allocation is part of the job's requirement. We are paid to do the job so we should feel happy with whatever we were assigned." Course allocation was beyond teachers' control as Lan commented, "I don't care about course assignment. It's not my business." When asked about their perceptions of the course allocation process, these teachers showed a high level of trust in the authority.

> About it … when he [the dean] assigned the teaching courses, … I believed he did consider carefully who was the best fit for that course according to their teaching competence. It means he considered the expertise and competence of each teacher and then assigned the most suitable course to him or her. (Hoa)

At some universities, although teachers could not choose which courses they would teach, course coordinators consulted with them about whether or not they agreed with the courses allocated to them prior to the official implementation (n = 6). This enquiry enhanced teachers' need for authority, and also satisfied their need for relatedness:

> The course coordinator assigns the courses to teachers. However, prior to a new semester, she emails teachers to inform them of courses we are going to teach. She often asks if we are happy with the assigned courses and the timetable. She knows the expertise, competence, strength and weakness of each teacher, so she does a very good job. (Thanh)

A small number of teachers (n = 3) demonstrated a lukewarm attitude to the allocation of the courses. Here is an example of Hoa's response:

> Researcher: How do you feel about the courses you have been assigned this semester?
> Teacher: They were acceptable.
> Researcher: What do you mean by "acceptable"?
> Teacher: Errrrr …. Not too bad, but they are not my cup of tea. But it doesn't mean that I oppose the allocation. I still can do well in my teaching. They are just not my favourite subjects.

Hai, whose ELT experience was under five years, indicated that because he was a newcomer, he should not make any suggestions and should not make any decisions about his duties.

> I don't like these courses at all. […] There is no rule that junior teachers are not allowed to make decisions about their work. But there exists a social norm in our minds that 'we should not say no' [when being assigned some tasks]. No matter what my boss assigns, I will obediently follow. If I say that 'it [the course] does not fit me or I don't like it', everyone [colleagues] will have preconceptions about me.

Some teachers (n = 8) expressed a clear dissatisfaction with the courses that they were required to teach. Here is an example of teachers' negative perceptions of courses they were allocated:

> No one at my faculty can choose courses to teach. Course coordinators assign courses to teachers and schedule teaching tables. But they do not always do a good job. I have a Bachelor's degree in Business English, but they [course coordinators] required me to teach Advanced Linguistics. I did not have that course in my undergraduate study. I was shocked and worried when I knew that I was going to teach that course. I don't understand why they assigned it [Advanced Linguistics course] to me. (Long)

An disclosed her resentment about course allocation. Problems with allocation influenced her needs for competence. She had to teach courses for which she lacked competence and interest. Although she raised her demands to the Dean, he did not listen and respond her concerns and this was upsetting. The inappropriate task allocation resulted in this teacher's lack of faith in the university leadership:

> I have been teaching the same courses for two years because no one in my faculty could teach these courses. All of them are not in my area of expertise. I am not allowed to teach courses that I'm good at. I'm so irritated. I did tell my dean that 'it shouldn't happen like that. I'd like to teach courses which support my professional and personal development. Since I have worked here, you only assigned me to teach general English. I'm not happy with that'. But he did not listen to me. He assigns courses to teachers without asking us for our opinions and feelings. He supposed that we could do well with these courses, so he gave them to us. But it's his perceptions, not ours. He should have listened to us to understand our interests, competence, and expectations. My university is employing a controlling management style. (Thuy)

## Discussion

All teachers in the current study reported that they were not allowed to choose the courses they would teach. Rather, administrators or course coordinators would assign courses to teachers. This finding reflects the influence of collectivist cultures, Confucian philosophy, and the characteristics of Soviet leadership system on the 'high-power distance' and 'top-down' approach and management of Vietnamese higher education (Hallinger & Truong, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2017; Tran, 2012). Vietnamese university teachers are expected to follow the decisions and task allocations made by school leaders (Truong Hallinger & Sanga, 2017).

If autonomy is defined as acting and making decision independently without any external forces or references (Goossens, 2006; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz, 2006), it can be argued that Vietnamese EFL university teachers have no autonomy in deciding their

work. However, using a self-determination theory as a theoretical framework, the study found that constraints in deciding courses to teach did not prevent the fulfilment of need for autonomy, for some teachers. As proposed by Ryan and Deci (2006), freedom to make a choice is not equivalent to full autonomy. An individual with an allocated task might feel autonomous so long as he or she wholeheartedly endorses that task. Accordingly, teachers could be *autonomously dependent* if they preferred being assigned tasks by leaders instead of making decisions by themselves (Ryan & Deci, 2006).

Concerning the first research question, nearly half of thge teachers in the current study reported that they did not have a desire to select courses to teach by themselves. They believed that course allocation should be done by their leaders rather than by themselves. These teachers shared a similarity in that they showed high levels of support and trust in the leadership. For example, Lan and Tu did not feel coerced or anger when they were not allowed to choose the courses they would teach. Instead, these teachers believed that the course coordinator who had extensive experience in teaching and managing would make better decisions than they could. This finding accords with that of Chen et al. (2013) who recently found that Chinese adolescents were willing to follow their parents' decisions or leave the decision-making to their parents because they trusted and valued their parents' involvement.

Although many teachers did not oppose the course allocation made by their leaders, their sense of autonomy might be higher if they were provided opportunities to make a decision whether leaving course selection for others or choosing courses to teach by themselves. These teachers were as regarded as *semi-autonomous dependence* as they did not report a high level of self-endorsement. Hoa commented, the courses she was allocated were "acceptable". Though this teacher did not fully self-endorse with the assigned task, she chose to conform with the authority's demand instead of complaining or opposing. Conformity in this situation not only helps to show the teacher's respect to the authority (Triandis et al., 1988; Truong, 2013) but also helps to maintain harmonious social relationships and avoid work conflicts (Le, 2014). However, some of the teachers had other reasons to conform. It is the situation of Hai who conformed because of the external pressure he felt from the social norm that the junior should be obedient and follow the senior (Englehart, 2000; Triandis et al., 1988). Teachers in this situation do not seem to show strong support for the authority's decision the way fully autonomous dependent teachers did. These analyses suggest that independent decisions with low levels of self-endorsement and high levels of external pressures can diminish the satisfaction of teachers' need for autonomy (Chen et al., 2013).

On the other hand, some teachers expressed disappointment and resentment about the course selections determined by their leaders. They were categorised as *heteronomous dependent* teachers (Chirkov et al., 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Xiang & Liu, 2018). Unlike the *autonomous dependent* teachers, these teachers did not value the decisions made by their superiors and would have preferred to be able to make these decisions themselves. As Thuy noted, she understood that her Dean assigned courses to teachers based on his observation and understanding of teachers' expertise and strength. However, she argued that his perceptions might be biased in favour of some teachers. This finding is line with

previous findings on educational leadership and management in the Vietnamese context, that is "teachers are reluctant to offer input into school decisions or challenge decisions made by their leaders" (Hallinger & Truong, 2014, p. 454). However, teachers emphasised that they should be involved or consulted before teaching and departmental decisions made. The reason behind teachers' negative emotional reactions to inappropriate course allocation might not be due to their limited autonomy in deciding their job. Rather, teachers were angry and upset because the courses they were required to teach might threaten their sense of effectiveness in teaching. Teaching unfamiliar or uninteresting courses might cause teachers more challenges in teaching and prevent teachers achieving teaching and learning objectives (Woolfolk et al., 1990; Zee & Koomen, 2016).

As some of the interview data presented here show, lack of self-endorsement in top-down assigned tasks might cause teachers negative emotional reactions. According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), teachers' lack of self-endorsement with assigned task can be caused by the frustration of their need for competence – desire to teach courses that teachers are expert at. It is supposed that if allocated courses aligned with teachers' interest and competence, they would not experience the disagreement and disappointment with their superiors. In other words, if teachers' desires and expectations were taken into consideration before task allocation, they might become more autonomously dependent.

Turning briefly to research question 2, the findings of the current study lend support to the importance of differentiating the concept of autonomy in SDT from the experience of dependence or interdependence (Chirkov et al., 2003; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Ryan and Deci (2017) argued that autonomy in SDT is not conceptualised as independence, separateness, and self-sufficiency. Rather, it concerns "the extent to which people experience their behaviour as volitional or fully self-endorsed, rather than being coerced, compelled, or seduced by forces external to the self" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 97). Consistent with this definition, the current study provides evidence that the extent to which teachers' need for autonomy was satisfied depended on teachers' approval or endorsement of the task(s) they were required to complete (Chirkov et al., 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2006, 2017). Teachers who found that the courses they were allocated to teach aligned with their interests and teaching competence were more likely to feel autonomous and support the task decisions of their leaders (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The study also lends support to Self-determination theory that the frustration of need for autonomy negative affects teachers' well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

## Conclusion

This paper investigates the concept of teacher autonomy in the Vietnamese higher education context. Working in a high power distance culture (Hallinger & Truong, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2017; Tran, 2012), it might be supposed that Vietnamese university EFL teachers would be autonomously dependent and obedient to authority (Truong et al., 2017). However, the study showed that teachers could be either *autonomously, semi-autonomously* or *heteronomously dependent*. It can be suggested that Vietnamese teachers are perhaps becoming more aware of workplace democracy and freedom to raise their voices.

Findings of the current study also show further evidence that autonomy is not only a Western concept (e.g., Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1968; Mahler, 1972; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz, 2006), but also important in the East or in collectivist contexts (e.g. Chirkov, 2009; Jang et al., 2010; Muller & Louw, 2004; Nalipay et al., 2020; Roth et al., 2007; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005; Vlachopoulos et al., 2013; Yamauchi & Tanaka, 1998). In short, teacher autonomy in the university sector of Vietnam is not entirely MIA. However, it should be noted that both cultural differences and individual differences can shape the construct of teacher autonomy and the way teachers feel satisfied with their autonomy. The study found that some teachers might prefer following their leaders' decisions rather than making a decision by themselves.

The current study's findings reinforce and further contribute to SDT by confirming the associations between teachers' self-endorsement for interdependent decisions and their perceived satisfaction of need for autonomy and well-being (Chen et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The alignment between teachers' competence and courses that teachers were required to teach was found to determine the extent of teachers' self-endorsement (Chirkov et al., 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2006, 2017). The current study also supports the application of basic psychological needs and SDT to examine teachers' autonomy in general education area and in particular Vietnamese educational context. The conceptualisation of autonomy as self-endorsement has been proven to be more useful and applicable when being used to examine Vietnamese university EFL teachers. Particularly, it corresponds well with cultural values of collectivism.

The current study's findings indicate that teachers might have reported different needs and interests related to their desire of autonomy and the fulfilment of their need for autonomy. Therefore, school leaders and administrators should provide each teacher with an appropriate, autonomy-supportive motivating style. To promote teacher autonomy, it is not necessary to provide teachers with complete freedom from external control and the capacity to act entirely independently. Rather, leaders should provide teachers with opportunities to raise their voices and expectations before the decisions related to teachers' tasks and duties are made. By doing so, teachers' senses of involvement and contribution to their task assignment will be improved. Teachers' trust and support to the leaderships will be promoted consequently. Besides, teacher reflective practice (Korucu-Kis & Demir, 2019) is likely be useful in improving teachers' sense of autonomy and emancipation in English language teaching. Reflective practice provides teachers with opportunities to make decisions about their instructional process, to self-observe, self-analyse, and self-assess their performance and other teachers' instructional practice (Farrel, 2004).

Given the prominent role of teacher autonomy as a determinant of teachers' attitudes, motivation and behaviours, more research in this area is sorely needed – ideally involving larger participant samples representing different cultural and educational contexts. Due to the limited scope of the current study, it was not possible to explore other kinds of constraints upon teachers' autonomy when teaching EFL at the higher education level in Vietnam. Further work should focus on investigating teacher autonomy in dealing with teaching-related issues, solving student-related issues, pursuing professional development

through avenues such as postgraduate study or short professional workshops, and selecting research activities.

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## Appendix A: Interview questions

1. Do you have the freedom to choose your own courses?
2. If yes, please tell me more about your course selection.
3. If no, who made the decision related to course selection? How do you feel about the restriction in choosing your own courses?

## Appendix B: Interview questions (Vietnamese version)

1. Thầy/cô có quyền tự do lựa chọn khóa học để giảng dạy hay không?
2. Nếu có, xin vui lòng cho biết thêm về sự tự chủ của thầy/cô trong việc lựa chọn khóa học để giảng dạy.
3. Nếu không, ai là người đưa ra quyết định liên quan đến việc lựa chọn khóa học để giảng dạy của thầy/cô? Thầy/cô cảm nhận thế nào về sự hạn chế trong việc lựa chọn các khóa học để giảng dạy?

### Disclosure statement

**Ethics approval**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), the University of Newcastle, Australia. The approval number is H-2018-0185.

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