Teachers' Perspectives and Strategies in Enhancing Learner Autonomy and Empathy in Vietnamese Tertiary EFL Education

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This qualitative study investigates the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to enhance learner autonomy and empathy, within the evolving landscape of Vietnam's education system. The research focuses on a purposively selected group of nine teachers from two institutions, representing various stages of teaching careers: novice, mid-career, and near-end career. Employing semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, the study delves into the teachers' pedagogical practices and experiences. Thematic analysis, underpinned by constructivist and humanistic educational theories, was used to interpret the data. The findings reveal several key strategies: fostering empathy through collaborative learning, utilizing reflective practices, integrating cultural awareness in language learning, encouraging student-led learning, emphasizing interactive communication activities, and incorporating technology for empathetic engagement. These strategies reflect a blend of constructivist and humanistic approaches, tailored to the specific cultural and educational context of Vietnam. The study contributes to the field by providing insights into the adaptation of teaching methods in non-Western contexts, highlighting the importance of contextually relevant practices in language education. It underscores the significance of fostering empathy and autonomy in EFL learners, suggesting a shift towards more holistic, student-centered learning approaches.

Keywords: empathy, learner autonomy, perspectives, strategies, Vietnamese tertiary EFL education

INTRODUCTION

The quest to nurture learner autonomy in language education, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), remains a prominent theme in educational research (Little et al., 2003; Han, 2020). Previous studies have highlighted various approaches to fostering learner autonomy, such as promoting self-regulated learning and enhancing metacognitive strategies (Benson, 2013; Holec, 1996; Yaşar & Atay, 2023). Despite these advancements, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these approaches can be integrated with the development of socio-emotional skills like empathy in EFL contexts. This study narrows its focus to a specific yet vital aspect of learner autonomy: the development of empathy in learners. It specifically examines the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers to foster this crucial skill. Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is integral to effective communication (Meyers et al., 2019). It extends beyond mere linguistic prowess, touching upon the socio-emotional facets of language learning (Leightin et al., 2018). In EFL settings, empathy is especially critical as it aids learners in grasping diverse cultural nuances and perspectives, thereby enriching their language learning experience (Calloway-Thomas, 2010).

This study is set against the backdrop of the Vietnamese tertiary education system, which has been experiencing significant transformations. These changes include a shift towards more student-centered teaching approaches (Le, 2016). However, despite the growing recognition of learner autonomy and empathy in educational discussions, research specifically focused on Vietnamese EFL teachers' methods to foster these competencies remains scarce. Although the importance of developing learner autonomy and empathy is increasingly acknowledged in educational discussions, there is limited research on how Vietnamese EFL teachers in tertiary education foster these competencies.

Focusing on two primary research questions, this study seeks to elucidate:

1. What strategies do Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers employ to enhance learner autonomy in empathy?
2. How do these strategies aid in cultivating empathetic understanding among EFL learners?

By exploring these questions, the research aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on instructional methods that promote empathy in language education. Understanding these strategies is essential for equipping learners with not only the linguistic skills but also the emotional and intercultural competencies required for effective global communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner Autonomy in Language Education

Learner autonomy, a concept popularized by Holec (1996), is fundamentally about giving learners more control over their learning process. Benson (2013) expanded this to include not only the capacity to make decisions about learning but also taking responsibility for those decisions. In the realm of language education, autonomy is seen as crucial for effective and lifelong learning. Little et al. (2003) and Han (2020) highlighted its importance in fostering a more engaged and reflective learning experience. Research in various EFL contexts has shown positive correlations between learner autonomy and language proficiency (Jianfeng et al., 2018; Phuong & Vo, 2019; Yen et al., 2023).

Empathy in Language Learning

Empathy in language learning extends beyond linguistic competence to encompass an understanding of others' emotions and perspectives. Mayer et al. (2004) defined empathy as a multi-dimensional construct involving emotional and cognitive elements. In the EFL context, empathy is particularly crucial as it helps learners navigate cultural differences and nuances in language (Baker, 2019). Studies by Jiang and Wang (2018) and Oxford (2015) suggest that empathy can enhance communication skills and cultural awareness in language learners.

Teaching Strategies for Enhancing Learner Autonomy and Empathy

Several pedagogical strategies have been identified as effective in promoting learner autonomy and empathy. Collaborative learning (Casale et al., 2018; Damon & Phelps, 1989), problem-based learning (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Zappile et al., 2017), and reflective practices (Dewey, 2022) are among the strategies that encourage learners to take charge of their learning and develop empathetic understanding. These approaches involve learners in active decision-making, critical thinking, and perspective-taking, which are essential for developing both autonomy and empathy.

Context of Vietnamese Tertiary EFL Education

The Vietnamese education system, particularly at the tertiary level, has been undergoing significant changes, with a shift towards more student-centered learning approaches (Nguyen, 2015). Despite this shift, traditional teacher-centered methods remain prevalent (Pham & Renshaw, 2015). Studies focusing on learner autonomy in Vietnam have highlighted challenges such as large class sizes, exam-

focused education, and cultural attitudes towards learning (Le, 2010; Vu & Burns, 2014). However, there is limited research specifically addressing how empathy is fostered in this context.

Empirical Studies on Learner Autonomy and Empathy in EFL Contexts

Empirical studies in various EFL contexts provide insights into effective strategies for fostering learner autonomy and empathy. For example, Iida (2011) in Japan and Al-Mahrooqi (2012) in Oman have explored the role of literature and storytelling in developing empathy. Meanwhile, studies by Nguyen (2013) in Vietnam have examined the use of technology and digital media in enhancing learner autonomy.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers in enhancing learner autonomy and empathy. The qualitative approach is chosen for its strength in providing in-depth insights into complex phenomena, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the teaching strategies and their implementation in the specific cultural and educational context of Vietnam.

This study is anchored in two primary theoretical frameworks that guide its exploration of teaching strategies in the Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. The first framework is based on constructivist theories of learning, which assert that learners actively construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. This approach to learning suggests that understanding is a process of internal construction, as learners actively engage with new ideas, integrating them with their existing knowledge. Central to this constructivist perspective is Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of social interaction and cultural context in the learning process. He posited that learning is deeply influenced by the society and culture in which an individual exists, and that social interaction is fundamental to the development of cognition. This aspect of Vygotsky's (1978) theory is particularly pertinent to this study as it aims to understand how Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers facilitate learning in a context that is socially and culturally distinct. It provides a lens through which to view and understand the strategies used by teachers in a setting where social norms, cultural values, and educational traditions play a crucial role.

Additionally, the study draws upon the principles of humanistic education, as proposed by Rogers (1965). Humanistic education is centered on the development of the whole person. It emphasizes the growth of emotional and empathic capacities alongside cognitive development. Rogers (1965) advocated for an education that respects the individuality of learners and focuses on their personal growth and self-actualization. In the context of this study, the humanistic approach provides a framework for understanding how empathy is nurtured in language education. It supports an investigation into teaching strategies that not only impart language skills but also foster emotional intelligence and empathetic understanding, which are essential for effective communication and cultural competence in a globalized world.

In summary, the combination of constructivist and humanistic educational theories forms a comprehensive theoretical foundation for this study. This dual framework facilitates a holistic investigation into the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers, examining how they not only impart language skills but also foster learner autonomy and empathy in a culturally rich educational setting.

Participants

The participants in this study comprised a purposively selected group of nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, drawn from two different tertiary education institutions in Vietnam. The selection criteria were based on a combination of teaching experience, willingness to participate, and representativeness of different career stages, ensuring a comprehensive overview of teaching strategies across varying levels of expertise. The participants included both male and female teachers, ranging in age from 25 to 55, ensuring a varied demographic representation. To protect their identities, pseudonyms have been assigned to each teacher. The selection was designed to encompass a range of teaching experiences, thereby providing a diverse perspective on the strategies employed in enhancing learner autonomy and empathy. This group was segmented into three distinct categories based on their professional experience: three novice teachers, who were in the early stages of their teaching careers; three mid-career teachers, who had a substantial amount of teaching experience but were not yet at the peak of their careers; and three near-end career teachers, who possessed extensive experience and were approaching the later stages of their professional lives. The novice teachers are referred to as Tuan, Lan, and Minh; the mid-career teachers as Ha, Binh, and Giang; and the near-end career teachers as An, Hue, and Phuong.

The selection process involved reaching out to several tertiary institutions and seeking recommendations from department heads for teachers who were known for their innovative teaching practices and willingness to engage in research. The final group of nine teachers was chosen to ensure a balanced representation across different career stages and to capture a wide range of teaching strategies. This stratification allowed for a comparative analysis of teaching strategies across different stages of a teaching career, offering insights into how experience might influence pedagogical approaches. The novice teachers provided fresh perspectives and potentially innovative approaches, the mid-career teachers offered insights grounded in a solid mix of experience and ongoing professional development, and the near-end career teachers contributed a depth of experience and a long-term view of changes and trends in EFL teaching.

In conducting research with human participants, ethical considerations were paramount. Prior to the commencement of the study, all participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, and the use of the data collected. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring that they were participating voluntarily and had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any adverse consequences. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process. The participants' identities were protected by assigning pseudonyms, and care was taken to ensure that any information that could potentially reveal their identity was not disclosed in any reports or publications. Moreover, sensitive information shared during interviews was handled with utmost discretion, ensuring that the privacy and dignity of the participants were respected.

Data Collection

The data for this study was primarily collected through semi-structured interviews, a method that allowed for both depth and flexibility in exploring the strategies used by Vietnamese EFL teachers to enhance learner autonomy and empathy. Before embarking on the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted with two EFL teachers who were not part of the main study. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the interview questions, ensuring their clarity and relevance, and to refine the interview protocol. Based on the feedback and observations from the pilot study, necessary revisions were made to the interview questions to better align them with the research objectives.

The revised interview questions focused on exploring the participants' experiences and strategies in promoting learner autonomy and empathy in their classrooms. Examples of these questions included: "Can you describe a particular strategy you use to encourage empathy among your students?" and "How do you adapt your teaching methods to foster learner autonomy in your classroom?" These questions were designed to elicit detailed responses about the teachers' pedagogical practices and their perceptions of the effectiveness of these practices.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, providing ample time for participants to share their experiences and insights in depth. The interviews were conducted in locations convenient for the participants, often in their offices or quiet meeting rooms within their institutions. This ensured a comfortable and private environment conducive to open and honest discussions.

Given the context of the study, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the native language of all participants. This choice was made to allow the participants to express themselves more freely and accurately. The use of Vietnamese also helped in capturing the nuances of the participants' experiences and perspectives, which might have been lost in translation if the interviews were conducted in English. For the purpose of analysis and reporting, the interview transcripts were translated into English. Professional translators proficient in both Vietnamese and English were employed to ensure the accuracy of the translations. Additionally, steps were taken to preserve the original meaning and context during the translation process.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data collected through the semi-structured interviews was conducted using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun et al., 2023). This approach allowed for a flexible yet detailed examination of the teachers' strategies in enhancing learner autonomy and empathy, as well as the contextual factors influencing these strategies.

The process of thematic analysis began with a thorough reading of the interview transcripts to gain an initial understanding of the data. This familiarization phase involved immersing in the details and nuances of the participants' responses, which was crucial for the subsequent stages of analysis. After this initial reading, the transcripts were reread and coded in a systematic manner. Coding involved identifying significant or interesting features of the data and collating these into potential themes. This process was both inductive and iterative, as it was guided by the data themselves rather than a preconceived framework, allowing themes to emerge organically from the teachers' narratives.

Once a comprehensive set of codes was established, the next step involved exploring and defining themes. This phase entailed sorting the different codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. It was a recursive process that involved constant moving back and forth between the entire data set, the coded extracts, and the developing themes, ensuring a coherent and consistent pattern.

After the themes were clearly defined and named, the final phase of analysis involved reviewing and refining them. This step ensured that each theme accurately reflected the meanings evident in the data set as a whole. The themes were then analyzed in relation to the research questions and the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. This involved interpreting the significance of the themes and discussing how they contribute to understanding the strategies used by Vietnamese EFL teachers to foster learner autonomy and empathy.

Throughout the data analysis process, a reflexive approach was maintained. Reflexivity involved being aware of and critically reflecting on the researchers' role and potential biases. This reflexivity ensured that the analysis was grounded in the participants' perspectives rather than the researchers' preconceptions.

FINDINGS

Fostering Empathy through Collaborative Learning

A significant theme that emerged from the data analysis was the strategy of fostering empathy among learners through collaborative learning activities. This theme was highlighted by all nine participants, with each group—novice, mid-career, and near-end career teachers—emphasizing its importance in their teaching practice.

Tuan, one of the novice teachers, described an activity where students worked in groups to analyze characters in English literature, discussing his emotions and motivations. The teacher noted, "In these discussions, students not only practice English but also learn to see the world from different perspectives. It is fascinating to see them empathize with characters who are culturally different." This approach aligns with constructivist theories of learning, as it illustrates how learners construct understanding through social interactions. The group discussions act as a platform for students to share and negotiate meanings, thereby enhancing their empathic skills. From a humanistic perspective, this activity supports the development of the whole person, as it nurtures emotional intelligence alongside language skills.

Binh, a mid-career teacher, shared an experience of using role-play activities, where students acted out scenarios involving cultural misunderstandings. The teacher reflected, "Role-play helps students 'step into the shoes' of others, which is essential for developing empathy, especially in a culturally diverse world." This method resonates with the constructivist view that learning is an active, contextual process where students learn by doing. In the context of empathy, role-playing facilitates experiential learning, as students actively engage in understanding different emotional and cultural viewpoints. In terms of humanistic education, this strategy aligns with the emphasis on experiential learning and personal growth, contributing to the holistic development of learners.

Phuong, a teacher nearing the end of her career, discussed using peer feedback sessions on language tasks. The teacher stated, "When students give feedback to each other, they learn to be kind and understand their peers' challenges. It is not just about language; it is about building a supportive community." This feedback mechanism is a practical application of the concept of social learning, where knowledge is co-constructed through interaction. It also reflects humanistic principles, as the emphasis is on empathy and mutual support, fostering a learning environment where emotional and social development is as valued as academic achievement.

Utilizing Reflective Practices to Foster Empathy and Autonomy

A prominent finding of this study was the use of reflective practices by teachers as a strategy to enhance both learner autonomy and empathy. This theme was recurrent in the responses of all nine participants, with each group—novice, mid-career, and near-end career teachers—acknowledging its significance in their teaching practice.

Minh, one of the novice teachers, described implementing reflective journals where students recorded their thoughts and feelings after language activities. The teacher remarked, "By reflecting on their experiences, students become more aware of their own and others' emotional states. This not only develops empathy but also encourages them to take charge of their learning process." This aligns with

constructivist theories that emphasize learning as an introspective process, where personal reflection leads to deeper understanding. From a humanistic standpoint, this practice supports the development of the whole person, aiding learners in connecting with their emotions and those of others.

Giang, a mid-career teacher, highlighted the role of peer reflection sessions. In these sessions, students discussed their experiences in language tasks, focusing on understanding different perspectives. The teacher noted, "These discussions help students to step into each other's shoes, fostering empathy. It also encourages them to be independent in evaluating their learning." This practice is reflective of the social constructivism, where learning is enhanced through social interactions. The peer reflection sessions also resonate with humanistic education principles, as they facilitate emotional and empathic growth alongside cognitive development.

Hue, a teacher nearing the end of her career, emphasized the importance of self-evaluation activities. She mentioned, "I ask students to assess their own progress in understanding and expressing emotions in English. This self-evaluation not only boosts their autonomy but also their empathic skills." Such activities draw on constructivist principles, where learners actively construct knowledge by assessing their own learning. In terms of humanistic education, self-evaluation fosters self-awareness and empathy, integral to personal growth and understanding others.

Integrating Cultural Awareness in Language Learning to Enhance Empathy

A key finding from the study was the integration of cultural awareness activities in language learning as a strategy to enhance empathy. This approach was underscored by all groups of teachers—novice, mid-career, and near-end career—each highlighting its importance in their teaching methodologies.

Lan, one novice teacher, shared her experience of incorporating cultural discussions and comparisons into language lessons. She said, "I encourage students to explore and discuss various cultural contexts in English. This not only improves their language skills but also helps them develop empathy towards different cultural perspectives." This method aligns with the constructivist theory, emphasizing learning as a contextual and interactive process where cultural understanding plays a key role. In terms of humanistic education, such activities acknowledge the diversity of students and foster an appreciation for different cultural backgrounds, which is essential for emotional and empathetic development.

Ha, a mid-career teacher, described using international news and events as discussion topics in class. She remarked, "Discussing global issues helps students to see the world beyond their immediate environment, building empathy and a sense of global citizenship." This approach reflects the constructivist idea of learning as a dynamic process influenced by real-world contexts. From a humanistic perspective, engaging with global issues cultivates a sense of empathy and connection with others, addressing the emotional and social dimensions of learning.

An, a near-end career teacher, highlighted the use of literature and films from different cultures in language teaching. He commented, "Through literature and films, students experience diverse emotional and cultural landscapes, which enhances their empathetic understanding." This strategy is grounded in the constructivist notion that learning involves constructing meaning through diverse experiences. In line with humanistic principles, exposure to different cultural narratives through literature and films nurtures a holistic understanding of the world, promoting both emotional intelligence and empathy.

Encouraging Student-Led Learning to Promote Empathy and Autonomy

The study revealed a notable theme centered on encouraging student-led learning as a strategy for enhancing both learner autonomy and empathy. This approach was recognized across the different experience levels of the participating teachers, with each group—novice, mid-career, and near-end career teachers—acknowledging its effectiveness in their educational practices.

Minh, one novice teacher, described implementing student-led discussions on various topics, where students not only chose the topics but also led the discussions. The teacher observed, "This approach empowers students to take control of their learning. As they explore topics of their interest, they also learn to understand and respect their peers' viewpoints, fostering empathy." This method resonates with the constructivist theory, which posits that learning is an active, self-driven process. From a humanistic standpoint, student-led discussions support the development of the whole person by nurturing interpersonal skills and empathic understanding alongside language proficiency.

Ha, a mid-career teacher, emphasized the use of project-based learning, where students worked in groups to complete projects on topics that interested them. The teacher explained, "Project-based learning not only develops language skills but also encourages students to collaborate and understand each other's perspectives, which is crucial for building empathy." This practice aligns with the social constructivism, emphasizing the importance of social interactions in the learning process. Furthermore, in line with humanistic education principles, project-based learning facilitates personal growth and emotional intelligence through collaborative experiences.

Hue, a teacher nearing the end of her career, spoke about the importance of student autonomy in choosing their own learning materials, such as articles or videos. She stated, "When students choose materials that resonate with them, they engage more deeply, not just linguistically but also emotionally, which enhances their empathetic skills." This approach is consistent with constructivist theories, as it involves students in constructing their own learning experiences. From a humanistic education perspective, allowing students to choose their materials respects their individuality and supports their emotional and empathic development.

Emphasizing Interactive Communication Activities to Develop Empathy

An important finding from this study was the emphasis on interactive communication activities by teachers as a means to develop empathy in learners. This strategy was highlighted across all experience levels of teachers—novice, mid-career, and near-end career—underscoring its perceived effectiveness in the Vietnamese tertiary EFL context.

Tuan, a novice teacher, discussed using role-plays and simulations in the classroom to foster empathy. He explained, "Role-plays allow students to inhabit different characters and situations, helping them understand diverse perspectives and emotions." This approach is in line with constructivist theories, which emphasize experiential learning as a key to knowledge construction. From a humanistic perspective, role-plays offer a pathway to emotional and empathetic engagement, crucial for the development of the whole person.

Giang, a mid-career teacher, described the use of group discussions on sensitive and diverse topics. The teacher noted, "In these discussions, students learn to express themselves and also to listen and empathize with others' viewpoints." This practice aligns with the social constructivism, highlighting the role of social interaction in learning. It also resonates with humanistic principles, as it fosters a learning environment where emotional intelligence and empathy are as important as linguistic proficiency.

Phuong, a near-end career teacher, focused on the use of storytelling and sharing personal experiences in class. She mentioned, "Storytelling encourages students to share and reflect on their own and others' experiences, building a deeper understanding and empathy." This method integrates the constructivist view of learning as a process of making personal connections with content. Additionally, in terms of humanistic education, storytelling and personal sharing nurture a sense of community and mutual understanding, key elements in emotional and empathic development.

Incorporating Technology to Facilitate Empathetic Engagement

A notable theme that emerged from the interviews was the incorporation of technology as a strategy to facilitate empathetic engagement among learners. This approach was observed across the experiences of novice, mid-career, and near-end career teachers, each emphasizing its relevance and effectiveness in contemporary EFL teaching.

Tuan, one of the novice teachers, highlighted the use of social media platforms for cross-cultural exchanges. He shared, "By connecting with students from different parts of the world via social media, our students engage in meaningful conversations, gaining insights into diverse life experiences and perspectives, which fosters empathy." This strategy aligns with constructivist theories that emphasize learning through real-world connections and interactions. From a humanistic education standpoint, these cross-cultural exchanges offer opportunities for emotional and empathic growth, crucial for understanding and appreciating global diversity.

Binh, a mid-career teacher, discussed the use of digital storytelling tools, where students created and shared stories about their personal experiences or cultural backgrounds. The teacher said, "Digital storytelling not only enhances their language skills but also allows students to express and understand emotions, fostering empathetic connections." This method resonates with the constructivist approach of learning through personal and shared narratives. It also aligns with humanistic principles, as it encourages self-expression and emotional understanding, integral to the holistic development of learners.

An, a teacher with extensive experience, emphasized the role of online collaborative projects. He explained, "In these projects, students work together with peers from different cultures on a common task, which enhances their ability to empathize with diverse viewpoints." This approach is consistent with the social constructivism, where collaboration and interaction are key to learning. Additionally, the use of technology for collaborative projects reflects humanistic education ideals, promoting empathy and intercultural understanding through shared learning experiences.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the existing literature on strategies employed by teachers to enhance learner autonomy and empathy, particularly in the context of Vietnamese tertiary EFL education. The themes identified not only align with but also extend previous research, highlighting unique aspects pertinent to the Vietnamese context.

The emphasis on collaborative learning activities as a means to develop empathy among learners echoes findings from previous studies (e.g., Casale et al., 2018; Damon & Phelps, 1989; Wahyuddin et al., 2022). However, the current study adds a nuanced understanding by illustrating how Vietnamese EFL teachers adapt these activities to their specific cultural and educational context. Unlike previous research, which often focuses on collaborative learning in more general terms (e.g., Casale et al., 2018; Damon & Phelps, 1989), this study provides detailed insights into how such activities are tailored to foster both language skills and empathetic understanding, especially in a non-Western setting.

While the use of reflective practices aligns with the recommendations of educational theorists like Dewey (2022) and Vygotsky (1978), this study offers a unique contribution by demonstrating how Vietnamese teachers implement these practices in EFL settings. The emphasis on peer reflection and self-evaluation activities, as observed in this study, provides a deeper understanding of how reflective practices can be effectively used to develop both empathy and autonomy, a connection that has been less explored in previous studies.

Previous research has established the importance of cultural awareness in language learning (Baker, 2019; Oxford, 2015), but this study extends this understanding by showcasing how Vietnamese teachers integrate cultural awareness in unique ways, such as through the use of international news, literature, and films. This finding highlights the role of cultural content in developing empathy, an aspect that has received limited attention in earlier studies, especially in the context of Asian EFL learning environments.

While student-led learning is a well-established concept in educational theory (e.g., Pastini & Lilasari, 2023), the current study sheds light on its specific applications in the Vietnamese EFL context. The strategies described by the participants, such as project-based learning and student choice in learning materials, differ from the more traditional approaches often documented in Western contexts (e.g., Agudelo & Vasco, 2019; Collier, 2017). This provides new insights into how student-led learning can be adapted to different cultural and educational settings to foster empathy and autonomy.

The focus on interactive communication activities, including role-plays, group discussions, and storytelling, aligns with constructivist and humanistic approaches. However, the current study contributes to the field by detailing how these activities are specifically employed in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context, which has not been extensively explored in previous research (e.g., Fu et al., 2013; Weizheng, 2019). This highlights the adaptability of these strategies in different cultural settings and their effectiveness in developing empathy among learners.

While the use of technology in language learning is a growing area of interest (Chun et al., 2016; Zhou & Wei, 2018), this study uniquely explores how Vietnamese EFL teachers utilize technology to foster empathetic engagement. The emphasis on social media platforms, digital storytelling tools, and online collaborative projects provides fresh perspectives on the role of technology in enhancing empathy, a dimension that is underrepresented in existing literature.

CONCLUSION

This study embarked on an exploration of the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers to enhance learner autonomy and empathy, a relatively under-researched area in the field of language education. Set against the backdrop of Vietnam's evolving educational landscape, with a growing emphasis on student-centered learning, this research aimed to uncover the pedagogical practices that foster these crucial skills in EFL learners.

Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilized semi-structured interviews with nine Vietnamese EFL teachers across different stages of their careers: novice, mid-career, and near-end career. These interviews were designed to delve into the teachers' experiences and strategies, offering rich, nuanced insights into their teaching practices. The data collected were analyzed through thematic analysis, guided by constructivist and humanistic theoretical frameworks, providing a comprehensive understanding of the teaching strategies and their underpinning philosophies.

The findings revealed several key strategies: fostering empathy through collaborative learning, utilizing reflective practices to enhance empathy and autonomy, integrating cultural awareness in language learning, encouraging student-led learning, emphasizing interactive communication

activities, and incorporating technology for empathetic engagement. These strategies not only align with constructivist and humanistic educational theories but also demonstrate innovative adaptations in the Vietnamese context.

The implications of this study are multifaceted. Firstly, it provides practical insights for EFL teachers, particularly in similar cultural and educational contexts, on how to effectively integrate empathy and learner autonomy into their teaching practices. The study underscores the importance of adapting teaching methods to suit specific learning environments and cultural settings. Secondly, it contributes to the academic discourse on language education, offering evidence of how empathy and autonomy can be fostered in non-Western contexts, thereby broadening the scope of existing literature. Finally, the study has implications for policymakers and curriculum designers, highlighting the need for educational reforms that support and encourage such pedagogical practices. It suggests a move towards more holistic, student-centered learning approaches that value emotional intelligence and cultural understanding alongside language proficiency.

In summary, this study sheds light on the innovative and culturally responsive strategies used by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers to develop learner autonomy and empathy. It contributes valuable insights to the field of language education, emphasizing the importance of contextually relevant teaching practices and the role of empathy and autonomy in effective language learning. The findings and implications of this study offer a foundation for further research and practice in similar educational contexts, aiming to enrich the learning experiences of EFL students worldwide.

LIMITATIONS

This study, while providing valuable insights into the strategies used by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers to enhance learner autonomy and empathy, has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size of nine teachers, although diverse in terms of their career stages, is relatively small and limited to two educational institutions in Vietnam. This restricts the generalizability of the findings to a wider population of EFL teachers in Vietnam or other similar contexts. Additionally, the study's reliance on qualitative interviews, while offering depth in understanding individual perspectives, may not capture the full range of teaching practices and experiences across the broader teaching community. Another limitation is the potential influence of cultural and social desirability biases, where participants might have provided responses they perceived as favorable or expected in their cultural and professional context. Lastly, the study did not incorporate the perspectives of learners, which are crucial in understanding the effectiveness of the teaching strategies from the recipients' viewpoint.

In light of these limitations, several recommendations for future research are proposed. Future studies could expand the sample size and include teachers from a wider range of institutions across different regions of Vietnam, which would enhance the diversity and representativeness of the findings. Incorporating quantitative methods, such as surveys or experimental designs, could provide additional data to support and complement the qualitative findings, offering a more comprehensive view of the teaching strategies used. Further research could also explore the learners' perspectives, providing valuable insights into how these strategies impact their learning experience and development of empathy and autonomy. Another avenue for future research is to investigate the long-term effects of these teaching strategies on learners' language proficiency and socio-emotional skills. Lastly, comparative studies involving teachers from different cultural or educational contexts could provide a broader understanding of how contextual factors influence the adoption and effectiveness of various teaching strategies in promoting learner autonomy and empathy in EFL settings.

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