

Implementing a Portfolio-based Learner Autonomy Development Model in an EFL Writing Course

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy is believed to play a leading role in life-long learning; as a result, a myriad of studies have been conducted to discover tools to promote learner autonomy (e.g., blogs, Facebook, web 2.0, learning contracts, etc.). Nevertheless, the effects of a portfolio on promoting learner autonomy have not been explored much. This paper endeavored to investigate whether or not learner autonomy was developed with the implementation of the portfolio-based learner autonomy development (PLAD) model in an EFL writing course. Regarding research methodology, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from a questionnaire with closed-ended and open-ended items and reflection logs kept in portfolios. For data analysis, the quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and inferential statistics, whereas qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis. The findings showed the development of learner autonomy after the course in which a portfolio was employed as a learning tool. In particular, the participants were aware of learner autonomy and felt positive about autonomous learning tasks, especially writing reflection. Self-assessment, however, was the most challenging task which they encountered because of lack of confidence and experience. In addition, it was evident that the participants could choose learning materials when they were offered freedom and rights to do this task.

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Introduction

Within language education in Asian contexts, aspects of learner autonomy have been exclusively studied and gradually applied in education systems (e.g., Duong and Seepho, 2014; Finch, 2004; Lee, 2008; Mineishi, 2010; Sakai, Takagi and Chu, 2005). In the context of Vietnam, however, Grammar-Translation method, Direct method, and Audio-Lingual method have dominated the national education system for a long time. In foreign language education, in particular, these teaching methods so-called the traditional methods or teacher-centered teaching methods have been commonly used. That is, the teacher is supposed to be a knowledge provider, a leader, a feedback giver, an evaluator, or even an authoritarian in a classroom, whereas students are expected to be good listeners and imitators. Consequently, EFL Vietnamese students have not taken opportunities to gain communicative purposes in the target language. Inevitably, autonomous learning cannot be promoted in such a language learning and teaching context since students have no rights to make decisions about their learning. Similarly, Lee (2008) points out, “promoting autonomy seems to be often overlooked or considered an afterthought in English education in an EFL context although it is of vital importance since there is little exposure to the target language” (p. 106).

In order to foster learner autonomy, hence, tools for the management of language learning process should be developed and used in tandem with training methods. A portfolio has been explored in a variety of studies as either a learning and/or assessment tool in language education. It is believed that a portfolio can “provide a tangible way of making sense of past and present experiences, putting learning in context, and capturing and displaying the learning that has taken place” (Jone and Shelton, 2011, p. 5). More importantly, a portfolio is identified as a powerful educational tool that helps students develop self-directed learning in which learners are able to monitor their own progress (O’Malley and Pierce, 1996). Accordingly, this paper focuses predominantly on constructing and implementing a model for promoting learner autonomy through a portfolio in an EFL writing class. With the aim to achieve the research objective, the following research question was formulated.

1. Does the PLAD model help to develop learner autonomy? If so, how? If not, why?

Theoretical background

Given the earlier-mentioned focus of the paper, the definition of learner autonomy and the description of the portfolio-based learner autonomy development (PLAD) model are provided in this section.

The concept of learner autonomy originated from the 1960s, and its importance toward language learning has been confirmed in a great number of studies due to positive results such as providing learners with freedom and excitement in learning and enabling learners to self-direct their learning. It is not easy to give a specific definition of learner autonomy, though. Learner autonomy is referred to as an ability to manage learning process independently and actively (Rivers and Golonka, 2009), and it is associated with a sense of responsibility (Dickinson, 1987; Macaro, 1997; Scharle and Szabó, 2000). Meanwhile, Benson (2001) argues that the self-management ability and a sense of responsibility are two of three elements of the nature of autonomy, namely learning management, cognitive process, and learning content as he defines learner autonomy as “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (p. 47). Learning content is separately discussed as a third vital element in autonomous learning since it is believed that if a learner can control learning methods but not learning content, they may fail to be a fully autonomous learner. Because of its sufficiency and generality, Benson’s (2001) definition is viewed as an operational definition for the paper.

The PLAD model applied in an EFL writing class is adapted from a conceptual model of self-regulated learning in a context of portfolio assessment by Lam (2013) and Huitt’s (2003) model of teaching/learning process. Lam’s (2013) conceptual model is composed of nine steps, namely introducing portfolio tasks, possessing knowledge and willingness, setting learning goals, choosing composing strategies, conducting self-assessment, self-monitoring their progress, providing internal feedback, providing external feedback, and conducting delayed evaluation. With reference to teaching/learning process, Huitt (2003) proposes a model consisting of four components: context (i.e., all factors outside the classroom which may influence the teaching and learning), input (i.e., what learners and teachers bring into classroom process), classroom process (i.e., the teacher’s and learners’ behavior in a classroom), and output (i.e., measures of learners’ learning).

In addition to the adaptation of the aforementioned models, the PLAD model is supplemented with other components of learner autonomy such as creating a study plan and selecting learning materials. In order for readers to get more understanding of the model, its specific steps are described below (see Figure 1). It is important to note that the arrows reflect the process of this model from the first step, ‘portfolio tasks,’ to the last step, ‘summative evaluation’. The double arrows refer to the interrelation between self-monitoring and other processes through learners’ internal feedback.

(1) Portfolio tasks

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

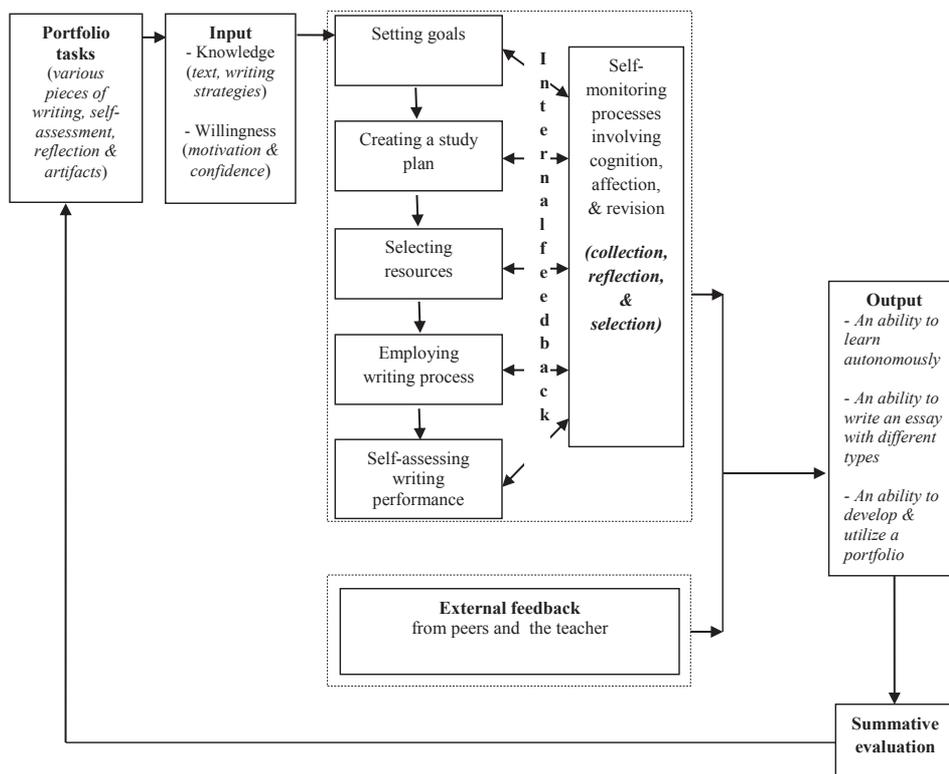


Figure 1. The portfolio-based learner autonomy development (PLAD) model in an EFL writing course

(2) Input

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

(3) Setting goals

There are two types of learning goals set by learners: long-term and short-term. The long-term goals address what learners expect to achieve throughout the writing course, whereas the short-term goals focus on what they expect to achieve in each unit. Specifically, learners first analyze their

language needs and choose writing strategies that they desire to employ in their writing tasks. They then set their long-term goals to see the overall picture of what they were going to achieve after the course. Finally, they set the short-term goals for each unit.

(4) Creating a study plan

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

(5) Selecting learning materials

Apart from the textbook, learners are encouraged to explore other resources and freely choose materials supporting their writing tasks with the following steps. Learners first decide the purpose of a writing task. Then they look for materials with the teacher's guide from various sources such as the Internet, newspapers, academic writing, grammar references, dictionaries and so on. Lastly, they work in pair or group to share the information they find out and discuss some points they intend to practice in the writing task.

(6) Employing writing process

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

(7) Self-assessing writing performance

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

(8) Self-monitoring learning process

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

(9) External feedback from peers/teacher

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

(10) Output

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

(11) Summative evaluation

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

Methodology

Research setting

This research project was undertaken at Faculty of Foreign Languages (FFL) of Nong Lam University (NLU), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. English majors are required to take three general writing courses (e.g., Writing I, Writing II, and Writing III) in the first three semesters before an IELTS-oriented writing course. Writing III was selected for this study as its focus was academic essays in which it was hoped that learners had plenty of opportunity to perform tasks related to autonomous learning and writing skill. The textbook of this course is "Effective Academic Writing 2", written by Savage and Mayer (2005) and published by Oxford University Press. Five units of this book were covered in this 15-week course.

Participants

Thirty-five second-year English majors at FFL-NLU were selected to be the participants by using convenience sampling method. That is, the researcher randomly chose one class that was arranged by the online registration system. Of the thirty-five participants, there were seven males (20%) and twenty-eight females (80%).

Research instruments

There were two instruments employed in this study: reflection logs and questionnaire. First, students were expected to write reflection on their learning achievements after each unit with suggested questions like *'How did I do?'*, *'What did I learn?'*, *'What was great?'*, *'What can I do better next week?'* and put them in the portfolio. Second, the questionnaire included two parts: Part I involved the participants' demographics; part II focused on the participants' perceptions of their autonomous learning tasks (e.g., setting learning goals, creating a study plan, choosing materials, self-assessing their writing, and reflecting on their own learning) in terms of knowledge, awareness, and skills before and after the course. In general, both closed-ended items designed in a five-point Likert scale (*1 = not at all, 2 = not much, 3 = so-so, 4 = much, 5 = very much*) and open-ended items were included in the questionnaire.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the instruments, inter-rater reliability and cross-check needed to be established to reduce the personal bias. The participants' mother tongue (Vietnamese), furthermore, was used for both instruments to avoid any language barriers. Also, the reliability of the questionnaire, quantitatively calculated by Cronbach, was .87, i.e., the reliability of the questionnaire was ensured.

Data collection and analysis

This study was mixed-methods research, thus qualitative and quantitative data were collected from the reflection logs in the portfolios and the questionnaire with both closed-ended and open-ended items. As for data collection, all the participants' portfolios containing the reflection logs were collected for assessment in the last week (week 15), and the questionnaire was conducted for ten minutes in class and collected in the fourteenth week.

For data analysis, the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire with closed-ended items were analyzed through descriptive statistics (e.g., mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (e.g., paired samples t-test). Meanwhile, the qualitative data generated from the reflection logs in

the portfolios and the questionnaire with open-ended items were analyzed through content analysis. Specifically, the raw data were first read and reread and put in Excel files. Then they were coded and recoded until major categories were created. It is noted that the participants' reflection portfolios were labeled from SP1 to SP35, and the respondents who answered the questionnaire were labeled from SQ1 to SQ35.

Results

Learner autonomy development

To deal with the research question concerning whether or not learner autonomy was developed with the use of a portfolio in an EFL writing class, the data generated from the questionnaire and reflection logs kept in the participants' portfolios are analyzed as follows.

As illustrated in Table 1, the participants' knowledge, awareness, and skills of learner autonomy were developed after the portfolio-based writing course in respect of mean scores. It is necessarily confirmed that the closed-ended questions were designed with a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 2 = not much, 3 = average, 4 = much, 5 = very much). Statistically, the average mean scores of knowledge, awareness, and skills obtained after the course ($\bar{X}=3.21$, $\bar{X}=3.41$, $\bar{X}=3.29$, respectively) were, in general, considerably higher than those obtained before the course ($\bar{X}=2.07$, $\bar{X}=2.10$, $\bar{X}=1.97$, respectively), of which those of the dimension of awareness were highest of all both before and after the course. Regarding items of these dimensions, 'writing reflection' was the highest rated task in all three dimensions. The mean scores of the participants' knowledge, awareness, and skills of 'writing reflection' were $\bar{X}=3.7$, $\bar{X}=3.9$, $\bar{X}=3.6$, respectively which were up to level '4' (*much*). In brief, it was evident that there was an increase in mean scores of the three dimensions after the course compared to those before the course. It can be inferred that the participants felt confident to do autonomous learning tasks, especially writing reflection.

Table 1 Paired Samples T-test of Knowledge, Awareness, and Skills of Learner Autonomy

| | Item | <i>p</i> | Before the course | | After the course | |
|-----------|------------------------------------|----------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| | | | Mean | Standard deviation | Mean | Standard deviation |
| Knowledge | Setting learning goals | .000 | 2.40 | .91 | 3.37 | .65 |
| | Creating a study plan | .000 | 1.89 | .63 | 3.20 | .87 |
| | Choosing learning materials | .000 | 1.74 | .62 | 2.88 | .91 |
| | Self-assessing writing performance | .000 | 1.80 | .72 | 2.94 | .80 |
| | Writing reflection | .000 | 2.54 | 1.14 | 3.66 | .83 |
| | Total | .000 | 2.07 | .48 | 3.21 | .57 |
| Awareness | Setting learning goals | .000 | 2.34 | 1.11 | 3.63 | .77 |
| | Creating a study plan | .000 | 1.83 | .85 | 3.11 | .90 |
| | Choosing learning materials | .000 | 1.83 | .57 | 3.17 | .92 |
| | Self-assessing writing performance | .000 | 1.97 | .82 | 3.20 | .83 |
| | Writing reflection | .000 | 2.46 | 1.07 | 3.91 | .89 |
| | Total | .000 | 2.10 | .63 | 3.41 | .63 |
| Skills | Setting learning goals | .000 | 2.00 | .84 | 3.34 | .73 |
| | Creating a study plan | .000 | 1.83 | .71 | 3.31 | .72 |
| | Choosing learning materials | .000 | 1.89 | .72 | 3.20 | .83 |
| | Self-assessing writing performance | .000 | 1.83 | .57 | 3.00 | .80 |
| | Writing reflection | .000 | 2.29 | .89 | 3.57 | .78 |
| | Total | .000 | 1.97 | .47 | 3.29 | .51 |

Note. $p \leq .05$

It can be also seen in Table 1, there was a significant difference in terms of *knowledge, awareness, and skills* of learner autonomy between before and after the course. Specifically, *p*-values of the three dimensions ($p = .000$) were smaller than .001 (i.e., level of significance). Evidently, the participants' autonomous learning was sharply enhanced after the course inasmuch as their perceptions of three dimensions of learner autonomy after the course were significantly different from those before the course.

Although three dimensions of *knowledge*, *awareness*, and *skills* of learner autonomy had the same highest rated task, writing reflection, the three dimensions varied in the lowest rated tasks. As can be observed in Figures 2, 3 and 4, *knowledge* of choosing learning materials ($\bar{X} = 1.74$, $\bar{X} = 2.88$, respectively), *awareness* of creating a study plan ($\bar{X} = 1.83$, $\bar{X} = 3.11$, respectively) and *skills* of self-assessment ($\bar{X} = 1.83$, $\bar{X} = 3.00$, respectively) were the lowest rated tasks both before and after the course. In short, the lowest rated tasks were varied in these dimensions. This may imply that a participant who is not good at a particular task can be good at others or vice versa.

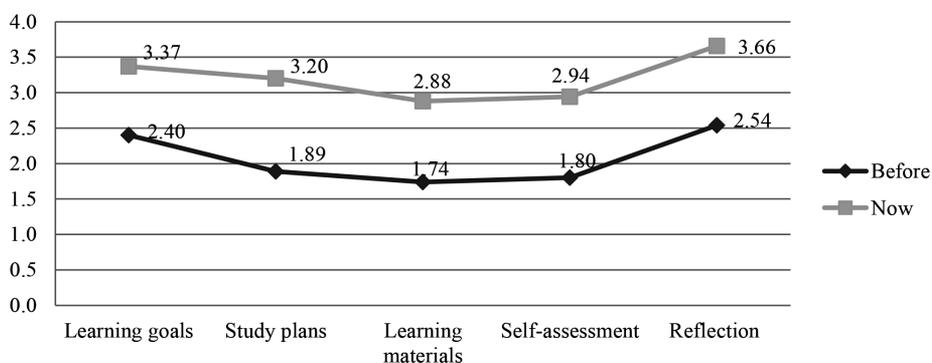


Figure 2. Knowledge of learner autonomy

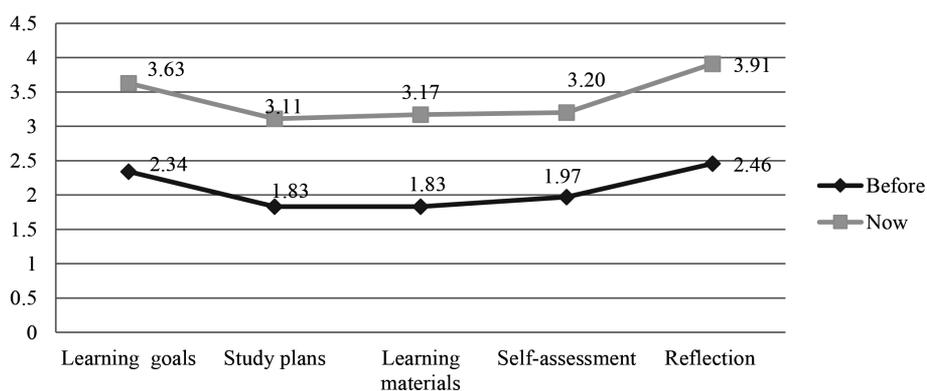


Figure 3. Awareness of learner autonomy

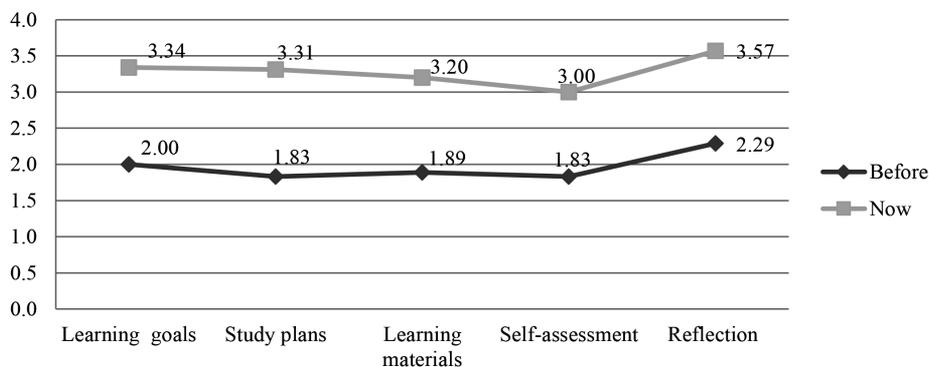


Figure 4. Skills of learner autonomy

Further, qualitative data gathered from the questionnaire with open-ended items and the reflection logs provided some possible justification for the increase. Most of the participants made a comparison between the previous and current learning. They admitted that they previously focused most on grades and knowledge that teachers provided them as SQ30 stated, “[w]hen I was young, I learned lessons that were provided by teachers by heart...”.

On the contrary, the participants’ knowledge, awareness, and skills of learner autonomy were considerably raised after the writing course. Specifically, they paid more attention to their own learning than before and was currently able to set learning goals, to create a study plan, to choose learning materials, to assess their writing, and to reflect on their learning. The majority of participants first found it useful for themselves to set learning goals suitable for their ability which motivated their learning process. Then they were able to create a proper study plan in which they could choose suitable materials to achieve the learning goals. Concerning learning materials, apart from the textbook, the participants looked for different sources such as online learning environment (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Google, VOA, CNN, etc.), offline learning environment (e.g., library, newspapers, reference books, CDs, etc.), and/or human resource (e.g., seniors, friends, teachers, foreigners, etc.). However, the participants in the current study had to strictly follow the content of the course book as scheduled. In other words, they had to spend considerable time covering the obligatory content rather than looking for other materials of their own choice. Besides, unfavorable learning conditions (e.g., no Internet access in class, uncomfortable classrooms, limited reference books, lack of a self-access center, and strict regulations in respect of checking out books) were seen as one of the constraints that contributed

to the failure of participants being able to learn autonomously. As for self-assessment, it seems that the participants' awareness of autonomous learning was considerably raised. SQ22 admitted, for example, "I absolutely believed in teacher assessment before, but now I realize that self-assessment is important".

In essence, it was qualitatively shown that there was a sharp distinction in one of the most outstanding autonomous learning tasks, 'writing reflection', between before and after the course despite the fact that the respondents had never done it before the course. They previously exposed the truth that they had never reflected on their own learning to evaluate their learning process until this writing course. Indeed, the participants were able to reflect on what they gained at their convenience (every week, every two weeks, or every month) compared to predetermined goals. The findings collected from the participants' reflection showed gradual development. Except for a minority of the participants who cursorily reflected on their achievements by some single words like "good", "done", or "incomplete", most of them reflected on their learning achievements seriously after each unit. For example, one of the three learning goals that SP24 set for the first week was learning seventy new words for IELTS in a week (i.e., ten words per day). Her strategy was to learn them by heart by writing them down over and over again. After a week, she reflected on her learning and realized that she could memorize twenty out of seventy new words. She also jotted down the reason that she procrastinated because of laziness. She then suggested the solution for the following week that she ought to be stricter with herself and even punished herself by not hanging out with friends on the weekend.

In sum, the findings presented a remarkable improvement in learner autonomy that the participants achieved after the 15-week writing course. In particular, the participants could set their learning goals and time, identify specific learning methods to achieve the goals, self-assess their writing performance, and most importantly reflect on their learning process.

Discussion

The influence of the PLAD model on learner autonomy development

The discussion on learner autonomy development with the use of the PLAD model is based on the comparison with Benson's (2001) definition which includes three aspects: (1) learning management, (2) cognitive processes, and (3) learning content. To become an autonomous learner, according to Benson, a learner needs to possess self-management skills, cognitive processes, and learning content. The findings of the current study demonstrated that the most outstanding issues (e.g., writing reflection, awareness of learner autonomy) are concerned with the aspect of cognitive processes, whereas the

most challenging issue (e.g., self-assessment) is related to the aspect of learning management. Concerning the aspect of learning content (e.g., choosing learning materials), the findings indicated that the participants could do this task, yet there remained some unavoidable limitations (e.g., fixed school curriculum, time limit, and limited learning resources) which hindered them from mastering this.

Awareness of learner autonomy

The increase of awareness of learner autonomy after the course is seen as an interesting finding in this study. Among three dimensions of *knowledge*, *awareness*, and *skills* of learner autonomy, in particular, the result showed that the dimension of *awareness* was most increased. In fact, they were aware that they should do autonomous learning tasks to be proactive in learning through the use of a portfolio. More importantly, it was determined that learning was their responsibility not the teacher's, which was different from what they had previously believed before they attended this writing course. In this respect, Nunan (1997) pinpoints that awareness is the first of five levels of implementation of learner autonomy. This means that if a learner wishes to be an autonomous learner, s/he first needs to be aware of what and how s/he is going to learn. In a similar vein, Benson (2001) asserts that conscious direction is the beginning of control over learning. This is inferred that the participants were willing to learn autonomously, which results in the development of autonomous learning skills in a portfolio-based writing class.

In comparison with the previous studies in relation with learners' awareness of learner autonomy, the findings discovered from previous studies (e.g., Balçıkkanlı, 2010; Finch, 2004; Haseborg, 2012) were similar to that of the current study. Particularly, the student participants' positive attitudes or great awareness of autonomous learning was performed by positive behaviors. For example, Finch (2004) concluded that the learning attitudes of Korean students positively changed because of the use of reflective and interactive learning journal in the non-threatening, student-centered learning environment. As a result, their confidence, motivation, responsibility, and independence were increased, which was believed to be long-lasting and self-directed.

In this study, additionally, learner attitudes or awareness of autonomous learning may be positively correlated with responsibility. This result was found in some research projects (e.g., Hobrom, 2004; Ismail and Yusof, 2012; Mineishi, 2010; Sakai, Takagi and Chu, 2005). The results of these studies indicated that the participants (e.g., students and/or teachers) were willing and able to take responsibility for their own learning. It is interpreted that the development of learner responsibility

may help promote levels of autonomy because several researchers (Dickinson, 1987; Macaro, 1997; Nunan, 1997; Scharle and Szabó, 2000) assert that learner responsibility is closely interrelated with learner autonomy.

Writing reflection: The most outstanding task

In addition to increased awareness of learner autonomy, writing reflection was recognized as the most developed task of all. Statistically, among five autonomous learning tasks (e.g., setting learning goals, creating a study plan, selecting learning materials, conducting self-assessment, and writing reflection), the mean scores of writing reflection was the highest ranked task in terms of *knowledge*, *awareness*, and *skills* after the course. This means that the participants acknowledged the benefits of writing reflection in autonomous learning and believed that they were able to reflect on their learning achievement best of all, although writing reflection had not previously been perceived and experienced as a learning task. It can be explained that the positive finding was due to the fact that the participants could self-evaluate their learning process and achievements, compare the achievements with the predetermined study plans, and make some suggestions for improvements by writing reflection after each unit and kept it in portfolios as “reflection is often associated with the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one’s (language) learning as a process and product” (Schwienborst, 2009, p. 93). Regarding the relationship between reflection and a portfolio, additionally, reflection in which learners can monitor their own progress and take responsibility for their learning to achieve the predetermined goals is one of the most essential components of a portfolio (O’Malley and Pierce, 1996). Hence, it may be concluded that the participants became autonomous learners because they were able to monitor and evaluate their learning process through writing reflection.

Choosing learning materials based on learners’ decisions

Learning content is in association with social interaction, i.e., learners are supposed to have rights to make decisions about their learning content and make connections between the content of in-class learning and the world (society) as researchers or teachers (Benson, 2001; Nunan, 1997); thus, learning content is regarded as one of the three key aspects of learner autonomy. In another aspect, other researchers (e.g., Littlewood, 1997; Rivers and Golonka, 2009; Scharle and Szabó, 2000) are more likely to focus on decision-making ability regarding management and organization of learning and/or strategies to be autonomous than learning content, i.e., learning content is viewed as a minor factor in the definition of learner autonomy. Throughout the course, the participants had a lot more freedom to

choose learning materials appropriate for their writing than before. Indeed, they equipped themselves with the necessary information on how and what to search for. More importantly, according to several participants, looking for materials and choosing suitable ones to put in portfolios was identified as a vital task that helped to support their writing. In practice, as reported earlier, the participants were able to find and choose materials from different sources like online and offline learning environment and/or human resource. This result was also discovered in some studies (e.g., Duong and Seepho, 2014; Haseborg, 2012; Luke, 2006). This can be inferred that the participants would be willingly responsible for what they learned if they were given enough rights to make decisions on learning content. As revealed by the participants, freedom to make choice of learning materials offered them more motivation and eagerness to take responsibility for their own learning because learners themselves know what they want to learn (Nunan, 1996, 1997).

Due to some unavoidable limitations (e.g., fixed school curriculum, time limit, limited learning resources, etc.), however, the participants were not really given the necessary rights to make decisions about their learning content. In case of interest in various materials, moreover, learning resources in this context such as curriculum-fixed textbook, limited reference books, lack of a self-access center were not really fruitful for the participants

Self-assessment

In this paper, self-assessment was conducted as formative assessment, i.e., it referred to self-grading writing performance using the writing assessment rubric during the course. In this respect, it was assumed that the participants noticed their strengths as well as weaknesses associated with their writing ability and determined how good their writing pieces were. It was because self-assessment was identified to benefit learners, such as taking responsibility for their own learning, encouraging learners to do their best work, helping learners to set realistic goals on their achievements, promoting learners becoming lifetime learners. However, it is alien to some English language learners, especially EFL learners (Gottlieb, 2006). Similar to this position, some participants of this study admitted that they were unable to self-assess their writing pieces as well as the teacher because of lack of confidence in their writing ability and unfamiliarity with self-grading their own writing pieces. In line with this finding, the result showing that teacher assessment was assumed to totally or mostly replace self-assessment was found in some previous studies (e.g., Haseborg, 2012; Sakai, Takagi and Chu, 2005; Yildirim, 2012). For example, learners themselves felt doubtful about their assessment ability when they were provided an opportunity to self-assess their learning performance (e.g., Sakai, Takagi

and Chu, 2005; Yıldırım, 2012). Instead of self-assessment, they asked for in-class tests or quizzes in which the teacher would be responsible for grading and giving feedback (Haseborg, 2012).

Conclusion

There was a considerable increase in the participants' autonomous learning after the 15-week writing course. Learner autonomy development, in particular, was discussed based on Benson's (2001) definition of learner autonomy. Interestingly, the findings indicated the highest rated issues (e.g., writing reflection and awareness of learner autonomy) related to the aspect of cognitive processes and the lowest rated issue (e.g., self-assessing writing performance) concerning the aspect of learning management. In addition, the aspect of learning content (e.g., choosing learning materials) was considered to be a debatable issue in this study because there were some unavoidable limitations, although it is believed to benefit autonomous learners. In order to apply the PLAD model in an EFL writing course effectively, EFL teachers should be prepared to create a suitable learning environment. First, they should try to provide a pressure-free learning environment in which EFL learners feel free to interact with their teacher. In terms of personality, therefore, an EFL teacher should be friendly, enthusiastic, and considerate. In respect of their teaching practice, it is recommended that EFL teachers should react positively to learners' mistakes or misunderstandings, i.e., they should try not to demotivate learners, and an EFL teacher ought not to put much pressure on learners, especially with regard to the giving of grades. Last but not least, freedom to make decisions about their own learning needs to be offered to EFL learners. With reference to further research, it is recommended that the PLAD model should be conducted in different EFL contexts to compare and contrast with the results of this study.

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