

## EFL Teachers' Perception on Students' Learner Autonomy in the Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum

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**Abstract:** Learner autonomy is essential in encouraging the students become responsible for their own learning. However, teacher's roles is still crucial to introduce the students to the concept of autonomous learning as well as to promote strategies to foster learner autonomy. Merdeka Belajar curriculum provides concepts that are in line with learner autonomy. Therefore, it is essential to conduct a study of learner autonomy as perceived and experienced by EFL teachers in Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. The purpose of this study is to investigate the teachers' perceptions of the concept of learner autonomy and to find out the strategies used by the EFL teacher to foster learner autonomy. This qualitative study was conducted in senior high school in Surakarta and its surroundings that used Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. The data in this study were collected through questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The teachers pointed out that students should be involved in decisions about their learning. Furthermore, teachers perceive quite/very desirable to involve students in several decisions dealing with teaching and learning process. The result of this study show that the teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy are positive. It is proved that the teachers offer strategies in order to promote students' learner autonomy.

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**Keywords:** Learner Autonomy, EFL Teachers, Teachers' Perceptions, Merdeka Belajar

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### A. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy is described in a variety of ways. (Fredholm et al., 2015) characterizes autonomy as the capacity to require the charge of own learning. Thus, (Benson, 2011), autonomy is "the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one's own learning". Moreover, the autonomous learner might take responsibility by setting their own goals, planning practice opportunities, or assessing their learning progress. Thus, an autonomous learner is a person who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions. Learner autonomy in language teaching and learning has been an important emphasis since language learning process requires the active involvement of the learners itself. The language learning of autonomous learner is thought to be more effective (Benson, 2011) because they are able to convey the learning efficiently and independently outside the classroom and are able to apply classroom knowledge and skills to their independent learning.

Learners should take on many of the responsibilities that have normally been viewed as the teacher's role, such as setting the objectives of learning and determining the learning

methods and evaluating knowledge acquisition (Littlewood, 1999). Furthermore, it is believed that increasing the level of learner control will increase the level of self-determination, hereby it will increase the overall motivation in the learner autonomy development.

On the other hand, the role of teacher in learning process is also seen as one of key factor in developing the autonomy. In order to encourage autonomous learner, teachers themselves have to show a level of autonomy in their ways to deal with teaching and learning (Benson, 2011). Learner autonomy can be supported by teachers' minimizing the evaluative pressure and any sense of coercion in the classroom, as well as by maximizing students' perceptions of having a voice and choice in the academic activities (Al Asmari, 2013). Moreover, fostering learner autonomy necessitates the creation of a learning community for students rather than the teacher ceasing to instruct, which would disrupt their learning (Little, 2004). Additionally, teacher autonomy is necessary for learner autonomy. In fact, teachers cannot expect their students to develop autonomy if they do not understand what and how to be autonomy is.

Since an increasing number of practitioners contribute to research on learner autonomy, the study of autonomy is still in its infancy (Benson, 2011). However, research on teachers' perceptions or beliefs regarding promoting learner autonomy is relatively recent development. It is essential to comprehend teacher's perception of learner autonomy when investigating the topic of learner autonomy, because teacher's perception can influence their practices and, consequently, the opportunities of learning learners take (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Teachers believe that learner autonomy provides learners opportunities and freedom to make choices and decisions dealing with their learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). In teachers' belief, learner autonomy implies that students can make a choice about how and what sorts of things they will learn. However, teachers must simultaneously learn to overcome their own fears about giving up some control of the classroom and improve their communication skills with their students in order to foster learner autonomy.

Moreover, the concept of learner autonomy is aligned as a manifestation of the recent curriculum in Indonesia published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture's new education policy, *Merdeka Belajar*, or independent learning. It emphasizes the freedom of teachers and students to select and implement learning strategies (Mira Marisa, 2021). Teachers are encouraged to be more innovative and make use of technology in their online classrooms as a result of the adaptability that comes with distance education. As a result, learner autonomy is deemed essential. Learner autonomy is defined as the capacity to assume responsibility for one's learning, learner autonomy is expected to encourage in the teaching and learning process, especially in this ongoing circumstance since teachers show their understudies in distance learning (Melvina et al., 2023). The principles in the *Merdeka Curriculum* include contextual learning, student-centered learning, future-oriented learning, and learning based on students' abilities and needs in the *Pancasila Student Profile*. These principles require students to take more control and responsibility for their learning process. In line with curriculum development, the teacher's role in encouraging student independence is very important because learner autonomy doesn't mean learning without teacher.

Since the Ministry of Education and Culture published newest curriculum '*Merdeka Belajar*' which supports autonomy development requires teacher to encourage students to be

autonomous learner. Teachers are expected to develop the learner autonomy regardless of their teaching context may challenge the English teachers itself. However, since developing learner autonomy in EFL context is a complex business, teachers as the main facilitator may not be fully prepared to promote learner autonomy. Therefore, the writers were interested to study what EFL teachers' perception on learner autonomy in Merdeka Belajar Curriculum and its challenges that appeared in promoting learner autonomy.

## **B. METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to answer the research questions. A qualitative case study design is used for this research for several reasons. First, it aimed to identify the teachers' belief of learner autonomy and teachers' perception of students' learner autonomy in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Second, it placed what strategies used by teachers to foster learner autonomy in classrooms. The six EFL teachers who teach in different school and level of students in Surakarta and its surroundings were invited as research participants. They filled out the questionnaire. The data collection, including questionnaire distribution and open-ended questions, was conducted from 15 - 19 January 2024.

This study used a questionnaire adapted from (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012) which include Likert-scale items, which focused on English teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. Based on the data gathered from the teachers' questionnaire, open-ended questions were held to explore more on teachers' beliefs in learner autonomy and what teachers' strategies to foster students' learner autonomy in classrooms. At the data analysis stage, the data from the questionnaire were analysed quantitatively by using descriptive statistics to calculate the frequency and the percentage of the data distribution.

## **C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Participants**

The respondents in this study were various since the teachers came from different gender, age, level of education and teaching experiences. The respondents constituted six EFL teachers working at senior high schools in Surakarta and its surroundings. The respondents consisted of three female and three male EFL teachers, five teachers had Bachelor' and one teacher a Master. Experience in teaching EFL varied from three years or less to over 15 years.

### **2. Questionnaire of Teachers' Perception**

Based on the questionnaire data, it can be obtained the summary of participants' responses. The result of the teachers' perceptions on learner autonomy are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Highest percentage of agreement with the questionnaire statements

Statements	Percentage of Agreement (SA+A)
Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do.	100,0
Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials	100,0
To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	100,0
Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.	100,0
Learner-centered classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy.	100,0
Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.	100,0
Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy.	83,3
Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	83,3
Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.	83,3
Learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would.	83,3
Learner autonomy can be achieved by learners of all cultural backgrounds.	83,3
Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other	83,3
Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy.	83,3
Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.	83,3
Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner.	83,3
Language learners of all ages can develop learner autonomy	83,3
Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners.	83,3
Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.	83,3
It is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults.	83,3
The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.	83,3
Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.	66,7
Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms.	66,7
Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching	66,7

Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.	66,7
Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access center.	66,7
Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.	66,7
Promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners.	66,7
Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy.	66,7
The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy.	66,7

The main finding that could be showed from Table 1 was the respondents tended to view learner autonomy positively. All participants agreed on the six items. They agreed on the chance on choosing kind of learning activity, learners choosing their own material, learners are involved in making decisions about the learning, learner-centered classrooms, and the learners' ability and motivation.

Additionally, most of the participants (83,7%) agreed on 14 items. They agreed on the ability of learners to be independent in study in library, to make choices about the learning strategies and to monitor one's learning. The participants also viewed learner autonomy as positive factor in fostering successful language learning. Likewise, learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively and the otherwise. Their positive responses also reflected that learner autonomy can be fostered for all cultural backgrounds and all ages. Also it can be promoted through individuals or co-operative work activities which provide learner opportunities to learn from each other and through outside the classroom. Confidence and motivation are considered key factors in developing learner autonomy. The percentage indicated the respondents tended to view that students with high confidence and motivation were more likely to develop learner autonomy than those with low self-confidence and motivation.

Furthermore, there were 66,7% of the respondents agreed on nine items. The opportunities for learner to complete their tasks alone and out-of-class tasks which use internet were considered effective in developing learner autonomy. Likewise, independent or group work activities and the opportunity for learner to decide their assessment instrument. Learner autonomy tended to view to be promoted easier with beginning language learners. Therefore, teachers' role was also considered as essential factors in enhancing learner autonomy. However, teacher-centered classroom and traditional teacher-led ways of teaching were considered unable in developing learner autonomy.

**Table 2.** Highest percentage of disagreement with the questionnaire item

Statements	Percentage of Disagreement (D+SD)
Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher.	83,3
Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher	83,3
Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher.	66,7
The proficiency of a language learner does not affect their ability to develop autonomy.	66,7

As can be drawn from Table 2, 83,7% of the responses showed that LA does not require total independence of the teacher. Although, developing LA means learning with teacher, 66,7% of the respondents considered that LA can be developed without teachers' help. The proficiency of language learner is considered as one factor that affected in fostering LA (66,7%). The items in Table 3 seemed to be controversial among participants since they gained equal percentage of agreement/disagreement.

**Table 3.** Equal percentage of agreement/ disagreement

Statement	Percentage of agreement	Percentage of disagreement
Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners.	50,0	50,0
It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners.	50,0	50,0
Learner autonomy is a concept which is not suited to non-Western learners.	50,0	50,0
Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy.	50,0	50,0

Regarding the desirability and feasibility of developing LA, teachers' perceptions are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Desirability and Feasibility

	Desirability				Feasibility			
	Undesirable	Slightly Desirable	Quite Desirable	Very Desirable	Unfeasible	Slightly Feasible	Quite Feasible	Very Feasible
Learner are involved in the decision about:								
The objectives of a course	16,7	16,7	16,7	50,0	16,7	33,3	33,3	16,7
The materials used	16,7	16,7	50,0	16,7	50	16,7	16,7	16,7
The kinds of tasks and activities they do	16,7	16,7	50,0	16,7	16,7	16,7	16,7	50
The decision about the topics discussed	16,7	16,7	33,3	33,3	16,7	16,7	33,3	33,3

How learning is assessed	16,7	16,7	50,0	16,7	50	16,7	16,7	16,7
The teaching methods used	16,7	33,3	33,3	16,7	33,3	33,3	16,7	16,7
Classroom management	16,7	50,0	16,7	16,7	50	16,7	16,7	16,7
Learner have the ability to:								
Identify their own needs	16,7	16,7	33,3	33,3	50	16,7	16,7	16,7
Identify their own strengths	16,7	16,7	16,7	50,0	33,3	33,3	16,7	16,7
Identify their own weaknesses	16,7	16,7	16,7	50,0	16,7	16,7	33,3	33,3
Monitor their progress	16,7	16,7	16,7	50,0	33,3	33,3	16,7	16,7
Evaluate their own learning	16,7	33,3	16,7	33,3	16,7	16,7	16,7	50
Learn co-operatively	16,7	16,7	16,7	50,0	16,7	16,7	33,3	33,3
Learn independently	16,7	16,7	16,7	50,0	16,7	16,7	16,7	50

To illustrate, teachers believed that it is desirable to involve learners in decisions about the objectives of the course with 16,7% quite desirable and 50% very desirable. Also, involving learners in making decisions about materials was considered as quite desirable by 50% and very desirable by 16,7% of the participants. 50% responses indicated that it is quite desirable and very desirable by 16,7% to involve learner in making decisions about the types of tasks and activities they perform. Equal numbers of responses (33,3%) indicated that allowing learners to decide on the topics covered was very desirable and quite desirable. The respondents agreed that it is quite/very desirable for learners to involve learner in making decisions in how the learning assessed (50/16,7). Equal numbers of responses (33,3%) showed that involving learners to decide on the teaching methods used was slightly desirable and quite desirable. Furthermore, the respondents are in the equal level agreed that it is quite/very desirable for learners to be capable for identifying their own needs (33,3%), as well as the ability to evaluate their own learning. 50% of the responses showed that it is very desirable for learner to be capable of identifying their own strengths, weaknesses, monitoring their progress, learn co-operatively and learn independently.

As for the feasibility of fostering LA, the respondents reflected equal number for slightly unfeasible and quite feasible (33,3%) in involving learner to make decisions about the objective of the course. The equal number of responses also showed in deciding about topics discussed (33,3%) for quite/very feasible. While in involving learner about the teaching methods used gain equal number of responses (33,3%) for slightly/very unfeasible. Furthermore, the participants believed that it is very unfeasible (50%) to involve learners in making decisions about materials used, how learning is assessed, and the classroom management. Additionally, learners' ability to identify their own needs is very unfeasible by 50%. The learners' ability to identify their own strengths are equal for very/slightly unfeasible by 33,3%, as well as the ability to monitor their progress. While the ability to identify their own weaknesses and learn co-operatively are equal for quite/very feasible by 33,3%. The participants believed that it is very feasible for learner have the ability to evaluate their own learning and learn independently by percentage 50%.

## **2. The teachers' Perceptions**

Most of the participants stated that the most of their students are not autonomous, while the others argued that they cannot say that all of them are autonomous or have the level of autonomy. The participants explained that there are reasons for this. Four of them pointed that students are not coming from such an educational background which foster autonomy. Most of them come from an educational background where there is so much dependence on the teacher.

All of the participants stated that they try to promote learner autonomy as much as the can. T4, for instance, mentioned that it depends on the nature of the class and subject requirements. More specifically, T5 stated "I just promoted learner autonomy in my 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students, while the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade I applied guided learning". Moreover, four of the participants stated that they try to give students opportunities regarding what topic they want to present or discuss. T4 stated "I provide them choices and they have their own freedom to organize it in the way they want". Also T1 and T3 mentioned that they provide main activities to promote students' learner autonomy, however they give their students freedom to manage how the task to be done. In addition, to promote learner autonomy T2 and T6 stated that they encourage students to actively participate in class discussions. All of the participants mentioned that they tried to promote LA in classes, but they still needed to do a lot.

Regarding the challenges in promoting LA in Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, two participants argue that some students are not ready for it since they enjoy spoon-feeding learning. Some students don't want to take any responsibility for their own learning. T6 gave an example: "they even ask you to show and complete the task for them". Some students come to class thinking that if the teacher does not spoon-fe them, then they are not doing their job. Additionally, T6 stated that this is a little bit cultural since they have students from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. There are cultural beliefs that teacher is mostly responsible for the teaching and learning process. T1, T3 and T5, on the other hand, perceived that class management and facilities as the biggest challenges. For several activities or tasks, it depends on how facilities support the learning process. When the facilities is insufficient, it hinder completing the tasks.

Several solutions for the potential challenges for promoting LA were suggested. The participants agreed that raising students' awareness about the importance of LA is a significant strategy to counter the spoon-feeding idea. Moreover, teacher should highlight students' work positively and implement various teaching techniques to help students with low motivation. Teachers also need to prove the students that all the efforts are highly appreciated. LA also can be promoted by helping students according to students' style of learning. It can be done by managing teaching strategy and set up the rules of the class.

## **3. Discussions**

This study aim to investigate the perceptions of EFL teachers about students' LA in Merdeka Belajar context. The results of the questionnaire indicate that EFL teachers are aware of the concept of learner autonomy and have a positive attitude towards promoting learner autonomy in language learning and teaching. Teachers revealed that learner autonomy can be



promoted in the classroom by encouraging students to actively participate in decisions about what they learn and choose different types of activities and projects. LA is considered to be primarily the ability to perform learning and master learning strategies, as it is considered to be very important in improving a students' LA. Additionally, studying independently in the library and completing out-of-class assignments, especially those that require the Internet, are considered signs of being an autonomous learner. LA can be defined as the ability of students to decide how they learn, what types of activities they engage in, and their ability to assess their own learning. In the study conducted by Borg & Al-Busaidi found in their study that teachers had many ideas about LA. The most important of these was that 95.1% of the participants valued the learner's freedom to make decisions and choices in learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012).

The concept of LA also involves the students' ability in adapting different approaches for exploration and utilizing various problem-solving skills in order to construct their own learning. Additionally, in LA there is total learning independence which is another form of student-centered learning with teachers' supervision or not. However, learning without a teacher would be a misconception among teachers (Agustina, 2017). Moreover, the others characteristic of LA are being able to take the responsibilities of different learning tasks such as planning, assessing and observing one's learning. Equally, being on time, actively participate in circumstances, solving problem skill and acquiring new skills in different experience is further trait of LA.

Regarding teachers' perceptions regarding the desirability of learner autonomy, most ELT teachers generally agree that it is quite or very desirable to involve students in decision-making, and that ideally students would be on the list. Most participants argued positively on student involvement in decisions about the topics discussed, the types of tasks and activities completed, homework, materials used, and how language was assessed. Balçikanlı conducted a study and found that students benefited greatly from gaining more decision-making authority in the classroom (Balcikanli, 2010). The EFL teachers in this study also believed that learners were able to recognize their needs and make their own decisions, weaknesses and strengths. They believed that future teachers needed to learn how to learn and how to promote learner autonomy. Some other studies also recommend the development of autonomy in language teacher training programs.

Furthermore, most teachers believed that it was slightly feasible or unfeasible to involve students in decisions about classroom management, the teaching methods used, and the time and place of the lesson. However, they indicated that they wanted to involve students in decisions about the topics discussed, the pace of lessons, homework, the selection of learning tasks, and how to assess learning. At the same time, the majority of teachers believed that students had the potential to learn collaboratively and independently, and to be aware of their own needs, strengths, and weaknesses.

In addition, according to the participants' responses to the interview questions, some of the EFL students are autonomous, some of them are not. The participants stated that this discrepancy can be considered for the fact that students are coming from different cultural and educational backgrounds. Despite students' academic backgrounds, almost all participants

stated that they wanted to promote learner autonomy as much as possible, but added that the extent to which autonomy could be promoted depended on the many aspects. Most participants believe that encouraging students to participate in class activities, teaching them how to study, providing project options, and encouraging them to choose their own topics promotes learner autonomy in the classroom.

Teachers play a significant roles in providing students various opportunities for improving their knowledge and skill such as planning, exploring and thinking critically. Despite the fact that participants strongly supported the role of learners in developing autonomy, they also appreciated their role in facilitating and encouraging the improvement of LA, as they argued, LA does not mean complete without teacher. Moreover, teacher can design teaching strategy by involving LA tasks as one of the main aspects. It is one of the way to improve LA by providing guidance, monitoring and also use various assessments. For better achievement on promoting LA, teachers need to shift their roles to become learning facilitator.

As for the challenge in promoting students LA, teachers should raise students' awareness of raising students' awareness about the importance of LA is a significant strategy in successful language learning as well as praising good performance and positively appreciate all efforts. In spite of resisting the desire to spoon-feed, teachers should be available to help and give guidance when required. Guidance is significant in promoting students to be autonomous. In order to prove proper solution to overcome the challenges, teachers should be ready to manage classroom with clear class rules, manipulate pedagogical approach and create student-centered circumstance.

#### **D. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

This study aims to explore the perceptions of EFL teachers about students' LA and investigates what challenges they face in promoting LA. The results show that teachers have positive attitudes in promoting students' LA. Despite the teachers hold various perceptions of LA, it is desirable promoting LA in EFL students. Although obstacles and challenges in promoting LA can be accounted, some fruitful solutions can be a great counter to develop LA. The current study is limited to explore the concept of LA in Merdeka Belajar context and a limited sample of EFL teachers in limited context participated in the study. A questionnaire and a semi structured-interview are including as the data collection instruments in this study. In other words, another limitation is the lack of observations. Therefore, future studies should use other data collection instruments, such as student interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis (i.e. document reviews, analysis of handouts) to get more comprehensive results.

Based on the result, the stake holder who take the responsibility as the curriculum developer are enhanced to create content to promote LA. Teachers are also encouraged to design their lesson in a way to enhance LA. Moreover, educational campaign of raising awareness of the importance of LA are highly recommended both for students and obviously for teachers in different educational context.

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