

# The Teachers' Perceptions of the Effects of Self-Directed Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: At a High School in Vietnam

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**Abstract:** *The goal of this qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of Vietnamese teachers' perceptions of the effects of self-directed learning during the COVID-19 pandemic at a public high school in the North of Vietnam. The theory of definitions and the model of self-directed learning is a solid theoretical foundation for analysis and evaluation of teachers' responses. The research used 12 individual interviews and 1 focus group to collect data from June 25, 2021, to July 8, 2021. Self-directed learning belongs to the learners themselves, but the relationship between teacher and student is not lost. In other words, this relationship changes from the relationship between the decider (teacher) and implementer (student) to mentor (teacher) and decider (student). However, in certain cases, teachers still have their role to change. On the other hand, the context of the epidemic is a common factor affecting many education systems, including Vietnamese education. In addition, the learner is also a separate individual. Therefore, these things have made it difficult for Vietnamese high school teachers to think about their lesson design.*

**Keywords:** Teacher perceptions, effects of self-directed learning, Vietnamese high school education, COVID-19, pandemic

## 1. Introduction

### Vietnamese education context

Before 1986, Vietnam had been under Chinese domination for 1000 years. Therefore, Vietnamese culture and education were deeply influenced by China's Confucian culture and education (Trong Kim, 2017). Then, France made Vietnam a colony in 1858. All over Vietnam were French schools, learning French culture (Trong Kim, 2017). The profound influence of foreign education and the illiteracy rate in Vietnam accounted for more than 90% of the population in the 19th century (Manh Tung, 2020). Thus, the Vietnamese government decided to change education under the Doi Moi policy in 1986 (Hong Thanh, 2011). In this policy, didactic pedagogy was applied to all levels of education (Huong & Fry, 2002). Students had a set of textbooks and considered them to be the standard of all knowledge. The teacher was the one who imparted all knowledge, also known as the teacher-centred model (Thao Do et al., 2016). Besides, the teacher was completely the final decision maker for all learning processes (Tran, 2013). Some Vietnamese proverbs affirm the decisive role of teachers in education and training. For example, the proverb "If you don't have a teacher, you will not be successful" (Ngoc Phan, 2020). This proverb is a topic that typifies the importance of teachers in determining student success. It showed that students depended on the guidance of the teacher (Nguyen Thi Mai & Hall, 2017). Students were the ones who only took notes and received lectures from the teacher (Das et al., 2019). As a result, students become passive learners, limiting the development of critical thinking and necessary independent skills (Littlewood, 2000).

The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam realised many limitations to the teacher-centred model. Thus, the department aimed to change the model from teacher-centred to student-centred. This model was

implemented after Resolution No. 29 of 2013 on "Basically and comprehensively renovating education and training to meet the requirements of industrialization and modernization" was issued (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2013). The resolution clearly stipulated that for high school education, schools must design and develop self-directed learning in students to promote lifelong learning. Students are empowered to make their choices instead of relying on teachers and taking responsibility for their learning outcomes. Besides, teachers consider designing flexible learning plans. This was to avoid the one-way imposition of knowledge by teachers. Moreover, learners did not memorize mechanical knowledge like more than 10 years ago, but actively created new learning ideas. In addition, the resolution suggested that schools should increase elective subjects or activities to train students' self-determination and self-direction. As a result, the shift to a student-centred teaching model is moving towards the core point of learner autonomy and individual responsibility (Partanen, 2018) rather than being a passive recipient of information like in teacher-centred education (Kain, 2003). With the new teaching model from 2013, the promulgated resolution 29 attached a student-centred model with self-directed learning to encourage students to develop problem-solving abilities and practice independent thinking skills, not only in study but also in life.

### Vietnamese Social Context

At the end of December 2019, the COVID-19 epidemic broke out in the Wuhan province of China with the specific manifestation of pneumonia of unknown cause (Khurshid et al., 2020). After 1 month, this virus quickly spread worldwide, including Vietnam (WHO, 2020a). Faced with a situation that could seriously endanger human health, the Vietnamese government decided to implement social distancing (MOH, 2020). This means that schools were forced to close and change teaching methods. During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators

quickly adapted to new ways of teaching using distance learning software (Longhurst et al., 2020; Pather et al., 2020). Although online learning can maintain classes, the duration has been significantly reduced. Besides, interacting with teachers and students is limited. As a result, improving students' self-directed learning is essential to keep up with the high school educational program. Students must learn on their own the knowledge and appropriate learning methods during the period of social distancing in Vietnam. This stimulates independence and a sense of responsibility in each learner as they learn to decide, practice and self-assess their results. Thus, the self-directed learning method is one of the most important educational methods, especially in high school education in Vietnam during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is only seen as a special context to detect specific manifestations of self-directed learning in the new form of online learning. While the COVID-19 pandemic promotes self-directed learning skills in students' learning, this context also brings pressures on both teachers and students (Agu et al., 2021). Thus, the study seeks to better understand the difficulties faced by Vietnamese high school teachers in the context of the pandemic when designing teaching plans with self-directed application. On the other hand, the study also collects teachers' perceptions about the positive or negative effects of self-directed learning when applied in this context.

## 2. Literature Review

### The definitions of self-directed learning

There are a lot of definitions of self-directed learning as a process (Knowles, 1975; Sze-yeng & Husain, 2010; Oddi, 1987; Greveson & Spencer, 2005). Confusion between self-directed learning definitions is a factor that complicates and obstructs the implementation of self-directed learning educational programs (Van der Walt, 2019). Therefore, educators and researchers have two directions: continue that confusion or research different definitions of self-directed learning.

### Self-directed learning as a process

The first point of view comes from researchers who are considered to have defined early self-directed learning (O'Shea, 2003). Knowles (1975) defined self-directed learning as a process that learners improve through experience or training. In relevant learning situations, learners establish their goals, providing multidimensional feedback on learning outcomes after learning and collecting (Taylor & Hamdy, 2013). Although Knowles' definition (1975) is arguably the commonly approached view, it still needs further discussion because this definition focuses only on the abilities required to be performed by an individual during the period of learning but does not reliably guarantee a lifelong process (Macaskill & Denovan, 2013).

Another perspective emphasizes the process by which learning tasks can be performed outside of education or the workplace in general to promote cognition and social action. Ellinger (2004) argues that self-directed learning has the function of helping to increase human resources. In contrast, Collin (1996) (as cited in Hewitt-Taylor, 2001) disagreed with the transition from self-directed learning to learning associated with established programs. As a result, proponents of self-directed learning as a liberating process work towards building liberal learning while also criticizing educational institutions for not providing an appropriate environment for learners to spontaneously learn to develop their abilities (Sze-yeng & Husain, 2010). However, these definitions have little to do with methods of enhancing self-directed learners' experience in the process of acquiring knowledge (Tennant, 1992). In addition, the above definitions seem to offer little actual evidence to support each view. This makes it difficult to convince people of self-directed learning as a process because the outcome of self-directed learning is always an observable product (Candy, 1991).

### Self-directed learning as an interaction

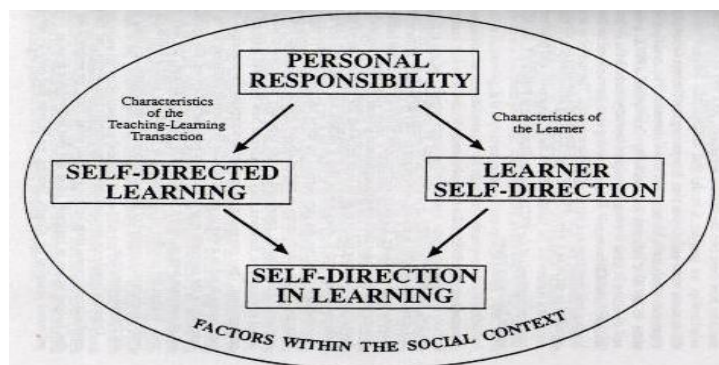
Some views concern the definitions of self-directed learning as the work of an individual. Based on the study by Dehnad et al., (2005) on self-directed learning of 3rd year medical students in Manchester and the study by Hoban et al., (2005) on the readiness of 972 first-year students at the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine in the USA, Greveson & Spencer (2005) defined autonomy as a prerequisite for self-directed learning. Although drawn from the analysis of two specific studies, this definition is nevertheless an assumption underpinning the possibility of exploring the application of self-directed learning in clinical medicine. Moreover, Regan (2003) claimed that self-directed learning is associated with individuality, independence in self-management, and self-learning. However, this definition does not provide convincing actual evidence for the definition of self-directed learning.

By contrast, many view self-directed learning as an interaction. When the learning environment or social contexts are ignored, self-directed learning is easily equated with separateness or selfishness (Brookfield, 1984). As Candy (1991) pointed out, self-directed learning is the connection between people and the environment, which has many aspects, such as people and learning conditions. Emphasis on autonomy makes understanding of self-directed learning potentially misleading. As a result, when learners develop their self-directed learning process, they will lack the skills or confidence in their learning (Candy, 1991). Because in some formal cases, self-directed learning is not only the work of the individual learner but also an association and cooperation between the educators and the learner (Brookfield, 1984). Whether learning improves results does not only entirely depend on the learners themselves, but also on the teacher's support in determining goals, learning activities, and giving ultimate results (Abd-El-Fattah, 2010).

## Personal Responsibility Orientation Model (PRO Model)

The Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model is a combination of self-direction in learning between self-directed learning and learner self-direction. Self-directed learning is the process of developing independence, also

known as autonomy, from within the individual learner. Autonomy shows not only the strength of reason (Parvin, 2007), but also the ability of the individual to make decisions and lead actions (Cuypers, 2009). Furthermore, learners also take responsibility for their actions in self-directed learning (Dehnad et al., 2014).



**Figure:** The Personal Responsibility Orientation Model (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991)

Obviously, the PRO model is a one-way model in which personal responsibility is the dominant factor in other aspects of self-directed learning. Self-directed learners have intrinsic personality qualities that regulate and inspire their evaluation of various learning circumstances. On the other hand, self-directed learning is impacted by the characteristics of the teaching-learning transaction. Thus, individual responsibility is not only understood in general terms as controlling life circumstances (MacKenzie et al., 2012), but also as having autonomy over learners' thoughts and actions during self-directed learning (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). Furthermore, because of the responsibility that each individual implements (Stockdale & Brockett, 2011), learner self-direction is just as responsible for their results. Therefore, self-directed learning is how one chooses to learn, accepts the results, and asks questions about the results (Rogers, 1961 as cited in Silén & Uhlin, 2008).

Despite its much strength, the PRO model also has weaknesses that should be discussed further. The importance of the social context seems vaguely defined in this model (Banz, 2009). Many argue that social interaction should not be fully removed from self-directed learning (Long, 1989) since context is important in self-directed learning, as it motivates learners (Lee et al. 2010). Moreover, learners can use social context to verify a learning task, and the outcome of that learning task is directly related to social responses (Banz, 2009). Ignoring the social context and focusing only on the learners is short-sighted (MacKenzie et al., 2012) because the social context may fill gaps by providing learners with a way to determine the direction of their learning (Hommes et al., 2014). In addition, learners also need social feedback to objectively evaluate the results of self-study.

## 3. Methodology

### Research design

The research uses a case study to emphasize a particular phenomenon to draw a general conclusion from specific

perceptions (Denscombe, 2017; Gray, 2014). A case study focusing on Vietnamese teachers' perceptions at UBHS high school of the effects of self-directed learning provides answers that are more subjective than generalizations (Bos, 2020). Participants' responses were personalized by subjective perception. Furthermore, the research context is the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the study can be able to analyse details of the participants' responses at a specific time (O'Leary, 2021).

### Data collections

The data was collected using qualitative data collection, including individual interviews and focus groups (Denscombe, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kumar, 2019). Using in-depth interviews is an effective method to increase the reliability of information and objectivity (Durkin et al., 2020) in collecting UBHS high school teachers' perceptions of the effects of self-directed learning during the pandemic. Use individual interviews first to gather answers, then find the common themes as the basis for conducting the focus group (Gudkova, 2017). The focus group further emphasizes the themes identified in previous individual interviews. Open-ended questions were designed and given in interviews to guide responses to the three main research questions. Besides, the 12 participants were Vietnamese, thus, the study coded pseudonyms (Flick, 2019). All private information of all teachers is highly protected by anonymity. This is an ethical mechanism to protect the identity of participants (Patton, 2015) because pseudonymization or anonymity are methods of increasing trustworthiness and maintaining a good relationship between the researchers and the participants (Guest et al., 2013).

### Analysis methods

For this research, the thematic analysis will be carried out inductively (Gibbs, 2018) to create codes, and themes. The process of creating and analyzing the codes is detailed in the next chapter. The data analysis process is performed



according to three steps: interview transcriptions, coding and defining themes.

#### 4. Findings

A total of 4 codes were created from the interview transcriptions, including relationships with teachers, educational models, autonomy, and creativity. The codes were created from the words and sentences from the English translation of each interview.

##### Codes and Frequency

Codes	Individual Interviews	Focus Group	Total
Relationship with Teachers	3	3	6
Educational Models	5	7	12
Autonomy	10	7	17
Creativity	12	7	19

From a list of codes generated from 12 individual interview transcriptions, I analysed common ground between the codes to combine them into specific themes. I have reviewed and named themes based on the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 to aid in addressing the research questions. As a result, two themes emerged. This section details the themes in the combination of specific codes. Direct quotes are attached as evidence of the participant's responses.

##### Themes Based On Codes

Themes	Codes
Student-Teacher Interaction	Relationship with teachers Educational models
Self-Responsibility	Autonomy Creativity

##### Student-Teacher Interaction

Student-teacher interaction was the first theme created from two codes, including relationship with teachers and educational models. The title of this theme is based on the definition proposed and the discussion of self-directed learning as an interaction in chapter 2. The interaction includes interaction with the social context and interaction with people. Teachers are one of the people with whom high school students interact quite a lot because there are two main components to education: educators and learners (Grimova & Van Schalkwyk, 2016).

##### Education Models

This code was created because I noticed that teachers perceived self-directed learning as tied to a particular educational model in their responses. An educational model is an overall view of how an educational environment works (Doménech-Betoret, 2018). Up to the present time, Vietnamese education has had two education models. Anne recalled her childhood:

Having previously studied in the teacher-centred model, I was given full theoretical knowledge by my teacher and

sampled practical exercises. I didn't seem to need to prepare anything when it came to new lessons.

The study understands that teachers in the teacher-centred model prevailed. In a lecture, students were passive recipients of knowledge (Weimer, 2013). Although students felt idle during class, they had little opportunity to develop problem-solving skills independently of self-direction (Ameliana, 2017). On the other hand, teachers were primarily responsible for controlling the lesson (Serin, 2018). However, they had little incentive to be creative in their lesson design.

In 2013, Resolution No. 29 on developing self-directed learning in the student-centred model was issued (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2013). Jennie felt excited about applying self-directed learning because:

My students are equal to me. They voice their questions and want to communicate more with teachers. In English, I am fortunate to see my students being more active. They communicate with me not in their native language but in English. I notice the sharpness and quick integration of students now. This has great implications for the current trend of globalization.

This is essentially a change rather than a loss of position. Teachers are not eliminated from their lessons (Serin, 2018). The class becomes a discussion or conversation between students and teachers. Students build on their skills and discuss learning goals with teachers to sift through the correct information (Collins & O'Brien, 2011). It is not the teacher who constructs knowledge, but the student who decides how that knowledge is constructed. In other words, teachers have empowered students to be autonomous in their learning. This reflects what students did and how they performed those activities (Weimer, 2013).

##### Relationship with teachers

The changing education models have changed the relationship between students and teachers. "In the past, I imparted knowledge to students without receiving feedback because I was the one who decided the content, manner and a method to ensure the learning task was completed."- Sophia said. However, when learners are the decision makers for their self-directed learning, this relationship changes. Joy said:

Students consider the relationship with me as a relationship between mentor and mentee. Mentoring means giving advice and answering questions when students need me. The decision-making power rests with my student.

In the teacher-centred model, knowledge is transmitted in one direction, from teacher to student. There was little or no response from students to the information they received. It is because the teacher played the most important role in this model. However, when the student-centred model with self-directed learning is implemented,

the relationship between students and teachers is a reciprocal interaction. Teachers set learning tasks and students complete their self-directed learning to deliver a measurable outcome Greveson & Spencer (2005). Because self-directed learning is not a process in which the learner is isolated from the social context and others (Long, 1989). Interaction with external factors is to seek help. However, this help is for reference only.

While Coral, Brian, and Doris agree 100% that the role of the teacher has been completely changed, Emma, Ankur, and Anne have shown that this relationship also changes dynamically. "In my laboratory lessons, I decide the approach and the students do the experiments. My decisions provide learners with the safest practice to ensure that dangerous situations do not occur"- Emma said. Emma's answer shows that, for practical subjects, the teacher still determines the experimental approaches. However, this does not lose the self-direction of students. Learners search for ways to conduct experiments. The teacher is not the oppressor, but in this situation, the teacher's decision is supported by the learners because they know that the decision is safe for the learners during the experiment.

### **Self-responsibility**

Self-responsibility is the second theme to be created by two codes, including autonomy and creativity. The name of this theme is considered from the theoretical foundation of the Personal Responsibility Orientation model (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991) presented in chapter 2.

### **Autonomy**

Autonomy is an influential factor in self-directed learning. "Self-directed learning is when students perform activities on their own. Learners are the ones who decide all the methods and assessment of learning tasks. It's the autonomy necessary for self-directed learning to have positive results "-Doris said.

Vanessa agreed:

They trust their ability to make decisions. But what interests me is that students are also responsible for the outcomes of self-directed learning. If my students give the wrong answer to this problem, they have to go through the previous steps themselves to see where they went wrong and look for ways to correct the mistake.

Autonomy is an element of self-responsibility. Because self-responsibility is the personal control over perception, behaviour, and emotions towards a certain goal (Kormos & Csizer, 2014). Learners with high personal responsibility are learners who master knowledge and choose appropriate methods to perform their learning tasks without being dependent on anyone (Benson, 2003). However, the participants' responses showed only the positive aspects of the autonomous students but did not present the complexities of the autonomous learners. Learners are responsible for being aware that they need to orient their learning tasks to carry out learning activities

actively. But autonomy can sometimes be a delay to self-directed learning because autonomy is not a steady state (Little, 2007).

### **Creativity**

Creativity is a code created when UBHS high school teachers became aware of students' self-directed learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. "When self-directed, they have to tinker and search for creative and reasonable learning methods to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and develop critical thinking through specific situations." - Sophia perceived.

Doris said:

Instead of just being interested in the characters and plot, my students learn more about the circumstances in which the novel was born. This helps them feel the details more deeply. Because any situation that takes place in a novel represents that social context.

Teachers' responses show that self-directed learning plays an important role in fostering students' creativity. Since learners are self-directed in learning, they are free to choose methods or even create unique ways to acquire knowledge. In addition, creativity is a way for individuals to express their abilities through senses, thoughts, and opportunities to act (Nussbaum, 2009). Furthermore, Ankurn and Aylin claim that students understand that the teacher is a mentor, not providing all the information to them. Therefore, students have to be more independent to find the most effective way to learn. Because when individuals create, there will be opportunities to realize the value of knowledge (Collard & Looney, 2014). However, I only received answers from Anne, which shows the downside of self-directed learning. Because learners freely decide to learn without being controlled by the teacher, learners are likely to become lazy with their learning tasks.

## **5. Discussions**

This research helps Vietnamese high school teachers to better understand the theory of self-directed learning and its important role. In addition, the study adds valuable empirical evidence to help demonstrate the positive effects of self-directed learning. The findings of the study contribute directly to the development of self-directed learning in high schools in Vietnam. When considering research methodology, research has mentioned that the weakness of qualitative research methods is ambiguity (Ochieng, 2009). With the solution described in chapter 3, the data was verified for accuracy. The study was successful in getting the satisfaction of 12 teachers about the transcription. No errors in grammar or expression. However, the responses of the 12 participants were all descriptive. Brian and Egan found it difficult to rephrase pedagogical situations; thus, they ignored questions about providing empirical evidence. This is a gap that the study did not consider when choosing the data collection methods corresponding to the qualitative research method.

The aim of the research is to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions of the effects of self-directed learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, that is not the most important thing the study found. The important thing is that UBHS high school teachers were not aware of other aspects of self-directed learning. For example, the participants focused only on positive effects and ignored the limitations of self-directed learning; participants were interested in motivating learners, but only Anne was aware of the complexities of learner autonomy. The lack of participants' awareness of the downsides of self-directed learning, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a gap in this study.

Up to the present time, not 100% of the classes have been applied to self-directed learning. The teacher-centred model has existed for so long in Vietnamese education that it is still influential to this day. High school teachers still think that they need to adjust and master the content knowledge system for students. Besides, the fear of making mistakes is a common phenomenon. There is a fear centre in every brain (Boaler, 2019). Each mistake develops into a synapse in the student's brain (Dweck, 2006). This causes students to become nervous and timid in their own self-directed activities. Therefore, many teachers still apply the teacher-centred model in many lessons. Self-directed learning is a new pedagogical approach that is being applied. Teachers should be the ones who best understand the weaknesses of self-directed learning to improve their quality of teaching. Research proposes a suggestion to help increase self-direction in students is that teachers can change the learning environment from documented learning to experiential learning (Kolb, 2014). For example, when students learn about history, instead of studying on campus, they can go to historical places to observe and transform their experiences combined with historical facts into knowledge. However, these locations should be implemented in the country to limit travel risks for students and teachers.

Another point to discuss is the personalities of the teachers. Aylin, Coral, Brian, and Anne are all strong personalities. They weren't afraid to give their perceptions. By contrast, Sophia and Joy were shy around me. They chose to respond to verified information with self-directed learning instead of providing their opinions. Obviously, the teacher's personality affects job performance (Judge et al., 2013). Many studies (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021; Roloff et al., 2020; Biljana et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2018) have demonstrated that teachers have an impact on student motivation and academic achievement. The Big Five personality trait (Barrick & Mount, 1991) is a model used to assess teacher traits, including neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Research results show that openness and conscientiousness are the two factors of teachers that have the most powerful impact on students' motivation. Teachers with characteristics such as respecting the rights of learners, designing learning activities with appropriate orientation, and the ability to suggest problems for students are often effective teachers (Kim et al., 2018). These are important studies to help participants realize

that they need to practice and develop these personality traits in a positive way to promote self-directed learning in students. On the other hand, they can gain new experience and hone the knowledge and skills required in a globalized context.

## 6. Conclusions

The purpose of the research is to gain insight into the effects of self-directed learning on education during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perceptions of teachers at a public high school in the North of Vietnam. Teachers' responses indicated that self-directed learning plays an important role in promoting creativity and critical thinking. However, self-directed learning seems to have a marked effect on 12th graders and students in higher education rather than on 10th graders. In addition, teachers changed their role from deciders in the teacher-directed learning model to mentors in the self-directed learning model. Furthermore, participants were aware of the overload of building many areas of knowledge content in the same lesson due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the personalities of learners are a barrier for teachers when designing teaching plans that apply to self-directed learning. An important finding of the study, however, is that the samples did not seem to be aware of the limitations of self-directed learning and had yet to provide critiques of this approach.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respects to the research authorship and/or publication of this article.

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