Understanding Teacher Autonomy Through EFL Teachers' Online Teaching Experiences

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Article information	Abstract
	Research on autonomy in foreign language education has largely focused on learner autonomy while relatively little attention has been given to teacher autonomy and the factors that underpin its exercise and development. Similar to learner autonomy, teacher autonomy is a multidimensional construct and the degree to which it can be exercised and maintained varies, depending on context. This qualitative research examines teacher autonomy in the context of emergency online language teaching. Accounts of two teachers' online teaching experiences were used to (a) explore how EFL teachers exercise and maintain their autonomy in teaching during the transition from face-to-face to online learning and (b) identify factors that affect their autonomy during this challenging time. Findings reveal that both teachers viewed the transition to online learning as an opportunity to exercise their autonomy and experiment with new ways to improve their practices. However, the extent to which they could implement new pedagogical ideas in their teaching depends on their professional relationships with others in their contexts. This study highlights the importance of reflection, collaboration, and negotiation as essential components of teacher autonomy and teacher development.

INTRODUCTION

Autonomy is often seen as a desirable goal for education and a defining characteristic of good language learners and teachers. For learners, it is a capacity that enables them to learn more independently and effectively. For teachers, being autonomous in their practice is a key to fostering autonomous learning in their learners (Cotterall, 2008; Dikilitaş, 2020). Research on autonomy in language teaching and learning tends to focus primarily on promoting learner autonomy, the learners' capacity to take control of their learning (Benson, 2011). To be autonomous, learners must be willing, able, and have the freedom to plan what and how to learn, monitor their learning progress, and evaluate their learning outcomes. Learner autonomy, however, does not mean learning without a teacher. In fact, its development entails a gradual and continuous transfer of control in the learning process from teachers to learners (Little et al., 2017). From this perspective, the development of learner autonomy depends, in part, on teacher autonomy. This means that teachers need to recognize and exercise their autonomy in teaching practice and professional learning to judiciously decide whether and how control should be shared with their learners (Little, 1995; Thavenius, 1999).

However, research on teacher autonomy and teacher education shows that teachers do not always have full control over what they do. Teacher autonomy can be affected by a variety of personal, interpersonal, and contextual factors. Studies in teacher education conducted in Europe, America, and Asia indicate that teachers' professional autonomy, particularly in terms of what and how to teach, is increasingly compromised by accountability systems and external standards that define the quality of teaching and learning (Elo & Nygren-Landgärds, 2021; X. Gao, 2018; Glazer, 2018; Lundström, 2015). These factors can result in feelings of incompetence and resignation among teachers (Lamb, 2000). These findings further indicate the need for researchers, teachers, and teacher educators to address the challenges that teachers face in their professional life.

The present study aims to contribute to the growing area of research on teacher autonomy by exploring how in-service EFL teachers exercise and maintain autonomy in the context of emergency online language teaching. Through grounding the concept of teacher autonomy in teachers' teaching experiences, this research aims to uncover conditions that promote or hamper teacher autonomy in their day-to-day online teaching. It further identifies practical strategies that can be considered for teacher autonomy enhancement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Framing teacher autonomy

While generally seen as a precondition for learner autonomy development (Little, 1995), some researchers argue that teacher autonomy can be a goal in its own right. Smith and Erdoğan (2008) referred to teacher autonomy as teachers' capacity to self-direct their teaching. They argued that this capacity should be promoted in teacher education because it can enable teachers to learn how to improve not only their teaching but also their professional development. This view is in line with McGrath's (2000) conceptualization of teacher autonomy which differentiated teacher autonomy into two interrelated perspectives: teacher autonomy as self-directed professional actions and teacher autonomy as freedom from others' control. The first perspective refers to teachers' capacity to self-direct their professional development and is associated with teachers' engagement in activities such as in-service training, action research, and reflective practice. This perspective of teacher autonomy requires teachers to be psychologically and technically prepared to take control of their professional learning. It also entails freedom for teachers to question their routine practices and to think outside of their own experience.

The second perspective of teacher autonomy is associated with freedom from others' control. While teacher autonomy suggests teachers' professional freedom, it does not mean the freedom to do anything as they please. This is because teachers' practices will inevitably be affected by macro constraints (decisions made by others outside the institution that are beyond teachers' control) and micro constraints (decisions made by others at the institutional level, which teachers may be able to influence). Such constraints include educational reforms, prescribed syllabi and textbooks, exam standards, and unspoken expectations within teachers' home

institutions (Benson, 2010; X. Gao, 2018; McGrath, 2000). These can create tensions that may result in teachers simply accepting and implementing decisions made by others in their classroom. However, McGrath (2000) argued that instead of conforming to these constraints, teachers should use their independent judgment, make a compromise, and take informed actions with regard to what is realistically possible in the context in which they teach. Similarly, Lamb and Simpson (2003) suggested that although constraints on practice are inevitable, they do not need to be disempowering. By confronting and understanding the factors that support or limit their autonomy, teachers can start to find opportunities to make constructive changes to improve their teaching. In this sense, teachers are positioned not only as teachers, but also as learners of teaching who become more effective in their practices by developing and exercising their professional autonomy.

Several studies have documented how constraints on practice can give rise to teacher autonomy and how teachers can work to overcome some constraints in their teaching conditions through experimentation, critical reflection, and peer collaboration (Hoang, 2018; Huang et al., 2019; Jeh-Awae & Wiriyakarun, 2021; Shaw, 2008; Xu, 2015). Together, these studies portray autonomous teachers as self-directed individuals who are able and willing to negotiate constraints within their teaching context and to use their independent judgment to empower themselves. These findings have substantiated the arguments put forth by McGrath (2000) and Smith and Erdoğan (2008) for the role of teacher autonomy in teacher professional development. They further suggest the complex interrelationships between teachers' cognitive abilities and contextual factors that shape the emergence of teacher autonomy within a particular instructional setting (Murray, 2014). Although teacher autonomy is an important aspect of teacher development, much of the early work on theorizing the construct focused mainly on pre-service teacher education. As noted by Borg (2021), there is a clear need for studies that bridge the gap between theory and practice by examining how in-service teachers operationalize teacher autonomy in their teaching practice.

Building on these conceptualizations and research literature, teacher autonomy is framed in this study as a professional capacity comprised of teachers' willingness, ability, and freedom to take control of their teaching and professional development within the prevailing constraints of their institutional setting. As such, the emergence of teacher autonomy is both personal and socially mediated, and teacher autonomy can manifest itself to different degrees in different contexts. This definition serves as a conceptual framework for analyzing teachers' online teaching experiences in this study.

2. Emergency online language teaching (EOLT) and teacher autonomy

The global outbreak of Covid-19 has resulted in the temporary suspension of face-to-face instruction worldwide. Emergency remote teaching has replaced in-class instruction. (Hodges et al., 2021). This sudden transition presented language teachers with unprecedented challenges because online language teaching and learning was a completely new experience for most teachers. Online teaching also requires additional skills from teachers. To begin with, teachers need to learn to use different online meeting applications and other technological tools to set up classes and maintain communication with their students. In addition, the new teaching

context also dictates a reevaluation of the lesson plan, teaching approach, and method of assessment. Research shows that these requirements, combined with a lack of preparation time and resources, can make emergency online language teaching (EOLT) a challenging task even for experienced teachers (L. X. Gao & Zhang, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020).

However, some studies show teachers' ability to make self-initiated efforts to manage some difficulties in EOLT. For instance, Watson Todd (2020) found that although the teachers in his study reported initial difficulties with issues related to time spent preparing and teaching online classes, they were able to solve the problems as they became more familiar with online teaching. This success was due to institutional support as well as the teachers' willingness to seek advice from various sources and experiment with different teaching approaches on their own. However, issues such as making time to check assignments and ensuring students' understanding of content remained to be addressed.

Similarly, Farrell and Stanclik (2021) found in their study that while the teacher could not completely overcome contextual factors that affected his online teaching (e.g., curriculum constraints and large class size), he continuously reflected on his teaching experience and used his reflections to guide his practice. As a result, the teacher was able to adjust his teaching principles, revise his teaching methods, and adapt classroom activities to match students' needs. These studies are particularly relevant to teacher autonomy research as they provide valuable insights into how teachers in different contexts negotiate constraints on their practices and identify opportunities to improve their teaching. In other words, these findings suggest that the shift to online teaching can trigger teacher autonomy. However, most of these studies (Farrell & Stanclik, 2021; L. X. Gao & Zhang, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020) are one-off, cross-sectional studies that did not track how teachers' theoretical understandings of teacher autonomy may evolve over time. This lack of longitudinal data may fail to uncover how teachers decide to exercise and maintain their autonomy in light of the changing teaching situation, and the factors that can support or hinder its development.

To date, there has been little discussion on how language teachers exercise and maintain their autonomy in the EOLT context where a host of different factors may affect their scope of action. Considering the importance of teacher autonomy in foreign language education and the situated nature of the construct, the present study explores teacher autonomy in the context of online language teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. It does not aim to evaluate the impacts of teacher autonomy on student learning outcomes. Rather, it seeks to understand the authentic processes by which teachers learn to recognize, exercise, and negotiate their autonomy in the face of unprecedented challenges. These context-specific findings contribute directly to the call for research evidence to strengthen the theory-practice connection in teacher autonomy as they can reveal how the construct is operationalized across different teaching situations (Holec, 2008; Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2020). Specifically, this study aims to address two research questions:

1. How do teachers exercise and maintain teacher autonomy during their online teaching?
2. What factors support or constrain teacher autonomy in the EOLT context?

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study follows a narrative inquiry approach (Barkhuizen, 2020). A teacher's narrative is a story that represents how teachers make sense of their professional experiences and how their understandings can change over time in their teaching contexts. Stories teachers tell of their experiences are more than just reported accounts of what they do. They are representations of perceptions and assumptions that influence teachers' pedagogical decisions and professional lives. Thus, narrative inquiry is a suitable approach to understanding the personal and social dimensions of teacher autonomy given that it can generate detailed accounts of how teachers exercise and maintain their professional autonomy during online teaching, the difficulties they encounter, and the subjective meanings they assign to their experiences.

1. Participants and context

This research was approved by Chiang Mai University Ethics Committee. Considering the purposes and the qualitative nature of this study, research participants were recruited using purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I contacted several teachers through my professional network and identified some who had experience teaching online as a result of the pandemic. Finally, two Thai EFL teachers, J (a female teacher in her early 40s) and S (a male teacher in his 30s), volunteered to participate in this study. Both teachers had taught online the semester before data collection. These participants were selected based on the assumption that their first-hand experiences conducting online classrooms at their respective universities during the pandemic would provide in-depth classroom-based insights into the interaction between teachers' theoretical understandings of teacher autonomy and their classroom practice.

J holds a doctoral degree in Applied Linguistics and has been teaching English at a Thai university for more than ten years. Apart from teaching, J had also supervised teaching practicum and engaged in several research projects on teacher development and strategic language learning. At the time of data collection, she was teaching two undergraduate courses (grammar and vocabulary). The second participant, S, graduated with his master's degree in linguistics and has been teaching undergraduate English courses for five years. He was responsible for two general English courses and an ESP course that specifically targets students' development of English skills for careers in science. Both participants are full-time teachers with classes of 28-32 students.

2. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from four online semi-structured interviews and personal communications, which took place weekly over a 15-week long semester.

At the beginning of the semester, two online semi-structured interviews were conducted with the two teachers. Each teacher was invited to talk about their online teaching experiences and elaborate on issues they found important in shaping their approaches to teaching online classes

(See Appendix for interview guides). All interviews were conducted in Thai and later translated for data presentation. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, both teachers were informed that their stories would be presented using pseudonyms.

During the semester, the two teachers also decided to continue sharing their online teaching experiences and anecdotes with me through instant messaging and short video calls. Unlike the main interviews, these forms of personal communication were more spontaneous and thus were not audio-recorded. Instead, data were logged in the form of field notes. The participants' commitment to this ongoing data collection process helped generate rich data that could reveal how their teacher autonomy manifested and how their perceptions of online teaching evolved over the course of the semester.

At the end of the semester, two more sessions of online semi-structured interviews were conducted with the two participants. The purpose of these final interviews was for the teachers to reflect on their teaching practices and professional development activities that had taken place during the semester. The first and final interviews lasted between 60-75 minutes and were audio-recorded with the two teachers' informed consent.

All interviews were transcribed and coded thematically, following the method proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Data from each source were coded in three rounds. In the first round of coding, I closely read and reread the transcripts and fieldnotes, then assigned codes to portions of data containing ideas related to teachers' willingness, ability, and freedom to take control of their teaching and professional development. In the second round, I analyzed the data from each teacher individually to identify factors that affected their autonomous practices. Similarities and differences between the two cases and other emerging findings that were relevant to the research questions were also noted. The final coding round involved revising, merging, deleting, and reorganizing the codes generated in the first two rounds to form teacher narrative accounts which are presented in the following section.

FINDINGS

J: It's a big leap for me

J considered herself a novice when it came to online teaching. When she started teaching online, she described her feeling as 'very confused', and her teaching approach as 'mainly lecture-based'. According to J, the lecture-based approach, which was 'the thing everyone is familiar with', could smoothen the transitions to the new teaching and learning context. However, she was not fully satisfied with this teaching approach. She noted that it was 'not the most interesting thing'. The class atmosphere, J observed, was 'not very interactive'.

> In the previous semester, my online class was very similar to my normal class. Each time, I'd tell my students what they were going to learn. Then, I'd spend most of the class time giving lectures, using my PowerPoint slides. Honestly, I wanted them to speak up more, but the lecture-based approach is like one-way communication. I didn't

leave much room for them to talk. And when they didn't talk, it's hard for me to tell if they'd learned anything at all. You know, when their cameras are off, you can't tell if they are still there or not. But the most pressing issue at the time was to get through the semester. We weren't sure what to do. We had little time to think.

Realizing how the lack of classroom interaction could limit her learners' opportunities to learn, J planned to 'do something to fix the problem'. At the beginning of the second semester, J started to look for available online resources and later used them to replace parts of her lecture. She also learned to create online interactive language games by herself.

> That (the lack of classroom interaction) was the first problem I had to quickly get out of the way. I went online and learned some interesting techniques from YouTube. I also asked other people to help me with technical stuff. Then I made some online quizzes on Quizziz and Vonder Go and used them in class to get my students to participate. Sometimes I ask the students to solve problems in groups in the breakout rooms because I want them to know each other and talk with each other. Then they could share their findings from the group work with me directly or they could write in the chat box.

J observed that her attempts could generate more interactions among her students. When asked what she thought was the main reason for her success, she explained that the activities she created and her 'new way of teaching' helped her students to feel more comfortable interacting in class. As a result, the students 'got less nervous when they had to turn on their microphones to talk to me and their friends'. Despite this success, J was still concerned about the quality of her online lessons, citing a lack of sufficient support from her university as the main cause.

> The main problem is that there has not been 'real' support from my workplace. I had to use my home internet to teach. Sometimes there were delays from my students' side. Sometimes my computer froze. You know, the cursor kept spinning and spinning, but the page wouldn't load. Then I had to use my phone and switched back to only lecturing instead because I couldn't set up any interactive activities on it. [...] It's a real struggle.

The lack of support appeared to bother J and left her feeling 'like I have to find the way to 'solve the problems by myself'. J realized that she could not wait for the university to provide her with a stable internet connection and started thinking of alternative methods of evaluating her students' engagement. Interestingly, the 'struggle' she experienced appeared to have also prompted her to rethink the meaning of attendance and classroom engagement and their role as an assessment tool. As a result, J decided to stop taking attendance entirely and put the 10% attendance and participation score onto quizzes and end-of-class reflections. She mentioned several times that 'flexibility is the key' and that this practice was 'fairer to those who have slow internet connection'.

> It really works. The students didn't understand it at first, but then they got used to it. Everyone was happy about it because even if they couldn't attend the live sessions, they could still watch the recordings and get the same benefits as those who attended. […] It's like my attitude about the whole thing has also changed as well. It's a big leap for me. I didn't have to evaluate their learning from how much they speak up in class or how many times they are present.

This excerpt clearly illustrates J's willingness, ability, and freedom to work around the constraints on her teaching practice. J used her independent judgment to modify her practices with her students' interests in mind. The sudden transition to online teaching and learning left her with little time to prepare. Moreover, the lack of institutional support also made her feel quite isolated while she tried to navigate the unfamiliar situation. Yet, these factors seemed to have motivated her to exercise her professional autonomy and proactively explore ways to make necessary changes to improve the situation. To J, this experience has been 'a positive transition that helped me regain my self-esteem'.

S: It's distressing

In his first interview, S described his online teaching experience as 'a distressing incident' that led him to rethink how he usually taught. Similar to J, S felt that online learning limited his students' learning opportunities. He explained that, as a teacher, he had to 'work twice as hard to make sure they understand'. He also felt that it was his responsibility to redesign his materials to fit the new teaching mode and find additional learning resources for his students.

> I had no idea what to do when I had to switch (to online teaching). Preparation for each lesson took much longer because the materials for online learning needed to be self-explanatory. […] Because we don't have a stable internet signal, the PowerPoint slides need to work on their own. They need to be well-structured and easy to understand. I had to revise the content and then try to make sure that the additional reading materials and exercises would still be understandable even when the students study on their own. […] Online learning has put students at a disadvantage and it's my job to compensate for their loss.

S was motivated by a sense of responsibility and a strong commitment to helping his students. He emphasized that he had to be 'more reflective than usual in my online classes'. Through 'minute-by-minute observations' of his own teaching, S was able to gauge his students' understanding and consequently 'tweak the content and teaching method' to better align with their needs. Despite his efforts, S still questioned whether what he did would contribute to his students' learning in a meaningful way.

> I think the reading materials and everything I prepared would help them pass the exams we're using. But was it the most effective way to assess learning now that we're online? Maybe yes if we see learning as memorizing content. Personally, I disagree with this concept and how we handle assessment. The students are here to learn, and learning should be about expressing ideas, not memorizing ideas. I think open-ended questions would be a better tool to tell how students learn.

S also mentioned that he had no control over how learning is assessed at his university. Although there were no formal rules barring teachers from using different assessment methods, S felt that it was unlikely for him to find support from his colleagues even if he had proposed his idea for change. Therefore, he decided to keep the idea to himself.

> We should rethink the assessment method, but we don't have the right setup for that and it's beyond my control. The method of assessment must be the same for all sections. It's about having the same standards for everyone and everything. I can't just do what I want in my section. [...] I can say that most of the course coordinators and the other teachers on the team will dismiss the idea because they don't like to grade papers with long answers. So, I didn't bring it up.

While S acknowledged the importance of maintaining educational standards, he remained convinced that multiple-choice exams were no longer an appropriate tool for assessment in the online learning context. The following comment clearly reflects a conflict between his beliefs and the assessment procedures that were being implemented by his department:

> We are still fixating on making students reproduce textbook content. We tend to assume that if we deviate too far from the book, our students would not be able to pass. The way we teach and assess them didn't make them think. Multiple-choice questions teach them that there's only one correct answer. I think learning is more than that. It's about applying what you know, critiquing it when it doesn't make sense, and arguing for what you believe.

The clash between his ideals and what S perceived as non-negotiable pedagogical requirements in his context appeared to affect his confidence in his ability to create change. This, in turn, resulted in self-doubt expressed in his final interview. Although he regarded online teaching as 'an interesting event that made me think more about my teaching', he still questioned the value of his reflective practice and used the same word 'distressing' to describe the overall experience. Knowing that he could not achieve his ideals on his own, S decided to 'suppress my negative emotions' and 'just do what the syllabus says and get it over with'. He remarked:

> My main responsibility, for now, is to follow the syllabus and the course coordinators' decisions. But that also reduces me to a mere lecture giver, not a real teacher. [...] I have no control over the situation. Even if I'm not happy, I can't change anything on my own. Maybe I reflect too much and now it becomes a bit unhealthy? Maybe I need to stop thinking about it? I tried to do things that I think would help my students, but in the end, I don't think it's any better. [...] It's not just the system (that is constraining). It's the teachers, too. We could have taken the opportunity to rethink things. If we all shared the same goal, we could design our courses and exams to promote real learning. But if we don't share this goal, it won't happen.

S stressed the importance of 'having control' as an essential part of his autonomy in recreating his online classes. Yet, the perceived lack of control and collegial support made him question his own reflective stance and, more worryingly, his professional identity and his ability to learn and grow as a teacher.

DISCUSSION

The present study explores teacher autonomy in the emergency online language teaching (EOLT) context. First, it looks at how two EFL teachers exercised and maintained their autonomy during the sudden transition from face-to-face to online teaching (research question one). Then, it uncovers factors that support and constrain the teachers' pedagogical and professional autonomy (research question two). Both teachers' stories reveal their exercise of teacher autonomy, particularly in the dimensions related to teaching practice and self-directed professional development (McGrath, 2000; Smith & Erdoğan, 2008). Despite their initial confusion, the teachers regarded the transition to EOLT as a valuable learning experience that has led them to critically reflect on their teaching and subsequently take self-initiated actions to support their students' learning. However, their autonomous efforts were also met with several contextual constraints, some of which cannot be easily overcome by their individual actions. This section discusses the findings in relation to the two research questions.

How teachers exercise and maintain their autonomy in the EOLT context

Regarding the first research question, both teachers exercised their autonomy through reflective practice and independent decision-making. J and S were motivated by a strong sense of responsibility to adjust their online lessons and teaching methods to meet their students' needs.

J was aware of her limited practical experience in teaching online and decided early on to develop the skills for online teaching through self-study. She went online to learn new teaching techniques, made quick decisions to adapt her lesson content, and experimented with a new method to assess her students. Similarly, S put in extra effort to gather additional learning resources, carefully monitored his students' reactions, and created new learning materials to be used exclusively in his online classrooms. These self-directed actions are characteristic of teacher autonomy as they reflect the teachers' abilities and willingness to make informed decisions to improve their practices based on their reflective evaluation of what constitutes effective online teaching and learning (Dikilitaş, 2020; McGrath, 2000; Smith & Erdoğan, 2008).

The findings reveal that J seemed to have a lot of freedom to exercise and maintain her autonomy in teaching and assessment. As the only teacher for each course she taught, J had full control over their design and management. This means that she could responsibly experiment with new learning activities in her classes and replace her old assessment method with the new one as soon as she saw its limitations. These decisions were based solely on J's discretion as a teacher. As a result, she was able to closely align her teaching practice to her students' needs and her pedagogical beliefs that online learning should be interactive and engaging. J's ability to implement changes in terms of what to teach and how to assess students' learning is a clear manifestation of her agency and freedom to maintain autonomy in her teaching.

S, on the other hand, had little freedom to manage the courses he taught despite his willingness to do so. As a teacher who taught multi-section courses, S's pedagogical decisions were conditioned by the centralized organizational structure that mandates how teaching and

assessment should be conducted for all sections. S was aware that he had to seek approval from other teachers on his team if he wanted to replace the multiple-choice exam with open-ended questions. Through reflection, he realized that the scope of change was too big for him and decided that it was not possible for him to modify the curriculum design that had already been agreed upon. This kind of change would have been feasible in J's context, where teachers were presumably free to revise course structure, yet it was arguably the main reason S found his online teaching experience 'distressing'. S's expressed ideal that learning is more than reproducing knowledge suggests his transformative view towards education, which according to Vieira et al. (2008), clearly indicates his willingness to take initiatives to empower his students. Ironically, S was the one who felt disempowered in this situation. Although this finding confirms previous studies that reflection helps teachers connect their personal theories to their teaching practices (Farrell & Stanclik, 2021; Hacker & Barkhuizen, 2008), this study presents a different view that reflection may not necessarily lead to self-empowerment.

This study illustrates that teacher autonomy emerges and develops through teachers' personal willingness and ability to take agentic actions. However, teacher autonomy is also socially-mediated as it depends on teachers' ability to negotiate over curriculum design and assessment methods with others (McGrath, 2000). As shown in S's case, institutional regulations which strictly control how learning is assessed can overpower his personal drive for autonomous practice. The perceived lack of freedom to make decisions for his online classes is so discouraging that it started to erode his self-esteem and prevented him from maintaining his autonomy in pursuing his ideals further. Thus, although teacher autonomy is seen as a teacher's capacity to self-direct their own teaching (Smith & Erdoğan, 2008), this capacity has to be developed through the process of teachers constantly balancing the personal and social forces that influence their teaching.

Factors that support and constrain teacher autonomy in the EOLT context

The findings reveal several factors that make online teaching challenging for the two teachers. J was bothered by a lack of classroom interaction and an unstable internet connection, whereas S initially struggled with an increased workload. Nevertheless, the teachers were able to manage these issues and used them to justify their autonomous initiatives to improve their teaching. Their actions demonstrate Lamb and Simpson's (2003, p. 62) conceptualization of teacher autonomy as an active process of teachers 'finding the spaces and opportunities for maneuver'. Yet, J's and S's accounts further illustrate that the extent to which teachers can exercise and maintain autonomy in their teaching is mainly influenced by the nature of their professional relationships with others in their instructional contexts.

La Ganza (2008) viewed teacher autonomy in terms of teachers' professional relationships with others working within and beyond their immediate instructional context (e.g., mentors, learners, supervising or coordinating teachers, and bureaucratic factors). He argued that the quality of these relationships can determine teachers' freedom in teaching and pursuing their ideals. The findings from J's account suggest that she enjoyed supportive working relationships with her students and colleagues. As a teacher with a doctoral degree and extensive teaching experience, J has established herself as a respected member of her department and was trusted

with managing her own courses. Her previous leadership role in supervising teaching practicum meant that she did not have to report to any supervising teachers. J's descriptions of how she could readily adjust her assessment method also suggest that there was minimal institutional interference in her pedagogical choices. Together, these relationships created a conducive space in which J could take full ownership of her courses and feel empowered to exercise and maintain her autonomy in teaching (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2017).

In contrast, S's comment, 'we don't have the right setup for that and it's beyond my control' suggests that the professional relationships he had with others in his context may not have empowered him to exercise his autonomy. S revealed that throughout his five-year career as a university teacher, he had never been involved in any decision-making process at the departmental level. The general English and ESP courses he taught were designed and supervised by a team of course coordinators. To maintain fairness and accountability, the course coordinators decided that every section of these courses needs to use the same assessment method. Their decision became an unspoken rule in S's department – a form of bureaucratic control or external interference that not only weakened S's willingness and ability to voice his concerns but also limited his freedom to exert his autonomy as a teacher (X. Gao, 2018; La Ganza, 2008).

The nature of S's relationships with the course coordinators, in other words, resembles that of supervisors and subordinates, with the former being able to closely monitor and influence the latter's professional practice. This type of relationship can be detrimental to teacher autonomy development because it does not allow teachers to take ownership of their practices or experiment with new approaches to teaching and learning (Nix & Barfield, 2009). Although teachers, in principle, should question the status quo and confront constraints on their teaching (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015; Smith & Erdoğan, 2008), S knew that doing so in his context would invite unnecessary scrutiny from his department which in turn could further undermine his autonomy.

In sum, this study reinforces the view that external factors, such as the need to follow mandated curriculum guidelines strictly and a lack of supportive collegial relationships can limit teacher autonomy (Benson, 2010; X. Gao, 2018). It should be noted, however, that what J and S were experiencing was quite common within Thailand's high power distance culture where teachers' freedom to make professional decisions is partly determined by their educational background, professional experience, and social position (Watson Todd & Darasawang, 2020). The findings further provide additional evidence showing that once the understanding of what can and cannot be accomplished in their teaching context become internalized in teachers' minds, they can turn into self-imposed constraints that make teachers feel powerless and devalued (S: 'But that also reduces me to a mere lecture giver, not a real teacher'). These findings raise an important question of how to foster supportive professional relationships among teachers so that, together, they can overcome both structural and internal constraints and claim more space for autonomy.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study addresses the need for more empirical evidence to deepen our understanding of the complex and multidimensional nature of autonomy in foreign language education. The teachers' accounts offer much-needed insider perspectives on how Thai EFL teachers exercised and maintained their professional autonomy in a challenging time. The findings, although drawn from a small sample size, add a 'unique voice' to the 'multi-vocal territory' of autonomy research (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2020, p. 253) and offer useful recommendations for teacher autonomy development at the collegial and institutional levels.

Echoing the claim made in previous studies (Aoki, 2002; X. Gao, 2018; Hoang, 2018), findings from J's and S' stories first point to the importance of collegial support in teacher autonomy development. S's story, in particular, reveals that centralized bureaucracies and pressure for accountability can reduce teachers' freedom and willingness to be reflective and creative in their teaching. Therefore, there is a need to replace institutional control, particularly in the form of top-down management of teaching and assessment, with teacher collaboration to foster teacher autonomy and encourage creative potential in teachers. For example, teaching staff can form a network of professional support where teachers with similar problems can share their knowledge and experiences, agree on a mutual goal to increase space for pedagogical autonomy, and collectively endorse their goal in department meetings. In such meetings, negotiations need to be made in terms of how teachers can accountably implement their ideas. Teacher collaboration of this kind can have a significant impact on teacher autonomy and teacher development as it encourages teachers to reflect on the context of their teaching, learn from each other, and brainstorm for bottom-up, self-initiated solutions to improve the situation (Aoki, 2003; Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2017). To promote more collaboration, more studies are needed to identify factors in teachers' professional relationships that sustain collaborative practice among teachers and how different types of collaboration can promote teacher autonomy. Provided that teacher autonomy is closely associated with learner autonomy (Little, 1995; Little et al., 2017), further research needs to examine more closely the links between the two constructs and establish how teacher autonomy, or the lack thereof, can impact the quality of students' learning and learner autonomy development.

Secondly, in order to understand how educational institutions can support teacher autonomy, the concept needs to be further investigated from a joint perspective of agents working at different levels of an educational hierarchy. The present study suggests that the powerful others, like the course coordinators in S's case, play an important role in determining how much freedom teachers could have in their practices. Yet, it should be noted that as a part of an educational institution, these powerful others cannot make decisions independently of the rules and regulations that govern the system in which they operate. These findings point to the need for institutions to create more opportunities for individual teachers to reclaim their autonomy by making their voices heard, and for the others in the supervisory roles to clarify the rationales behind their decisions. These opportunities are likely to generate a shared understanding of what teacher autonomy means in a particular context and what autonomous teaching entails for teachers at different organizational levels. Regular meetings or professional development workshops that promote open dialogues among colleagues can increase teacher

involvement in decision-making and curriculum design, which in turn can strengthen teachers' sense of control. This is fertile ground for further research. Studies similar to that of Khalil and Lewis (2019) and Yi (2017) in which teacher autonomy is examined through the perspectives of teacher educators, teachers, and managerial staff will likely generate useful insights into how teachers can transform their workplace into a space for collaborative decision making where teacher autonomy can grow.

The present study captures the process of how two EFL university teachers responded to EOLT and examines it from the perspective of teacher autonomy. Although the new teaching context initially resulted in confusion and increased workloads, these emotional and pedagogical demands did not appear to constrain teacher autonomy. Teacher autonomy in this study was affected by how the teachers relate professionally to others in their working contexts, rather than changes in the mode of instruction. These findings have direct implications for teacher development and research on autonomy in foreign language education as they point to the importance of promoting reflection, negotiation, and collaboration as a part of teachers' career-spanning professional development. This study does not argue for working conditions in which teachers have complete autonomy to do what they want with their classes, nor does it aim to prescribe best practices for teacher autonomy development. Rather, it advocates for collective efforts to create working conditions that value teachers' professional judgment and empower them to use such capacity to effect change within the negotiated framework of their institutions' standards.

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Appendix

Questions for the first interview

1. Please give an overview of your online teaching experience in the previous semester.
2. How is online teaching different from your in-class teaching?
3. Please describe your current online teaching experience and the adjustments you made for this semester (if any). What are the reasons for the adjustments?
4. What are the benefits and drawbacks of online teaching for you and for your students?
5. What do you like and dislike about your online teaching experience?
6. Do you have any other comments or points that you would like to add?

Questions for the final interview

1. Please give an overview of your online teaching experience this semester.
2. Are there any changes in your view about online teaching since the beginning of this semester? How?
3. As a teacher, how does it make you feel?
4. How would you rate your overall online teaching experience this semester?
5. What are the things that you did/ did not do well? What do you think can be done to make your online teaching more effective and successful?
6. What did you learn during your online teaching that you think could benefit your future teaching (online and in class)?
7. Do you have any other comments or points that you would like to add?