

Learner Autonomy: Pakistani English Teachers' Beliefs

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Abstract

The idea of learner autonomy (LA) has been widely referred to in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) for more than three decades. Only limited work has been conducted on the teacher's perception of LA. The present study was conducted to focus on this gap. It investigated Pakistani English university teachers' beliefs about LA. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 16 teachers from four public universities of Punjab. Content analysis informed that majority of teachers had a little familiarity with the concept. Learner autonomy was defined as learner independence in terms of ability or authority to take control of their learning, as the learner's responsibility alone or shared, as a technique and as a process. Teachers' opinion was divided upon the idea of the innate nature of autonomy. However, the majority found autonomy supportive learning environment quite crucial to learner's autonomy. It can be implied that teachers need an awareness of the nature and significance of autonomy in their learners for successful language learning.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, English teachers' perceptions, learner independence, learner responsibility

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Introduction

A body of research has been conducted to investigate the nature of Learner Autonomy (Benson, 2001). Several claims are made on the rationale of LA (Camilleri Grima, 2007; Cotterall, 1995; Palfreyman, 2003) such as it is a human right and it improves language learning and prepares the students for life-long learning by letting them make the best use of learning opportunities. However, researchers found teachers' voices lacking language teachers' perception of LA. This is a significant gap as teachers' beliefs influence their teaching practices. It was intended to address the gap by investigating what exactly 'LA' means to English language teachers working in public universities of Punjab, Pakistan.

Literature Review

The idea and implementation of learner-centred approaches in teaching have been well-established for many decades. Learner as an active individual got recognition in Psychology under the influence of Kelly (1955).

Rather than taking learner as passive being, researchers considered him/her someone who brings previous beliefs, experiences and inclinations to the classroom and who achieves self-development by shaping his or her learning practices actively (Stevick, 1980). In constructivism, the learner is placed in the centre focusing learning process more than the product. Success was considered dependent on the learner's self-awareness of his/her learning and learning management.

Though a great deal of theorizing (see Benson, 2007) was witnessed over the years, the concept of autonomy remained unclear exactly what it means to language instructors at large in different cultures. The earliest and most cited definition of LA is found in Holec's seminal work (1981) as the '*ability to take charge of one's own learning*' where this ability means

'to have and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e. determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.); evaluating what has been acquired' (p. 03).

Later, the term 'ability' was replaced by 'capacity' (Benson, 2013; Little, 1991) and 'right' (Benson, 1997) and Holec's (1981) phrase 'take control of' was understood as learner's responsibility (Dang, 2010). Wang (2014) considered a learner's attitude and ability as kernel key factors to decide LA. Moreover, LA has been theorised from technical, psychological, and political perspectives (Benson, 1997) and, later, from a sociocultural perspective (Oxford, 2003) depending upon different theoretical assumption where a technical perspective centre son the physical settings of learning, a psychological aspect focuses on the mental attributes like motivation; and while a political (or critical)view focuses on the role of control and power, a sociocultural angle highlights the roles of learners' interaction and social participation in fostering learner autonomy. Variation in the use of terminology has been found in five ways as pointed out by Benson and Voller (1997) including situations, a set of skills, an inborn capacity, the exercise of learners' responsibility and learners' freedom of choice. When applied to education, Reinders (2010) argued that learners would be able to take charge of their learning only if they had the freedom to do so. While Yasmin and Sohail (2018a) analysed that learners and teachers usually face barriers like state-governed education policies, fixed curricula and prescribed texts which leave most of the teachers unable to promote autonomy in their learners. It is also established that LA facilitates foreign language learning (Yasmin & Sohail, 2018b) and teachers are the potential agents of any educational reform; hence, their role in LA development is vital (Yasmin et. al. 2017; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018c).

Research Question

1. What does 'LA' mean to English language teachers in Pakistani universities?
2. How far Pakistani English university teachers consider 'LA' innate?

Method

Following an interpretive paradigm, researchers adopted a qualitative approach to examine the meaning of participants attached to the concept of LA.

Participants and Context

With a target population consisting of regular English teachers of 20 public universities of Punjab, present study selected a sample of 16 teachers (MI, AP, SJ, MA, KN, RJ, JJ, ZK, IG, SH, SM, MN, RM, SS, SB, FM) from four public sector universities including Punjab University Lahore (PU), Government College University Lahore (GC), University of Gujrat (UOG) and University of Education (UE). The selection of universities was made on the criterion of being the old and new institutions whereas selection of teachers was made on the basis of their academic background in literature or language and their teaching experience.

Method of Data Collection

Participants' views were explored through semi-structured interviews where order and wording of questions were kept flexible to make the flow of interview smooth as suggested by Bailey (2007). Interview questions were identified based on relevant literature on LA. Prior to the interview process, participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of research and that they could leave the process when they want. The ethical form also made it clear that the data would be used for research purposes only. Further, pseudonyms were used instead of their original names to ensure confidentiality. Each interview was an individual face-to-face interaction recorded in a duration of 40-60 minutes which was later transcribed.

Method of Data Analysis

An inductive approach of constant comparison analysis was followed to analyze the data thematically (Creswell, 2003). Multiple readings of the transcribed data led to breaking up the text into codes (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) which were later reduced to themes. Despite the prevailing major themes informed through literature, coding was kept open so that pre-determined sets of categories might not influence the analysis and resulting categorization reflect the reality as was perceived by participants. Interpretation of results involved a thick description of participants' views linked to literature. Following suggestion of Lincoln and Guba (1985) different strategies like sending transcriptions back to participants for verification of truthfulness of data and including rich verbatim descriptions of participants' views were employed to ensure trustworthiness, credibility and objectivity. A review of existing codes and the codes derived in the present study are elaborated in table 1.

Table 1

A review of existing codes and codes emerged in the present study

Sr. No.	Common Codes	Themes emerged in the present study
1	Unawareness about the concept	Unawareness about the concept
2	Learner independence	Learner's ability to be independent
3		Learner's power to be independent
4	Learner's responsibility	Responsibility shared with the teacher
5		LA is a strategy
6		LA is a process of development
7		LA is innate

Results and Discussion

When participants were asked about the nature of LA, their perceptions revolved around three major themes. The themes emerged from data included familiarity with the concept, the definition of LA, and the role of the environment.

Familiarity with Concept

When participants were asked whether they had ever heard about the term LA, participants came up with mixed opinion and majority show either lack of familiarity or recent acquaintance with the term. Three of them (MI, RM, MA) expressed an earlier familiarity with the term, nine respondents informed that they came across the term recently while three (FM, RJ, SH) were not aware of the term earlier and heard it for the first time when interviewer sent them a brief literature on the subject.

A majority of participants heard about the term and concept during their study as MA learnt about it from an article during M.Phil, RM learned about it from Vygotsky's (1978) work and also in reference to teaching method. MN mentioned that though she heard about the concept from her teacher while discussing teaching method "*but I don't think that I am very confident about the exact terminological meaning of the term but I can just understand what learners' autonomy can stand for*". One participant came across the term in a recent session on professional development conducted by British Council. Other five participants learnt about the concept during their teaching profession where JJ pointed out that he might be familiar with the concept and not the term exactly while SJ cautioned that TEFL context informs about LA, "but as far as the public sector is concerned this term seems to be like a cry in the wilderness". Perhaps, for this reason, most of the participants from literature background either showed unawareness (FM, SH, RJ) as FM shared, "*Actually I have never heard of that term before you mentioned it in our last meeting... Afterwards I went home and I did some research and tried to understand what it actually means and what is the significance for a learner to be autonomous*" or got familiarity with concept behind which they learned from others like SB who learnt it from researcher or SM who got acquaintance with the term during a workshop where resource person was discussing learners of today.

Definition of LA

Despite theorising over the years, the concept of autonomy carries diverse interpretations in different cultures. Holec (2008) felt that issues related to the concept of LA were resolved and Sinclair's suggested 13 aspects were pronounced settled among language teachers. Borg and Busaidi (2012) argued in their study that such consensus in literature didn't guarantee any analogous understanding among language teachers and some of the pronouncements might appear questionable to these teachers. English language teachers' perceptions about the concept of LA were investigated and researchers came up with seven themes depending upon participants' understanding.

Independence in Terms of Learner Ability. A majority of participants ($N=9$) held this view that LA is a learner's attribute. They theorised it on Holec's (1981) line that LA is learner's ability to take charge of his/her own learning. One participant SS explained what an autonomous learner means to her in terms of what 'ability' was termed by Holec (1981), and this 'ability' was translated by SS in the same vein when she explained what an autonomous learner means to her, "when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation". A learner's ability to learn on their own was agreed by most of participants and RM, FM, MA, JJ, RJ emphasised on independent action without any external support. Their focus on independence recalls individualistic overtones of some researchers (reference needed). RM stated, "*they should be able to handle the situations where external help might not be available and they should be able to get through those difficult situations through their own resources*", whereas FM defined it as learner's, "*ability to critically analyse things on his own and it also gives him some decision making power and lastly and most importantly independent action. He can independently act on his own will and adapt the direction of learning and method of a learning a language according to his own interests*". Another participant, MA, also supported learner independence with less dependence on teacher, teaching material and traditional teaching context. JJ went further that autonomous learner have an ability to achieve their targets and , first, he limited teacher's role by illustrating example, "*there are many things in the classroom especially at university level we teach them, there are so many things that are left as well and we don't feel that our students should be bound with spoon-feeding*", and then he felt that teachers' role should be minimized maximally, "*they (should) try getting the things with their experiences, with challenges they fight themselves without the intervention of teachers*". RJ's notion of independence of learner excluded external human support only and for her learner has an ability to find sources to help him/herself.

Six participants defined it as the ability to learn independently, three participants contradicted in terms of the level of independence. SH agreed with LA as learner's ability to think and do on their own but he placed this exercise of independence within established learning context and negated complete freedom and termed LA as, "*the ability of student that how much space they able to create within the learning environment ... It's not entirely autonomous, it's not entirely guided, somewhere in between autonomous and guided*". Another participant SM also supported this view by equating LA with an active response to teaching. SM held learners' personal reflection as an important process of autonomous learning. These perceptions relate autonomy with humanist approaches where learner was actively engaged in shaping learning experiences (Stevick, 1980).

Besides ability, RM considered attitude as the kernel of LA when stressed the need of learner to be motivated, "*They should be sufficiently motivated to learn*". This reminds how Wang considered these two factors central to autonomy. While Holec's term ability implies many features found in characteristics of 'good language learner' and self-motivation was one of them (Naiman et al., 1978). Reinders (2010) found learners quite unlikely to take control in absence of some degree of motivation.

Learner's Responsibility. Two participants FM and RM defined LA in terms of learner's exercise of responsibility as was advocated by Little (1991). FM attached an exercise of responsibility to learner where he/she would be free to determine the direction of learning but at the same time would be liable for consequent learning process, "*a lot of responsibility lies upon the shoulders for their own learning because if they fail to choose a proper direction or proper method of learning then they are basically responsible for their own demise*".

Independence in Terms of Power to Decide. Like learning element, however, LA includes the idea of learners' freedom of choice which is a relative political aspect. Practically learners would not be able to take charge of their learning or make choices or direct their learning the way they like if they are restricted by certain factors i.e. government educational policies, prescribed curriculum and teaching material. Six participants SB, FM, SS, KN, IG, MN defined LA in terms of independence in making decisions.

FM, for instance, related LA to autonomy in general in terms of freedom and liberty where everyone has a right to choose when he defined LA as, “*a person’s ability to be free, a person’s liberty and LA is, therefore, a person’s ability to make decisions for his own learning*”. He placed the right or power at the centre of LA and which means “*to have the power to direct himself in his own way of learning ... a learner’s capacity to detach himself from the bonds of the typical educational environment and it gives a critical reflection*”. Thus, his concept denounced any support a learner may need from others and reflected an ideal learner who would be well-prepared to take charge of the learning process. It may be argued whether such an ideal-self exist in a culture where traditional teacher-centric teaching is in practice. FM’s point of view here contravenes the statement made by SH who denied a complete detachment from the learning environment. KN and IG supported the stance of FM that the autonomy of learners was their freedom to experiment to devise suitable ways of learning for them. IG views teachers’ contribution in the form of feedback only whereas KN restricted teachers’ role inside as well as outside the class.

Other participants like SB MN and ZK associated learner capability for different tasks with freedom of choice as it appeared ability of a learner alone was not sufficient to be a successful autonomous learner if freedom of action was prohibited. SB explained her notion of learner capability and her use of word ‘can’ referring to learners’ right or power of making decisions actually rather than learner’s ability in psychological dimension, “*learners themselves are capable of setting goals, they can go for choosing the material-mean they have liberty to choose the material what they want; they can set tasks ..., they monitor themselves ... they can evaluate themselves more*”. Capacity to learn collocates with learner freedom in the perceptions of some other participants also. MN combined learners’ psychological ability to its political dimension when she said, “*learner’s own capacity and the learner’s own freedom to understand and learn the things the way which he or she finds plausible and possible and, you know, feasible*”. Likewise, ZK defined LA as learner’s ability of choice but suggested the provision of the power of choice for him to actualize LA. He like the majority of participants pronounced teachers’ role as facilitator, “*There shouldn’t be any input from the teacher’s side*”.

Sharing Responsibility. While a majority of participants perceived LA as the independence of external support whether it be in the form of teachers, few participants defined it as learners’ action within the established institutional culture, one participant AP termed LA as equal sharing of responsibility of learning process between learner and teacher. Unlike others defining it as learner independence, he termed it as co-learning; autonomy in life and autonomy in the classroom, according to him, were two different concepts. AP defines LA as:

“(autonomy is) sharing responsibility, it is not independence in the strict sense of the term, we never take it like that in the classroom and see, what a learner knows about the subject?... It is the teacher who will lead... would initiate, would remind, will oversee the whole processes, will give feedback, tell the student that this is the direction, this is the channel that you will follow.”

He viewed teacher autonomy as a pre-requisite of LA and perceived it a teachers' role to make learner responsible for the learning process.

LA as a Strategy/ Technique. One participant perceived LA as a strategy to develop positive attitude in learner for successful learning. SJ called it, “a wonderful term, a strategy, a technique which may help not only in the development of positive attitude but it also aids in the refinement of skills and analytical capacities which ultimately flourish quality learning and nurtures lifelong learning”.

LA as a Process. Besides taking LA as a technique, SJ defined LA as a continuum where the learner's ultimate objective is to become successful in practical life as she called it “a journey from formal to experiential learning”.

LA as an Innate Capacity. Autonomy, as Candy (1988) considered, is an innate capacity of the individuals which may be suppressed by institutional education. This perception is debatable as Holec himself never pronounced it innate but his focus on the psychological aspect made many consider it as inborn capacity as was noticed by Benson and Voller (1997). Sinclair (2000) held that the view that capacity for LA is not necessarily innate is well established among language teachers. All participants of the present study except two (RJ, ZK) delineated LA as the innate capacity to some extent. MI considered LA an innate ability to a large extent and illustrated his own example focusing on a curiosity-a common characteristic of autonomous learners:

“Frankly speaking no discredit to my teachers, but I have learnt very few things from my teachers during my student life. I was such kind of curious learner so I would read more about things... some people are naturally curious. They like to be independent and they want to learn of their own choice”.

While explaining how LA could be referred as innate, SJ elucidated the connection between intrinsic motivation and LA as she said, “*the intrinsic motivation is connected to this innate factor. If a learner is intrinsically motivated, then he will always be ready to take initiatives*”.

It should be noted here that few participants perceived innateness as synonymous with the individual difference in some inborn qualities while others agreed upon a sense that an inborn attribute is present in all human beings. This view goes with learning which is innate in all humans and human beings may vary in degree of autonomy as SB related LA to learning that *“learning is a human trait... To me, LA is very much present in the learner, and SM related LA to different levels learners can achieve, “everyone has a capacity to discover this autonomy if given them right circumstances and the right facilitating teacher. It will be fluctuating as ... every person comes from a different background with different conditioning so it will be at a different level in every person”*. It goes with a description of LA by Esch (1998) and Sinclair (2000) who considered LA as a matter of degree which is unstable and variable. Sinclair's statement suggests that learners with a traditional teaching background can achieve a higher degree of autonomy if provided with the autonomy-supportive environment. Furthermore, learners may also vary in autonomy depending on the kind of task i.e. some may have autonomous nature for a certain kind of task and not for other.

While the perception of a majority of participants supported the views of previous researchers that though LA is innate but it can be fostered through training by parents or teachers, yet five participants disagree with LA as a universal feature in all human beings. Participants like SS, MA, AP, SH, JJ called innateness in terms of individual difference which may exist in some and not in others as AP expressed, *“To some extent we can relate it with innateness in the sense that he(learner) thinks that this is the natural way this is the instinctive way that I can prefer to learn... this is the difference between styles and strategies. Styles are your natural preferences”*, while strategies, he explained with the example of the military, are learned and followed to attain a certain goal. In this vein, he concluded that a non-autonomous learner would not be able to utilize their natural instinct *“we can say that student is deprived of that kind of innate property of it and that can never come through training”*. Similarly, MA considered it a part of the personality that varies from person to person as he said, *“the type of learner is concerned, extrovert-introvert, that is perhaps innate if you ask me,...It's difficult for the teacher to work on that aspect of their personality”*. With the same view of LA as inborn capacity and only a few are gifted with, SS presented the situation of Pakistani learners for whom teacher's encouragement and effort to build confidence in learners is significant, *“There are a very few learners in Pakistan who have innate capability of being autonomous. A learner would be more autonomous if he has, even a small amount of, the innate capability of being autonomous and with it if he found such environment both at home and institute”*. While IG felt that if LA is considered innate in all learners, it remains dormant in most Pakistani learners as they are quite shy. Two participants explicitly negated the idea of innateness in LA. RJ and ZK believed that LA is learned by learners and developed by teachers or institution. ZK shared his own observation, *“It can't be innate. Like there are people who are submissive and want to live submissive throughout their lives”*.

Role of Environment

Despite the lack of consensus on the innateness of LA, it is also a fact that researchers agree that language learners can foster a capability for autonomy in them (Benson, 2001; Candy, 1991; Nunan, 1996). Approaches to developing LA emphasise on supporting learners to take control through learner training by developing meta cognitive strategies (Benson & Lor, 1998, p. 4; White, 2003, p. 149). Sinclair in her survey review (1999) autonomy as a capacity for taking charge of one's own learning which (capacity) needs to be developed through reflection and learner training by a teacher or a counsellor. Participants (SJ, RM, SS, KN, JJ, IG, SH) also understood that learners' experiences with social or cultural factors may promote or inhibit the growth of autonomous characteristics. All participants viewed that LA can be harnessed through meaningful learning experiences which can be influenced by parents, institution or teacher (Nakata, 2009). A learner's immediate environment starts at home and parents were held responsible in creating an autonomous supportive environment from the very early age of a child as SS related LA positively with "*amount of confidence given by parents at home and then by teachers*". In absence of autonomy-supportive environment, SH believed, any innate ability would be of no use.

Role of the teacher was also emphasized by many (KN, RJ, SJ, MA, FM, RM, SS). FM translated Holec's definition of LA as an innate ability and considered it important for teachers to understand that each child possessed ability and teachers would have to trust them for better learning. SJ called autonomy a matter of "*nature as well as nurture. This nurturing can be carried out by the teacher by placing learners in multitasking scenarios while providing them maximum opportunity to work for them, in their own way.* She considered learning process a shared goal between teacher and learner, "*Both teachers and learners can play a constructive role in becoming autonomous... by being in a bond of trust and in an environment where nurturing of creative potential as well as analytical and critical thinking skills can be made possible*". Hence, both, teachers as well as learners will have to recognize the responsibility to gear the wheel of learning. Teaching has a potential of bringing change in learners as RM described, "*good study habits can actually be developed by the schools and universities that they study in, ...and by the teachers themselves..., how they motivate them, how they make them do things on their own*". Another participant MA strongly believed that teacher can create such a classroom environment "*where students can develop confidence in communicating with the teacher, with other fellows... where students ... can find an opportunity to learn a language on their own through their cooperation with other learners*". Without effective teaching, LA in the majority of Pakistani learners might remain dormant as IG termed as "*they are shy or they don't have the confidence to actually exercise their autonomy or freedom*".

Discussion

Researchers found a diversity of perceptions of English teachers about LA. Despite Holec's (2008) and Sinclair's claim of the settlement of the definitional issue, still, the term is conceptualised in various ways. Teachers' perceptions mentioned above support Borg and Busaidi's (2012) argument that consensus in literature cannot guarantee an analogous understanding of LA among teachers. It might be argued here that this variety of shades in the meaning of LA is due to a lack of understanding about the concept. None of the participants learnt about LA fully during academic or professional life. Except for three participants who showed earlier familiarity with the concept, rest of them only heard about the term either through their teacher, colleague, or researcher during this interview process or resource person during the workshop. Neither of participants ever learnt about the concept in depth. A similar finding from Vietnam (Nguyen, 2014) informed that teachers in Asia are not well aware of the concept even while using some strategies like projects for evaluation, they are unaware of its significance in promoting autonomy.

The notion of independence carried two semantic shades. Half of the participants considered it an ability to learn without support while other half took it as the freedom to take control of their own learning and found it essential along with capacity like Frieire (1996) who takes autonomy as the learners' capacity and freedom to construct and reconstruct the taught knowledge.

Independence without external support echoes the individualistic tones found in previous studies also (Borg & Busaidi, 2012), and it shows that misconception related to LA taken as synonymous to self-study where teachers' intervention is considered detrimental (Esch, 1998) still persist as was also vocalized by some researchers recently (Martinez, 2008; Benson, 2009; Nguyen, 2014). This individualistic tone along with teachers' emphasis on the psychological and political dimensions of LA shows that interdependence as a social dimension of LA was not considered important or ignored by a large majority.

Like some participant teachers of Nguyen's study (2014), one participant of the present research also viewed LA as a process which enables the learner to perform independently in practical life. LA was also considered by one participant as a strategy. These results are similar to those of Benson and Voller (1997: 1-2) in which they pointed out the use of the term in five ways a decade before: a situation in which learners learn on their own, as a set of skill which can be helpful in making one self-directed, as an inborn capacity which in many cases might be suppressed by institutional practices, as a right of learner, as an exercise of learner's responsibility. After a decade, this variety in the use of term still recurs.

Participants viewed LA as innate capacity either as a shared common phenomenon in all humans or gifted to only a few but all of them agreed that LA can be promoted and enhanced through multiple factors. Learners' home environment, classroom context, institutional culture, educational policies impact their mode of learning. Here, the most important factor is the fact that how much "the learner himself is resilient against all these sociological odds" as was pronounced by MN with apprehension about her learners who do not possess that resilience.

Conclusion

It is intended to explore Pakistani teachers' perceptions about the concept of LA. The reported insights into their beliefs are a valuable addition to existing literature as, despite a plethora of research on LA for last more than 30 years, little attention was paid to the sense teachers make about LA. In absence of such insight into teachers' understanding of the notion, it would be hard to plan or encourage Pakistani teachers to integrate LA into their practices.

Teachers' perception depicted a lack of familiarity with the concept and a diverse opinion over the concept of LA as being an innate feature, learners' ability to work independently, having the power to take independent decisions regarding their learning, a strategy, individual responsibility or a sharing of responsibility. Present findings indicate that unlike to earlier researchers' settlement over theoretical aspect and definitional issue, Pakistani teachers conceptualize the term in various ways.

Recommendations

It is implied from present results that learning environment has a potential to influence the autonomy in learners either by impeding or catalysing learner abilities. As participants lack an understanding regarding LA, researchers recognize a need for a rigorous professional development of teachers to create awareness and develop teacher as well as teaching autonomy in them. It is recommended here to train teachers before and during their service. Furthermore, it is suggested that management policies regarding pedagogy should be revised.

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