

EFL Learner Autonomy: Iranian University Instructors' Beliefs vs. Actual Practices¹

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Abstract

During the past few decades, creating autonomy in language learners has been considered as a milestone in the success of language learning programs. Most of EFL/ESL teachers apparently do not belittle the significance of autonomous learning because adding to one's knowledge is the learners' duty. However, knowing how many teachers value this concept and take practical steps to promote it in class is equally important. The answer to this question would result in understanding the differences between teacher beliefs and teacher practices regarding the fostering of autonomous learning in the class. To learn these issues, the present mixed-methods study made use of a questionnaire in the quantitative phase, and open-ended questions along with interviews to serve as the qualitative data. Analysis of the data indicates all teachers acknowledge the significance and necessity of promoting autonomy for learners in EFL classes. However, the quantitative data reveal a statistically significant difference between what they believe in and what they actually do in practice. The qualitative data also indicates that such a difference exists and suggests that it is caused by students' passive learning styles and low levels of motivation and the pressure that the teaching demands place on the teachers. Several implications are provided regarding how EFL teachers can foster autonomy for learners in their teaching process.

Resumen

Durante las últimas décadas, la creación de autonomía en los estudiantes de idiomas se ha considerado un hito en el éxito de los programas de aprendizaje de idiomas. La mayoría de los profesores de ELE no menosprecian la importancia del aprendizaje autónomo porque aumentar el conocimiento es un deber de los alumnos. Sin embargo, saber cuántos profesores valoran este concepto y toman medidas prácticas para promoverlo en clase es igualmente importante. La respuesta a esta pregunta resultaría en la comprensión de las diferencias entre las creencias del docente y las prácticas del docente en cuanto al fomento del aprendizaje autónomo en el aula. Para conocer estos temas, el presente estudio de métodos mixtos hizo uso de un cuestionario en la fase cuantitativa y preguntas abiertas junto con entrevistas que sirvieron como datos cualitativos. El análisis de los datos indica que todos los profesores reconocen la importancia y la necesidad de promover la autonomía de los estudiantes en las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera. Sin embargo, los datos cuantitativos revelan una diferencia estadísticamente significativa entre lo que creen y lo que realmente hacen en la práctica. Los datos cualitativos también indican que tal diferencia existe y sugiere que es causada por el aprendizaje pasivo de los estudiantes y los bajos niveles de motivación y la presión que las demandas de enseñanza ejercen sobre los profesores. Se proporcionan varias implicaciones con respecto a cómo los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera pueden fomentar la autonomía de los alumnos en su proceso de enseñanza.

Introduction

Since the mid 1990's, autonomous learning has been considered as a major factor in the process of language learning. Numerous studies (e.g., Benson, 2011; Lamb, 2008; Little, 2004; Sinclair, 2008; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Ushioda, 1996, 2011) have focused on the concept of autonomous learning. Owing to the range and variety in the very notion of autonomous learning, several different definitions have been provided. Despite the complex nature of the concept, the different definitions suggested for autonomy in learning share a number of features: control and responsibility of the learners regarding the mastering process (Holec, 1981), which includes the recognition of useful learning strategies (Oxford, 2003), the existence of some dominance over contents to be learnt and the processes of learning (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003), and the realization and understanding of the purposes of learning (Benson, 2011). Nevertheless, the areas where there still is a need for further scrutiny are in the degrees of autonomy which are expected to be reached, and the different kinds (versions) of learner autonomy (Benson, 2007).

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Autonomous learning can be seen in two main areas: 1) after the class time (e.g., distance learning, extensive reading, self-access) and 2) during the class time (e.g., students sharing their ideas on materials selection or defining learning goals). The second area, which concerns in-class autonomy promotion, may only be achieved through the teachers' teaching methods, and these methods are affected by the ideas the teachers have about what language teaching is and how it is supposed to be carried out. Most EFL instructors do not deny or oppose the promotion of learner autonomy (Almusharraf, 2020; Nurfigah, 2020; Yuzulia, 2019). However, it may be wondered how far language instructors value autonomy, how much weight they give to the implementation of autonomy-producing practices in their classes, and if they believe and act differently regarding the importance of fostering autonomy for learners in the classes they teach. The current research aims to find answers to these questions.

To sum up, the present study has three main purposes. The first is to investigate EFL university instructors' ideas about fostering autonomous learning in the classroom. The second is to understand what these instructors do to engage students in teaching tasks that promote autonomous learning. And the third is to investigate whether there is a divergence in what the instructors believe in and the actual teaching practices in class regarding the promotion of learner autonomy, and if there is such a difference, to find the reasons.

Review of Related Literature

Autonomous Learning

Most of research studies conducted on learner autonomy indicate that autonomy is necessary in EFL/ESL classrooms, and there are many reasons for this necessity. For example, higher degrees of autonomy yield a larger amount of control over the learning process (Ushioda, 2011). Such control is observed in how a learner assesses her/his language needs, evaluates her/his several step-by-step learning stages, tries to tackle problems, searches for resources which help learning, and learns about necessary strategies of learning to name a few (Benson, 2011). All such steps will result in creating a sense of responsibility in the learners who will be more successful in learning a second or foreign language (Holec, 1981). This success is also believed to exist in the relationship between L2 motivation and learner autonomy and has been pointed out and illustrated in studies by Ushioda (1996), Spratt et al. (2002), and Khonamri, et al. (2020).

The results of these studies revealed that the relationship between learner autonomy and motivation works in both directions, varying in different stages of a learners' progress, and in their lives in general. Motivation itself is dynamic and over the course of a learner's studies, it can shift in form and strength (Ushioda, 1996, Green, 1999). The emergence of rich multi-faceted motivation models has also been reported (e.g., Dörnyei, 1994; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). These depart from the integrative/instrumental or intrinsic/extrinsic bipolar models. They also involve certain elements such as initiative, goals, and self-determination, which are generally considered to be part of autonomy. Depending on the sort of motivation involved, the relationship between motivation and autonomy could be complex and work in different directions. We should not presume that the relation between autonomy and motivation is generally one in which motivation is led by autonomy (Spratt et al., 2002).

In a more recent study (Tilfarlioglu & Ciftci, 2011) of more than 180 EFL learners, it was found that there is a strong connection between self-efficacy, which is an indicator of motivation, and learner autonomy. The conclusion of the research study said that autonomous learning and self-efficacy positively influence success in academic life by providing a foundation for human motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment. Learner autonomy can serve as a diagnostic tool in its relationship with academic success. Take the role of the ability to identify one's own weaknesses. For example, more autonomous learners, who are more capable of identifying their learning problems and making up for them, will definitely remove the barriers ahead of them more often and in a shorter time in comparison with less autonomous individuals who always have to wait for some instructor, teacher or outsider to recognize their weaknesses and try to find them practical solutions. Thus, self-efficacy and autonomy in academic issues will both save the learners' time and give them a positive sense of well-being, since being told that you have problems is a bit depressing, identifying and solving your problems yourself does not require anyone other than yourself to intrude into your personal issues. In essence, there is general agreement among researchers regarding the significance of autonomy for learners since it helps foster motivation, and consequently makes it easier for language learners to succeed in their academic activities (Ushioda, 2011).

Although there is a wide range of literature on studies about the benefits of autonomous learning, there are only few on teacher beliefs regarding autonomous learning and the consequent roles in developing autonomy among learners (Dam, 2003). Neglecting teacher beliefs and the resulting effects on autonomy promotion has continued until recent times, and as some researchers have mentioned, ideas and attitudes of language teachers regarding the meaning of learner autonomy have not been considered sufficiently (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2011). Voller (1997) believes that teachers have three roles to play to promote autonomous learning: 1) facilitators who provide support; 2) counsellors who bring one-to-one interaction; 3) resources who provide knowledge and skills. Further expanding on these three, Dam (2003) provided clear examples of the abilities of teachers in class times: provide learners with suitable and various activities so that the learners can choose from, introduce different ways by which learners can monitor how they proceed in learning, and encourage decisions and choices made by learners throughout their learning process.

However, how far the instructors believe in the effectiveness of such roles and activities should be investigated. Do the teachers' ideas about learner's autonomy necessarily mean that the teachers take practical steps in their classes? The following section explores the connection between what teachers believe and what practical steps they actually take in the classrooms more deeply.

Teacher Beliefs and Practical Measures

There has been much research on teacher beliefs in second language acquisition in the last two decades (e.g., Borg, 2003; Brown, 2009; Busch, 2010; Chaochang, 2016; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003; Kubanyiova, 2009). The divergence between beliefs and actual practical measures is a sub-area of this area of research, and the present investigation also focuses on this very topic. Many seminal research studies on teacher beliefs in language teaching have been linked to Borg. Phipps & Borg (2009) elaborate on the significance of teacher beliefs concerning teaching and learning:

1. They powerfully affect pedagogical decisions.
2. It is possible for them to be firmly-rooted and difficult to change.
3. They may not emerge in teachers' practical measures. (p. 381)

The same research project (Phipps & Borg, 2009), which mainly focused on grammar-related teaching ideas and practices of teachers, revealed that most teachers put into practice only a portion of their personal beliefs during the class time because of their students' expectations and preferences, as well as matters concerning classroom management. An example of a case where student expectations block the teachers' beliefs from being carried out is the situation in which students oppose working on a passage the teacher has found useful because they dislike its topic. As for classroom management issues, a teacher might avoid a pair work activity they find constructive because of the mismatch between the students' age and the task topic.

The study also found that positive experiences of teaching have a key role to play in what the teachers do in class. Many teachers update their knowledge on theoretically supported teaching methods, but when those methods are implemented while leaving the teachers without any sort of positive and successful experience, the methods only stay in the teachers' mind as idealist theory. Instead, they might choose to make use of methods which they themselves have tested and found them to be useful and constructive.

Other studies (Chan, 2003; Lai et al., 2013; Melvina & Suherdi, 2019) found similar results concerning the teachers' preparedness to practice implementing autonomous learning during class time. Lai et al. (2013) found that the general attitude of teachers toward self-directed learning is positive. Chan (2003) found the same situation: Most instructors believe in the importance of autonomous learning, even though they still prefer giving dominance to the teacher in the learning process. This reduces the students' share in learning control issues. The researchers concluded that specific limitations in the academic environment in some areas like Hong Kong where there is heavy pressure to study, the environment may hinder the development of autonomous learning in class. Hong Kong's education system is examination-oriented and highly competitive. A more didactic and expository style of instruction is reinforced by the evaluation system, covering both school-based and public examinations. The tradition of teacher-centered and didactic styles of learning has a profound impact on the learning of students. This recapitulates the notion stated by Borg (2003) which said specifying context-related factors and reasons which result in the divergence between teacher beliefs and teacher actions is of primary importance if we aim at knowing more about this phenomenon.

Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) found that in Saudi Arabia, most college English language instructors accepted student self-rule as a significant and alluring objective. However, they did not succeed in advancing it during class time. The reasons mentioned concerned factors relating to the curriculum (time pressure on the teachers), to culture (ignoring students' self-rule by putting the learning load on the students' shoulders), and other student-related factors (students expecting the teacher to do the job and just relaxing during class time). Such results were also found in Borg and Al-Busaidi (2011).

Comparative outcomes were likewise present in Japan. An investigation of Japanese EFL secondary teachers (Nakata, 2011) indicated that there is inconsistency between educators' perspectives on the significance of self-sufficiency and their usage of class activities that help autonomous learning. The investigation presumes that because of the cultural/social setting, secondary school Japanese EFL teachers are not prepared to advance autonomous learning in their classes, although the instructors completely comprehend the significance of doing so. At present, there is a dominant conventional culture in the Japanese exam-oriented educational setting, where the judicious mind is valued (i.e., "being taught" involving imitation, listening, reading, and remembering) (Nakata, 2011).

Another investigation (Bullock, 2011) in the Ukrainian setting detailed comparative outcomes, where the author inferred that educators' general perspectives to student self-evaluation were positive, yet the actual practice caused problems. The issues related to usage might be the consequence of classroom management issues like losing control over the class, learners' perspectives, such as not taking the activity seriously, or deficient time and teacher support.

A report from China (Wang & Wang, 2016) demonstrated similar issues, too. The discoveries suggested that most EFL instructors comprehended the features and significance of student independence, yet in reality it was restrained by different contextual difficulties regarding learners (such as an unwillingness to take over responsibility), instructors (such as their concerns about a lack of time), the institution (such as not wishing to allow teachers to change methods), and also because of the Chinese culture, which regards teachers as providers of knowledge, and considers student independence to be an unusual switch of responsibility.

Even though empirical investigations of student autonomy in language classes are few, there have been related investigations in other areas. Chen (2008) investigated why secondary school teachers do not actualize activities that mirror their beliefs regarding reading technology implementation. Chen found that although educators believe in the significance of integrating technology, few of them practiced those ideas in class. This disparity was the consequence of an absence of adequate guidance, an absence of sufficient time and expert assistance with respect to implementation procedures. The author claims that all members revealed elevated degrees of like-mindedness on constructivist ideas, however teaching was still teacher-centered and based on lecturing, and their use of technology only promoted this kind of teaching.

Liu (2011) did similar research with over 1,000 elementary school teachers investigating their ideas about learner-centered instruction and the degree to which they made use of technological tools in learner-centered teaching. The outcomes showed that there were clashes between educators' opinions and what they do in class. The two investigations – one using a qualitative technique with a smaller sample of secondary teachers, while the other utilizing quantitative instruments with over 1,000 samples – recognized differences between instructors' beliefs on the necessity of integrating technology during class time and the teachers' actions in class. It is not illogical to assume that similar contrasts could similarly exist in EFL classes and it is necessary to see whether such conflicts really occur and if they do, to investigate the causes and identify recommendations for actualizing developments.

Research Questions

Three research questions gave direction to the present study:

1. *To what extent do EFL instructors at the university believe in the benefits of autonomous learning?*
2. *How much do these EFL instructors implement practical measures for fostering autonomous learning in the classes they teach?*
3. *Are there any disparities between the EFL instructors' convictions and their real practical measures? Assuming this is the case, what are the reasons for them?*

Research Methodology

Research Design

The present research study investigated Iranian EFL instructors' beliefs and actual performances with respect to advancing student autonomy in university classrooms. In so doing, this study applied a sequential mixed-methods design which gathers quantitative data before qualitative.

While the quantitative data was appropriate to get insights on the instructors' beliefs on autonomous learning and the potential divergences between their convictions and actual practical measures, the limitations of quantitative information, as Muijs (2004) clarifies, makes it is hard to get to a more profound comprehension of processes and contextual variations. To supplement the quantitative part, qualitative data was utilized to explain richer and more intricate discoveries from various points of view. A sequential mixed-methods design is applied when subsequent qualitative data is needed to expand, clarify, or affirm prior quantitative outcomes.

Participants

Participants were EFL instructors at a language university in Tehran. All of them were teaching one to three general English courses while the investigation was being carried out. In addition to teaching at university, the teachers were also teaching at various private language institutes and had a minimum of five years of experience at their various institutes. All of them had taken part in at least one comprehensive teacher training course before they started their jobs as EFL teachers. Most of the instructors had also had at least three years of experience teaching the courses at university and therefore had enough experience in EFL instruction at university. All the teachers were from Iran and could speak English fluently. The instructors who took part in the quantitative phase were selected through simple random sampling, while those in the qualitative phase were chosen through purposive sampling, up to the data saturation point, where no new information or themes could be observed in the data.

Instruments and procedures

To gather the quantitative information, a questionnaire was used which was especially designed for psychological constructs (e.g., teacher beliefs, learning strategies, and motivation to learning) (Brown, 2001). Since the purpose of this research was to investigate EFL instructors' convictions and self-revealed classroom performances, a survey is most suitable for providing valuable insights for the author and allowing them to operationalize these constructs (Ruel et al., 2015).

The process of data collection included two stages – collecting the quantitative data (the questionnaire) and collecting the qualitative data (the semi-structured interviews). The questionnaire included questions with Likert-type scales as well as open-ended questions. The objective of using this instrument was to investigate how instructors viewed the function of autonomous learning and how much action they take to help promote and help student autonomy. A pilot of the questionnaire was used with ten instructors (other than the participants) in October, 2017 to measure reliability. The Cronbach's alpha values were determined to evaluate the reliability and consistency of the closed-ended questions. Items with values under .80 were eliminated; the rest of the questions in the final version all came to or surpassed .85. In January, 2017, 54 copies of the questionnaire were given to EFL instructors in the South Tehran Branch of the Islamic Azad University in Iran, 31 of which were completed and returned to the researcher.

The second part of the research included classroom observations and/or the interviews with chosen members. The original design of the study aimed at conducting observations to investigate what instructors really do in their classes and to assess how much the instructors' practices uphold student autonomy in the classes. However, none of the instructors who completed the questionnaire agreed to partake in the observation phase and due to this the observations did not take place at all. Then five of the instructors consented to partake in the semi-structured interviews. The consequent interviews were done in the participants' native language—Persian (Farsi)—each of a duration of 12-18 minutes. It should be mentioned that the Persian versions of the interviews were translated into English and then examined by an assistant professor of translation before the English versions were translated back into Persian by the researchers. This was done to confirm that the content of the original Persian versions was preserved. The interviews were conducted using a question list taken from an interview guide, and the researcher followed up on the answers provided. For example, in the questionnaire the respondents showed great interest in learner autonomy, but in the interview it was noted that the very concept of autonomy that existed in their minds was far from the standard meaning of learner autonomy. Therefore even though

they tried to promote learner autonomy further, it would be to no avail because their understanding of it was far from reality. As a result of this, the researcher understood that the mere interest in and effort to promote autonomy does not directly translate into the promotion of autonomy by the teachers under study. The outcome of this follow-up helped the interviewer explain a few other issues that had also risen out of the questionnaires and further investigate the instructors' answers regarding the practical measures they take in their classes.

It should be mentioned that the instrument and method used in the present study were checked and found to comply with the Research Ethics Charter of the Islamic Azad University (IAU). The purpose and nature of the study, for instance, were explained to the participants; they were assured that their participation in the interviews and questionnaires would be voluntary and that the information they provided would be used only to complete the aims of the study; they were also assured that data gathered from the participants would be kept confidential and anonymous, and the participants were informed that the data were their property; the questions of the interviews were semi-structured because the researcher hoped to elicit the participants' own points of view, and they were asked if they wanted to check the accuracy of the transcripts before they were used in the study. Care was taken to guarantee that the interviewed participants had no problems with being recorded.

Results and Discussion

Questionnaire Results

Thirty-one valid questionnaires were returned to the researcher. The first section of the questionnaire analyzed the EFL instructors' idea regarding the significance of student autonomy (the column on the left) and their practical measures in class (the column on the right). The teachers answered the questions through a Likert scale going from 1 (the lowest) to 4 (the highest). Cronbach's alpha was checked for the internal consistency of the multi-question parts, and the two parts came to the satisfactory level (Autonomy in beliefs, $\alpha = .81$; Autonomy, $\alpha = .85$). The data was analyzed in SPSS.

Research Question 1: To what extent do EFL instructors at the university believe in the benefits of autonomous learning?

The first research question—identifying the degree to which EFL instructors at the IAU believe in the benefits of autonomous learning—can be addressed dependent on the statistical outcomes for Parts 1 and 2. In Part 1, the mean score for instructors' convictions on the significance of autonomous learning (the column on the left) is 3.25 out of a potential 4.00 (as indicated in Table 1). This shows that a large portion of the participants value the benefits of autonomous learning.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Autonomy in beliefs	31	2.70	3.90	3.25	.35
Valid N.	31				

Table 1: Descriptive data for autonomy in beliefs

In Part 3, the instructors had the chance to remark on the reasons they considered autonomous learning significant, and the reasons they mentioned can be placed into three primary groups:

1. Development of learner self-initiative (seven teachers):

It [autonomous learning] is significant in light of the fact learners can't rely upon instructors for their lifetime. (Teacher 7)

Learners should develop student autonomy so they can figure out how to rely upon themselves. (Teacher 30)

2. Development of motivation for learning (four teachers):

Through student self-sufficiency and the longing to learn, learners could be more spurred to improve. (Teacher 12)

Student independence is crucial, and it is profoundly associated with the students' degree of motivation. (Teacher 9)

3. Promotion of reflection and self-awareness (four teachers):

Autonomous learning is important on the grounds that it assists learners with getting more mindful of their learning issues. (Teacher 1)

It is important for learners to ponder on their personal learning and know about and be liable for their learning process. (Teacher 27)

Furthermore, the teachers' beliefs with respect to the significance of student autonomy were also surveyed in Part 2 of the questionnaire. The statements that follow had the most noteworthy mean scores among the items in Part 2:

The sixth statement: Teachers should urge students to take part in autonomous practices (mean = 3.82, Std. = .392).

The fifth statement: Instructors should speak with learners about autonomy and its benefits in the educational lives of students (mean = 3.67, Std. = .540).

The seventh statement: Instructors should utilize exercises in class that advance autonomy (mean = 3.55, Std. = .506).

The ninth statement: Teachers should urge learners to ponder over their learning (mean = 3.55, Std. = .506).

According to these results, we can consider that the instructors for the most part perceived the significance of autonomous learning and accepted that they should work on it to help learners.

Research Question 2: How much do these EFL instructors implement practical measures for fostering autonomous learning in the classrooms they teach?

In Part 1, the mean score for instructors' actions to foster autonomous learning in class (the column on the right) is 2.45 out of a potential 4.00 (see Table 2 below), which indicates that a large portion of the instructors do not take part in numerous autonomy-provoking practices in class.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Autonomy in practice	31	1.90	3.40	2.45	.42
Valid N.	31				

Table 2: Descriptive data for autonomy in practice

In Part 3, the teachers had the chance to share the practices they do to advance autonomous learning in class. These examples can be divided into two primary groups:

1. Sharing language learning resources:

- Sharing sources of language on the internet (three teachers)
- Introducing the students to the Language Diagnosis & Consulting Centre (two teachers)
- Introducing students to the university libraries (one teacher)

2. Promoting learner's choice

- Sharing the films or articles they themselves like (three teachers)
- Planning spare time for learners to read whatever they like in class (two teachers)
- Having learners select their own structure or topics for presentation (2 teachers)

Research Question 3: Are there any disparities between the EFL instructors' convictions and their real practical measures? Assuming this is the case, what are the reasons for these distinctions?

To investigate whether there were differences between the instructors' beliefs concerning autonomy and their real classroom actions, a paired samples t-test was run between the two variables, the results of which are below (Tables 3 and 4).

		Mean	N	Standard Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Autonomy in beliefs	3.2485	31	.35	.05
	Autonomy in practice	2.4455	31	.42	.06

Table 3: Paired sample T-Test statistics of teacher beliefs and practices

		Paired Differences				T	Df	Sig. 2-tailed
		Mean	Std. D.	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
				Upper	Lower			
Pair 1	Beliefs – practices	.81	.58	.098	.62	1.02	31	.000

Table 4: Paired samples T-Test results of teacher beliefs and practices

The Tables show that there is a noteworthy contrast between the instructors' beliefs with respect to the significance of autonomous learning and their real classroom actions. The result was significant at $p < .001$. This suggests that although the EFL instructors may concede to the significance of elevating learner autonomy, these convictions are not reflected in the instructors' actual class-time performances. The reasons behind this disparity can be found in the instructors' answers to the open-ended questions. In Part 3 of the questionnaire, the teachers were required to remark on whether the Iranian teaching situation encourages or discourages the advancement of learner autonomy. Many of the instructors (14 of 15) who responded to this item said that it does not and they provided these reasons for it:

A. *Learners are only slightly motivated to learn the second language. (Two teachers). As one of the teachers said, the existing political system is not in favor of English because of the problems it has with major English-speaking countries like the US. Therefore, since significant development in teaching English is not a major concern, the promotion of autonomy in the learning of it is not encouraged much, either.*

B. *Instructors are feeling the pressure due to educational program demands. Consequently, there is not enough time. (Eight teachers).*

C. *Learners seem to show little interest in becoming autonomous. (Five teachers)*

Findings from the interviews

Five interviews (semi-structured) were held from April to June 2018. The instructors who took part in these interviews communicated their eagerness to participate when they completed the questionnaire. The meetings were carried out in the interviewees' native language – Persian (Farsi) – and took around 12-18 minutes. Every interviewee had to first answer the questions in the guide, after which they were urged to further expand on their answers. The sessions were recorded and later transcribed for examination. The current section gives the results of the interviews as indicated by the order of the study's questions.

The degree to which the instructors believed in the values of autonomous learning.

Almost the entirety of the interviewees believed in the significance of student autonomy. Every one of them said that student independence is imperative for learning English. The reasons given for the significance of student self-governance compare with the outcomes from the questionnaire (the open-ended questions):

Helps develop learner self-initiative

Students should be in control of their progress in a language; we, as instructors, can't help them forever. (Interviewee 4)

Teachers can't constantly guide them even after they leave university. (Interviewee 3)

Promotes motivation for learning

It's just self-governing students who have the genuine want and inspiration to learn, thus, they only arrive at better outcomes. (Interviewee 2)

Increases the power of self-reflection and self-awareness

They have to figure out how to consider their own learning and realize what works in their personal case. (Interviewee 4)

Apart from sharing how much they believed in autonomous learning; the interviewees also shared their views on what autonomous learning is:

Interviewee 1: *Autonomy for a learner is when the learner finds additional information on what they need to learn without instructors guiding them.*

Interviewee 2: *Learner autonomy occurs when instructors introduce sources which students then use to learn from without anyone else's help.*

Interviewee 3: *Learner autonomy is about the awareness of students regarding what they should learn.*

Interviewee 4: *Learner autonomy is all about the condition in which the learner is aware of his personal interests in language and tries to get more than what is presented during class time.*

Interviewee 5: *Learner autonomy is when students study the lessons before they are taught and practice them after class.*

While the significance of autonomy for learners is respected by all of the interviewees, not all of them show a clear understanding of the concept which concerns assuming greater control over one's own learning by noticing and identifying the strategies that one already uses or might potentially use. Interviewee two and Interviewee four showed different understanding of the continuum of autonomy of learners and seem to consider autonomous learning as something like successful methods for learning.

The degree to which instructors help language learners enhance the autonomy of learners in the classroom.

All the interviewees shared descriptions of the procedures they follow in class for implementing autonomy during the interviews. Based on the questionnaire results, the teachers' activities are divided into two key categories: introducing learning opportunities and enhancing the involvement of students in class. These categories are further supported by the activities these teachers listed in the interviews:

Introducing further language resources for autonomous language learning

1. *Sharing successful methods for learning English.* (Interviewee 1)
2. *Sharing specific games for online playing which helps learning English.* (Interviewee 5)
3. *Providing tools or websites for learning English that students may use.* (Interviewee 2)
4. *Encouraging learners to make use of the Language Diagnosis & Consulting Centre (LDCC).* (Interviewee 2)
5. *Providing tools or websites for learning English that can be used by students.* (Interviewee 3)

Further enhancement of learner involvement in class

1. *Allocate some time for students to prepare for exams by themselves in the classroom.* (Interviewee 2)
2. *Require students to try to find answers on the internet individually.* (Interviewee 3)
3. *Ask learners to give a presentation on a reading task in groups.* (Interviewee 3)
4. *Prepare the atmosphere for the learners to improve in creative thinking.* (Interviewee 4)
5. *Assign a kind of activity for students that they are interested in and ask them to expand on it the way they like to.* (Interviewee 4)

Although the five interviewees were acting to encourage learners to create autonomy, what they actually reporting doing in practice was not exactly what is commonly and academically known to promote learner autonomy: assuming greater control over one's own learning noticing and identifying the strategies that one already uses or could potentially use. The vast majority of the actions they took centered on introducing English learning resources (e.g., sites, games, and learning techniques) to the learners. A few of the instructors even seemed to confuse the increasing of students' share of speaking in class (e.g., learners' giving presentations) with building up autonomy among their learners.

Even though the two concepts are not opposing, expecting learners to present something because of an assignment or assigning time for them to get ready for a test do not line up with the soul of student autonomy, because such tasks are given by the instructor and are not something the students want to do. While learner autonomy aims at creating independent learners who can handle the process of their learning themselves, increasing student talking time, does not promote learner autonomy. Thus, the interviews uncovered that the instructors might not be aware of how to guide their learners to become self-sufficient and may confuse the concept of autonomy with student-centered approaches of language learning.

The difference between teacher beliefs and actions.

A summary of the interviews outcomes indicates the following causes of the relatively large difference between the instructors' opinions on the significance of autonomous learning and their real actions in connection with advancing autonomous learning during the class time:

1. *A low levels of learner motivation* (Interviewees 1, 2, 3)
2. *A low level of proficiency in English* (Interviewee 2)
3. *Requirements imposed on instructors by the curriculum* (Interviewees 2, 3)
4. *Attitudes of students tending towards passivity* (Interviewees 4, 5)

The reasons provided in the interview information mostly coordinated with the results of the open-ended questionnaires which indicated that curricular requirements, such as the force on teachers to sue specific books and the limitations on the time they have to complete specific materials, were the fundamental explanations given for why most instructors did not take part in more autonomy-creating practices during

class time. In the interviews, most instructors referred to learners' low degrees of motivation as a principal reason. The instructors felt that the learners were not intrigued by language learning and most probably preferred not to put additional time and energy into language learning outside class.

The reason, as stated earlier, may be the existing governmental policies which do not respect English and only include it in the curriculum since it is a widely-used international language. In this manner, the instructors feel that empowering autonomy in learning is an exercise in futility. The instructors are weakened by their learners' understanding of what learning entails, seeing teachers as those responsible for learning and learners as receivers of the service, and the requests of the college's fixed educational plan. Thus, the instructors have almost no enthusiasm for finding techniques to advance student autonomy. Combining the interview and questionnaire data, the teachers' perceptions regarding learners' low motivation levels where the fundamental explanation why instructors do not show interest in advancing learner autonomy in class, when confronting the limitations of fixed curricular demands.

Discussion and Suggestions for Further Studies

In general, analysis of the data resulted in these three themes:

EFL instructors' high respect for autonomous learning

The results which were drawn from the two phases of this study were joined here to give a triangulation of these EFL instructors' views of autonomous learning (Ivankova & Greer, 2015). Results of both quantitative and qualitative data demonstrated that the instructors in this investigation believed in the importance of student autonomy in learning English. The greater part of instructors did not invalidate the significance of student autonomy and thought it was a useful capacity for language students to develop. This outcome is in line with the results of Chan (2003), Lai et al. (2013), as well as a more recent investigation by Melvina and Suherdi (2019).

The disparity between the views of EFL teachers about the value of autonomy for learners and their real classroom practices

However, the views of the teachers about the value of learner autonomy did not translate into practices that many educators would consider as promoting autonomy. The findings of the questionnaire suggested there was an important difference between the views of the instructors and their actions in class. The qualitative evidence also supported this difference and showed that, in the instructors' views, the problem arises either from the learner characteristics, such as insufficient motivation and a passive approach to learning, or from institutional limitations, such as the pressure to adopt a defined curriculum. Similar results were found by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2011). The dominant causes of their research, which explored the elements that discouraged teachers from fostering autonomous learning in class, were "factors relating to the learners (absence of motivation; poor skills for learning independently) or institutional (overfilled curriculum, restricted materials) considerations" (p. 287). The investigation by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) also highlighted the characteristics of the learner (e.g., a lack of motivation or an absence of adequate skills) as a key factor that discouraged EFL instructors from fostering learner autonomy, even though they believed in its significance.

The limited perspectives of EFL teachers on how learner autonomy can be promoted in the classroom

The data obtained from the open-ended questions along with that of the interviews indicate that while teachers participated in some activities in the classroom that facilitate autonomy, their practices were very limited. In addition, many instructors seemed to confuse the essence of fostering autonomy for learners to opt into a teaching approach that was more student-centered. In his work, Benson (2011) refers to several different styles of teaching practice correlated with the growth of autonomy:

- * Resource-dependent (autonomous use of supplementary materials)
- * Technology-dependent (ability to use technologies designed for education)
- * Learner-dependent (direct behavioral production and psychological changes)
- * Classroom-dependent (planning and assessment control for the learner)
- * Curriculum-dependent (curriculum planning and assessment) (p. 123)

Most participants in the current study concentrated on the first approach in terms of activities teachers adopt in class to encourage learner autonomy: providing appropriate language learning tools (self-access centers, blogs, games, etc.) and asking them to make use of these resources in their free time. While such activities have their own benefits, they are not enough to promote autonomy in EFL classrooms.

Implications

One suggestion for improving the situation is that teachers should put more emphasis on classroom activities (e.g., allowing students some influence over the subject of the lesson, activity types, materials, etc.) or curriculum-based tasks to facilitate autonomy for learners. The use of such activities here in Iran could increase levels of motivation and participation among language learners.

Professional development workshops could be a viable alternative to encourage language teachers to participate in more autonomy-promoting practice in the classroom. In the study by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2011), it was found that there was a difference between the importance of autonomy of language teachers and what they actually did in class. Four workshops were conducted for the EFL instructors in an effort to resolve the problem, giving them the chance to participate in different discussions about autonomous learning, presenting activities that could encourage autonomous learning, opportunities to share effective strategies with their peers, and working on their own plans for promoting autonomous learning in their classes. The investigation ended with encouraging input from the teachers attending the workshops voicing a sense of willingness to accept the challenge of introducing more autonomous learning activities in the classroom. Based on the researchers' pedagogical experience, since Iranian teachers believed in the independence of learners, but did not have specific workable ideas about how to encourage it, these kinds of workshops could help them move forward. The workshops should have the following features: (1) They should include a clear definition of the very concept of learner autonomy, further expanding on what it is and what it is not; (2) Part of the workshop should be devoted to providing and discussing practical measures can lead to learner autonomy; (3) They should be based on the country's specific situation and educational context, and based on all the matters specifically relating to it, and methods should be presented to promote learner autonomy.

It is proposed that instead of providing language learning materials and sources, based on the present empirical results, EFL instructors should participate in conversations with learners about the reason they are learning English, what they hope to obtain, and how they intend to reach their aims (Griffiths, 2013). For example, by asking the reasons the students have for learning English, EFL teachers, who are more experienced in language learning, can guide students to more specific methods or tools students can apply independently to increase their own knowledge out of class. Or, by understanding how the students aim to reach what they are hoping for, teachers may find faults in their learners' ideas and a few discussion sessions may help students reach their goals more easily and in a shorter time.

Teachers should plan exercises or tasks in the classroom that stimulate the students' interests –and raise their motivation (Yarborough & Fedesco, 2020). Examples of such activities are those which are autonomy-provoking. For instance, to get students more interested, teachers can delegate some of the material selection and minor teaching responsibilities to groups of students who, through group discussions and online research, can find some materials and enjoy the sense of control they have not previously been given (Tussa'diah & Nurfadillah, 2018). As they have a better understanding of the tasks and themes where their peers are involved in, higher-level students may conduct activities which can help others learn English. For example, in a class with students of the same age, after asking the students where they need to speak or write in English, they could find common contexts of interest.

Learners can be asked for their opinions on the sort of activities which are done in those contexts and the kinds of classroom practice they consider helpful in advancing them. The activities which are chosen to be relevant and helpful may be used along with modifications made the teacher. Institutions may also offer language teachers workshops in which they have the chance to share their effective teaching practices regarding autonomy and encourage other teachers to step in the same path. A wider range of practical measures in class can lead to better results for the promotion of autonomous learning during teaching hours.

Limitations

One limitation that the researcher faced in the current study was that none of the instructors who completed the questionnaire agreed to partake in the observation phase. Before the study was conducted, the researcher had wished to include observations as part of the study and compare and triangulate the findings with those of the others. However, because of the participants' desire to not be observed, for reasons not given by participants, no such observation was performed. Based on the researchers' knowledge of the context, the reason the teachers did not want to be observed might have been related to

the small share of learner autonomy which existed in their classes, while they had expressed strong support for autonomous learning in the interviews and questionnaires.

This sharp contrast between what they claimed and what they did in practice may have caused them to try to save face and avoid making it visible in the real context. After all, differences between beliefs and practices can be counted as a sign of imperfection which many would try to keep hidden. This could have affected the outcome of the study since there was a reduction in the data collection tools. Had the observations taken place, the researcher would have had one further means of collecting information on how far autonomy is promoted in the actual classrooms.

A second limitation of the current study was that only five of the instructors agreed to take part in the semi-structured interviews. Had the number of interviewees been larger, the results of the interviews would have provided more data on which to base conclusions. The reasons for this limited turn-out were not given by the instructors since they were not asked for them, though based on my understanding of the context, it might have been that the teachers felt they would have to defend themselves for not giving autonomy the attention it deserved, the result of which would be a sign of weakness or backwardness in their teaching which they would have not wanted to display. The researcher accordingly interviewed only those participants who said they agreed and were happy to participate in person and share their views.

Conclusion

The aims of this study were to explore the views of university EFL instructors on the value of autonomy for learners, and also to find out the degree to which the instructors take real action to encourage autonomy in their classes. The study also tried to establish whether there was a difference between the views of teachers and their activities in the classroom. The findings show the teachers were unanimously in agreement regarding the value of autonomous learning in English language classrooms. They agreed that student autonomy is essential and needs to be cultivated.

The questionnaire findings, however, showed that a significant difference existed between the views of the teachers and their actual performance in the classroom. Data emerging from the qualitative phase also supported the difference and indicated that the instructors thought it stemmed from the low levels of motivation and the learners' attitude passivity and the difficulties teachers face because of the teaching requirements of the university. The details collected through the open-ended items and interviews showed that while teachers participate in some activities in the classroom that facilitate autonomy, their practices are very minimal.

In addition, many teachers might have confused the meaning of fostering autonomy for learners with adopting a student-centered teaching approach. To improve the situation, teachers should put more emphasis on classroom activities or curriculum-based tasks to facilitate autonomy for learners. Such activities here in Iran could increase levels of motivation and participation among language learners. Workshops on professional development may be a viable alternative to encourage language teachers to participate in more autonomy-promoting practice in the classroom.

It is also proposed that instead of providing language learning materials and sources, based on the present empirical results, EFL instructors should take part in conversations with learners about the reason they are learning English, what they hope to obtain, and how they intend to reach their aims. The present study and its results are significant because of two points: First is the fact that learner autonomy is a major factor in the process of language learning, and second is that teacher beliefs concerning teaching and learning affect pedagogical decisions.

Research studies, investigate how teachers see and how far they are willing to take action regarding the promotion of learner autonomy, contributing to research areas that deal with practical areas of learner autonomy promotion., The present study found that there is a gap between what teachers think and how they actually perform, showing that there is a need for helping teachers further implement what they have in mind. Among the limitations faced in the current study was that none of the instructors who completed the questionnaire agreed to partake in the observation phase, therefore, observations did not take place at all.

The researcher had wished to include observations and compare and triangulate the findings with those of the others. However, because of the participants' preferences, no such observation was performed. Another limitation of the current study was that only five of the instructors agreed to take part in the interviews. Had the number of interviewees been larger, the results of the interviews would have provided

more data on which to base conclusions. Future studies can investigate teacher beliefs in different learning contexts such as language institutes and schools.

As the current study only investigated university instructors' opinions, there is still a need for further investigation into whether or not the condition is different in such contexts. Another suggestion for future studies is that since the present study was in Iran, with its own specific cultural and historical features, other studies should investigate into the situation of developed countries, which have quite different educational environments and backgrounds. It is possible that based on the various differences between the countries, results would vary as well.

Based on the findings of this study, EFL teachers working in the country and setting under study could expand their knowledge about the very concept of learner autonomy and the way it is implemented in the class by participating in workshops which are both theoretical and practical and offer workable ways of creating autonomous learners. Besides workshops, which may or may not be available all the time and in all settings, teachers should individually expand their knowledge by studying the various papers, books, etc. on this topic which are available online and include almost everything an EFL teacher requires.

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Appendix

Autonomous Learning Questionnaire for Teacher Perceptions and Practices

Part 1

Put a checkmark on one of the four options below. If you don't believe in an item very much, check the left-most items which indicates *low*. If you strongly believe in an item, please check the right-most item meaning *high*. The two middle items are *relative* and *relatively high* respectively.

1	I think autonomous learning is a necessity for all students. low relative relatively high high	1	Through explaining, I encourage students to be autonomous. low relative relatively high high
2	I think learner autonomy increases motivation for learning. low relative relatively high high	2	I use autonomy-provoking activities that are motivating. low relative relatively high high
3	Learner autonomy will lead to better learning. low relative relatively high high	3	I tell students how to use language resources for learning L2. low relative relatively high high
4	Learners enjoy their learning more if they are autonomous. low relative relatively high high	4	I encourage learners to try find their strengths/weaknesses. low relative relatively high high
5	With proper strategies, all learners can become autonomous. low relative relatively high high	5	I sometimes ask students about their learning expectations. low relative relatively high high
6	Learners should set up their own learning goals. low relative relatively high high	6	I discuss parts of my teaching planning with my students. low relative relatively high high
7	Learners should identify their strengths and weaknesses. low relative relatively high high	7	I allow students to evaluate their learning. low relative relatively high high
8	Learners should be given the chance to discuss their learning. low relative relatively high high	8	I encourage and require students to learn out of class. low relative relatively high high
9	Teachers should make learners evaluate their learning. low relative relatively high high	9	I ask students to set and discuss their learning goals. low relative relatively high high
10	Learners should be able to learn outside the class. low relative relatively high high	10	I help learners stimulate their own interest in learning L2. low relative relatively high high

Part 2

Please put a checkmark next to the items you agree with.

- 1- Instructors ought to help learners find their strengths and weaknesses themselves.
- 2- Teachers should help learners discover knowledge in L2 by themselves rather than get it from the teacher.
- 3- Instructors help students learn from their peers, and not just from their teachers.
- 4- Instructors should help learners in becoming more self-directed in their learning.
- 5- Teachers should speak with learners about autonomy and its benefit in the educational lives of students.
- 6- Instructors ought to urge students to take part in autonomous practices.
- 7- Instructors should utilize exercises in class that advance autonomy.
- 8- Instructors should help learners to decide what to learn outside the classroom
- 9- Teachers ought to urge learners to ponder their learning.
- 10- Instructors should help learners to stimulate their own interest in learning English.

Part 3

Please answer the following questions based on your personal opinion (the back of this page has plenty of white space, so please write your answers on the other side of this page).

- 1- How important do you think learner autonomy is, and what are your reasons for believing so?
- 2- What do you exactly do to promote learner autonomy in the classes you teach?
- 3- Do the curriculum and teaching environment encourage or discourage learner autonomy? Why?

Interview Guide

Main Question 1:

- How do you define learner autonomy?

Possible further details:

- What are the values of learner autonomy?
- What do you think are the subdivisions of autonomous learning?

Main Question 2:

- To what extent do you believe in these values?

Possible further details:

- How far do teacher beliefs influence learner autonomy?

Main Question 3:

- How do you think students would react to the promotion of autonomous learning?

Possible further details:

- How can we help them become more interested in autonomy?

Main Question 4:

How do you promote it?

Possible further details:

What do you do to promote it in class?

What do you do to promote it out of class and as extra-curricular activity?

What are the tools you use to promote it?

Main Question 5:

Do you think you are promoting it in practice as much as you believe in it?

Main Question 6:

What are some of the problems that hinder the process of promoting it?

Possible further details:

Name some obstructive factors that are learner-dependent.

Name some obstructive factors that are teacher-dependent.