EFL Teachers' Practices and Perspectives on Learner Autonomy in Virtual Language Learning Environments in Jordan

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Abstract
The current study investigated EFL teachers' perspectives and practices regarding learner autonomy in virtual language learning environment in Jordan. An interview and observation checklist have been used to collect data. Ten EFL teachers have been interviewed and one recording of their classes has been observed. Results revealed that teachers were aware of the psychological and they employed some strategies reflecting their views. Unlike the psychological perspective, the political perspective was not seen in EFL teachers' practices. However, EFL teachers did believe in their importance. Based on the result, enhancing the pedagogy of autonomy should be a priority of policy makers while strategizing future plans. Besides, national curriculum should provide teachers with a freedom to enhance learner autonomy. Further research should be conducted using wider sample, and including further variables.

Keywords: learning autonomy; virtual learning language environment; EFL teachers; teaching practices and perceptions; learning and teaching process

Introduction

In 2020 we witnessed an unprecedented upheaval in the education sector world-wide. No one, particularly those in the education field, had anticipated such challenging circumstances. Learners had to switch from a traditional in-person method of instruction (with the integration of technology vis-à-vis learning and teaching) to an all-in online learning approach using a plethora of virtual learning environments. The adoption of innovative learning approaches came into effect because of the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak resulted in education taking a back seat as the health sector was considered priority world over.

Policy makers faced tough decisions, teachers and learners were being affected by the pandemic in unprecedented ways. The downside was that learners were falling behind in their learning. Those who managed to get an opportunity to learn had to overcome many constraints. Two distinct categories emerged: those who were taking a double blow because they were already

struggling in their learning prior to the pandemic and that of learners who managed to pursue and continue with their education. They looked at the challenge as an opportunity to adopt to new ways of learning.

Learner autonomy was undermined. Being one of the central goals of education, teachers' inability to respond to learners' demands resulted in learners being subjected to a deficient form of autonomy. This situation was compounded by a reliance on teachers who could not respond to their autonomous agency. When learner autonomy is compromised, learning per se becomes eroded. Without their own desire to learn, it is difficult to improve learner performance. It is important to state that several theorists like Weinstein (1987), Dickinson (1995), Spahr (2001), Boud (2012), Benson (2013), Sukerti & Yuliantini (2018), and Csizér et al., (2021) concur that autonomous learning requires that learners accept their charge of learning, be responsible for the process of learning or the way of processing their own learning. They are active participants who not only memorize knowledge, but also play a key role in monitoring their processes of learning. Therefore, the teachers' role is to make learners responsible by finding practical ways of learning autonomously rather than merely adhering to the implementation of a rigid curriculum.

As stated by Csizér et al., (2021) the notion of autonomy resonates with active learning, whereby learners construct their own learning intrinsically – a matter of becoming actively engaged in the learning process. In turn, learners actively relate their learning with the world outside the classroom thus becoming life-long learners. This implies that the core role of teachers should be that of facilitators, organizers, and resource persons providing learners with feedback and encouragement.

It appears that the pandemic had a negative impact on learning, resulting in learner autonomy being severely compromised. Learners lacked opportunities to engage actively and to construct their independent learning environments, this was exacerbated by teachers who could not engage learners in constructive learning.

Research suggests that teachers should focus on learner autonomy, so that learning can be self-directed and independent especially during unprecedented times like the period 2020-2021. In such circumstances, teaching English as a foreign language, learner autonomy can provide learners with opportunities to learn on their own. Learner autonomy can be enhanced through the practice of learning a foreign language as learners require more independent efforts within and outside the classroom to make sense of what they have attained. If EFL is aimed at encouraging learners to read, write, listen, and speak eloquently, then these learners require much self-direction and independence to do so. Several researchers like Chang (2020), Han (2020), Firat (2016), and Benson (2013) stated that learner autonomy plays a fundamental role in developing the quality of language learning. It prepares learners for life-long learning and makes the best use of learning opportunities in and out of the classroom. Learners can actively engage in tasks to practice reading, writing, talking, communicating, and the pandemic revealed that it is necessary to acquire these skills either face-to-face or virtually while learners engage communicatively. It was established that EFL teachers should employ computer assisted language learning tools or virtual language learning environments to motivate learners to learn English language as a foreign language from different locations at different times (Son, 2014).

Likewise, Benson (2013) highlighted that learner autonomy works in two ways: beyond the classroom, like computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and in the classroom where students engage in selecting materials and formulating learning objectives. Both ways of learning could not be assimilated unless EFL teachers were aware of such modes of instruction, and how

to motivate students to learn inside and outside the classroom, especially in a virtual language learning environment as teachers are not available to students all the time.

Covid-19 provided educators and stakeholders with profound insights on exploring various methods of learning. However, any new way of learning always influences both learners and teachers because it is new and adopting anything new takes time. All over the world learners suffered and incurred difficulties in advancing or attaining higher marks and grades (UNICEF, 2020). Therefore, exploring EFL teachers' awareness and practices of enhancing learner autonomy in different virtual language learning environments (VLLE) is a priority to strategize plans in teachers' professional development programs, particularly during unprecedented times.

Learner autonomy in the context of VLE requires investigation as there are differences between online language learning and traditional in-class learning (Wang & Zhan, 2020). Students should take charge of their learning by stating their goals, content, processing it, managing time and finding ways of presenting the content for assessment. Students cannot perform all these tasks without teacher support and familiarity with what autonomous learning means. Teachers can achieve this by providing room for students to be independent learners and performing tasks with the teachers' feedback.

Learner autonomy is essential in in-person instruction to create life-long learners. Yet, it is more important in virtual language learning environments. This notion is in line with the ideas of Fotiadou et al., (2017) who identified the significance of interaction, dialogue, and feedback of teachers when studying using VLE. It is essential to unveil teachers' views and perspectives on the role of VLE in developing learners' autonomy and their actual practices during online courses and to investigate if there is a gap between EFL teachers' perceptions and practices.

Literature review
Learner autonomy in the EFL field

The concept of learner autonomy in language learning is viewed as the ability of learners to take charge of their own learning. Holec (1981) who was the main figure in the autonomy domain, detailed the theoretical basis of this topic. According to him, the concept focuses on taking control of learning, that is, an ability to identify goals, selecting materials and tasks, and time management. Tuan (2021) clarified that learner autonomy involves freedom in learning, and in this context, it is important to state that autonomy is not the same as self-instruction but rather the capacity for detachment, critical reflections, decision making, and independent actions.

According to Tuan (2021), learner autonomy in the field of foreign language learning was highlighted in the 1979 report, prepared by Holec for the Council of Europe. It encourages learners to become autonomous, and to accept responsibility for their own learning. Holec as cited in Çakici (2015) accentuated that learners should be given the responsibility to make decisions concerning the aspects of their learning styles, capacities, and needs. Likewise, Fener and Newby (2000) highlighted that constructivist theories of learning constitute the essential theoretical background for the psychological aspects of learner autonomy. That is, each learner has his/her own way of perceiving the world, and he/she generates their mental models thereby making sense of experience and knowledge. The key to succeed in learning depends on allowing everyone to construct meaning, not make them memorize and repeat others' meaning. This entails that learning a language is not a way of rote learning but an individual making sense of what they learn, and it even continues after school.

Weinstein (1978) explained in detail how autonomy develops in language learning. There are three types of autonomy: the role played by teachers in developing learners' ability to operate independently to communicate in real situations, developing more generalized autonomy with the

help of teachers, and teachers helping students develop motivation, confidence, knowledge, and skills to communicate independently. To attain learner autonomy, teachers play a key role because they are responsible for developing a learning environment conducive for promoting autonomy. The latter requires that they enjoy the freedom in how they teach learners and the way of teaching whether in-person, online, or in any other virtual environment. According to Spahr (2001) learner autonomy is based on the idea that EFL teachers teach how to learn not what to learn. EFL teachers should try to make learners aware of the language components, the strategies of performance learning especially how to develop language skills, and how to help learners become active, reflective, critical thinkers and, initiate experimental practices in any mode of learning either in formal or informal contexts.

To promote learner autonomy, the teacher should be a catalyst, consultant, observer, analyst, stimulator, and councilor. Teachers should consider learners as their partners and help them reach specific targets. As shown by Çakici (2015), in promoting English as a foreign language autonomous learning requires teachers helping learners to set objectives, plan their study, select materials, evaluate themselves, change the traditional concept of being a teacher and accept that learners make mistakes as they gain experience. They ought to support the way students select material and process it based on their interests. Undeniably, this is not reflected in reality as shown by Mulyati (2022), for instance, the learner autonomy level was moderate, and the activities implemented by teachers in Indonesia either before COVID-19 or during the pandemic needed to be developed, as teachers' instruction was traditional and mostly that of spoon feeding the learners.

It can be inferred that learner autonomy in face-to-face learning environments is possible to promote despite the traditional trends in teaching, as stated by Ningsih and Yusuf (2021). Where teachers control the classroom, decisions regarding the lesson and the assessment remain in the hands of teachers. The rapid advances in technology contributed to the emergence of new learning opportunities although this was widely embraced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Adopting change is challenging as learner autonomy in online learning situations depends to a large extent on teachers.

Learning autonomy in VLE

Virtual Learning environment is defined by the US-based learning circuits magazine as a group of approaches based on the models of the web that integrates virtual concepts for interaction forums, tests, homework, and online meetings. According to Torres Martín et al., (2021), VLE plays a role in improving the quality of education and ensures the continuity of education in emergencies like what transpired during the period 2020-2021, that is, the COVID-19 pandemic. Previously VLE required certain skills for teachers to adopt to VLR but the pandemic forced teachers and educators to learn new applications and technologies as online learning was the new way to ensure the continuity of learning. It provided learners with the opportunity to determine the suitable time and pace for learning. VLE could also provide students with access to online material, whereby they could communicate with their classmates using applications rather than engaging face-to-face in classrooms. VLE provides ample resources for online and different types of online interaction like chatting, discussion forums, emails, creating videos, sharing screens so learners can develop their autonomy of learning (Mulyati, 2022). This was investigated by Mutlu and Eroz-Tuga (2013) who discovered that learners who studied English as a foreign language with the help of technology were willing to take responsibility for their own learning and engaged in extra curricula activities more than learners who studied the traditional way. Likewise, Tseng et al., (2020) examined the effects of virtual learning and learner autonomy in language learning and

found that there are many positive effects when learners take charge of their learning abilities and learning styles from all sources available to them.

Moreover, Günes and Alagözlü (2020) investigated the relationship between learner autonomy and asynchronous distance learning and blended learning environments. They found no relationship between learners who learn virtually, that is, online or blended learning methods and developing their autonomy. Jordan is not an exception, Rashed and Alkawaldeh (2017) studied the experiences of Jordanian teachers of English as a foreign language regarding independent learning and its relationship with instructional implications. They averred that there was a need to train teachers on how to develop learners' self-directed learning because students were totally dependent on teachers and considering traditional approaches to teaching English as a foreign language were dominant, teachers were remiss of the importance of promoting learner autonomy. Similarly, Jones (2001) stated that EFL learners are interested in learning English using technology, yet they prefer the teacher-directed environment rather than the virtual one that promotes autonomous learning. On the other hand, Doğan and Mirici (2017) found that EFL teachers had positive views on different domains of learner autonomy. However, they did not perceive ways of promoting it in face-to-face classrooms. Al-husban and Waghid (2022) postulate that the effective way to prepare young learners, regardless of their ability, for the future with all its obstacles and complexities, is to teach them what it means to act with autonomy, that is, independence and self-directedness

It can be noted that all these ideas were implemented in a very limited context before the pandemic, but it became the primary pattern of learning during the pandemic. Teachers were coerced to learn various forms of virtual learning to ensure that learners in various environments were not deprived of proper education. However, teachers' voices were high, and they complained about the way learners responded to the new way of learning, many could not comprehend online learning. On the other hand, the use of technology in teaching English as a foreign language has been thoroughly investigated and they discovered that the role of technology in enhancing learner autonomy is limited. Therefore, it is important to get the views of the teachers in VLE to promote learner autonomy, and to also discover what the teachers learnt from COVID-19. They had the opportunity to utilize technology and make learners learn autonomously. If they did not learn or draw any lessons from the pandemic, then they will continue doing things the same way.

Research method

The research method used for this inquiry was qualitative, where interviews were conducted from February to May 2022. 12 interviews were conducted remotely in Jordan with EFL teachers who were teaching in public schools. The objective of the study was to formulate a comprehensive analysis of EFL teachers' perspectives and the role of virtual learning environments in promoting learner autonomy.

Data collection and data analysis
The research analyzed the qualitative component using two instruments, as follows:
1. In-depth interviews with EFL teachers in public schools. A semi-structured interview protocol was prepared in English and Arabic. It had the instruction to state life events rather than question and answer option to enhance the interviewees' ability to freely express the status quo, providing personal or demographic data, their experience, opinions and practices to stimulate learner autonomy. The interview included three questions: A) How they perceive learner autonomy? B) What are EFL teachers' perspectives on the importance of LA in

enhancing students' skills in English as a foreign language in VLLEs? C) What VLLE activities they ask students to perform by themselves?

2. An Online Observation checklist of EFL teachers was used to review the body of literature on LA. That is, four EFL teachers agreed to join their Microsoft Teams classes to identify to what extent EFL teachers promote LA. To verify the reliability of the research tool, EFL teachers were observed online while conducting online classes using Microsoft Teams, then an agreement coefficient was measured, which was equivalent to 0.94. It is considered appropriate for the purpose of this study. Content validity of both research tools was verified by a jury of specialists in the field of TEFL and psychology.

For the interviews and observation scale of the online classes of EFL teachers, the researcher obtained informed consent from the participants of the study. This included not mentioning their names and acknowledging that their ideas reflected their own experience, and they will be used only for scientific purposes
Instruments.

Data analysis

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed. In particular, the data was analyzed in three steps: familiarizing, coding, recoding, and interpreting. To begin, the transcripts were transcribed, then the researcher and a co-researcher read and reread them to be familiar with the data and finally made a list of different types of information. The second step, coding, and recoding, was conducted. According to Cohen et al., (2018), coding data refers to "the process of applying codes to collected information that remind the author about which data belongs in which category". The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews was analyzed by open coding, i.e. the researcher read and labeled all the information to form initial coding which led to the development of categories of information on the phenomenon being studied. The researcher then grouped codes with the same features to form larger categories. Finally, themes were identified by discovering relationships or patterns of categories. There was emphasis on the last step, summarizing and interpreting data, establishing meaning of the categories and themes. After the summarization of the data, the researcher interpreted them by stating the significance of what the researcher had found in the previous steps and what could be learned from that. The analysis of the observation checklist focused on identifying the frequencies of certain activities or practices that promote learner autonomy performed by EFL teachers while conducting online classes.

The sample of the research

Ten interviewees were randomly selected to conduct semi-structured interviews. All of them were public school teachers, teaching English as a foreign language, with five of them being males and five females. Their experience ranged from three years to seven years. The researcher observed eight recording classes from nine.

The research questions

The current study sought to answer the following questions:
- What are EFL teachers' perspectives on learner autonomy in VLLE?
- What are the EFL teachers' practices using VLLE ?

Results and discussion

To answer the first question: What are the EFL teachers' perspectives on learner autonomy in VLLE?

Data was collected from 10 interviews, participants were asked questions pertaining to the following themes: Teachers' cognitions/knowledge of LA in VLLEs.

- Six teachers stated that LA means independence in learning using any kind of technology without the supervision of the school or teachers. Two EFL teachers said that, "Learners should be given the freedom to develop their English language skills using social media." Another teacher said, "It refers to using YouTube or online resources to learn without depending on teachers". Another teacher stated that, "It is the guided responsibility of teachers to provide students with the ability to learn from the applications of technology".

- The participants had insightful ideas about what learning autonomy means. They agreed it is attained by focusing on independence, freedom, and responsibility, and this is in line with published literature (Weinstein, 1987; Dickinson, 1995; Benson, 2013; Chang; and Mulyati, 2022). However, EFL teachers did not perceive the core meaning of the concept of learner autonomy, that it is a key player in promoting language learning either by using traditional classrooms or virtual applications. This idea is consistent with Ahmadianzadeh et al., (2020) and Barker and Gossman (2013), who established that some teachers have a misconception about learner autonomy. They believe that learner autonomy means out of class self-study, with the exception of one teacher from the research group who mentioned that students need the support of teachers to be autonomous learners.

EFL teachers' perspectives on the importance of LA in enhancing students' skills in English language within VLLEs

All participants said that LA is quite important in learning English as a foreign language. If EFL learners are motivated, they are autonomous, and this in turn enhances their ability to learn the language. Some participants mentioned that LA is particularly important and becomes prominent in online learning or when using virtual language learning environments like emails, social media, english videos, discussion forums, songs, online reading materials uploaded on the websites, or electronic games. So, EFL learners have the freedom to select learning resources at their pace, enhance their ability to read, listen, or write because they want to, not because teachers asked them to do it. This idea was supported by Benson (2013) who highlighted that online materials and resources of teaching English can contribute to learner autonomy positively. On the other hand, some participants said that VLLEs play a key role in enhancing learners' independent learning but learners cannot learn without teachers. Others said that VLLEs could motivate some learners to learn independently but could demotivate others who may find it distracts their attention. These ideas were supported by literature. Tseng (2020) and Phungsuk et al., (2017) based their studies on the idea that psychological perspectives can promote LA because motivation, confidence, and eagerness to learn encourages learners to do any task just to learn not to get more grades.

VLLE activities that EFL teachers ask students to perform by themselves

- Participants stated that they used various activities like asking students to check the meaning and the pronunciation of new vocabulary, creating electronic mind maps after comprehending

the text, collecting more information about the topic of the reading text, doing online quizzes, participating in asynchronous discussion forums, doing homework and sending it by email or on the website of the school, participating in breaking rooms on the Microsoft teams, participating in chat boxes, and watching the recording materials prepared for assessment.

- This is clear that the participants of the study can promote autonomous learning. However, the researcher elaborated the question by asking further details on task selection, such as, "Who selected the tasks? Did students have the room to select whatever tasks they preferred, or did they have to perform all of the tasks?" Eight of the ten EFL teachers stated that if they had provided students the opportunity to do the tasks they wanted, half of them would do a few tasks from what they had to do, and if they asked them to decide the task and the time to perform it, they would not agree on anything as students have different interests and circumstances. One of the teachers said, "I tried to provide students the opportunity to choose if they preferred a quiz or an open task to check their knowledge of tenses, I spent fifteen minutes, and they could not agree on which task they preferred".

It can be inferred that teachers' views expressed the political perspective (Boud, 2012; Firat, 2016; Csizér et al., 2021). This perspective entails the freedom of selecting how learners learn, selecting the activities to work on, and involving learners in what to learn. Online learning helps learners to do tasks they have the freedom to do in the way they like and in the time they prefer. However, the participants expressed this perspective, but they did not believe in it, they expressed that feasibility is difficult. This could be linked to their misconception of what learner autonomy is and how it can be translated into action.

To answer the second question: What are the EFL teachers' practices using VLLE?

The researcher analyzed ten online EFL classes with a co-observer to identify the practices that enhance learner autonomy, and to assess to which level these practices are consistent with teachers' perspectives. Table 1 shows the frequencies of the intended practices.

Table 1. Frequencies of EFL teachers' practices of LA during online classes

No	EFL teachers' LA practice	Frequency
1	Students had the opportunity to select what to learn.	0
2	EFL teachers provided students with chances to read any reading text based on their interests.	0
3	Speaking tasks identified by the EFL teachers and stated clearly in the curriculum.	8
4	EFL teachers asked students to join any breaking room in the teams to practice grammatical roles or revise vocabulary exercises.	2
5	EFL teachers used some rewarding activities to motivate learners	10
6	EFL teachers explained the strategies to do tasks and to do homework alone.	6
7	EFL teachers made learners aware of the assessment tools	2
8	EFL teachers motivated learners to study out of the class independently.	4
9	EFL teachers asked learners to self-assess their performances.	0
10	EFL teachers gave learners freedom to select the assessment tool based on their interests like online quizzes or online activities, or free reading tasks.	0
11	EFL teachers explained where learners could find the learning resources and how to obtain benefits from them.	9

12	Covering the content of the textbook is more important than providing extra activities.	10

As seen in Table 1, teacher-led activities were dominant even in the online delivery mode of instruction. That is, all EFL teachers did not provide learners any freedom to select the topic of learning either reading or speaking or what to learn. Learners had to follow the demands of the fixed curriculum, and covering the content was their priority rather than teachers providing learners with a chance to do extra activities using extra material to promote learner autonomy. This undoubtedly impeded the core of learner autonomy as stated by Ahmadianzadeh et al., (2020); Tuan (2020); and Mulyati (2020), top-down curriculum planning and implementation restrict EFL teachers' skills of transforming from transmissive teaching to cultivating learner autonomy. Teachers had limited opportunity to align teaching material and curricula to the learners' needs (Al-husban and Akkari, 2021). EFL teachers could not or did not have the skills to encourage learners to make decisions regarding their learning (Ahmadianzadeh et al., 2020). This indicated that there was a gap between their desire to impart and promote LA and the feasibility of it (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Teachers do not have the thorough knowledge of what LA is and how to translate this knowledge into action.

Based on Bensons' (1997) classification of learner autonomy, and in line with teachers' views in this study, EFL teachers did not reflect the political perspective; neither did they provide learners the opportunity to select any learning resources or topics. Consequently, learners adhered dogmatically to the teachers' manual (3). Furthermore, EFL teachers were forced to teach a top-down curriculum, as they had no authority to adapt it based on learners' interests or needs.

There was such a consistency in their views of the significance of motivation, knowing how to study effectively, encouraging students to do stated tasks and their actions (Chang, 2020). It co-relates to Benson (1997), whereby the psychological perspective implies that the more teachers encourage and motivate learners, the more they become learner autonomous – an idea corroborated by the participants' responses either interviewed or observed.

Furthermore, it is obvious that a few EFL teachers were aware of the social interaction even if it was remote. The observed EFL teachers did not employ the breakout rooms while doing online classes, which implies that there exists a gap between what teachers know and what they do, that is, although they were aware of the importance of social interaction, they persisted with their outmoded forms of teaching. This approach does not promote learner autonomy (Feryok, 2013). According to Feryok (2013) when small groups of learners interact consistently to internalize their learning, they attain learner autonomy.

The above findings reflect research done in other countries and settings (Feryok, 2013; Rañosa-Madrunio et al., 2016; Ahmadianzadeh et al., 2020; Ningsih and Yusef, 2021). However, this research inquiry expanded previously held views on learner autonomy by investigating teachers' cognition and practices in the VLLEs. The study was concluded after 18 months of remote learning due to the effects of COVID-19, making the current results more useful as to how teachers can help students to learn autonomously. One of the solutions to ensure continuity of learning in a crisis is to equip students with the strategies of autonomous learning. By implication, a pedagogy of autonomy should be a priority when reimagining education in the forthcoming years, not only in Jordan or in the Middle east but also worldwide.

Conclusion

This research was restricted in terms of its sample, and this limits the chance of disseminating good results. However, the results bring to the fore the importance of empowering

EFL teachers with the pedagogy of autonomy by focusing on both the declarative knowledge of LA as well as the procedural one, to ensure EFL teachers understand the core of LA and they can translate it into practice efficiently. Some of the insightful findings unveiled that EFL teachers perceived the importance of LA, and the freedom of learners to select the content they study as well as the activities they can do. While observing them, they followed teacher-centered instruction, which reveals that knowing about LA is not sufficient to ensure EFL teachers translate this knowledge into action, especially in virtual learning environments. It is indefensible to think that since EFL teachers adopted online or blended approaches to learning, they could employ strategies promoting autonomous learning, like asking students to check material and perform language tasks or working online cooperatively in breakout rooms or interacting with others in the electronic discussion forum posts. EFL teachers need to receive professional development training through an initiation into practical knowledge about the best practices of teaching English, as a foreign language because becoming proficient in the English language cannot rely on limited training but continuous practice. Also, reversing the top-down curriculum by providing ample freedom to EFL teachers so that they adapt the textbook approach based on learners' interest, needs, and time as it seems to be more apt in advancing learner autonomy. This will hopefully enhance EFL teachers' skills and knowledge as they focus on learner-centered pedagogy that promotes learner autonomy. Furthermore, research could be conducted by analyzing EFL teachers' detailed practices and attitudes whilst teaching each language skill with a focus on the productive skills as well as adhering to training programs that focus on LA in relation to EFL learners.

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