

Investigating EFL Teachers' Beliefs on Integrating Learner Autonomy into their Teaching Practices

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is broadly recognized as a crucial element of language education since it allows learners to actively engage in their learning and promote lifelong learning skills. This study aimed to investigate EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers' beliefs on the concept of learner autonomy and find out the degree to which they integrate the tenets of autonomous learning into their teaching practices, mainly through out-of-class projects. This quantitative study randomly employed 108 EFL teachers from various universities in Kurdistan-Iraq and used a questionnaire for data collection. The findings of the study demonstrated that instructors had a positive attitude towards incorporating learner autonomy into their teaching practices. Furthermore, the data revealed a frequent use of out-of-classroom activities by EFL teachers to promote learner autonomy.

Keywords: learner autonomy, teacher beliefs and practices, out-of-class activities, EFL teachers.

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Introduction

The momentum of learner autonomy has risen due to the remarkable shift from old practices of language teaching-learning to recruiting learners in the centre of learning (Harmer, 2007). This means that the educational moves and modern pedagogical approaches consider learner autonomy as a means of lifelong learning and learners' rights in education (Hafner & Miller, 2011; James, 2006; Laal, 2011). The most common definition of learner autonomy can be traced back to Holec, who defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (1981, p. 3). In simple terms, learner autonomy stands for the learners' authority and responsibility over their learning both inside and outside the classroom (Gorzelsky, 2009). Furthermore, it entails the learners' attitudes and freedom to exercise during the learning process (Su, 2010). For Little, learner autonomy refers to the learners' "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (1991, p. 4).

From the point of view of learner autonomy, students should be provided with the flexibility to make choices over their learning. Likewise, learners should be allowed to think about what or how to learn a language and this introspection may incredibly boost their learning progress (Harmer, 2007). This flexibility may equip learners with the ability to harmonise with various learning environments or challenges and continue their learning throughout their lives. This allows learners to tailor their learning to their interests, needs, and preferences (Miller, 2010). Additionally, learners are expected to have the capacity and readiness to be able to work autonomously and this is not merely gained in the classroom, nor inborn. For this reason, learners should be trained and provided with autonomous opportunities to independently exercise their learning. This can result in expanding learners' options for learning rather than confining them to one specific way of learning (Thanasoulas, 2000). Engaging learners in autonomous learning may give them more perseverance to accomplish the learning tasks independently and bear responsibility for their learning, including the consequences.

To boost autonomous learning, EFL teachers explicitly need to enhance learners' sense of responsibility and, perhaps more importantly, encourage them

to actively participate in decision-making about their learning (James, 2006; Ponton & Rhea, 2006). Therefore, EFL teachers should be quite familiar with the features of autonomous learning if they want or expect learners to act autonomously throughout their learning process, specifically in contemporary pedagogical and educational practices, which have greatly been influenced by technology (Harmer, 2007). This alludes that real autonomous learning in EFL contexts may initiate pedagogical shifts and understanding of what the process should involve or require (Hamad, 2018; Little, 1997).

It cannot be denied that out-of-classroom project-based learning can promote autonomous learning since it provides learners with opportunities to work and learn independently and steer their learning. Additionally, out-of-classroom activities allow learners to seek out opportunities to use and practice English in authentic settings. Consequently, EFL learners are more likely to gain exposure to the meaningful use of language and be communicative competent (Pickard, 1996).

Throughout such projects, having said, students can have chances to work as independent groups and collaborate with their colleagues to learn and accomplish tasks without getting help from teachers. Nevertheless, this is not absolutely to diminish the role of teachers as they can guide learners and mediate the process of learning (Van Lear, 2008). Indeed, teachers' engagement is crucial to equip learners with the knowledge to properly exercise their autonomy as needed and maintain the learning condition in which learners can be more autonomous (Najeeb, 2012). As the prime cornerstone of learner autonomy, therefore, the perspective that learners have the right and potential to learn by themselves has gained a consensus among the majority of pedagogues, scholars or proponents (Benson, 2011; Smith, 2003; Thanasoulas, 2000).

Learning can be more meaningful and productive as long as learners are concerned about making decisions for their learning. Consequently, learners may transfer this autonomy to the other aspects of their lives and behave as more responsible people in their society (Little, 1991). It is advisable to introduce the notion of learner autonomy into the curriculum step by step to gradually persuade learners to be in charge of their learning and also make independent decisions regarding their learning.

It can be said that gaining learner autonomy can be the ultimate goal of all kinds of learning, particularly language learning, as it encourages learners to rely on themselves to complete the tasks and set their own learning goals (Benson, 2006). According to Hedge, learners "should not be passive recipients of knowledge but should use their abilities for judging and deciding to take on more responsibility for their learning" (2000, P. 82). That is to say, democratic

and well-educated societies that value freedom of thought as well as action may regard the self-reliant learners as an ideal outcome of education, as the goal of their education is not only acquiring knowledge and skills but also enabling learners to be independent and responsible for their learning (Hamad, 2018, Harmer, 2007; James, 2006). This indicates that achieving this goal might not be easy in a context where classroom practices have traditionally been instructed, regulated and assessed by only teachers (Hedge, 2000).

Aim of the Study

This study aims to examine learner autonomy, specifically about out-of-classroom learning projects within the universities of Kurdistan. This study intends to explore EFL teachers' perceptions about the appropriateness and effectiveness of using out-of-classroom learning projects to promote autonomous learning. In other words, the study aims to investigate the teachers' beliefs and perceptions about integrating learner autonomy into their teaching practices. Moreover, this study aims to raise the awareness of English teachers at the universities of Kurdistan about the issues involved in using learner autonomy to improve their teaching methods as a way to best meet students' needs. Therefore, the results of the study can be considered as a reasonable guideline for teachers and curriculum designers to develop and implement autonomous learning-based projects beyond the classroom. In particular, this study aims to answer the following questions;

1. What are the teachers' beliefs towards incorporating learner autonomy into their teaching practices?
2. To what extent do English teachers make use of autonomous learning techniques such as out-of-class projects?

Research Methodology

In this quantitative study, the researchers utilized a questionnaire as a research tool to collect data. The rationale behind this choice was that questionnaires enable gathering standardized responses (Denscombe, 2007, p.169). By providing all participants with the same set of questions in a consistent manner, the influence of interpersonal factors on the collected information was minimized (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2007). This means that questionnaires ensure standardization and consistency in the research process. In other words, by employing standardized questions, researchers can uniformly gather data, minimizing bias and increasing the reliability of the results (Davies & Hughes, 2014). This could enhance the reliability and comparability of data and, perhaps more importantly, enable researchers to draw a valid conclusion (Gray, 2014). Furthermore, this method was considered cost-effective since it allowed for gathering substantial information within reasonable time and financial constraints (Kumar, 2014).

The questionnaire comprised two sections. The initial section aimed at obtaining participants' demographic information such as; gender, age, years of teaching, qualifications, and teaching location. It is worth noting that participants' anonymity and privacy were ensured. About this, questionnaires can provide a degree of anonymity to respondents, promoting honesty and openness (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In this study, researchers adhered to ethical guidelines when administering the questionnaire including informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and protecting participant privacy (Neuman, 2014). The second section consisted of 22 items presented in the form of rating scales, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. These questions sought to explore the teachers' beliefs and determine the extent of using autonomous learning techniques such as out-of-class projects at universities in Kurdistan. Importantly, all the questions were formulated in a comprehensive language and avoided biased language, ensuring that participants would interpret them in the same manner as the researchers intended (Cohen et al., 2007).

Context and Participants of the Study

The procedure of participant selection is critical to guarantee the study's validity and generalizability of findings. For this reason, this study randomly employed 108 EFL teachers from several universities in Iraqi Kurdistan. According to Kumar, random sampling is recognized as the most common technique for selecting participants in quantitative research, whereby "each element in the population is given an equal and independent chance of selection" (2014, p. 239). This means that representativeness was ensured through random selection, which gave each EFL instructor an equal chance of taking part in the search. To ensure that results may be generalized to the larger context of EFL teaching in the area, this aided in creating a sample that roughly reflected the overall population of EFL instructors (Gray, 2014). In other words, this sampling allowed objective selection procedures which could result in promoting research validity and making results more applicable beyond the chosen universities with more assurance (Davies & Hughes, 2014). In addition to its time-saving benefits, randomly selecting teachers also addressed the issue of researcher bias, which led to producing study findings that were more trustworthy and dependable (Cohen et al., 2007).

Results and Discussion

This section is devoted to presenting and discussing the statistical results obtained from the questionnaire to answer the research questions separately. However, it is worth mentioning that the responses were tabulated as SA which stands for strongly agree, A which means agree, N means neutral, SD is strongly disagree, and D refers to disagree. Additionally, the first table includes the percentages of responses for each item; the second represents the mean and standard deviation of the study dimensions. Therefore, each dimension will be

introduced separately to grasp a clear picture of the research data. Furthermore, SPSS was used by the researchers to examine the data and compute different statistical measures for their study inquiries.

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. I believe language learning will be successful if it is done both in class and outside of class.	66	38	1	1	2	4.5278	0.74204
	61.1 %	35.2 %	0.9%	0.9%	1.9 %		
2. Promoting out-of-class learning is necessary for language learning.	50	53	4	0	1	4.3981	0.65481
	46.3 %	49.1 %	3.7%	0.00 %	0.9 %		
3. Learning English in class is superior to learning outside of class.	11	38	27	31	1	3.2500	1.01507
	10.2 %	35.2 %	25%	28.7 %	0.9 %		
4. Target language is primarily learnt through formal in-class instruction.	5	36	29	35	3	3.0463	0.98003
	4.6%	33.3 %	26.9 %	32.4 %	2.8 %		
5. Giving students outside-class projects is essential for language learning.	44	57	6	1	0	4.3333	0.62652
	40.7 %	52.8 %	5.6%	0.9%	0.00 %		
6. I encourage my students to explore and learn beyond the classroom tasks and activities.	57	48	3	0	0	4.5000	0.55535
	52.8 %	44.4 %	2.8%	0.00 %	0.00 %		
7. I usually assign out-of-class activities and projects to my students.	27	66	14	1	0	4.1019	0.64038
	25%	61.1 %	13%	0.9%	0.00 %		

8. Part of my course assessment is about tasks and projects that students have to do outside of class.	24	59	18	7	0	3.9259	0.80540
	22.2 %	54.6 %	16.7 %	6.5 %	0.00 %		
9. Most of my course assessments include tasks and activities which students do in class.	18	53	14	23	0	3.6111	1.00311
	16.7 %	49.1 %	13 %	21.3 %	0.00 %		
10. I grade out-of-class projects and give students feedback on them.	15	76	15	2	0	3.9630	0.59477
	13.9 %	70.4 %	13.9 %	1.9 %	0.00 %		
11. Giving students home tasks and assignments is a main part of my teaching style.	22	65	15	5	1	3.9444	0.78339
	20.4 %	60.2 %	13.9 %	4.6 %	0.9 %		
12. Encouraging students to engage in out-of-class activities is sufficient for successful language learning.	23	55	17	13	0	3.8148	0.90840
	21.3 %	50.9 %	15.7 %	12 %	0.00 %		
13. I usually assign students to spend time at home to prepare for our next classes.	19	73	11	5	0	3.9815	0.68333
	17.6 %	67.6 %	10.2 %	4.6 %	0.00 %		
14. I develop activities and tasks which extend beyond in-class time.	13	84	8	3	0	3.9907	0.55527
	12 %	77.8 %	7.4 %	2.8 %	0.00 %		
15. I spend part of my class time giving directions and advice to students on how to improve their language on their own.	24	71	12	1	0	4.0926	0.60430
	22.2 %	65.7 %	11.1 %	0.9 %	0.00 %		
16. My students have to work on projects in groups and present them when they come	24	73	9	2	0	4.1019	0.61050
	22.2	67.6	8.3 %	1.9 %	0.00		

to class.	%	%			%		
17. My instructional activities need to be closely supervised by myself as a teacher.	13	67	21	7	0	3.7963	0.73318
	12%	62%	19.4 %	6.5	0.00 %		
18. Some of my instructional activities involve group work and preparation before and after class time.	20	73	11	4	0	4.0093	0.66270
	18.5 %	67.6 %	10.2 %	3.7%	0.00 %		
19. My syllabus comprises the activities and tasks which students need to conduct in class.	14	65	20	9	0	3.7778	0.77741
	13%	60.2 %	18.5 %	8.3%	0.00 %		
20. When working on projects, students need to ask me for instructions on how to do the projects.	14	78	11	5	0	3.9352	0.64523
	13%	72.2 %	10.2 %	4.6%	0.00 %		
21. I give outside class activities so students practice what they have learned in class.	27	66	12	3	0	4.0833	0.68529
	25%	61.1 %	11.1 %	2.8%	0.00 %		
22. I usually make myself available for close supervision and consultation for outside-of-class activities my students need to do.	29	65	13	1	0	4.1296	0.64261
	26.9 %	60.2 %	12%	0.9%	0.00 %		

Table 1: Percentage of the responses for each item, including the mean and standard deviation

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Teacher beliefs	108	1.80	5.00	3.9111	0.45041

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Teacher practice	108	3.12	4.76	3.9858	0.31640

Table 2: Mean and Standard deviation of the study dimensions

As can be noted in Table 2, the EFL teachers hold a favourable belief regarding integrating learner autonomy into their teaching practices with a weighted mean value of 3.9111. The computed value of standard deviation (0.450) showed that very few EFL teachers are not interested in autonomous learning tasks beyond the classroom. In item number two in table one, having said this, 95.4% of the teachers considered out-of-classroom activities as an essential tenet for effectively learning a second language. As in item five, the majority of teachers believed that giving students outside-class projects is essential for language learning. This has even been confirmed by the studies (Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari, 2014; Balçıkanlı, 2010) which were conducted in similar contexts to this research. This might be primarily because the notion of learner autonomy in language education has received a lot of attention across the world. After all, both academics and practitioners realize its relevance and possible advantages (Ohara, 2013). Overall, teachers might recognize the significance of autonomous learning to guide and train students to manage and steer their learning, in particular, beyond the formal classroom settings. Similarly, this can be considered a remedy to boost learners' motivation and gain fruitful educational outcomes (Pintrich, 2000).

It is essential to have an adequate understanding of the ideas and beliefs held by instructors to facilitate the successful implementation of autonomous learning into their teaching practices. This means that such beliefs can remarkably impact the techniques and procedures EFL teachers choose to apply in their teaching practices. Concerning the second research enquiry based on the provided data in Table two, the EFL teachers exhibited a high level of using autonomous learning techniques in their teaching practices, as indicated by a weighted mean score of 3.9858. About this in item number six in the first table, almost all the EFL teachers (97.2%) reported that they encourage their students to explore and learn beyond the classroom tasks and activities. Similarly, in item fifteen, 95 of the participants stated that they spend part of their class time giving directions and advice to students on how to improve their language on their own. This is consistent with the discussion in literature, which has already been mentioned that teachers' engagement is crucial to train and equip learners

with the knowledge to properly exercise their autonomy as it is needed and also maintain the learning condition in which learners can be more autonomous (Najeeb, 2012). Based on the responses in items 7, 10 and 21, moreover, above 90 of the teachers mentioned that they assign their students with out-of-class activities and then grade their work. This can be considered a beneficial strategy to guide learners to independently address their learning issues and choose their best learning methods (Kashefian-Naeeni & Kouhpeyma, 2020). This also indicates that autonomous learning encourages learners to rely on themselves to complete the tasks and set their own learning goals (Benson, 2006). Perhaps more importantly, to compensate for the limitations of classroom time and to increase the probability of effective language learning, learners should be encouraged to build their learning strategies so that they can become autonomous learners as much as possible (Harmer, 2007, P. 394).

Conclusion

This study surveyed the beliefs of EFL teachers regarding incorporating learner autonomy into their teaching practices. The study found that EFL instructors from the universities of Kurdistan hold a favourable view towards incorporating learner autonomy into their teaching practices. The teachers showed a desire to embrace the notion of learner autonomy and integrated it into their teaching practices to a good extent. To promote learner autonomy, teachers need to have a good understanding of its concepts and elements. They should provide learners with flexibility and more opportunities to manage and take control of their learning, in particular, out-of-class learning tasks. This can result in enabling EFL learners to become self-regulated learners and boosting their lifelong learning skills as well. Thus, it is significant to stimulate educators or curriculum designers to increase the frequency and variety of autonomous learning opportunities for students. This is especially beneficial when these opportunities are provided beyond the traditional classroom environment.

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پوخته:

سەر به خۆی فێرخواز به شیوهیهکی بهر فراوان وەک بنهمایهکی گرنه و سهرمکی پهرومردهی زمان ههژماردهکریت چونکه ریگه به فێرخوازان دهوات چالاخانه بهشداری فێربوونیان بکهن و تواناکی فێربوونیان له تهواوی ژیاانیان بهروپیش بیهن. ئهم توێژینهوهیه ئامانجی لیکۆلینهوه بوو له بیروبووونی مامۆستایانی زمانی ئینگلیزی لهسهر چههمکی سهر بهخۆی فێرخواز و بزانتیت تا چهند بنهماکی فێربوونی سهر بهخۆی له وانهکانیان به شیوهیهکی کردار مکی تیکهل دهکهن، وه به تایبهتریش له ریگهی پرۆژمکانی فێربوون له دهرهوهی پۆل، ئهم توێژینهوه چهندایهتیه به شیوهیهکی ههرمهکی ۱۰۸ مامۆستای زمانی ئینگلیزی له زانکو جیاوازمکانی کوردستانی عێراق بهژداری پیکردووه وه پرسیارنامهی بهکارهیناوه بو کۆکردنهوهی زانیاری. دهرهناهمهکانی توێژینهوهکه دهرناخست که مامۆستایان تیروانینیکی ئهرینیان ههبووه بهرامبهر به بهکارهینان و جی بهجیکردنی بنهماکی سهر بهخۆی فێرخوازان له کاتی وانهوتنهومیاندا. جگه لهوهش، داتاگان ئهوه پیشاندهدن که مامۆستیانی زمانی ئینگلیزی به بهردهوام هانی بهکارهینانی چالاکییهکانی دهرهوهی پۆل دهدهن و بهکاری دههینن به مهبهستی هاندان و یارمهتیدانی قوتابیانی بو سهر بهخۆ بوونیان له پرۆسهی فێربوون.

ملخص:

استقلالية الطالب بشكل واسع يُعدّ مبدأً مهماً وأساساً لتعليم اللغة؛ لأنّها تسمح للمتعلّمين بالمشاركة بنشاط في تعلّمهم وتطوير قدراتهم التعليمية طوال حياتهم. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في آراء معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية حول مفهوم استقلالية الطلبة ومعرفة مدى دمجهم لمبادئ التعلم المستقل في موادهم بطريقة عملية، وخاصة من خلال مشاريع التعلم خارج الفصل الدراسي. شملت هذه الدراسة كميّة عشوائية، وهي تضمّ 108 معلمي لغة إنجليزية من جامعات مختلفة في كردستان - العراق واستخدمت استبيانات لجمع المعلومات. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن المعلمين لديهم موقف إيجابي تجاه استخدام وتنفيذ مبادئ استقلالية الطلبة أثناء تدريسهم. بالإضافة إلى ذلك ، تظهر البيانات أن معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية يشجعون باستمرار استخدام الأنشطة اللامنهجية لتشجيع الطلبة ومساعدتهم على أن يصبحوا مستقلّين في عملية التعلم.