

Iranian EFL Teacher's Perception of Learner Autonomy and the Related Challenges**Somayeh Shahsavari¹***IslamicAzad University- Science and Research Branch of Isfahan, Iran***Omid Tabatabaei²***Islamic Azad University of Najafabad, Isfahan, Iran***Nastaran Mehrabi³***Islamic Azad University of Khorasgan, Isfahan, Iran*

Abstract: *Learner autonomy has been a recent trend in education which highlights the students' engagement in their own learning. Although over the past 30 years, a large body of research has been carried on learner autonomy, limited attention has been paid to the sense teachers make, theoretically and practically, of this concept. The present study is an attempt to shed light on the general existing pattern of the way teachers view learner autonomy, autonomous activities and the challenges they face in classrooms. To do so, applying the convenience method of sampling, a structured questionnaire consisting of five sections was emailed to most of the teachers teaching English as a foreign language in Isfahan, Iran. In order to have a more precise analysis, an interview was carried out to see what reasons are behind the participants' answers. Employing the referential statistics, the results indicated that many teachers viewed autonomous activities as a set of skills or abilities that learners need to master in order to learn independently. It was, however, revealed that the teachers emphasized a range of factors daunting due to limitation of the language centers they work in. On the other hand, learner-related factors were most widely cited by these teachers. The findings of this study might benefit those teachers and institution officials interested in enhancing learning autonomy among their students and even educating themselves or the other teachers to make use of it practically in classrooms.*

Key words: Lerner autonomy, autonomous language learning activities, EFL teachers

1. Introduction

Regarding the noticeable speed of technology enrichment in the field of second/foreign language learning (ESL/EFL), as well as, the new strategies and methods, it is really crucial to take steps in the right directions to train better language learners. There are many different influencing strategies which can efficiently help the learners become able to compensate for this high-speed advancement of technology. One of these efficient strategies or better to say attitudes is making the best efforts to educate independent as well as autonomous language learners in order to provide them with opportunities to take charge of their own learning. To do so, being aware of teachers' and learner's perceptions of the term is really important since it can powerfully affect the selection of methods, materials, activities and so forth. Autonomy does not mean a new methodology but an attitude adopted by the learner in his/her learning process which is

based on the learner's responsibility needed to be recognized and improved (Andreu, 2007).

However, it has been approved that during the last decades, a large body of research has been performed to investigate what autonomy is, how it can be promoted, or even the interrelationship between autonomy and gender, learning styles, motivation, teaching and learning activities.

Nevertheless, little has been done in the field of teachers' beliefs and perception of the matter. In fact, it is not known that whether teachers generally accept the views about learner autonomy or even to what extent they know about it. Palfreyman (2003) did acknowledge the gap that may exist between theoretical discussions of learner autonomy and teachers' own perceptions of the concept and made the point with specific reference to the manner in which learner autonomy has been conceptualized from technical, psychological, and political perspectives (Benson, 1997) and, additionally, from a sociocultural perspective (Oxford, 2003).

Therefore, being aware of teachers' and learners' beliefs of the matter can be regarded as the first step to promote learner autonomy and make use of the most influential autonomous activities in EFL classes.

In the present research the following questions are going to be answered:

1. What are different factors contributing to learner autonomy based on L2 teachers' and learners' points of view?
2. Do teachers and learners believe inside and outside class activities and opportunities can promote learner autonomy?
3. Are there any significant differences between L2 teachers' and Learners' beliefs regarding the factors contributing to learner autonomy as well as inside and outside class activities?

2.Review of related literature

Although much has been written about learner autonomy, there has been little research carried out into teachers' perspectives so no much is known about what learner autonomy means to language teachers in various contexts and educational settings around the world (Borg, 2003). Due to the fact that teachers play a crucial role in the promotion of learner autonomy, addressing their beliefs in this area is effectively influential. In this section some studies which have explored teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy are discussed.

As far as this study investigates, Camilleri (1999) had done the first study to investigate teachers' views about learner autonomy. The study was carried out with teachers in various European countries. The main findings were:

- A willingness of teachers to change and develop practice
- Strong support in incorporating learner autonomy in different areas of teaching (material selection, areas of classroom management, learning strategies, learning styles)

- A reluctance of teachers to involve learners in aims and methodological decisions
- Constraints from higher authorities made it hard to encourage learner autonomy or offer more learner choice

Camilleri, on the other hand, (1999) presented questionnaire data collected from 328 teachers in six European contexts (Malta, The Netherlands, Belorussia, Poland, Estonia and Slovenia). The questionnaire consisted of 13 items each asking about the extent to which learners, according to the teachers, should be involved in decisions about a range of learning activities, such as establishing the objectives of a course or selecting course content. As a result, teachers were found to be positive about involving learners in a range of activities, such as deciding on the position of desks, periodically assessing themselves and working out learning procedures. In contrast, teachers were not positive about learner involvement in the selection of textbooks and deciding on the time and place of lessons.

In another study, Chan (2003) examined teacher's perspectives of learner autonomy in a large-scale study at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her findings show that teachers felt mainly responsible for the methodological decisions within the classroom. Moreover, respondents reported a clear awareness of autonomy as a goal of teaching and felt fairly positive about students' decision making abilities in different aspects of the language learning process. Teachers did feel, however, restricted by curriculum constraints and consequently did not provide decision-making opportunities for learners in areas of autonomous learning (e.g. learning objectives, activities). This study reveals the fact that learner autonomy cannot be encouraged without support from the teacher. In addition, it shows that thinking about our beliefs and teaching practices is important as it allows for reflection and change if needed. The instrument from the above study was used once again by Balçıkanlı (2010) to examine the views about learner autonomy of 112 student teachers of English in Turkey. Additionally, 20 participants were interviewed in focus groups of four teachers each. The results suggested that the student teachers were positively disposed towards learner autonomy – i.e. they were positive about involving students in decisions about a wide range of classroom activities, though, again, they were less positive about involving students in decisions about when and where lessons should be held. Al-Shaqsi (2009) was another survey of teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. This was conducted with 120 teachers of English in state schools in Oman. A questionnaire was devised specifically for this study and it asked respondents about (a) the characteristics of autonomous learners (b) their learners' ability to carry out a number of tasks (each of which was assumed to be an indicator of learner autonomy – e.g. deciding when to use a dictionary or identifying their own weaknesses) and (c) how learner autonomy might be promoted. The three characteristics of autonomous learners most often identified by teachers were that they can use computers to find information, use a dictionary and ask the teacher to explain when they do not

understand. The teachers in this study also assessed their learners positively on all of the indicators of learner autonomy they were presented with. The three most highly rated indicators were asking the teacher to explain when something is not clear, giving their point of view on topics in the classroom and using the dictionary well. The final study presented here is Martinez (2008), who examined, using a predominantly qualitative methodology, the subjective theories about learner autonomy of 16 student teachers of French, Italian and Spanish. These students were studying at a university in Germany and were taking a 32-hour course about learner autonomy at the time of the study. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and observations during the course; copies of the instruments were, though, not included with the paper and it was not possible therefore to critique or draw on these in this study. Results showed that student teachers had positive attitudes towards learner autonomy and that these were informed largely by their own experiences as language learners. The conceptions of autonomy held by the student teachers generally reflected the view that (a) it is a new and supposedly better teaching and learning methodology; (b) it is equated with individualization and differentiation; (c) it is an absolute and idealistic concept; (d) it is associated with learning without a teacher. Such perspectives do not align with those currently promoted in the field of language teaching (and actually reflect several of the claims Esch (1998), above, made about what learner autonomy is not).

Bullock (2011) conducted a small-scale study of English language teachers' beliefs about learner self-assessment which highlights a gap between teachers' positive theoretical beliefs about this notion and their beliefs in its practicality.

Nakata (2010) compared English language teachers' (positive) theoretical views about the value of learner autonomy with their (less positive) reported classroom practices (and finds a substantial gap between the two). Both these studies, then, add to existing concerns in the literature that learner autonomy is a notion around which theoretical ideals and pedagogical realities may not always concur.

Reviewing the literature on learner autonomy reveals the fact that although a large body of research has been carried out to investigate learners' views toward learner autonomy, little has been done on explore teachers' point of view.

3.Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were divided into two groups, including the EFL teachers and learners. In order to have a large number of participants to be able to generalize the gained results, two different methods of sampling i.e. snowballing and convenience sampling were employed.

The population from which the group of teachers was chosen consisted of nearly all the teachers, teaching English as a foreign language at Gooyesh Language Institute (GLI, an English language institute with ten branches all over the city of Isfahan) and many other teachers in other institutes in Isfahan, as well. Due to the fact that the

population was really big at first, an opportunity was created to select only the experienced teachers out of all the participants (It should be noted that the final selection of teachers was done after filling out the questionnaires). Therefore, the chosen group of teachers included 150 male ones having more than five years of experience in teaching English, being originally from Isfahan, having not been to any other countries, holding bachelor's, master's or doctorate degrees just in TEFL. This way the negative effects of diversity in the above factors were ruled out of the results of the study.

The second group of the participants consisted of the students chosen from the same language centers out of which the teachers were selected. Regarding the proficiency level, in order to have a homogeneous group of students, this study made an attempt to select only those students who passed the advanced levels of the language institutes and attended in the preparation courses for TOEFL. Therefore, it was possible to become convinced of the fact that all the students are proficient enough to take part in this research and they are able to comprehend and answer the questions as well. Since the purpose of the study was to gain the general pattern of the existing view point of the learners, the factors such as age range, gender and culture were not strictly controlled. Nevertheless, for minimizing the negative impact of the above factors, among all the learner participants only those who were male, originally from Isfahan, in 25 to 40 age range, having not been to any other countries and holding at least bachelor's degree were selected. With regard to the number of the teacher participants, 150 learner participants who had the above characteristics were selected.

3.2. Instrument

The instruments used for collecting the required data were a structured questionnaire and an interview.

3.2.1. Questionnaire

Questionnaires are inaccurately considered to be an easy to use instrument for collecting data in research. It is undeniable that they possess several advantages in comparison to other instruments, for example, they can be administered relatively economically, can reach a large number of participants in geographically diverse areas and can be analyzed quickly (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). However, such merits are futile if the questionnaire is not well-designed. So, with regard to the fact that a comprehensive and complete questionnaire is required, this study has made a good use of the existing questionnaires designed by Borg & Al-Busaidi, (2012). They took a noteworthy amount of time to prepare the questionnaire.

3.2.2. Interview

Interview was the other instrument employed (after the questionnaires were filled out). The questions for the interview were prefabricated and they were about more personal information related to the answers the participants gave in the questionnaires to see what reasons were behind their answers. In order to develop the interviews, the questions were designed based on what the participants chose and wrote on the

questionnaire; they were asked to clarify their answers by reasoning, giving examples and explanations. The participants were also asked to talk about the challenges they have encountered in this regard. Therefore, the interviews helped the researcher analyze the participants' answers better and more precisely. One example of an interview schedule can be found in Appendix C.

4. Procedure

4.1. Phase 1

As beforehand mentioned, in order to design the questionnaire which was used in this study, a systematic method was employed (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Although one may make sure that this questionnaire is reliable, it was piloted in a population of 30 teachers. Applying SPSS 18, the value of Cronbach's alpha was found to be 0.87 which confirmed the reliability of the questionnaire. In order to check the validity of the questionnaire it was given to four experts (university teachers who teach testing) and they were kindly asked to check its content validity. They all expressed their agreement about relevance of the content validity of the questionnaire. Making use of convenience and snow-balling methods of data collection, these questionnaires were distributed among more than a thousand teachers in Isfahan through emails or on papers.

Prior to having been invited to complete questionnaires, the teachers had received an email with information about the study and explanation of the concept of learner autonomy. Then, a day later a request was sent and they were asked to fill out the attached questionnaire as soon as possible. Moreover, they were kindly asked to do their best to contribute it toward other teachers they know. This process lasted almost three months. After receiving about 324 responses from teachers, demographic parts of these completed questionnaires were investigated and only 150 ones who were male, originally from Isfahan, more than five years experienced, holding bachelor's, master's or doctorate degrees, were included to play a role in results of the study. Eventually, another email was sent to thank those who sent back the questionnaires.

4.2. Phase 2

This phase of the study was made up of follow-up interviews with teachers who filled in the questionnaires and volunteered to speak (the ones who were eager to take part in the interview wrote their names at the bottom of their questionnaire). The interviews were carried out for the purpose of exploring the reasons of teachers' responses in more detail in order to provide the possibility of analyzing the questionnaires with highest accuracy. All the interviews were held in the participants' first language to let them clarify their reasons in detail effortlessly. Furthermore, getting permission for the volunteers in advance, they were audio recorded for further analysis. Out of the 150 selected questionnaires respondents, 48 volunteered to do an interview. As handling the interview with all these volunteers was really time-consuming and daunting, among them all, merely 30 participants were chosen to be interviewed. These 30 teachers were selected using criteria from two specific questionnaire responses: (a) teachers'

beliefs about how autonomous their students were and (b) teachers' years of experience in ELT. Each interview lasts for almost 25 minutes. These 30 interviews took place nearly 15 days; all interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio recorded.

4.3. Phase 3

As this phase of the study deals with acquiring the learners' beliefs and perceptions toward learning autonomy, the students' questionnaire (which was piloted in a group of 42 advanced-level students; the amount of Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was calculated to be 0.81) were printed and given to the students who passed the advanced levels of the language institutes and attended in the preparation courses for TOEFL exam. After filling out the questionnaires by the learners, an attempt has been made to select only those students who were studying in advance levels of the same institutes from which the selection of the teachers had been done; thus, analyzing the data could be more valid. Owing to the fact that the students may have difficulties in answering the items of questionnaire, the researcher herself, explained the topic and objectives of the study to them and gave the questionnaires and helped them with their questions as well.

As managing an interview with all the students was kind of difficult, the questions of the interview were also printed and given to the students. However, based on the mentioned criteria which were used for the selection of the teachers to be interviewed, the learners were chosen, and then they were asked to take time answering the open ended questions of the interview in the presence of the researcher to answer probable questions.

5. Analysis

A systematic method of analysis was employed to make it possible to consider all the influencing factors in the study. Thus, the study was done based on the following procedure:

At first, regarding the variables and the research questions, the items of the questionnaire were classified. To do so, four experts were asked to comment on the classification of the items. The questions were answered based on the first section of the questionnaire. This section contains 25 items. In order to answer the first research question, items 1, 4, 7, 9, 12, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, and 25 were taken in to account. Aiming at answering second question, items 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 13, 14, 17, and 24 were considered influential.

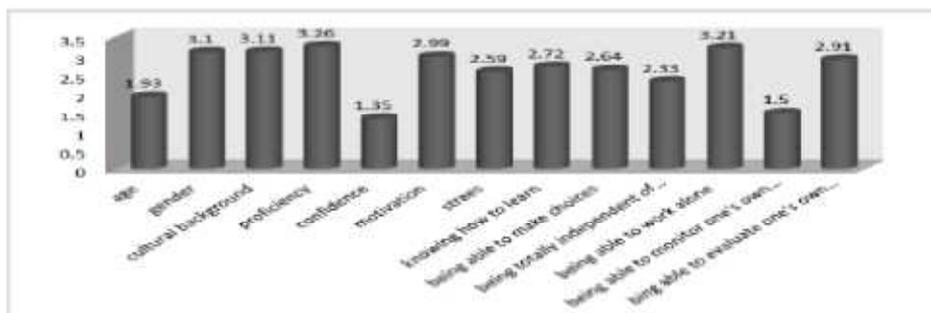


Figure 5.1. The frequency graph of the factors contributing to learner autonomy based on learners' point of view

Considering the above bar graph and based on the frequency of learners' beliefs on the matter, the factors which were considered influential in defining the characteristics of an autonomous learner are listed in the following:

- Proficiency Being able to make choices
- Being able to work alone Stress
- Cultural background Being totally independent of teacher
- Gender Age
- Being able to evaluate one's own Learning Being able to monitor ones' own learning
- Knowing how to learn Confidence

It should be mentioned again that in the next chapter these factors, based on the results from interviews are discussed in details.

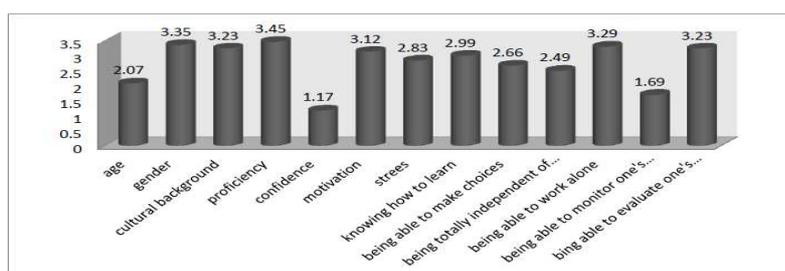


Figure 5.2. The Frequency Graph of the Factor Factors Contributing to Learner Autonomy Based on Teachers' Point of View

The above bar graph and based on the frequency of teachers' beliefs on the matter, the factors which were considered influential in defining the characteristics of an autonomous learner are listed in the following:

- Proficiency Stress
- Gender Being able to make choices
- Being able to work alone Being totally independent of teacher
- Being able to evaluate one's own learning and cultural background Age
- Motivation Being able to monitor ones' own learning
- Knowing how to learn Confidence

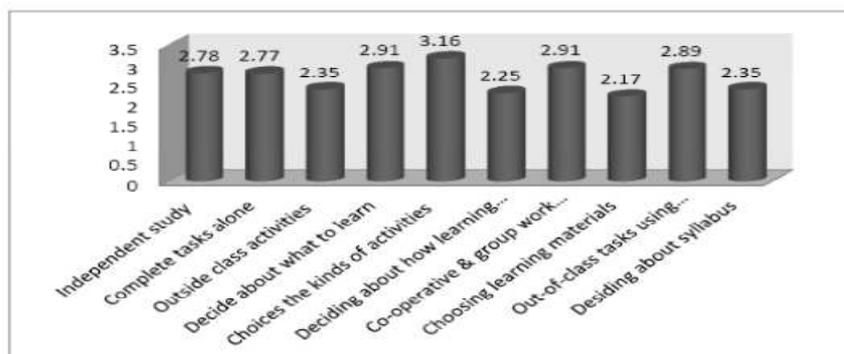


Figure 5.3. The Frequency Graph of Inside and Outside Class Activities and Opportunities Based on Teachers' Point of View

Regarding the above bar graph and based on the frequency of teachers' beliefs on the matter, the most influential inside and outside class activities and opportunities to promote learner autonomy are listed in the following:

- Letting learners have some choices in the kinds of activities they do
- Doing co-operative group work activities and involving learners in making decisions about what to learn
- Doing out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet
- Studying independently in the library or at home
- Giving opportunities to learners to complete tasks alone
- Doing outside classroom activities (including, doing projects, reading supplementary books, doing extra exercises and etc.) and letting learners be engaged in designing syllabus
- Involving students to decide how their learning will be assessed
- Letting learners choose their own learning materials

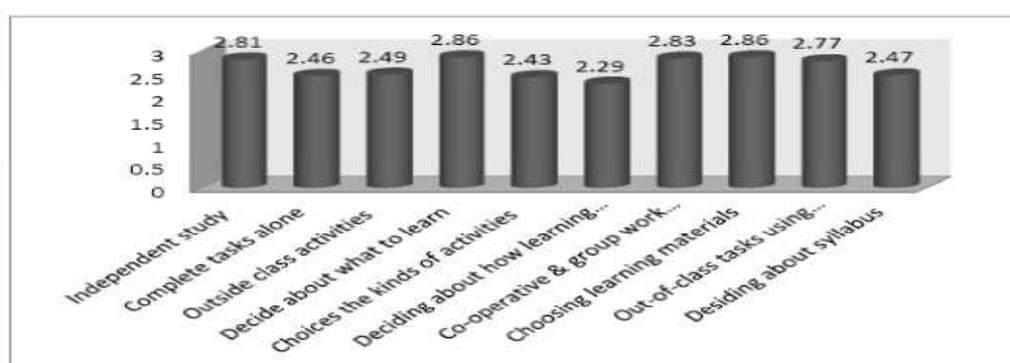


Figure 5.4. The Frequency Graph of Inside and Outside Class Activities and Opportunities Based on Learners' Point of View

Regarding the above bar graph and based on the frequency of learners' beliefs on the matter, the most influential inside and outside class activities and opportunities to promote learner autonomy are listed in the following:

- Involving learners in making decisions about what to learn and letting learners choose their own learning materials
- Doing co-operative group work activities
- Studying independently in the library or at home
- Doing out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet
- Doing outside classroom activities (including, doing projects, reading supplementary books, doing extra exercises and etc.)
- letting learners be engaged in designing syllabus
- Giving opportunities to learners to complete tasks alone
- Letting learners have some choices in the kinds of activities they do
- Involving students to decide how their learning will be assessed

For the purpose of answering the final research question, inferential statistics including, Chi-Square and Two-independent sample tests were applied.

Aiming at answering the first part of the final question, comparing and contrasting the teachers' and learners' beliefs on the factors contributing to learner autonomy, Chi-Square was calculated.

Table 5.1. The Chi-Square Results for Factors Contributing to Learner Autonomy

Variable	Chi-Square value	df	Sig
Ages	31.785	4	0.000
Make choices about how they learn	4.239	4	0.375
Confident	9.654	3	0.022
Cultural backgrounds	11.224	4	0.024
be totally independent of the teacher	4.879	4	0.300
Learning how to learn	13.600	4	0.009
Being able to work alone	2.075	4	0.722
Being able to monitor one's own learning	26.674	3	0.000
Motivated	5.166	4	0.271
Proficiency	19.766	4	0.001
Ability to evaluate their own learning	9.881	3	0.020
Gender	18.986	4	0.001
Are not stressed out	20.660	4	0.000

The above table reveals the fact that among all the factors related to learner autonomy the followings are the ones which teachers and learners statistically have the same idea about as the sig value is more than 0.05 (p-value>0.05).

- Being able to make choices Being able to work alone

- Being totally independent of teacher Motivation

On the other hand, the factors listed below are the ones which teachers and learners do not exactly agree on, since the sig value is less than 0.05 (p-value<0.05).

- Age Confidence
- Cultural backgrounds Being able to evaluate one's own learning
- Knowing how to learn Gender
- Being able to monitor one's own learning
- Proficiency Stress

The second part of the final question deals with comparing the teachers' and learners' views about the inside and outside class activities and opportunities for the promotion of learner autonomy. In order to make this comparison, Chi-Square for these activities and opportunities was calculated.

Table 5.2. The Chi-Square Results of inside and outside class activities

Variable	Chi-Square value	df	Sig
Studying independently in the library or at home	19.891	4	0.001
Giving opportunities to learners to complete tasks alone	23.299	4	0.000
Doing outside classroom activities (including, doing projects, reading supplementary books, doing extra exercises and etc.)	7.522	3	0.057
Involving learners in making decisions about what to learn	4.700	3	0.195
Letting learners have some choices in the kinds of activities they do	19.381	3	0.000
Involving students to decide how their learning will be assessed	3.689	4	0.450
Doing co-operative group work activities	12.737	3	0.005
Letting learners choose their own learning materials	35.335	4	0.000
Doing out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet	4.583	4	0.333
Letting learners be engaged in designing syllabus	9.123	4	0.058

Regarding the above table, it is obvious that based on the amount of obtained sig (p-value>0.05), the following activities are the ones which learners and teachers have the same opinion about their effect on the promotion of the learner autonomy.

- Doing outside classroom activities
- Involving learners in making decisions about what to learn
- Involving students to decide how their learning will be assessed
- Doing out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet
- Letting learners be engaged in designing syllabus

On the other hand the following activities and opportunities are the ones which both groups (the teachers and learners) do not agree that they have the same effect since the sig is less than 0.05 (p-value<0.05).

- Studying independently in the library or at home
- Giving opportunities to learners to complete tasks alone
- Letting learners have some choices in the kinds of activities they do
- Doing co-operative group work activities
- Letting learners choose their own learning materials

In order to answer the third part of the final question which is about contrasting the teachers' and learners' views on the effect of learner autonomy on L2 learning, before comparing the mean of the variable (does learner autonomy enhance L2 learning which is the result of adding the item number 8 and 21), the Levene's test for equality of variances should have been applied.

7. Conclusion

As discussed earlier, despite a substantial amount of research over some 30 years, research on learner autonomy has paid limited attention to the sense teachers make (as well as comparing teachers' and learners' senses), theoretically and in practice, of this concept. Yet, without such insights, we lack a basis for understanding how teachers interpret the notion of learner autonomy and where necessary for encouraging them to make it a more central aspect of their work. The following is a summary of the salient findings to emerge here which in most cases overlap with the findings of the study done by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012).

With regard to the results obtained from interviews and questionnaires of the two groups, the factor of 'learning to learn' was that which received the most overall support. In questionnaires the two group participants responded in a way that proficiency got the highest level of importance while confidence got the lowest level.

Considering the results obtained from the questionnaires and interviews of the group of teachers, the factor of letting students have some choices and of the group of learners, the factor of involving learners in making decisions were the ones which received the most overall support. Many of the teachers commented on learner autonomy; they viewed it as a set of skills or abilities that learners need to master in order to learn independently.

Regarding the gained results from the interviews, the teachers highlighted some of the factors which limited the extent to which they felt they were able to promote learner autonomy. These are related to learners, the institutions and teachers, though learner-related factors were those most widely cited by the teachers. whereas teachers felt that their students did not understand the importance of developing autonomy, and some thought because of the educational system in our country most of the students expect their teachers to play the main role in the class and if the teacher tries to hand over some part of this responsibility to students, they think he or she is not an active well- experienced teacher. Some others mentioned that they are

not allowed to have creativity and they have to just observe the rules of the educational system in which they work. However some argued that they need to attend in some in-service training courses to teach them how to develop learner autonomy in their classes.

However, generally all the participants agreed on the limited attention which the teachers and students paid to the effect of learner autonomy and the ways to improve it.

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