

**An Overview of Learners' Autonomy in EFL Learning and How it Has Been
Investigated in the Saudi EFL Context**

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Abstract

Teaching does not cause learning; learners should be responsible for creating their own paths (Larsen-Freeman, 2006). Thus, it is essential to promote this concept in the language learning process. In order to achieve the desired aims of language learning and teaching, the importance of a learner's autonomy in language education should be recognized. This research essay manifests some important points related to learner's autonomy in language learning and teaching. A general overview of learner's autonomy in language learning is presented. Besides, suggested definitions for learner's autonomy are illustrated. In addition, the evident role of teachers to motivate their students to take charge of their own learning is fully explained. Moreover, previous research regarding teachers' perspectives towards the autonomy of learners is displayed. Furthermore, the introduction of this crucial topic in the Saudi EFL context in different studies is uncovered. Indeed, this paper highlights the significance of learner's autonomy as an educational goal to be successfully accomplished.

Keywords: autonomy, mobile applications, perspectives, Saudi EFL context

Language learning is an interesting field of study. People naturally enjoy knowing how to speak a different language and the distinguished way of communicating that comes with it. Additionally, it can be considered a privileged feature to have the capacity to integrate with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Haque (2019) has described people as they are uniquely attributed to learn and use language and even called them a language-specific species. Indeed, the process of language learning cannot be separated from the way of teaching this language. According to recent research and new developments in language learning and teaching, it has been suggested that the best way of teaching a language is to engage language learners in this challenging process and to maintain the concept of learner's autonomy. A majority of the studies in the English language learning field has focused largely on teaching or course effectiveness, but little has been done to look at what makes learners become self-motivated enough to take control of their own learning. However, this aspect needs to be investigated as a crucial quality of effective teaching. Teachers should consider learner's autonomy as an educational aim and create an appropriate environment to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning (Little, 2000).

To define the concept of learner's autonomy, it first has to be stated that this term was originated by Holec, in 1981, who is considered the father of learner's autonomy (Shangarffam & Ghazisaeedi, 2013). He has defined this term as the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981). Learner's autonomy is considered one of the significant topics in education in the twenty-first century. It has become an inevitable requirement for any pedagogical institution in order to create a knowledgeable generation of youth by enabling them to be responsible for their own learning in and out of educational institutions. Moreover, many researchers (Thornbury, 2006; Najeeb, 2013; Little, 1991)

have described learner's autonomy as the independence the student has to pursue their own interests in language in their own time, outside of the classroom. Therefore, they can be able to enhance their own learning according to their own set of objectives and goals. Despite the fact that there is little consensus on its definition, learner's autonomy as a term is mostly associated with motivating self-esteem of students. Some researchers have declared it important for autonomous learners to have self-confidence and a high level of independence (Asiri & Shukri, 2020). Besides, Sella (2014) has emphasized that there is no single conclusive definition of autonomy. Indeed, Benson's definition can be accounted for as the most comprehensive definition of autonomy as he has described this concept as a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times (Benson, 2001). However, Littlewood (1999) has considered responsibility as a major dimension of this capacity. In fact, it can be assumed that autonomy is currently viewed as a prerequisite for success in language learning. Little (2000) has assured the essentiality of autonomy as he has declared that achievers have always been autonomous.

Needless to say, language teachers have a radical role in developing learner's autonomy. To be an autonomous learner is not an innate talent that learners are born with, it is indeed a skill that need to be nourished and mastered. Thus, the guidance of language teachers for their students in formal education to be more active and independent is extremely substantial. Teachers are not only required to convey information to learners but also to motivate learners to learn and guide them how to learn in an appropriate way (Rinantanti, 2015). To explain, it should be understood that the teacher is a guide, a facilitator, not a detainer of knowledge (Lamb, 2011). Language learners need to be aware of their abilities in creating and contributing in what they are trying to learn. The significance of supporting students to become more autonomous is considered one of the most prominent topics to be investigated in the field of foreign language learning and teaching. Indeed, teachers' help in enhancing learners to be autonomous is indispensable. Teachers who are supportive of autonomy need to raise learners' sense of control over their learning processes and should not undermine the identity of learners, their capacities and possibly their motivation levels (Lamb, 2011). Shahsavari (2014) has claimed that the classroom will be just a place where students attend with only the aim of passing exams if teachers do not realize the methods they can utilize to develop the autonomy of their students.

Additionally, Shahsavari (2014) has described promoting learner's autonomy as a moral duty for teachers, which distinctly confirms the essence of this crucial quality of teaching. Little, (2000) has noted that the pedagogical dialogue between the teacher and students, and the learning strategies used, can be considered effective factors in the promotion of learner's autonomy. There are numerous studies that investigate the necessity of being autonomous for teachers to be able to support their students' feeling of independence. According to Little, 'learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy in two senses: it is

unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner. In addition, teachers need to apply to their teaching strategies the same reflective and self-managing processes that have been attained during their learning' (1995, p. 175). In the same vein, other researchers have argued that teachers who themselves are not autonomous language learners may have a negative influence on the development of autonomy in their students.

Exploring the perspectives of teachers towards learner's autonomy has been the main topic of a handful of studies in various contexts. Since teachers are the most prevalent guidance provider and the extreme effective interlocutors in classrooms, their beliefs and perspectives towards learner's autonomy should be investigated and considered. As Alrabai (2017) has emphasized, the teacher plays a central role in learner's autonomy. Some of the studies have revealed that teachers have the belief that learners do not take responsibility for their learning and do not act autonomously because they think of their teacher as the main figure in classrooms and that the main role in learning should be theirs. (Shahsavari, (2014); Borg & Al-Busaidi, (2012); Yildirim, (2012)). Moreover, other studies have displayed the reasons that deter teachers from practicing autonomous learning in their classrooms. Shahsavari (2014) has stated in his study that some teachers detected that they were not allowed to be creative in their teaching, and they are following the rules to avoid having any problems with the administration. Thus, as it has been assumed if teacher's autonomy is not provided, there is little room for learner autonomy to be developed.

It is worth mentioning that classroom culture and dynamics in the society are of an essential role in constructing perceptions of both teachers and learners towards learner's autonomy. However, Camilleri in her study (1999), has claimed that teachers are willing to change and to develop practice for learner autonomy, but they are reluctant to involve learners in defining aims and in methodological decisions. Additionally, Chan's study (2003) has demonstrated that teachers are quite positive about supporting autonomous learning, yet they do not provide learners with opportunities to develop decision-making skills because they are restricted by curriculum constraints and time management problems to keep up with the curriculum. In fact, the majority of the studies have proved the significance of the teacher's role in promoting learner autonomy. Dogan and Mirici (2017) have noted that although there have been some disagreements, most instructors believe that learner's autonomy could not be promoted without the help of teachers. However, it has to be highlighted those diversified issues related to EFL teachers' perspectives towards autonomous learning should be intensively debated.

Concerning investigating the topic of learner's autonomy in the Saudi EFL context, it can be declared that few studies have investigated learner's autonomy as a vital issue in the Saudi EFL context. Al-Rabai (2017) has stated in his mixed method research that learner's

autonomy appears to be well beyond the capabilities of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. Thus, recommendations have been offered to the Saudi government and related institutions to lead the charge in this direction and to lay the foundations for teacher autonomy, as it is the core of developing learner's autonomy. Additionally, he suggests that promoting learner's autonomy should be considered a key educational goal of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. In the same vein, Al Asmari (2013) has conducted a study at Taif University English Language Center and emphasized that it is important to provide students with learner training and to make it an integral part of teaching to develop learner's autonomy. Asiri and Shukri (2020) have shown in their study involving 150 female EFL learners at the English Language Institute at King Abdul-Aziz University that there are low levels of autonomy among Saudi learners. Consequently, they have suggested that further studies are encouraged on promoting and raising awareness of learner's autonomy.

As it has been proven that technology has a radical impact on EFL learning in numerous contexts. Hazaea and Alzubi (2018) have explored the effect of Mobile Assisted Language Learning on learner's autonomy in their qualitative study in Najran University. They have examined the use of WhatsApp and Google's search engine in reading classes. Indeed, they have found that learners' autonomy is improved through the use of selected mobile applications in terms of taking responsibility for and making decisions about reading materials and the time and place of reading. Therefore, investigations into the role of mobile applications, and social media in particular, to foster learner's autonomy are highly needed.

To conclude, it can be assumed that it is impossible to teach learners everything they need to know in class. Thus, the class activity should be driven to the development of learner's autonomy. In fact, educators should be aware that the development of autonomous learning to the students implies better language learning and contributes to creating a promising future in the field of language learning and teaching. Additionally, it has to be acknowledged that being an autonomous learner can raise the awareness of one's responsibility as a member of a society. Therefore, learners need to be prepared for living in their society as independent individuals who can contribute to its advancement.