

Iranian EFL Instructors' Perceptions and Practices Concerning Learner Autonomy

Nooshin Azin¹, Reza Biria^{2*}, Ahmad Ameri Golestan³

¹ PhD Candidate, Department of English, Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch, Isfahan, Iran, nooshinazin1392@gmail.com

^{2*} Associate Professor, Department of English, Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch, Isfahan, Iran, biriareza53@gmail.com

³ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Majlesi Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran, a.ameri@iaumajlesi.ac.ir

Abstract

The current study explored the Iranian EFL instructors' perceptions, practices and challenges related to learner autonomy (LA). Applying a mixed method design, two kinds of instruments were used: Teachers' beliefs questionnaire derived from Borg and Al-Busaidi's study (2012) and a follow-up focus group discussion. First, the questionnaire was answered by 100 university instructors. Then, to have a knowledgeable focus group who can yield profound dependable information, five EFL instructors with more than 10 years of intensive experience were asked to take part in the interview. The data analysis in both quantitative and qualitative strands indicated that the majority of the participants highlighted the importance of fostering and practicing LA among learners and stressed teachers' essential role as facilitators and guides. Teachers revealed more inclination toward psychological and social aspects of LA rather than political and technical ones. Moreover, while considering LA enhancement as a desirable goal, they showed doubt concerning its practicality due to the constraints in the educational system, learners' characteristics, and teachers' factors. Regarding the degree of LA, the questionnaire showed mixed ideas of teachers, while the focus group participants believed in the lack of LA among EFL students. The findings of the study can have some pedagogical implications for enhancing LA in the Iranian educational system.

Keywords: Instructors' Perceptions, Instructors' Practices, Learner Autonomy

Received 24 April 2019

Accepted 02 June 2019

Available online 20 June 2019

DOI: 10.30479/jmrels.2019.10530.1318

© Imam Khomeini International University. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

After more than 40 years of practice and research on learner autonomy (LA), it has become a key theme in the field of language learning and teaching discussed in numerous books, conference presentations, and journals (Benson, 2011). Nowadays, LA is becoming a learner's desirable characteristic. This is the result of a broader global educational climate in the post-modern world that inclines towards concepts such as learning-to-learn, general skills, and lifelong learning (Benson, 2016).

Benson (2011) describes LA as “the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one's learning” (p. 58). It has also been defined by various researchers in different ways. In the late 1990s, many researchers (Littlewood, 1997, 1999; Macaro, 1997; Nunan, 1997) tried to operationalize the belief that autonomy is of multiple degrees. Nunan (1997) introduced a model of five levels of learner action –awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence. Littlewood (1997) presented a three-stage model: autonomy as a communicator, autonomy as a learner, and autonomy as a person. Macaro (1997) at around the same time, offered a somewhat similar three-stage model. Another broadly cited distinction was proposed by Littlewood (1999) between proactive autonomy and reactive autonomy. As Benson (2006) asserted, each of these models indicates a probable development from lower to higher levels of autonomy without any radical educational reforms. On the other hand, Benson (1997) introduced three basic versions of autonomy in the educational context: technical, psychological, and political. Then, Oxford (2003) presented her four classifications: the technical, psychological, socio-cultural, and the political-critical perspective. Recently, Oxford (2015) revised these categories. Her psychological perspective is broken down into seven categories (e.g., emotionally intelligent learner, psychologically self-regulated learner), whereas a further six divisions of the autonomous learner are discussed in her analysis of a sociocultural view (e.g., cognitively apprenticed learner, mediated learner).

Moreover, two general approaches were recently identified by Benson (2016). One approach highlights learning outside the classroom and considers autonomy as a situational condition in which learners guide their learning independently of teachers outside the classroom (Dickinson, 1987). The other underlines the learners' management on the learning process whether inside or outside the classroom and does not exclude classroom teaching (Little, 1991). Benson (2016) favored the second approach; however, he argued that the two approaches are not necessarily conflicting. Palfreyman (2003) has also mentioned, “While it is useful to distinguish the different perspectives ... in real educational settings, such perspectives are not black-and-white alternatives” (p. 4). Benson (2016) further added that a key point about LA is that second or foreign language teaching is at an early

age in many parts of the world, particularly in Asian countries. In these countries, educational systems have influenced English language teaching so deeply that students' understanding of language learning are directly associated with their experience of how they are being taught.

Central to any educational system is a teacher. The teachers are hearts and brains of education, and practical changes would be initiated, facilitated, and implemented by them. As Borg and Al-Busaidi (2011) stressed, any instructional transition needs teachers' common understanding, collaboration, reflection, and action. Teachers' beliefs and understanding affect their behaviors, and teachers' instructional behaviors have a powerful effect on students' learning (Muijs, Kyriakides, Van der Werf, Creemers, Timperley, & Earl, 2014). As Skott (2014) reasoned "beliefs are expected to significantly influence how teachers interpret and engage with the problems of practice" (p. 19). According to Borg and Alshumaimeri (2017) "what learner autonomy means to teachers will thus impact on how much and how teachers promote it, and subsequently on the opportunities that learners have to become autonomous" (p. 2). Thus, exploring what teachers know, believe, and think about LA can be considered as the first step for fostering LA among learners.

2. Literature Review

Several studies are available regarding language teachers' beliefs about LA. Camilleri (1999) gave a questionnaire to 328 teachers in six European contexts and found that teachers were positive about learners' involvement in a range of activities, such as evaluating themselves at times, making a decision on the location of desks, and working out learning procedures. However, they were not positive about learner collaboration in selecting textbooks and the time and place of lessons. This study was replicated with a group of 48 student teachers in Malta by Camileri Grima (2007). The findings showed that these teachers were more positive than those in the earlier study in certain aspects of autonomy, such as learners' involvement in the selection of materials, self-assessment and deciding on their short-term objectives. Using the same instrument, Balçıkanlı (2010) examined the views of 112 student teachers of English about LA in Turkey. Some of them were also interviewed. The results demonstrated that these student teachers had a positive view about learner's decision making about a wide range of classroom activities, but, again, they were less positive about students' decisions about when and where of having lessons. In another survey, Al-Shaqsi (2009) investigated 120 English teachers' beliefs about LA in state schools of Oman. The teachers identified three characteristics of autonomous learners more often: they can use a dictionary, use computers, and ask for more explanation if they do not understand a point. Overall, these teachers assessed their learners positively. Martinez (2008), with predominantly

qualitative methodology, studied the subjective theories about LA of 16 student teachers of Spanish, Italian, and French who were studying at a university in Germany. The Findings showed the student teachers' positive attitudes towards LA based on their own experiences as language learners. Their perspectives about autonomy were: (a) it is a new and better methodology; (b) it is connected with individualization and differentiation; (c) it is an ideal and complete concept; (d) it is related with learning without a teacher. Such perspectives are not consistent with those recently proposed in the field of language teaching that stresses that LA is not self-instruction/learning without a teacher and it does not mean that intervention of teacher is banned (Esch, 1998).

Bullock (2011) and Yoshiyuki (2011) in their separate studies compared and highlighted a gap between teachers' positive theoretical beliefs about LA and their real practice in their classes. Their findings suggested that ideological beliefs and pedagogical realities may not always agree.

In a well-known study, Borg and Al-Busaidi, (2012) investigated the teachers' conceptualization of LA with 61 English teachers at a large university language center in Oman. The study highlighted the teachers' positive theoretical perception about LA, yet the results showed their less optimistic view of the practicality of fostering LA in class. The teachers believed that lack of motivation, limited experiences of independent learning, and institutional factors limit learners' autonomy. These researchers also tried to link this experimental phase of research to professional development workshops for teachers. And finally, in a more recent work, Borg and Alshumaimeri (2017), inspected the beliefs of 359 teachers working at a university in Saudi Arabia in the form of a questionnaire study. The teachers related LA with notions of control and independence perceived it as the ability and willingness to complete tasks, in or outside the classroom, collaboratively or individually, and with little teacher involvement. They believed that promoting LA was a desirable goal but not feasible due to curricular, societal and learner factors.

In a notable work, Barnard and Li (2016) collected various studies of what LA means to language teachers in a range of Asian contexts such as Vietnam, China, Japan, Brunei, Thailand, Philippines, and Indonesia. All the papers in this collection followed the general methodological pattern proposed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012); though, some adjustments were made in individual studies based on specific contextual limitations. It is interesting to know how teachers of various nationalities and ethnicities in Asia conceptualized LA, whether they wanted to implement it, what challenges they encountered, and whether they would be ready to apply it after providing professional development. Overall, the findings indicated the same patterns and results as those reported in Borg and Albusaidi (2012).

Nearly all the teachers in these studies believed in the positive role of LA and its desirability. They thought that LA development facilitated learners' language learning, besides most of them supposed the positive role of professional workshops in implementing LA among their learners. However, the majority of them showed some doubt about its feasibility considering cultural traditions and local conditions, prescribed curriculums, institutional constraints, traditional beliefs about teachers' role as the authority in the class, and lack of learners' prerequisite skills and strategies to be autonomous.

In Iran, Likewise, several attempts have been made to investigate teachers' beliefs about various aspects of LA. Salimi and Ansari (2015) explored the beliefs of 35 Iranian English teachers' beliefs about LA in the form of a questionnaire. The collected data showed that teachers were familiar with the concept of LA and believed that it has an essential role in effective language learning. In another study Nasri, Eslami Rasekh, Vahid Dastjerdy, and Amirian (2017) tried to find the constraints of promoting LA in high schools. For this purpose, 19 teachers, as well as 17 students, were interviewed. While the teachers referred to predetermined materials, schedule, and tests, lack of facilities, university entrance exam, students' desire to depend on teachers, and learners' low level of English proficiency as the major limitations of promoting LA, the students referred to lack of time, students' proficiency level, teachers' lack of training, and students' schooling background.

Another investigation of EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions concerning their readiness to exercise autonomy was done by Farahani (2013). She concluded that there is a gap between learners' and teachers' consciousness of autonomous learning and their actual practice in the classroom. According to teachers, learners displayed a fairly low degree of autonomy and not fully prepared; learners, though perceived themselves to be motivated, resorted to their teacher as a source of knowledge and believed that teachers should raise their awareness towards practicing autonomy. Moreover, learners and teachers voiced their disagreement regarding the constraints they faced when applying autonomy.

Kianpoor (2013) in another study explored Iranian EFL teachers' and learners' beliefs about LA and found that Iranian EFL teachers and learners gave more importance to aspects of LA such as learners finding out learning strategies and explanations to classroom tasks, self-assessment, material selection, setting course objectives, and choosing learning tasks.

Zarei (2016) also found that learners gave significant decisions of their learning process such as deciding the objectives of the course, selecting what to learn next, and choosing educational activities and materials to their

teachers. However, learners depicted themselves as useful agents in evaluating their learning, course and weaknesses in English. Moreover, teachers considered their role as a significant factor in developing learner autonomy.

Finally, Amirian and Azari Noughabi (2017) in their study reported 123 EFL teachers' beliefs regarding LA. Focusing on desirability and feasibility aspects of LA, their results showed lack of remarkable interest among teachers in both domains.

Although there exists a reasonable literature on LA, there is a rather small body of literature concerning the notion of LA among EFL instructors in the context of Iran. Most previous studies, explored teachers' beliefs either pure quantitatively without considering teachers' voices (Amirian & Azari Noughabi, 2017; Salimi & Ansari, 2015; Zarei & Rastegar Haghighi, 2017) or pure qualitative (Nasri et al., 2017) . Then, in this study, utilizing a mixed method design and following the methodological pattern presented in Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) research, triangulation of data was applied in order to provide more in-depth insights into the realistic status of LA in universities of Iran concerning English language learning and teaching. For this purpose, the subsequent research questions were proposed:

1. What does LA mean to Iranian EFL university instructors in Iran?
2. According to Iranian EFL university instructors, how desirable and feasible is it to foster LA?
3. To what extent do Iranian EFL university instructors believe that their learners are autonomous?
4. What are the opinions of Iranian EFL university instructors regarding their roles in fostering LA?
5. What challenges do Iranian EFL university instructors encounter in promoting LA?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

100 ELT university instructors participated in the study and completed a teachers' beliefs questionnaire. The respondents were all Iranian comprised of both females and males with varied teaching experiences. Table 1 describes the teachers' years of experience and qualifications.

3.2. Design

An explanatory sequential design was employed in the present study. The design begins with quantitative strand and then a second qualitative strand is conducted to explain the quantitative results (Creswell, 2015).

Table 1

Demographics of the Questionnaire Participants (N = 100)

Variables		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	37	37%
	Female	63	63%
Qualification	PhD	40	40%
	student/candidate		
	PhD holder	26	26%
Teaching experience (Years)	M.A. holder	34	34%
	<5	23	23%
	5-9	17	17%
	10-14	31	31%
	15-19	20	20%
	20-24	6	6%
	25+	3	3%

Then for the purpose of achieving a bulk of in-depth information, from a group of volunteers, five EFL university instructors were selected to take part in a focus group discussion. According to Riazi (2016), focus group is usually consisted of 5 to 10 homogeneous people with common experiences and views on specific topic of interests. The participants were all female and PhD candidates in applied linguistics with more than 10 years of teaching experience in universities.

3.3. Instruments

Two kinds of instruments were used in this study:

3.3.1. Teachers' Beliefs Questionnaire

It was basically derived from Borg and Al-Busaidi's study in 2012. It consisted of four sections. Section one consisted of 37 Likert scale items asking key themes related to LA, and teachers needed to respond to on a five-point scale of agreement. Section two explored teachers' views about desirability and feasibility of (a) engaging learners in a range of course decisions and (b) expanding specific abilities related to LA in learners. Section three asked teachers two questions about their teaching at the university: How autonomous they feel their learners are and whether they think they foster LA in their teaching. For both questions, teachers are asked to give explanations to clarify their answers; Section four gathered background information about teachers and their work experiences.

Regarding reliability and validity, it is worth mentioning that Amirian and Azari Noughabi (2017) largely administered the same questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha formula. The reported reliability indexes of 3 sections were 0.84, 0.81, and 0.74 for the first, the second, and the third section respectively. Considering its validity, it should be noted that since the

items and sections of the questionnaire were all developed by experts in the field of LA and teachers' cognition and detailed process of drafting, critical reviewing and revising were done before the release of the final version of the questionnaire (see Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012), it can be claimed that the questionnaire measures what it is supposed to measure. In this respect, Benson (2016) asserted that "Borg and Al-Busaidi's questionnaire was grounded in a thorough review of the academic literature on autonomy, which means that it is well suited for international use" (p. xxxvi). Unfortunately due to the restrictions posed by the number of participants of the study, the statistical procedure of validation in the context of the study was out of question.

3.3.2. Focus Group Discussion

Since based on the explanatory sequential design, quantitative data needs to be further explained and supported by qualitative strands, a follow-up semi-structured interview in the form of focus group discussion was also conducted with five EFL university instructors. . Following Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) interview schedule, the main themes investigated in the focus group were (a) the teachers' beliefs about the characteristics of autonomous learner; (b) the extent of their learners' autonomy; (c) teachers' role in fostering LA; (d) the desirability and feasibility of promoting LA among university students; (e) the challenges they face in enhancing their learners' autonomy.

3.4. Procedures

First, teachers' beliefs questionnaire in a google form was made available to the ELT instructors, and then, a focus group discussion was arranged to learn more about how teachers were experiencing this phenomenon.

To this aim, from a group of volunteers five experienced university instructors were selected to take part in the discussion. The interview lasted for about two hours. The dominating language was English, but whenever required, they were allowed to explain the ambiguous or confusing points in Persian. The interview was recorded and later transcribed.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

Descriptive statistics for the closed questionnaire items in the form of mean and percentage were calculated. The main categories of open-ended questionnaire and interview were also subjected to content analysis. . To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, another ELT expert checked the codes extracted from the qualitative data to identify if she would arrive at the same outcome. The investigators' perspectives triangulation (Riazi, 2016),

therefore, helped to enhance our confidence and validity in the conclusion. Now the summaries of questionnaire and interview data analysis for each of five research questions are reported here.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. RQ1: What does LA mean to Iranian EFL university instructors in Iran?

Considering four basic orientations of LA according to Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), table 2 reveals that the most supported constructs were psychological (M=4.38) and social orientations of LA (M= 4.30) followed by the political (3.90) and technical scales (3.74).

Table 2

Teachers' Beliefs about LA

Basic constructs	M	SD
Psychological view	4.38	.23
Social view	4.30	.27
Political view	3.90	.34
Technical view	3.74	.30

(1 = completely disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = unsure, 4 = agree, 5 =completely agree)

The related statements of these four constructs and the instructors' responses are presented in Appendices 1, 2, 3, and 4. Psychological orientation mostly concentrates on individualistic view and mental attributes of learners. The responses showed that a high proportion of instructors (above 90%) stressed the crucial role of being confident, motivated, and knowing how to learn in the development of LA. The ability to evaluate and monitor one's learning were also considered central to LA. Besides, the high mean on the social aspect of LA indicated that teachers stressed the role of co-operation and class activities in promoting LA. Moreover, as it is presented in Appendix 3, the majority of instructors believed that giving a choice of activities to learners and involving them in what to learn can improve LA. Further, in the technical view, out-of-class tasks and activities which require the learners to use the internet received considerable support from teachers.

More insights into the teachers' beliefs about LA were obtained from the focus group interviews. Teachers had various views on the concept of LA and the characteristics of an autonomous learner. However, four basic features recurred in their answers including responsibility, awareness, certain learners' characteristics (e.g. motivation, self-confidence, and creativity), and

being active. The following table reveals the main categories and subcategories with some illustrative quotations:

Table 3

Teachers' Beliefs about Characteristics of an Autonomous Learner in Focus Group

Main category	Subcategories	Illustrative quotations
Responsibility	Finding best ways for learning	<i>Autonomous learners are responsible; they manage and handle their learning activities. They are not dependent on teachers to tell them what to do and what not to do.</i>
	Independence	
	Management	
Awareness	Self-evaluation	<i>Autonomous learners know what they want and are aware of their needs. They have a goal; when they have a long-term goal, it creates interests and motivation in them so that they can check and evaluate themselves frequently. Besides, they have the inner drive and act independently. In this way, they don't need external feedback from their teachers. For them, the teacher is not the only source of knowledge. They have already shaped the internal criterion and evaluate themselves accordingly. Autonomous learners have strategy-awareness and know when to use what.</i>
	Goals	
	Needs	
	Learning process	
	Weaknesses	
	Strategies	
Motivation		<i>Autonomous learners are responsible, motivated, and creative. They have high levels of self-confidence and self-awareness.</i>
Self-confidence		
Creativity		
Being active		
		<i>They are motivated, active, and not waiting for the class to end since they are aware of their needs and goals. They do several out-of-class activities and search the web for gaining more information.</i>

This dominant belief about the importance of psychological aspect in fostering LA is consistent with previous findings in literature (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Bullock, 2011; Camilleri, 1999; Nguyen, 2016; Tapinta, 2016; Yoshiyuki, 2011) and can be considered as what Benson called “the consensus view in the current academic literature” (p. xxxvii).

Other important aspects for fostering LA, according to the instructors were taking part in cooperative activities (social aspect), having choice in the kinds of activities and what to learn (political aspect), and being active out of class and using internet (technical aspects). These findings are compatible with what Murphey and Jacobs (2000) asserted about the role of cooperation

and collaboration among learners and teachers in fostering students' responsibility, individual accountability and, positive interdependence; and with what Benson (2016) stated about the role of in- class and out of class activities in developing LA.

4.1.2. LA and other Factors

Teachers' beliefs about other factors such as LA and age, LA and culture, LA and teacher's role, LA and teaching approaches, LA and learner's proficiency level, and LA and learners' learning are as follow: the majority of teachers believed that language learners of all ages could develop LA, and this is not related to any special age range (M=3.71). Moreover, the majority of teachers assumed that learners with various cultural backgrounds could develop LA, and it is not just suited to Western learners (M= 4.01). Besides, they widely considered that LA has a positive effect on the learners' quality of learning (M=3.95).

Concerning teachers' role, they were quite favorable toward it and considered their role crucial in supporting LA (M= 3.67). However, more than half of them rejected traditional teacher-led methods for promoting LA (M=3.55); and on the subject of proficiency level, the data showed a lack of agreement among instructors (M=3).

4.1.3. RQ2: According to Iranian EFL university instructors, how desirable and feasible is it to foster LA?

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate teachers' views about students' involvement in decision making and the range of abilities and skills indicating LA. In all cases, teachers were more optimistic regarding the desirability than the feasibility of fostering LA. The means of both feasibility in decision making (M= 2.25) and ability parts (M= 2.69) were lower than their desirability counterparts (M= 2.60, M= 2.94).

The most feasible aspects in decision making part according to teachers were decisions about topic and kinds of tasks and activities; however, the least feasible ones were related to learners' involvement in decision making on assessment, teaching methods, and used materials.

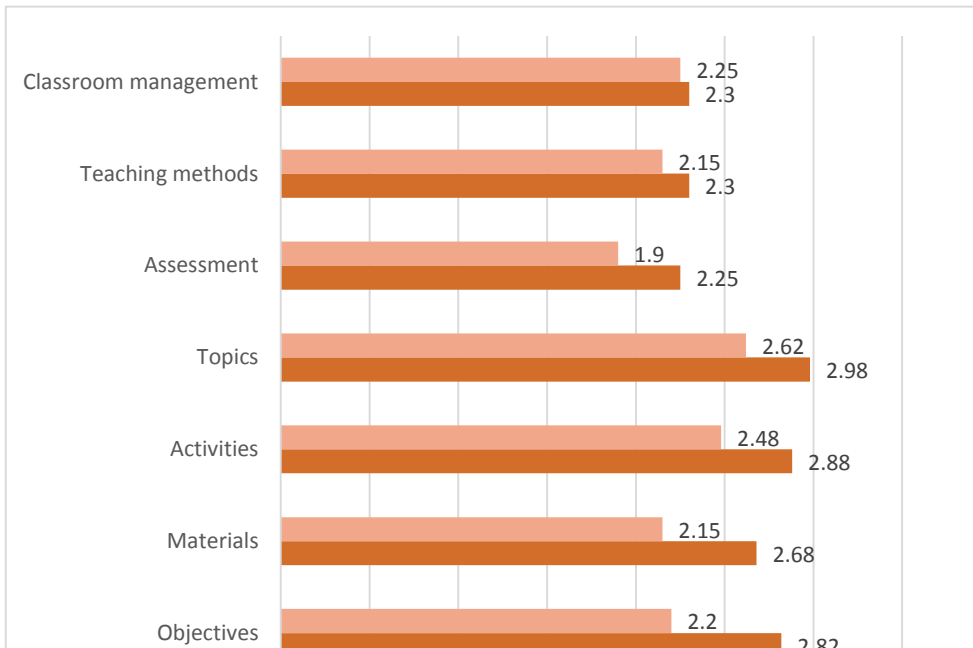


Figure 1. Desirability and Feasibility of Involving Learners in Decision Making (1=undesirable/unfeasible; 4= very desirable/feasible)

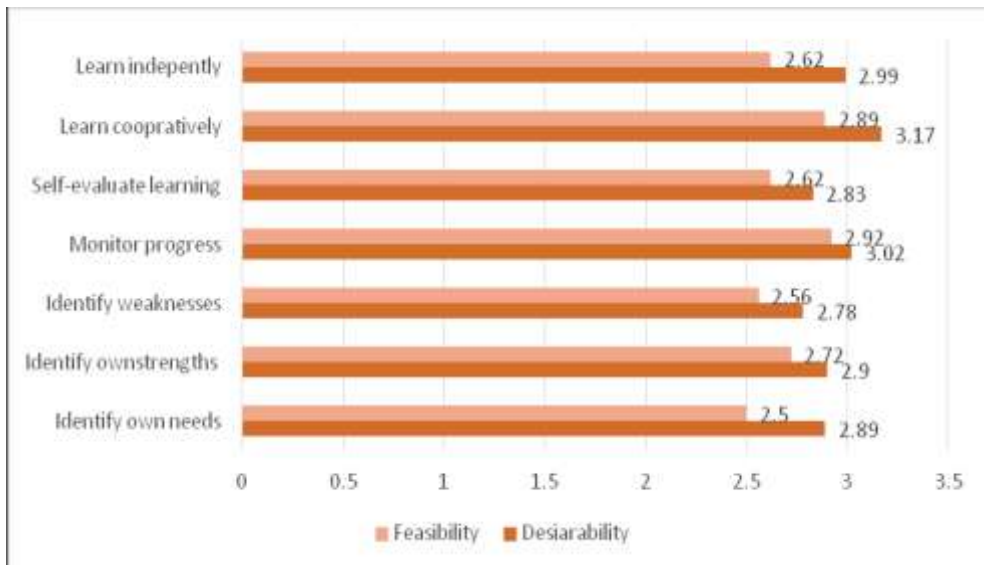


Figure 2. Desirability and Feasibility of Learning Skills in Learners (1=undesirable/unfeasible; 4= very desirable/feasible)

Regarding the ability part, teachers held that learners' ability to learn cooperatively and monitor their progress was the most desirable and feasible ones; on the other hand, identifying their own needs was viewed as the least feasible one.

This confirms previous findings in the literature (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Bullock, 2011; Haji-Othman & Wood, 2016; Nakata, 2011; Reinders & Lazaro, 2011; Yoshiyuki, 2011). Qualitative data supported quantitative findings, in that in the interview session, the teachers stressed the learners' lack of awareness and stated that their students generally could not even recognize their needs and goals, let alone to make decisions about class needs, objectives, methodology, and assessment.

4.1.4. RQ3: To what extent do Iranian EFL university instructors believe that their learners are autonomous?

Table 4 displays instructors' opinions about their students' degree of LA. As it can be seen generally, 36% of them agreed that their students have a fair degree of LA; however, about the same amount, that is 37% of the teachers disagreed with the statement, while 27% were unsure.

Table 4

Teachers' Beliefs about their Learners' Level of LA

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
In general, the students I teach English most often to at universities, have a fair degree of LA.	11	26	27	22	14
In general, in teaching English, I give my students opportunities to develop LA.	0	5	20	52	23

Question 1 in section 3 of the questionnaire asked the teachers to express their level of agreement with this statement 'In general, the students I teach English most often to at universities have a fair degree of LA', and to give explanations for their answers. As it can be seen the results were mixed and showed lack of certainty among teachers. One possible argument is that since LA is a multidimensional construct, teachers don't have a similar understanding of it. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) referred to the evidence of "differing expectations of what autonomous learners were able to do" as a probable justification for this doubt (p. 17). Besides, according to Nunan (1997), LA is not binary and can happen in a degree or continuum.

In the comment part, most comments were expressed by those who disagreed with the above statement. The same question on the extent of

learners' autonomy was repeated in the focus group interview. The main results of the questionnaire's comments and the interview session were combined and presented in table 5 plus some illustrative examples:

Table 5

Teachers' Reasons for the Low Degree of Learners' Autonomy

Main category	Illustrative quotations
Dependent & passive	<i>They are not autonomous. They are not taught to be autonomous and creative. They are passive and prefer spoon-feeding instruction.</i>
Not able to identify their goals, needs, weaknesses	<i>They do not even know the goals of their major of the study. Most of them cannot recognize their needs, let alone their goals.</i>
Not able to evaluate their learning progress	<i>Most of the students do not know what evaluation is and how to evaluate their abilities and progress. On the other hand, some of them overestimate their abilities and have false feeling about their knowledge and skills.</i>
Focusing on scores; don't feel responsibility for their learning; preferring shortcut and easy ways	<i>They do not feel responsibility for their learning and keep asking about the final exam. For most of them, gaining passing score is much more important than learning. They do not like to have strict teachers and do not want extra burdens preferring to have everything ready-made. Even in doing their homework, they usually copy the answers from other students.</i>

On the other hand, those who believed that their students have a fair degree of autonomy mentioned that their learners are responsible, know strategies, have cooperation, give lectures, and involve voluntarily in class activities with the help of their teachers. One teacher pointed out:

“They do most of the activities cooperatively. They are volunteered to give lectures or teach a part of the lesson”.

Besides, some credited the role of prior educational experience and stated:

“In my opinion, as the students become older, their level of autonomy increases. They know how to study. They know their weaknesses and try to turn them to their strength”.

Although in the questionnaire's open-ended questions, some instructors expressed their positive views about their learners' degree of autonomy, in focus group all teachers unanimously voiced their learners' lack of autonomy. One reason for this unanimity among instructors in the focus group would be that all instructors focused on just personal characteristics of learners (psychological aspects of LA) rather than other aspects; characteristics such as lack of responsibility and motivation, over-reliance,

lack of ability to identify goals and needs, lack of ability to monitor and evaluate their improvements.

The second question of section three asked the opinion of the instructors concerning this statement: 'In general, in teaching English I give my students opportunities to develop LA', and the majority of them (75%) believed that they provide opportunities for students to foster LA (table 3).

Due to the similarity of the concept, the open-ended question of this part is reported and analyzed in the fourth research question.

However, a small number of teachers reported that developing LA is time-consuming, disturbs the class order and reduces teachers' authority, and is a waste of time. Such participants expressed their views as follows:

- I cannot focus on students' autonomy completely since we face a limitation of time.
- It may disturb class order and result in disorder and reduce teacher's authority.
- If students are not motivated and don't want to learn, it will be useless.

This part leads to the fourth research question that emphasizes the role of a teacher in fostering LA.

4.1.5. RQ4: What are the opinions of Iranian EFL university instructors regarding their roles in fostering LA?

The results of the questionnaire showed a positive view of instructors considering their role in fostering LA. This question was also explored in the focus group and the second question of section three. The main themes along with illustrative quotations are summarized in Table 6.

As the above responses indicate, EFL instructors regarded teachers as guides and facilitators who equip learners with learning strategies, encourage them, raise their awareness, and involve them in various cooperative activities and learning tasks. The role of teachers in preparing appropriate activities and providing instructions and guidance was stressed in multiple studies. Benson (2016) considers the learners' ability to take control of their learning as the key element in LA conceptualizations and stresses the vital role of teachers in improving this ability. He also underlined the teachers' role in "guiding students towards resources and activities that will meet their personal learning goals" (p. xxxiv). In this way, teachers are scaffolding their learners' decision-making process to meet their individual learning goals and interests.

Table 6

The Teachers' Role in Fostering LA

Main category	Illustrative quotations
Acting as a guide & facilitator	<i>Teachers shouldn't teach everything. Their role is to guide and show. Learners should be responsible for learning. Teachers should encourage them and show the way. Teachers act as a facilitator in the process of learning. Teachers have a vital role in the process of learning. Learning autonomy is not equal to self-study instruction.</i>
Teaching them how to learn	<i>I strongly focus on their autonomy by teaching them how to learn. Teachers should teach strategies explicitly and help students remove and change their old study habits to newer self-reliant ones.</i>
Giving awareness & encouragement	<i>It is good to give students awareness of the objectives of the course and to ask them to reflect on what they have learned in the class and find their weaknesses. It is imperative for teachers to give students the required motivation, hope, courage, and self-confidence.</i>
Making learners engaged in various learning tasks & activities	<i>Getting them involved in classroom activities, tasks, or projects help them move from theory into practice, learn independently, generalize & use whatever they have learned in real life situations. Thus, they may learn to stand alone later in life. I ask students to search for a particular topic before coming to the class. With this activity, they can gain background knowledge and take part in class discussions. So they will not wait for me to explain everything to them.</i>
Considering students' needs	<i>In some courses, learners are allowed to select their favorite topics to discuss, read, or write which in turn would lead to the enhancement of their sense of autonomy and motivation.</i>

4.1.6. RQ5: What factors do Iranian EFL university instructors perceive as challenges for fostering LA?

Data analysis showed that there were three primary factors that limit fostering LA among students; they include educational system, learners' characteristics, and teachers' experiences and beliefs. Table 7 illustrates the main categories, subcategories, and some related quotes.

The findings support the results of the previous studies on the obstacles and challenges of LA development (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Haji-Othman & Wood, 2016; Nguyen, 2016; Tapinta, 2016).

Table 7

Challenges for Fostering LA

Main category	Subcategories	Illustrative quotations
Educational system	Schools and institutional barriers; lack of long-term consistent plan for fostering LA	<i>No time for extra activities. We should obey dictated syllabus; besides, classes are populated, and courses are of different natures. They have never been taught and learned to be autonomous learners. I think the educational system does not allow such autonomy.</i>
Learners' characteristics, beliefs & prior education	Lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence, teacher-dependence; primacy of passing the course rather than learning; lack of training to be autonomous	<i>All illustrative quotations in Table 5 can be applied here.</i>
Teachers' experiences and beliefs	Be used to their traditional role as an authority; lack of training to be autonomous and teach autonomy	<i>Many teachers do not know what autonomy is and how it can be taught. They haven't been trained to be autonomous and to teach autonomy. Teachers should be trained long before in primary and guidance schools. It is difficult to change the beliefs and methodologies of the university instructors since they believe that their method is the best one. For many teachers, learner-centered classes are equal to losing their control and authority.</i>

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study contributes to the literature by considering Iranian EFL university instructors' perceptions about LA, the desirability and feasibility of promoting LA, their perception about the extent of their learners' autonomy, the teachers' role in fostering LA, and finally, the challenges they face in fostering LA among university students. For a better and deeper understanding of how instructors conceptualize LA and its related issues in

universities, a mixed method approach (teachers' beliefs questionnaire and focus group discussion) was employed.

The results showed that EFL instructors had more inclination toward psychological and social aspects of LA rather than political and technical ones. Considering the desirability and feasibility of applying LA, a gap was seen. In spite of the positive perspectives of the teachers toward fostering LA, the teachers were negative about its feasibility and aware of the limitations that they possibly face in implementing proper strategies.

Regarding teachers' beliefs about how autonomous their learners were, in the quantitative part, the picture was mixed and showed a lack of consensus. However, the analysis of the focus group discussion suggested that the teachers' overall perception of their learners' autonomy was negative and they unanimously agreed that their students did not have a fair degree of autonomy.

Another notable result emerging from the data was that instructors strongly believed in the crucial role that a teacher could take in reinforcing LA, and they regarded teachers as guides and facilitators. Moreover, instructors believed that three primary factors that limit fostering LA among students were educational system, learners' characteristics, and teachers' experiences and beliefs.

One of the key factors limiting LA in Iran is the local educational system. The educational system in Iran is centralized, and the ministry of education makes all the decisions about various aspects of a curriculum such as the types of materials and evaluation system (Alibakhshi & Rezaei, 2013). In such a system, "what and what for questions" (Benson, 2016, p. xxxvf) are often decided by curriculum planners and course writers on top which results in "control rather than support" (Behrman, Deolalikar, & Soon, 2002, p. 41).

The development of LA is obviously a long-term process and needs fundamental reforms in the educational system. An exam-based system that focuses on mere knowledge and memorization should be replaced by a skill-based one. In theory, learner-centered education is a desirable objective for the ministry of education and higher education, but in practice, no significant improvement can be seen due to inconsistencies between plans and executive actions. It is not logical to expect the learners who have been trained based on memorization-based instruction to be able to choose and decide on how to learn and what to learn. Unlike several researchers who highlighted the importance of encouraging choice and decision-making for improving LA (Benson, 2016; Borg & Al-Busaidi's, 2012; Macaro, 2008), in this study, decision making was rarely referred to as a salient factor for fostering LA by teachers. In fact, the concept of learners' decision making, in formal education in Iran, can be considered unrealistic particularly in setting "where

teacher control remains a hallmark of professional competence” (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2017, p.21).

However, any modification in the educational system should start from teachers. They are mediators between theory and practice, between curriculum designers and learners. Benson (2016) called teachers as “mediators of the idea of autonomy in diverse contexts of practice” (p. xxxvi). According to Borg (2016) the topmost goal of teacher cognition is being practical. Many useful theories of learning will be of no use if they are not applied by teachers. With the transmission of the predominant paradigm in teaching methodology and emergence of the constructivist approach, nowadays teachers are regarded as “active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs” (Borg, 2003, p. 81). To be active decision maker and critical, teachers need to be autonomous. It is not reasonable, as stated by Little (1995), to expect teachers to enhance LA when they themselves do not have any. Moreover, how teachers feel in their educational context is very important. Do they feel that they work in a context, reinforcing and shaping a positive professional identity with job satisfaction, or in a context which is being viewed as instrumental tool whose job is to teach prescribed materials?

Here the key role of systematic professional development programs for empowering the teachers is undeniable, since these programs can affect teachers' cognition which in turn influence teachers' behaviors and practices (Borg, 2011; Khatib & Miri, 2016; Miri, Alibakhshi, & Mostafaei-Alaei, 2016). Besides, in such programs their voices can be heard and many useful concepts over aspects of learning and teaching can be shaped and shared. Then, the most practical solutions regarding the limitations of local context can be taken. Johnson (2006) refers to the need for such programs to maintain “a teaching force of transformative intellectuals who can navigate their professional worlds in ways that enable them to create educationally sound, contextually appropriate, and socially equitable learning opportunities for the students they teach” (p.235).

Furthermore, most teachers highlighted the prominent role of psychological attributes of learners in grounding LA: attributes such as awareness, motivation, and metacognitive skills. Many scholars believed that to be autonomous and strategic, learners need to be equipped with a thorough metacognitive knowledge that contains awareness about themselves, strategies and learning tasks. These factors need to be integrated into English language learning programs. In this way, teachers are leading learners towards activities and resources to meet their own individual learning goals.

Bearing in mind that language learning is “an embodied action” (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 108) which happens in specific cultural and sociopolitical environments, it is essential to consider the local context, its sociocultural and sociopolitical conditions as well as the educational needs of learners, institutional limitations, teacher education system, and any other EFL learning and teaching factors relating to the EFL process.

To close, despite its contributions, the limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The generalizability of the findings to other settings and respondents with different sociocultural background should be done with caution. Moreover, observation can be added to realize to what extent teachers put these beliefs into practice. Besides, to further our research, we intend to identify university students’ beliefs about LA to have a more comprehensive view in this regard.

References

- Al-Shaqsi, T. S. (2009). Teachers’ beliefs about learner autonomy. In S. Borg (Ed.), *Researching English language teaching and teacher development in Oman* (pp. 157-165). Muscat: Ministry of Education, Oman.
- Amirian, M.R., & Azari Noughabi, M. (2017). An investigation into Iranian EFL teachers’ perception of learner autonomy. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 8 (4), 807-816.
- Balçıkanlı, C. (2010). Learner autonomy in language learning: Student teachers’ beliefs. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(1), 90-103.
- Behrman, J. R., Deolalikar, A. B., & Soon, L. Y. (2002). *Promoting effective schooling through education decentralization in Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines*, ERD Working Paper No. 23. Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank.
- Benson, P. (1997). The philosophy and politics of learner autonomy. In: P. Benson, & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 18–34). London: Longman.
- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. London: Longman.
- Benson, P. (2013). *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge.
- Benson, P. (2016). Language Learner Autonomy: Exploring Teachers’ Perspectives on Theory and Practice. In R., Barnard, & J., Li, (Eds.), *Language learner autonomy: Teachers’ beliefs and practices in Asian contexts* (pp. xxxiii-xliii). Phnom Penh: IDP Education.
- Borg, S. (2011). The impact of in-service teacher education on language teachers’ beliefs. *System*, 39(3), 370-380.

- Borg, S., & Al-Busaidi, S. (2012). Learner autonomy: English language teachers' beliefs and practices. *ELT research paper*. London: University of Leeds, British Council.
- Borg, S., & Alshumaimeri, Y. (2017). Language learner autonomy in a tertiary context: Teachers' beliefs and practices. *Language Teaching Research*, 23(1), 9-38.
- Bullock, D. (2011). Learner self-assessment: An investigation into teachers' beliefs. *ELT Journal*. 65(2), 114-125.
- Camilleri, G. (1999). *Learner autonomy: The teachers' views*. Retrieved from http://archive.ecml.at/documents/pubCamilleriG_E.pdf
- Creswell, J.W. (2015). *A concise introduction to mixed methods research*. USA: Sage publication, Inc.
- Dickinson, L. (1987). *Self-instruction in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Esch, E. (1998). Promoting learner autonomy: Criteria for the selection of 33 appropriate methods. In R. Pemberton, E. S. L. Li, W. W. F. Or & H. D. Pierson (Eds.), *Taking control: Autonomy in language learning* (pp. 35-48). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Farahani, M. (2013). *A study on teachers' and learners' readiness for autonomous learning of English as a foreign language* (Master's thesis, Kharazmi University).
- Flavell, J. H. (1979). Metacognition and cognitive monitoring: A new area of cognitive-developmental inquiry. *American Psychologist*, 34(10), 906-911.
- Haji-Othman, N.A., & Wood, K. (2016). Perceptions of learner autonomy in English language education in Brunei darussalam. In R. Barnard, & J. Li (Eds.), *Language learner autonomy: Teachers' beliefs and practices in Asian contexts* (pp. 79-95). Phnom Penh: IDP Education.
- Johnson, K. E. (2006). The sociocultural turn and its challenges for second language teacher education. *Tesol Quarterly*, 40(1), 235-257.
- Khatib, M., & Miri, M. (2016). Cultivating multivocality in language classrooms: Contribution of critical pedagogy-informed teacher education. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 13(2), 98-131.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2008b). Research methodology on language development from a complex systems perspective. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92(2), 200-213.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy. 1: Definitions, issues and problems*. Dublin, Eire: Authentik.
- Little, D. (1995). Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System*, 23, 175-181.
- Littlewood, W. (1997) Self-access: Why do we want it and what can it do? In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.). *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 79-92). London: Longman.

- Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(1), 71–94.
- Macaro, E. (2008). The shifting dimensions of language learner autonomy. In T. E. Lamb, & H. Reinders (Eds.), *Learner and teacher autonomy: Concepts, realities, and responses* (pp. 47-62). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Martinez, H. (2008). The subjective theories of student teachers: Implications for teacher education and research on learner autonomy. In T., E. Lamb, & H. Reinders (Eds.), *Learner and teacher autonomy: Concepts, realities, and responses* (pp. 103–124). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Miri, M., Alibakhshi, G., & Mostafaei-Alaei, M. (2017). Reshaping Teacher Cognition about L1 Use through Critical ELT Teacher Education. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 14(1), 58-98.
- Muijs, D., Kyriakides, L., Van der Werf, G., Creemers, B., Timperley, H., & Earl, L. (2014). State of the art: Teacher effectiveness and professional learning. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 25, 231–256.
- Murphey, T. & Jacobs, G. (2000). Encouraging critical collaborative autonomy. *JALT Journal*, 22(2), 228-244.
- Nakata, Y. (2011). Teachers' readiness for promoting learner autonomy: A study of Japanese EFL high school teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27, 900–910.
- Nasri, N., Eslami Rasekh, A., Vahid Dastjerdy, H., & Amirian, Z. (2015). Promoting learner autonomy in an Iranian EFL high school context: Teachers' practices and constraints in focus. *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning*, 4(3), 91-105.
- Nguyen, V.L. (2016). Learner autonomy in Vietnam: Insights from English language teachers' beliefs and practices. In: R. Barnard, & J. Li (Eds.), *Language learner autonomy: Teachers' beliefs and practices in Asian contexts* (pp. 1–22). Phnom Penh: IDP Education.
- Nunan, D. (1997). Designing and adapting materials to encourage learner autonomy. In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 192-203). London: Longman.
- Oxford, R. L. (2003). Toward a more systematic model of L2 learner autonomy. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives* (pp. 75-91). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oxford, R.L. (2015). Expanded perspectives on autonomous learners. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 9, 58–71.
- Palfreyman, D. (2003). Introduction: Culture and learner autonomy. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures:*

- Language education perspectives* (pp. 1-19). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reinders, H., & Lazarou, N. (2011). Beliefs, identity and motivation in implementing autonomy: The teachers' perspective. In: G. Murray, X. Gao, & T. Lamb (Eds.), *Identity, motivation, and autonomy in language learning* (pp. 125–142). Bristol: Multilingual Matters
- Riazi, M. (2016). *The Routledge encyclopedia of research methods in applied linguistics*. New York: Routledge.
- Salimi, A., & Ansari, N. (2015). Learner Autonomy: Investigating Iranian English Teachers' Beliefs, *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5(5), 1106-1115.
- Skott, J. (2014). The promises, problems and prospects of research on teachers' beliefs. In: H. Fives, & M.G. Gill (Eds.), *International handbook of research on teachers' beliefs* (pp. 13– 30). London: Routledge.
- Tapinta, P. (2016). Thai teachers' beliefs in developing learner autonomy: L2 education in Thai universities. In R. Barnard, & J. Li (Eds.), *Language learner autonomy: Teachers' beliefs and practices in Asian contexts* (pp. 96–113). Phnom Penh: IDP Education.
- Wenden, A. (1998). Metacognitive knowledge and language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 19(4), 515–537.
- Yoshiyuki, N. (2011). Teachers' readiness for promoting learner autonomy: A study of Japanese EFL high school teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(5), 900-910.
- Zarei, S. & Rastegar Haghighi, Z. (2017, February). *Learner Autonomy: An Investigation into the Perspectives of Iranian EFL Teachers and Learners*. Paper presented at the third National Conference on English Studies and Linguistics, Iran-Ahwaz. Abstract retrieved from <http://eltl.ir/en/blog/427-learner-autonomy-an-investigation-into-the-perspectives-of-iranian-efl-teachers>
- Zhang, L. J. (2010a). Awareness in reading: EFL students' metacognitive knowledge of reading strategies in an acquisition poor environment. *Language Awareness*, 10(4), 268-288.
- Zhang, L. J. (2010b). Negotiating language, literacy and identity: A sociocultural perspective on children's learning strategies in a multilingual ESL classroom in Singapore. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 1(1), 247-270.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Psychological View of LA

Responses	Percentage of agree & strongly agree
Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.	95%
Learning how to learn is the key to develop LA.	95%
Motivated language learners are more likely to develop LA than learners who are not motivated.	92%
To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	82%
The ability to monitor one's learning is central to LA	73%

Appendix 2

Social view of LA

Responses	Percentage of agree & strongly agree
Co-operative group work activities support the development of LA.	93%
Learner-centered classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing LA	89%
LA is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.	87%
LA is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.	84%

Appendix 3

Political view of LA

Responses	Percentage of agree & strongly agree
LA is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do	93%
Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes LA.	82%
LA is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.	67%
Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	64%
LA is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.	46%

Appendix 4

Technical view of LA

Responses	Percentage of agree & strongly agree
Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote LA	80%
Independent study in the library is an activity which develops LA	61%
Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.	61%
LA is promoted by independent work in a self-access center	49%