

Learner autonomy: english language teachers' beliefs



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Introduction

The research paper is about Learner Autonomy; its objectives, content, progression, methods and techniques used in obtaining the data to acquire the findings and then evaluating them to answer the research questions proposed by the researchers. As a foreign language trainer, there are many elements that contribute to teaching English language to non-native speakers which would support, develop or hinder the processes of teaching and learning. One of these is Learner Autonomy and this has been an important aspect in the realm of foreign language teaching for about 30 years. The lack of extensive study (in theory and practice) about what learner autonomy means to teachers, practitioners, curriculum developers, specialists and students only made me more curious and inquisitive. There is a lack of understanding and interpretation of this element and the urgent need to centralize it in our lessons and the teaching-learning strategies.

Literature states that learner autonomy was “ the ability to take charge of one’s learning...to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning” Holec (1981: 3). However, variations of this definition has surfaced replacing a lot of variables within it thereby challenging the understanding of the whole concept, leading to eventually defining what does not comprise the meaning of ‘ Learner Autonomy’. This is rather confusing and does not point to a single definition that would wrap comprehensible meaning around the concept of ‘ Learner Autonomy’, whether it is a teaching or a learning process.

Research Study

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The analyses of learner autonomy have often ignored the teachers' voices and that has caused a misunderstanding or no knowledge of the existence of this aspect in language teaching and learning, although there is extensive literature that talks about this. This study aims to bridge that gap- on how teachers seek to notice and promote learner autonomy. It also sought to design and conduct teacher professional development workshops about learner autonomy after the findings of the study.

The institution considered in the research was the university Language Center at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. One of the aims of the language centre is to support and develop learner autonomy through specific curriculum based teachings designed to achieve this aim through their English language classes. The language centre also employs about 200 teachers of over 25 nationalities who teach English to 3, 500 Omani undergraduate students. Even with detailed courses and assessments available at the centre, the management and teachers had failed to reach a common decision regarding the existing strategies of learner autonomy in showing successful results. The context of this study is appropriate as it is set in a language centre with similar course structures and parameters as its counterparts around the world. The teaching staffs comprised of mixed nationalities and they are all concerned with English language teaching and learning. The literature is drawn from relevant sources pertaining to teaching English as a foreign language.

The research questions are clearly outlined, drawn from literature references too and hence, it is deductive in nature. The researchers have listed six questions they had hoped to achieve by the end of the study, which would <https://assignbuster.com/learner-autonomy-english-language-teachers-beliefs/>

not only answer the aim of the research but also provide a basis for developing professional workshops for the Language Centre teachers after the study was successfully completed. Although the topic of this research would influence many more teachers or enthusiasts of this field to conduct further studies or to provide fresh evidence and results, the research paper could be used as a pilot to project one's thoughts and understanding of this element in language teaching. The research has clearly listed its limitations and therefore, we can assume that there is a need to develop or improve the instruments used in measuring the data collected using the action-research method.

The various criteria that could be used to evaluate this research are:

- If the findings of the study are guidelines to teachers or language specialists, is it not completely exhaustive in nature?
- Could the research be justified to answer all the questions raised if only one method was adopted instead of mixed methods?
- Were the researchers justified to select only 20 teachers for their interviews and draw comparisons between the questionnaires (from 61 participants) and the interviews?
- Would it not have been justified if they had used previously tested (not robust) instruments of measurements and then delve upon findings, comparatives and inferences using the new instrument that they had created?
- If the instrument created was tested with a set of different subjects (18 teachers from Turkey) and was found to produce a 'unidimensional'

(Cronbach's Alpha, Bryman & Cramer, 2005) result on the scales, why did the researchers continue using it even when it had its own flaw?

- The results were shared with the teachers but there is no evidence of their feedback on the findings of the study. This would have been useful for further studies delving in the same philosophy, especially when one cannot possibly measure the amount of learner autonomy granted to the learning process inside a classroom.

Assumptions

The epistemological and ontological paradigms of the researchers are reflected in the way they have handled their knowledge of the field of study derived from a large base of literature to support their understanding and reasons to achieve the objectives of their research questions. The manner of presenting the content of the study is fairly detailed which gives the readers a clear view into the research paradigms. The researchers have expressed their views and mentioned their extensive readings in their theoretical background of the study. It definitely provides the sample population an assurance that the study is deductive, conclusive and supported by previous researched items. The arguments are always provided with answers or presumed responses citing writers of books and other researchers of the field. The limitations they faced were supported with reasons and suggestions towards further research requirements.

Methodology

The clarity of the aim of the study was seen in six research questions drawn in order to explain the 'gap' the researchers believed that existed between

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the beliefs of learner autonomy in learning a second language and its practices inside the classroom. The rationale in this study outlines how achieving this gap would improve the quality of language learning while promoting democratic societies where the learners are independent individuals who would eventually make the best use of these learning opportunities in and out of the classroom. The study framework is explained and displayed in clarity and it is concise. It not only compares in its literature the rationale of the aspects in the language learning world with previous studies, but also manages to synthesize it in its context, methodology and data analysis, drawing inference and justifying their methods. It manages to convince the target audience of the rationale through its findings, the questionnaires and the follow up interviews.

The topic of the research engages both social and psychological aspects, thus the researchers believed that to incorporate mixed methods using an instrument that they had created would help them in successfully acquiring the aim of the study. The rationale supported the nature of the research and gave it a sense of direction in achieving its objectives. Since previously used instruments (in other research studies) in measuring data collection based on the same philosophy were considered to be lacking of empiricism, the researchers decided on not using the same instruments because they turned out to be unrelated to the purpose of this research especially to study the existence of a gap between theoretical beliefs and the actual practices. The researchers invested two months in developing the questionnaires and placed more emphasis on content in order to avoid repeating the flaws that previous research studies undertook using the same instruments. Due to

time constraints, they decided to interview selected teachers who answered two specific questions by citing keywords.

Data Collection

The study was conducted on 61 (30.5 per cent of the total number of staff employed) teachers who taught English and who belonged to ten different nationalities. Out of which, 59 per cent of them were females, 81 per cent had a Master's degree and 8.5 per cent a Doctorate, respectively. In terms of their teaching experiences, they ranged from a minimum of four years to a maximum of 25 years (15-19 years of work experience made the majority of the respondents to the study).

The research was conducted using mixed methods where the researchers systematically studied the insights obtained from addressing the six research questions they raised in order to conduct professional development workshops for the teachers at the Language Center. They also developed their own instrument as they couldn't find a robust one that was well designed to support their study. They did not want an easy questionnaire (as compared to conducting interviews) that would incorporate flaws like those found in Brown & Rodgers, 2002, and hence decided upon creating one guided by a number of principles that had density in content, texture and were relevant in terms of professionalism, relevance to the research topic, interesting and easy to complete. The research detailed seven steps that were taken to formulate both the instrument and the closed and open questionnaires. Each of these steps detailed the painstaking efforts the

researchers had put into the study to formulate an action plan before reaching out to their participants -

1. An extensive reviews of literature especially the items that would go into the questionnaires (different perspectives that highlighted learner autonomy from teacher's and learner's psychological, sociological, technical and political views) that by the third draft, it consisted of 50 Likert scale items (five-point scales of agreement with five as 'most agreed') kicked off the initial design of data collection methods.
2. An academician with experiences in drafting questionnaires was asked to critically review the third draft mentioned above and he in his feedback raised the question about 'multiple indicator measure' from Bryman (2008: 698).
3. This led to the compilation of 12 constructs with questions relating to them that would then be measured using the instrument that was created, measured on Cronbach's alpha. Each construct had a set of questions dedicated to them which were reviewed by the same external academician who managed to direct their thoughts towards defining an equal and unified underlying construct or a set of constructs.
4. By this time, the researchers had three sections of 42 Likert-scale items incorporating 10 constructs with items relating to self-evaluation and learning objectives and finally, demographic information. The pilot questionnaires were conducted on 18 teachers from a different language centre located in Turkey where the staffs employed were from different nationalities too. It resulted in a further revision of the

instrument because the researchers noticed a 'unidimensionality' (Cronbach's Alpha, Bryman & Cramer, 2005) on the scales. They revised Likert-scale items that were represented under four orientations of learner autonomy- *Technical, Psychological, Social and Political* .

5. The final and eighth draft of the questionnaire, after seven drafts before it, had five sections with 37 Likert-scale items, ten edited constructs (reduced from 12), and an option to volunteer for a follow-up interview. This was then converted into a web based format using *SurveyMonkey* that was tried and tested online by the two researchers and a colleague.
6. An email was sent to all 200 teachers of English at the Language Center, Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, detailing the information about the study and a request to take part in answering the questionnaire. They were provided with the option of attempting the questionnaires through the web based format or as an attachment in Word-document. There were given a 10-day window period to complete them. However, only 16 per cent returned their completed questionnaires before the deadline but 25 per cent submitted theirs after the deadline. The total response a week after the deadline was 33.5 per cent, with a final use of 30.5 per cent (61 respondents) after discarding incomplete questionnaires.

While selecting the teachers for the interviews, the researchers drew up criteria for selection. This was done so because there were 42 respondents agreeing to do the follow-up interviews but there were time constraints for

the researchers, inclusive of conducting a semi-structured interview of 30 minutes each. The criteria were based on specific responses to two questions in the questionnaires; the teachers' beliefs about autonomous learners and their work experience as English Language Teachers. The final selection of the participants for the interview was based on the stratified random sampling process (Bryman 2008). This interview took a month to complete with the researchers dividing the 20 teachers between them; 10 of them conducted via telephone from the United Kingdom and the other 10 were face-to-face interviews conducted in Oman.

The methods incorporated to conduct the study managed to always work closely to the research paradigm. The extensive literature reviews and study supported their arguments throughout their findings, which was done in order to avoid gaps and loopholes in their study. The methods of data collection supported the aim of the research and definitely helped in answering the questions raised. They not only referred to instruments that could be used but also tested them if they would help in achieving their research objectives. The study listed three research papers that used instruments of the same kind but had flaws in them. Even if they had managed to create their own instrument, it was tried and tested, reviewed and edited eight times, just so that they would be able to collate the constructs and results after gathering relevant information. I did not notice any gaps in data collection; however, the interview could have been affected by two variables. These variables might have influenced the teachers' responses to the questions asked-

1. The interviewers were the teachers' manager and a UK-based academic therefore placing the teachers in a spotlight to provide diplomatic responses to sensitive questions.
2. The manner of interviews conducted via the telephone from the U. K. and face-to-face in Oman would differ because what we say in person would slightly vary from the way we would over the phone.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the closed questionnaire were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 18), a statistical analysis program. Statistical studies were drawn as descriptive and inferential and these were used to examine and calculate the frequency counts and percentages of the items, the relationships and their differences between the variables. The responses to the open questionnaire were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Newby, 2010) where the issues were organized in broader categories of sub questions relating to the constructs developed around the six research questions. The researchers resorted to this type of analysis to achieve a connection between the questions in the questionnaires and those asked during the interviews.

They decided to draw comparisons between the data collected from the questionnaires and the interviews because in doing so, they are able to prevent any flaws in collecting data which takes place when data is collected only from one source. The manner in which the data was analysed provided an illustration of the quantitative results using qualitative examples. They were also successful in gaining meaningful understanding of why the

teachers answered in a way that was particularly directed to the constructed questions. There were no gaps in the data collected even if the researchers had to wait for more respondents. They managed to extend their window period, selected the completed questionnaires, segregated them according to their items or criteria of selection, sorted the teachers they wanted to interview based on variables they considered would help them understand the gap (of the area of research which in this case is Learner Autonomy and the lack of research conducted and availability of findings from previous research to understand the concept from an English language teacher's view) they raised in their research questions and used an instrument they created with extensive background theory to support their arguments.

Other Issues

The first researcher's institutional ethics committee approved this study. An email containing detailed information was sent to all the staff employed at the language centre. They were free to decide whether they wanted to be involved in the study or not which was mentioned in the first email. The second email was then sent out after a week with a choice to answer the questionnaires either by using the link to the web based questionnaires or as an attached word document, thus satisfying the comfort of the participants. These voluntary participants were also informed about the confidentiality of the data collected in order to protect their identities. Those who agreed to take part in the follow-up interviews were asked to sign their names at the bottom of the questionnaires. Even with all these significant steps taken up to ensure coverage of the ground of ethics, there was no mention about sharing the research findings with those who took part in the interview <https://assignbuster.com/learner-autonomy-english-language-teachers-beliefs/>

because they would have had questions they needed to be answered or some might have felt that their lack of knowledge of Learner Autonomy would reflect upon their profession as an English Language Teacher.

However, in order to prevent any unconscious or unintentional effects on the participants, the researchers have managed to use the results from this study and conducted professional development activities and workshops. This was a positive ethical incentive of the study since it gave the teachers an opportunity to benefit from participating in the project.

Conclusions

This study was based on extensive literature review that dated back since 1991. The researchers covered a lot of reading materials from books, journals and other research papers related to the topic and they managed to find the gap their study was based upon. The background theory of the paper listed four studies that were conducted qualitatively (one) and quantitatively (three) using instruments that were considered robust and had flaws. The researchers believed that methodologically, all the studies generated findings about how teachers reviewed learner autonomy and none of them gave insights into teaching practices. However, the names of these instruments were not mentioned in the studies conducted. They tried and tested the instruments they considered were used in these studies and developed an instrument of their own by seeking critical reviews from a third party. The constructs in the questionnaires were raised from the research questions and held great relevance in terms of findings.

The quantitative results were self explanatory, but the instrument the researchers created would require further review and improvements especially while using Cronbach Alpha. In order to achieve a 0.81 score on the Cronbach Alpha, the variables from the findings had to be adjusted. This flaw occurred even after testing it with 18 different participants before administering it to the real subjects of the project. Even if the overall participation (in collecting data from completed questionnaires) consisted of 61 respondents, the interviews were conducted only on 20 of the 42 who volunteered to take part. The answers they had provided to the interview questions could be constricted or influenced due to the positions held by the interviewers and the manner in how the interview was conducted-over the telephone and face-to-face. Although there is no absolute or perfect findings in any research paper due to external elements or variables that would eventually get flagged as an issue, this study however managed to successfully achieve in answering the research questions raised and justified the use of their methods and instruments. Their conclusion was open ended and they invited further research using an improved instrument of statistical measurements.

As an English Language Teacher, I would use this study to reflect upon the steps taken in drafting the questionnaires and the follow-up interview questions provided in the appendix of the research paper. I would also use this paper as a guideline to intensive reading of literature and if required, critical reviews and comments from another party to reflect upon methods I would choose to conduct my own research. I would however not consider accepting the findings of the study because it failed to assess teachers'

beliefs about different orientations to learner autonomy and in-class observations were not conducted to record teacher's practicing learner autonomy in class even if they claimed to do so. With such a sound methodology, the number of participants in this study was fairly low (61 out of 200 teachers) and the researchers ought to have tried a different way into getting more participants.

The references provided have in fact helped me in assisting some reading suggestions for my research topic. The challenge of developing one's own instrument to be used in a quantitative study is risky but not impossible and the researchers have managed to derive this in their study by piloting it with a separate group of subjects, an academician and a colleague. The ability to accept flaws and the willingness to reach out and explore available instruments that would help improve the project gives the target audience the hope of flexibility and the option of evolution of instruments, ideas and strategies, which is the basic foundation of language teaching practices.

The study was very clear about the research questions raised. There was clarity in terms of literature, the context of the research was relevant and four research studies conducted were outlined specifically stating how this research topic is aimed at answering the question (or gap) that exists in the realm of English Language Teaching. The researchers knew their sample population and hence were smart to collect data from the centre of where the problem exists-a language centre and the data collected from teachers of English who were qualified in their field with good amount of years of experience and qualifications. The participants were not oblivious of the topic of the research either. The language centres' goals comprised of <https://assignbuster.com/learner-autonomy-english-language-teachers-beliefs/>

achieving learner autonomy and therefore the findings of the research would in a way help them understand and improve their strategies of achieving their goal. The researchers did not conduct the study and leave the participants thinking or reflecting about their knowledge or lack of learner autonomy. In fact, the follow-up of the study were professional development activities and workshops. This is an incentive in its most ethical form, but then again, all research papers are not shy of limitations.

Critically analysing a published research article was initially challenging to a newcomer like me. To understand terminology, deriving its meaning and relating it to research studies; to compare and pick what might be a flaw from findings, to understand and evaluate one's understanding about the methods of research to designing one; the ability to analyse have moved from knowing nothing to being able to construct a (set of) research question/s. Often have we been instructed to read a lot, and I wondered what exactly should I read? By analysing and practising the analyses of published research papers, I now understand what 'reading' truly mean and how to sift through journals, articles and books to find the right matter for reading, the process of reading them to avoid addressing limitations and to critically analyse them. The support given in terms of classroom lectures, text book readings, taking part in peer discussions, presentations and eventually picking up a paper to analyse, all contributed to my understanding of research in social sciences.

Extensive reading would eventually grow in the coming days and weeks, but for now, I am confident to say that I know how to formulate my research topic and questions, the outline of the research or its methods, the ethics <https://assignbuster.com/learner-autonomy-english-language-teachers-beliefs/>

that is rooted in every research, the instruments I would need according to the methods I would choose, how data would be collected and analysed, collate my findings to the research questions, the language or terminologies used in relation to the nature of the context of research and finally, the style of referencing and citations.

As far as I am concerned, I would define an analysis of a published research study in a quote from C- JoyBell C- *“ There is a magnificent, beautiful, wonderful painting in front of you! It is intricate, detailed, painstaking labour of devotion and love! The colours are like no other, they swim and leap, they trickle and embellish! And yet you choose to fixate your eyes on the small fly which has landed on it! Why do you do such a thing ?”*