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An Investigation of Iranian EFL Teachers' and Learners' Beliefs about Learner Autonomy

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to investigate Iranian EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers' and learners' beliefs about learner autonomy with a look upon differences between the two groups and also within each group. To this end, 193 EFL learners and 93 EFL teachers were surveyed through "Learner Autonomy: the Teachers' Views" questionnaire. Out of this number of participants 34 learners and 19 teachers were given a written survey with open-ended questions for more detailed views on the issue of autonomy. The results of the quantitative data indicated that Iranian EFL teachers and learners gave more importance to aspects of learner autonomy such as learners finding out learning strategies and explanations to classroom tasks, self-assessment, material selection, setting course objectives, and choosing learning tasks. Furthermore, there was a significant difference between teachers' and learners' beliefs in terms of choosing course content (tasks), methodology of the lesson (individual/pair/group work, use of materials, type of classroom activities, type of homework activities), choosing learning tasks, record-keeping (of works done), and homework tasks. Moreover, it was found that learners' beliefs as a whole were stronger than teachers'; female learners' beliefs were stronger than male learners'; beginner learners' beliefs were weaker than advanced and intermediate language learners', and there was no significant difference between teachers' gender and experience range and their interaction on their beliefs about learner autonomy. Considering the qualitative results, it was shown that autonomous learners are active, motivated, independent, self-confident, and good decision-makers. Moreover, beginner language learners' expectations from the teachers' roles in helping learners to become autonomous were different from intermediate and advanced learners' expectations.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Chapter 3. Methodology

Chapter 4. Results and Discussion

Chapter 5. Conclusion, Implications, and Suggestions for Further Research

List of Tables

List of Appendices

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Overview

Since the late decades of the twentieth century, there have been many changes taking place in the field of education. These changes have led the field towards teaching individuals to be able to have the major role in their educational life by taking active measures, i.e. having control over their learning process and learning content so that they can be better individuals in society (Reinders, 2000; Sabanci, 2007). These changes have also been taking place in the field of English language teaching (ELT) resulting in allocation of a greater role to learners. In other words, the changes contributed to the establishment of learner-centered approach which viewed language learning as a process resulting from the collaboration of teachers and learners (Sabanci, 2007). This approach requires learners to be more active in the learning and teaching process which is in sharp contrast to its previous approaches, which viewed teacher as the sole individual deciding over the classroom procedures and learners as passive recipients of teachers' knowledge (Tudor, 1993). The move toward adopting learner-centered approach in ELT led to the emergence of the concept of *learner autonomy* (Sabanci, 2007). The term learner autonomy was first used by Holec (1981) in a report presented to the council of Europe about the feasibility of learner autonomy in the classroom (Sadeghiyan, 2010). Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning"

(p.3). There are other definitions of the concept given by different scholars (e.g., Dickinson, 1995). For example, Little (1991, p. 4) sees autonomy as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action." Holec (1985) believes in autonomy as a capacity too. He talks about *autonomization* which is a "matter of acquiring those capacities which are necessary to carry out a *self-directed* [italics added] language program" (p. 180). Littlewood (1999) proposes a culture-free definition of autonomy as "students' capacity to use their learning independently of teachers" (p. 73).

Palfreyman (2003, p. 3) contends that "learner autonomy in language education is interpreted in various ways in the literature on the topic, and various terms such as '*learner autonomy*', '*learner independence*', '*self-direction*', '*autonomous learning*', and '*independent learning*' [italics added] have been used to refer to similar concepts." Benson and Voller (1997, p. 2) claim that learner autonomy has been used in at least five ways:

- When learners study entirely on their own

- For skills capable of learning and applying in learner centered language learning

- For autonomy as an inborn capacity which has been suppressed by the educational system

- For attempt on learners' part to take responsibility for their own learning

- For learners to have the right to choose the direction of their learning

As Little (1995) holds "the basis of learner autonomy is that the learner accepts responsibility for his or her learning" (p. 175). This acceptance has socioaffective and cognitive implications. It brings about students with a positive attitude to learning and develops in them a capacity to ponder on the content and process of learning with the thought of having conscious control on them (Little, 1995). Littlejohn (1985, p. 258) believes that "learner autonomy is based on the idea that students are likely to be more enthusiastic about learning if they are involved in decision-making processes regarding their own language competence." The practice of learner autonomy requires learners to have developed understanding of the nature of language learning and of their role in it (White, 1995).

Autonomy can be important in terms of creating a positive link between the present and the future (Wang, 2011). Learners who accept responsibility for their own learning enjoy a higher possibility to devise a method to achieve their learning goals and when they achieve their goals, there is a greater possibility that they maintain a positive attitude toward

learning in the future (Wang, 2011). Chan (2001) proposes some steps for learners to take more responsibility for their own learning:

- setting goals

- developing strategies to achieve those goals

- developing plans for studying

- reflecting on the learning process to find problems and ways of managing them

- choosing effective resources and supplementary materials

- evaluating the learning process

Gremmo and Riley (1995) hold that in the 1970s some scholars argued that self-directed language learning could not be applied in cases such as child language learning, learning difficult languages, institutions with examination-led courses, and adults with low educational level, but all these difficulties and barriers have been dealt with to a large extent with the recent improvements. Little (1991) provides pedagogical principles for implementing learner autonomy:

- empowering the learners

- learner reflection

- appropriate use of target language

Empowering the learners requires them to take responsibility for their own learning. Learner reflection gives learners opportunities to

reflect both at micro level and macro level on their learning process. Appropriate use of target language is made possible only when the teacher leads the classroom in a way that enables learners to use the target language for genuinely communicative and real life purposes (Little, 1991).

Alongside the issue of learner autonomy, the term *autonomous learner* has received much attention. Dam (1990) states that a learner qualified as an autonomous learner is someone who independently chooses purposes, aims and set goals, chooses materials, methods and tasks, exercises choice and purpose in organizing and implementing the chosen tasks, and chooses criteria for evaluation.

There are inventories of autonomous learner characteristics but some experts contend that they do not comply with reality because most of the characteristics attributed to autonomous learners include a wide range of characteristics that are not common to them (Thanasoulas, 2000).

However, Omaggio (1978, cited in Wenden, 1998, pp. 41-42) has characterized autonomous learners with seven main attributes:

- they have insights into their learning styles and strategies
- they take an active part in their learning
- they are good at risk taking
- they are good at guessing

- they pay attention to both content and form

- they looks at the second language as a separate system and try testing hypotheses and rules in it

- they are tolerant of ambiguity

Learner autonomy can be approached from three philosophies of language learning: *positivism*, *constructivism*, and *critical theory* (Kehrwald, 2005). Positivism as the dominant approach in the twentieth century is based on the assumption that "knowledge reflects objective reality" (Benson, 1997, p. 20). This philosophy is in compliance with the enhancement and development of the *traditional classroom* where teachers are transmitters of knowledge and learners are passive recipients of that knowledge (Benson, 1997). Therefore, positivism is against the development of learner autonomy as the latter is a separation from traditional conventions and convictions and is directly related to self-directed language learning and self-evaluation (Thanasoulas, 2000). Constructivist approach, on the other hand, claims that "knowledge is represented as the construction of meaning" (Kehrwald, 2005, p. 8). This philosophy commends that learning consists of reconstruction of experience instead of committing predetermined knowledge to the memory (Benson, 1997). It is congruent with psychological models of autonomy that relate to learners' attitude, motivation, behavior, and self concept (Benson, 1997). So, constructivism supports self-directed

language learning as a needed ingredient for learner autonomy (Thanasoulas, 2000). While critical theory and constructivist theory share the notion that "knowledge is constructed through experience", the former emphasizes the social milieu and elements in which construction of knowledge happens (Kehrwald, 2005). In critical theory, learning is related to issues of power and ideology (Thanasoulas, 2000). It interacts with social context and therefore brings about change. This theory gives a more social and political character to the learner autonomy (Thanasoulas, 2000).

The concept of learner autonomy requires handing over the responsibility of learning management from teachers to learners (Kehrwald, 2005). Before implementing autonomy, it is necessary to measure learners' readiness for changes in their attitudes and beliefs which autonomy causes (Cotterall, 1995).Why should learner beliefs be so important in planning for autonomy? It is because learners' attitudes and beliefs have a great effect on their learning (Cotterall, 1995). Wrong beliefs may result in less effective methods of learning which influence learners' success in language learning (Horwitz, 1988).

In discussing learner autonomy, it is believed that beside students' willingness to move toward self-directed learning, they must be allowed to do so (Kehrwald, 2005). The change in learners' role is a direct result of a change in teachers' (Holec, 1987). Teachers' general beliefs can have

8

an effect on their job and recognizing their occupational beliefs. This recognition is a prerequisite for understanding teaching and supporting development of teachers in their profession (Borg, 2003). Teachers' and learners' beliefs about their responsibilities and roles in the classroom must change if the learners are supposed to become autonomous (Kehrwald, 2005). In the same line, the present study investigates teachers' and learners' beliefs about learner autonomy with a look upon differences between the two groups and also within each group.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The concept of autonomy in ELT was first introduced in the European context and then spread to other parts of the world in lesser or greater scales. The extent of reception by different countries returned to different issues such as their cultural and educational system. The status of English in Iran is as a foreign language and it is a subject matter taught in guidance schools, high schools, and universities. The educational system is traditional and teacher-centered (Ahmadi, 2012; Hashemian & Heidari Soureshjani, 2011). In other words, it is mostly bound by strict and inflexible rules on classroom procedures and learning content which do not allow for any practice of autonomy on the side of learners (Pishghadam & Mirzaee, 2008). Learners are observers and listeners in the classroom and this passive role in the learning process acts as a hindrance to their success (Ahmadi, 2012). There is another system for

learning English implemented through private English language institutes. These institutes have the potential for implementing autonomy and are willing to provide facilities for their learners to learn languages independently (Ahmadi, 2012). In order to improve the learning experience and outcome of ELT among Iranian EFL learners, proper implementation of different aspects of learner autonomy in the educational system and the language institutes is required. The implementation itself requires that the people involved in English language teaching and learning have access and also be presented with information about learners' and teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Learner autonomy and teachers' and learners' beliefs concerning it are important issues in the field of language learning. Therefore, investigating teachers' and learners' beliefs is necessary since it has an immense pedagogical and practical effect on their teaching and learning (Kehrwald, 2005). Furthermore, there are some studies concerning learner beliefs about learner autonomy (Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002; Gieve & Clark, 2005), teachers' belief about leaner autonomy (Al-Shaqsi, 2009; G. Camilleri, 1999b; Chan, 2003; Sabanci, 2007), and student teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy (Balçıkanlı, 2010), but to the best of the researcher's knowledge, few studies, if any, have

compared teachers' and learners' beliefs about learner autonomy both in international and Iranian contexts.

1.4. Purpose of the Study

The current study aimed at finding about English language institute teachers' and learners' beliefs about learner autonomy. The study also aimed to find the areas in which teachers' and learners' beliefs were significantly different. The study also attempted to find out if teachers' gender and teaching experience and their interaction could make any significant difference in their beliefs. Concerning learners, the study tried to find if their gender and proficiency level and their interaction could make any significant difference in their beliefs. It assumed that the findings would be illuminating for educational policy makers and help improve the English language teaching experience in both institutes and schools.

1.5. Research Questions

According to the purpose of the study, the following research questions were stated:

1. What are EFL teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy in foreign language learning?

2. What are EFL learners' beliefs about learner autonomy in foreign language learning?