Kharazmi University

Department of Foreign Languages

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

A Study on Teachers' and Learners' Readiness for Autonomous Learning of English as a Foreign Language

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March 2013

Abstract

Learner autonomy has been the recurring theme in language teaching and learning since three decades ago. It is part of a wider panorama in education whose implementation provides the ground for individuals' life-long learning. While a large body of the available literature has been awarded to how to promote autonomous learning, only a limited space has been allocated to the ways learners and teachers conceptualize the concept. Moreover, the literature suggests that learner autonomy is seamlessly interwoven into the fabric of the social/cultural context; therefore, it seems inadequate to convince teachers and learners to practice autonomy in the abstract. This study debates , in any given context, prior to taking any measurements which lead to developing autonomous learning, it is required to scrutinize learners' and teachers' perceptions concerning their readiness to exercise autonomy in their learning and teaching. To this end, 305 EFL learners and 110 teachers participated in the study. Their attitudes towards the way they perceive the concept of autonomy were elicited through questionnaires, interviews, and non-participant observations. . The study reports on learners' beliefs in four main areas: 1) learners' and teachers' responsibilities, 2) learners' motivational level, 3) their strategy use, and 4) employing learning activities. As for teachers, their attitudes fall into four parts: 1) learners' and teachers' responsibilities, 2) evaluating learners' abilities, 3) autonomy and their teaching, and 4) recommended learning activities. Questionnaires were administered to the participants and then interviews and non-participant observations were conducted in order to light up the inner corners of the argument. The results uncovered 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 constraints they faced when practicing autonomy. Reiterating the significance of studying attitudes and expectations learners and teachers hold, the study concludes with some implications for both EFL learners and teachers regarding applying autonomy during the learning and teaching process and hopes to be a driving force behind further research.

Keywords: autonomous learning, EFL setting, learners' and teachers' attitudes, readiness, Iran

Acknowledgements

I count myself very lucky to have Dr. Atai as my supervisor, and I would like to express my deepest gratitude to him for his continuous support, encouragement, and insightful comments from the very first draft. He has been, and continues to be a great source of inspiration.

I am deeply indebted to my advisor Dr. Babai whose generous guidance and feedback enabled me to stay on the right path.

My special thanks should go to Kish Institute learners and teachers for their great and valuable contribution to conduct this research. The same applies to staff in Kish Institute who helped me whenever they could.

Last, but not least, I need to thank my parents for their unconditional love and strong emotional support who patiently endured and helped an always-busy daughter.

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Chapter One:
Introduction

1.1. Overview

The saying goes: you can bring the horse to the water but you cannot make him drink. In the context of language teaching and learning the same goes for teachers who provide their learners with necessary requirements and rich input but they cannot make learning happen; unless learners are reluctant to take part in the learning process their presence (learners) in the classroom will not suffice (Scharle & Szabo, 2000).

Since the 1960s, the swing of the pendulum has been towards learner-centered approaches in language teaching and learning and as Tudor (1993) put it from "how to teach" to "how to learn". Learners no longer receive knowledge passively but they actively take part in the language learning process. Teacher should respect and be sensitive to learners' needs, strategies, and learning styles and room is to be allocated for learners' creativity and self-direction. Language learning is a collaborative process rather than a set of rules to be transferred from teacher to learners (Tudor, 1993).

One of the manifestations of this shift has been the notion of learner autonomy which has become of interest among researchers in the last 30 years (Benson 2000, 2001; Boud, 1988; Chan, 2001; Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002; Cotterall, 1995a, 1995b,1999; Crabbe 1993, 1999; Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981, 1988; Little 1990, 1991, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 2009; Littlewood, 1996; Sinclair, 2000; Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002).

Holden and Usuki (as cited in Balcikanli, 2008) attribute the growing interest in the notion of autonomy to the way it can create an atmosphere where the learners' capacity to learn is developed. Scharle and Szabo (2000) argues "success in learning very much depends on learners having a responsible attitude and … also the changing needs of learners will require them to go back to learning several times in their lives … the best way to prepare them for this task is to help them become more autonomous" (p.4). Similarly Benson (2000) turns the spotlight on the more lifelong learning and training people to be more autonomous to be able to meet their ever changing needs.

It is argued that in today's educational system the issue facing educators is not teaching students to get better marks, but preparing them for life beyond the classroom (Flannagan, 2007). Learners in language classrooms now are expected to bear responsibility for their own learning and do their own share (Benson, 2001).

In fact the shift of interest towards increased learner involvement in the language teaching context can be tracked down to many innovations in the last thirty years such as the dawn of communicative language teaching and the dusk of form-focused syllabus. Before the emergence of communicative approach in 1970s which marks the beginning of an important paradigm shift in language teaching and one whose consequences continued to be felt today, no room was allocated to autonomy in the field of language teaching; classrooms were controlled by teachers and no space was allowed for students' choices or preferences.

However, with the advent of the new notion of language as communication and turning attentions on cognitive processes the path was smoothed for more autonomous learning in which teacher-centered learning constraints have been loosened (Paiva & Braga, 2008). It is argued that the communicative approach has been the only theory in SLA which has prepared the ground for the promotion of learner autonomy in the field of language teaching (Benson, 2001, 2002; Littlewood, 1996; Nunan, 1996).

As a matter of fact the history of autonomy as an instructional end has one foot in communicative approach, and the other in changes in educational philosophy, language learning theory, psychology and also political changes taken place in the twentieth century which Pemberton, Li, Or, and Pierson (1996) necessitate their modification to fast growing changes in the world. To be more exact the origin of autonomy dates back to some centuries when philosophers such as "Galileo, Rousseau, Dewey, Kilpatrick, Marcel, Jacotot, Payne and Quick" considered the concept of autonomy across different periods (Balcikanli, 2008).

However it was Holec's (1981) seminal work which planted the seeds of interest in the concept of learner autonomy in the field of language teaching and learning. According to him learner autonomy is defined as "ability to take charge of one's own learning and … to have responsibility for all decisions concerning all aspects of this learning …" (p.3).

Learner autonomy has been defined by different scholars. For instance, Little (1991) defines it as a "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action" (p.4). Dickinson (1987) approaches the term from the same direction considering autonomy as "a mode of learning; one in which the individual is responsible for all the decisions connected with his learning and undertakes the implementation of these decisions" (p.27). His definition seems to give learners the power to choose the what, how and when of learning without drawing on teacher.

Young (1986) goes to the same direction emphasizing that "the fundamental idea in autonomy is that of authoring one's own world without being subject to the others" (p.19). Taking autonomy as an approach to learning, Boud (1988) gives another definition stating that "the main characteristic of autonomy as an approach to learning is that students take some significant responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to instruction" (p.23). For Cotterall (1995) it is as behaviors employed by students to gain independence. She takes it as "the extent to which learners demonstrate the ability to use a set of tactics for taking control of their learning" (p.195).

However the insights from the above-mentioned definitions should not blind us to the fact that learner autonomy is not mere independence from teacher and classmates and that learning does not happen in a vacuum without interaction with others. To be autonomous, learners are to establish a sense of interdependence and share responsibility with peers and teacher (Benson, 2001; Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1999). Usuki (2000) claims autonomous learning does not imply "a complete shift of instructional mode from teachers to learners … but it is learners' internal attitude towards themselves as a learner" (p.1). Little (2009) argues "autonomous learners always do things for themselves, but they may or may not do things on their own" (p.223).

Reviewing the literature, one can see the weight of the argument has made the issue of necessity of learner autonomy superfluous and as a result it has attracted a lot of attention and much attempt has been devoted to its investigation. Sanprasert (2010) concludes that incorporating a course management system into an English course can provide circumstances for learning autonomy. Developing learner autonomy in the classroom setting has been echoed in Crabbe's (1993), Dam's (1994), and Onozawa's (2010) studies. Balcikanli (2008) conducted a questionnaire study with Turkish students to show that there is possibility to foster learner autonomy in EFL setting. Xhaferi and Xhaferi (2011) run a study to investigate learner autonomy development among university students in Macedonia concluding that autonomy can be fostered through using strategies such as note taking, portfolio writing, and keeping diaries. Hurd (2004) worked on implication of autonomous learning for distance language learners.

Ellis and Sinclair (1989) highlight the effectiveness of learning and learners' pursuing their learning outside the classroom. Lee (1998) focuses on helping learners to raise awareness of independent learning outside classroom setting. Cotterall (2000) turns the spotlight on the

importance of fostering autonomous learning as a goal and suggests some guidelines for course designer to this end. Lo (2010) draws on portfolio writing as a tool for promoting autonomous learning among Taiwanese students. Littlewood (2000) argues against commonly held preconceptions about Asian students' autonomous learning, seeking proof from students themselves through investigating their attitudes. Suggesting strategies for fostering autonomous learning in the Chinese context, Naizhao and Yanling (2004) insist that encouraging learner autonomy can lead to effective learning among students. Wang (2010) takes the same path, exploring methods to develop learners' awareness and autonomous learning habits.

Ho and Crookall (1995), Kojima (2006), Lamb (2004), and Nguyen (2011) have addressed the concept of learner autonomy from a cultural point of view. Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) and also Lee (1998) are among researchers who stress the promotion of learner autonomy. Dafei (2007), Deng (2007), and Qi (2011) conducted studies to find a relationship between autonomy and language proficiency. Coming up with the link between autonomy and motivation, Dickinson (1995) and Ushioda (1996) were among the first who delved into this relationship. Dickinson's study depicted a detailed picture of the link between autonomy and motivation, suggesting this link can justify the autonomy power. Ushioda specifies that "autonomous learners are by definition motivated learners" (p.2).

Likewise Corno and Mandinach (1983), Ellis (1999), Sharp (2002), Spratt et al. (2002), and Tatarko (2010) show an interest towards this link in their studies. Spratt et al. concluded that motivation is a key factor which precedes autonomy, moreover Ellis comes with the classical chicken-and-egg question and advises that "we do not know whether it is motivation that produces successful learning, or successful learning that enhances motivation" (p.119). The findings of Sharp's study show that autonomous learners seem to be more motivated intrinsically rather than be motivated with external factors.

Using learning strategies in autonomous learning has been echoed by Cotterall (1999), Dickinson (1987), Ridley, Schutz, Glanz, and Weinstein (1992), Victori and Lockhart (1995), Wenden (1991), White (1995), and also Zimmerman (1989).

The common thread running through the above-mentioned studies is the focus they put on learners' responsibility taking as a key factor in the process of autonomous learning. Playing the main role in the concept of learner autonomy, learners' acceptance of responsibility unfortunately seems to be taken as the Cinderella variable in this part of literature.

For many autonomy researchers, learners' accepting the responsibility for their own learning, is the key aspect of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991, 1995) and to this end one should explore the extent to which learners are ready to take the burden. Littlewood (1999) gives two reasons to justify the importance of learners' taking more responsibility in the learning context: learners need to reach the ability to carry on learning after formal education, and learning can only be accomplished by learners themselves. Little (1995) explicitly mentions that learner's acceptance of responsibility is the cornerstone of learner autonomy which carries socio-affective and cognitive implications.

Preceding this responsibility acceptance many scholars (Chan, 2001, 2003; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Lamb, 2004; Littlewood, 2000; Scharle & Szabo, 2000; Spratt et al., 2002; Zhong, 2010) turn the spotlight on the investigation of the learner responsibility through their beliefs which mirror its degree. In fact fostering autonomy establishes from the bottom, i.e. from learners' beliefs.

Learners' belief which has been one of the most recently debated areas in language learning and teaching has resulted from a growing interest in the affective domain of language learning. According to Oxford (1990) "the affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure" (p.140). Richardson (1996) defines beliefs as "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (p.106). Horwitz (1987) highlights the influence of learners' beliefs about language learning on their practices as language learners and further argues learners' inaccurately held beliefs can lead to employing of less productive learning strategies. If these beliefs left unchallenged they can hamper learners' progress.

White (1999) views learners' beliefs system as a helping crutch they draw on when facing new environments. Flannagan (2007) cites Bandura who believes "success in autonomous learning is governed by personal beliefs" (p.96). Reinders (2000) argues teaching learners to become more independent is one thing and how they experience it and what they think of it is the other side of the coin.

Broady and Kenning (1996), Carter (1999), Chan (2001), Chan et al. (2002), Chang (2007), Cotterall (1995, 1999), Victori and Lockhart (1995), and Usuki (2000) are among researchers who have addressed learners' perception in autonomous learning. According to Dickinson (as cited in Finch, 2000) modifying learners' beliefs regarding language learning is a

must before promoting learner autonomy and as a result of the shift of roles, both teacher and learners need advanced preparation. Zhong (2010) approaches it from the same angle, stating that "before promoting autonomous learning, it is essential to detect learners' beliefs … as they govern learners' actions" (p.212). Cotterall (1995) presents the matching argument to the above debate mentioning that "the beliefs learners hold may either contribute or impede the development of their [learners] potential for autonomy" and that "before interventions aimed at fostering autonomy are implemented, it is necessary to gauge learners' readiness for the changes in beliefs and behavior which autonomy implies" (p.196). Similarly McDonough (as cited in Cotterall, 1999) says:

> …what we believe we are doing, what we pay attention to, what we think is important, how we choose to behave, how we prefer to solve problems, form the basis of our personal decisions as to how to proceed. An important fact about this argument is that it is not necessary for these kinds of evidence to be true for them to have important consequences for our further development (p. 9).

Teachers' role in realization of learner autonomy has been stressed by Little (2002) as he mentions in a formal setting students do not automatically accept responsibility for their own learning. It seems that the implementation of the autonomous learning would be a failure if we do not take teachers' beliefs into consideration.

The birth of the research on teacher cognition in general education started in the 1970s (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Carter, 1990; Calderhead, 1996; Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006) and specifically in the field of L2 teaching it started in the 1990s (Borg, 2003, 2006; Freemen & Richards, 1996; Freemen, 2002; Johnson, 2006). Borg (1999) highlights the powerful effect of teacher perspectives on his classroom practice. Trebbi (2008) equates teachers' beliefs as internal limitations which can affect their teaching endeavor.

"Fundamental to the development of learner autonomy are the beliefs about the perspectives on roles and responsibilities in teaching and learning held by both learners and teachers" (Lamb & Reinders, 2007, p. 273). Similarly Hill (1994) detects the locus of control and decision on training autonomous learners in the hands of teachers. Fostering responsible attitudes in the learner demands some departure from roles conventionally held by teachers. However, practicing learner autonomy never implies the fact that the teacher is unnecessary and he should

give up his control. Learner responsibility can only develop when teacher allocates more space for learner engagement (Scharle & Szabo, 2000).

As Little, Hodel, Kohonen, Meijer, and Perclova (2007) put it, teachers who are inclined to foster learner autonomy must: 1) engage learners in their own learning, empowering them to use learning objectives and control learning process (learner development), 2) raise their awareness to reflect about learning and target language (learner reflection), 3) involve learners in contexts where they can use target language (appropriate target language use).

Given that students are to learn to take responsibility, the teacher requires learning to loosen up even when she accommodates support and structure. It reminds us that teacher's beliefs, intentionally or unintentionally, can restrain or encourage the development of learner autonomy (Lamb & Reinders, 2007).

When discussing learner autonomy one might hold the misconception that teacher is the main obstacle to autonomy, so it seems that the teacher should be removed or provides conditions for students to learn independently and then learners will be forced to manage their own learning process or in other words take a "sink or swim approach" (Wenden, 1995). However as Little (1995) advises us learners generally lack appreciation of assuming responsibility in learning process- teachers must assist them to do so. Holec (1981) also warns us not to take learners' autonomous learning capacity for granted and it is "not inborn but must be acquired either by natural means or by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way" (p.3).

Kohonen (2001) highlights the role of teachers in advancing autonomous learning and believes teacher's professional growth is connected with language learning. Moreover Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) concluded that students with an autonomy supportive teacher were more motivated than students with a controlling teacher. In another study carried by Ryan and Grolnick (as cited in Deci et al.) the results revealed that when students were inattentive and bored in the classroom teacher became more controlling rather than the time students listened to the teacher carefully and were engaged. Reviewing the literature on autonomous learning some studies have tried to explore a new role for teachers as facilitators of learner autonomy (Camilleri, 1999; Little, 2007; Yang, 1998).

Parallel with aforementioned literature on autonomous learning in language teaching and learning, much of the literature on learner autonomy suggests that it is a Western educational trend not fitted in Eastern classrooms and while its practice has been favored in native

educational setting, its role has been problematized in EFL context (Chan et al., 2002; Pierson, 1996; Pennycook, 1997).

The consciousness that leaner autonomy should go further away than western limitations has triggered a growing body of literature challenging the conventional image of Asian students (Adamson & Sert, 2012; Dickinson, 1994; Holliday, 2003; Jones, 1995; Littlewood, 1996; Littlewood, 2000; Widdows & Voller, 1991).

On the other hand, there are studies which reflect an opposite picture of Asian learners' response to autonomous learning. They show that learners are syllabus-dependent, passive and there is little sense of initiative (Balla, Stokes, & Stafford, 1991; Evanse, 1996; Kember & Gow, 1991). Although these studies present contrasting views of Asian students' reaction to autonomous learning, they do show many of these learners credit freedom in language learning and the opportunity to manage their own learning. They also turn the spotlight on the fact that the cultural appropriateness of autonomy has been addressed regarding non-western ELT learners (Benson, 2006).

Contextualizing the autonomy discussion, the Iranian literature on learner autonomy with its short history on the issue, also reveals different studies attempting to make its contribution to the field. In case of promoting autonomy Hadidi Tamjid and Birjandi (2011) and also Zohrabi (2011) conducted studies with tertiary students. Jalali and Ghaznavi (2011) set off a study to find the relationship between CALL and autonomy. Hashemian and Heidari Soureshjani (2011) ran a study with respect to autonomy in distance learning.

Regarding the relationship between autonomy and learning styles, Nematipour (2012) can be an example, considering autonomy and metacognitive strategies Ajideh's (2009) work is of importance. Critical thinking and autonomy has been addressed in Fahim and Sheikhy Behdani's (2011) research. The influence of portfolio writing on autonomy (Khodadady & Khodabakhshzade 2012) and the effect of autonomy on students' writing (Sadegh Bagheri & Aeen 2011) are of notable examples. Approaching autonomy from positivism and constructivism approaches, Zoghi and Nezhad Dehghan (2012) tried to capture these two camps. Regarding investigating learners' beliefs Kashefian-Naeeni and Riazi (2011) and Ahmadi (2012) conducted a questionnaire survey.

Aiming to make its contribution to the literature on autonomous learning from an affective point of view, the present study set off to probe learners' and teachers' perceptions and

awareness regarding their readiness to enter the autonomous learning process. The findings and reflections are expected to be an area of interest for both learners and teachers in the way of increasing learners' awareness during the whole process of learning, helping them gain better insight and understanding of their own part as language learners and making teachers more sensitive to their own roles as language teachers.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Being labeled as the lingua franca since the late of 19th century (Crystal, 2003), learning English has been a Herculean task for many round the world. A lot of money and energy has been invested yet little result has been returned. Among these investors are teachers who put large amounts of energy in their classes but learners are otherwise engaged. While trying to strike a balance between input and intake, they encounter learners who never do their homework, are not willing to use the language or working in groups, or lose learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom. The important reason behind all this can be learners' over-dependence on the teacher and their tendency to take a passive role especially in some contexts like Iran, with its spoon-fed educational system, (Ghorbani, 2009; Tajadini, 2008; Tajadini & Sarani, 2009) where both teachers' and learners' interpretation of and their beliefs on their roles and functions in the learning process may mismatch; so their autonomy suffers.

To lessen the pressure now learners' autonomy seems to be back in favor with researchers. Whereas there is a voluminous literature on learner autonomy and much has been written on what learner autonomy is, (Benson, 2001, 2006; Holec, 1981) and on justifications of its promotion (Camilleri Grima, 2007; Cotterll, 1995; Palfreyman, 2003) for over 30 years, only a limited room has been allocated for different ways teachers and learners conceptualize autonomy in language teaching and learning and act accordingly.

Sharing the same concern, Stephenson (1998) and MacDougall (2008) touch upon the importance of investigating learners' readiness as well as Benson (2001) who demands further research on learners' attitudes and Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) call for exploring teachers' beliefs which they believe have been absent from the literature. The same gap is felt in the Iranian context with its top-down curriculum in which classrooms' input and output are controlled (Ghorbani, 2009) and yet the roles of teachers and learners have been defined so

rigidly (Eslami R. & Valizadeh, 2004) that inserting an idea like autonomous learning which takes its root in Western culture seems to be a demanding job needing previous preparation on the part of learners and teachers.

Comparing with other Asian countries, Iran seems to follow a contrasting foreign language learning policy in which educational policies, decided in advance by central government, are handed down to inferior organizations to be carried out (Ghorbani, 2009) and also language teaching is being considered more traditionally (Farhadi, Hezaveh, & Hedayati, 2010).

This study, then, addressed the issue of EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy as an important yet neglected variable in practicing autonomous learning hoping to get better understanding of their perceptions and interpretations of this role shift which reflect their readiness for taking the plunge.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

Promoting autonomous learning has been of main concern among researchers in the last three decades. Different approaches have been taken to develop learner autonomy in L2 context. However as the main stress is on the learner and teacher during the exercising learner autonomy it seems reasonable to tap their attitudes in this regard before implementing any necessary plans.

To this end, this study intended to investigate teachers' and students' beliefs and attitudes on autonomous learning to determine the extent of their readiness. As for learners, their readiness was assessed in four parts including their attitudes towards sharing the responsibility between learner and teacher, their motivation level, employing learning strategies, and practicing autonomous activities. Secondly the extent to which independent variables such as: age, gender, proficiency level, and marital status can hold differences across learners' attitudes were considered.

As for teachers, the investigation was done in the same parts, with some modifications, including: teachers' perception on assigning responsibility to their learners or themselves, how much they considered their learners capable of doing autonomous abilities, the role of autonomy in their teaching, and autonomy encouraging activities they inspire learners to do. Furthermore the degree to which age, gender, teaching level and teaching experience can make differences

across teachers' perceptions was assessed. To achieve this, a sample population of language learners and teachers were chosen from Kish Language Institutes located in Tehran.

1.4. Significance of the Study

For thirty years or so autonomy in language learning has been the topic of interest for many researchers and practitioners, making heads turn. An overview of the literature on autonomy shows that the area of interest has been either on learners' readiness for autonomous learning or how to promote it among learners at the university level where teachers are given a fair amount of freedom in their teaching practice; and no studies have been carried out in an institutional context characterized by whole-class teaching and a teacher-centered approach where in some EFL contexts like Iran, with its conservatively planned educational system, it is the only place where learners are exposed to contextualized language.

This study attempted to employ a sample with different profile, working with language learners studying at language institutes, and different context which as the only non-academic center deserves more attention.

Furthermore, while there has been abundant research on autonomy from the point of view of learners and learning (Balcikanli, 2008; Chan et al., 2002; Chan, 2001; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Kocak, 2003; Mineishi, 2010; Reinders, 2000; Spratt et al., 2002; Yildirim, 2008; Zhong, 2010) teachers' perspectives on this issue has remained unexplored (Al-Shaqsi, 2009; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Chan, 2003; Joshi, 2011; Nakata, 2011; Reinders & Lazarro, 2011).

Studying teachers' beliefs has been one of the research areas in education which has been largely addressed in the past three decades and lately in the field of English language teaching; it is now accepted that what teachers believe can influence their work (Borg, 2003) and that understanding teachers' beliefs is an important part of discerning teaching and of supporting the professional development of teachers.

The study seeks its justification through the fact that a study of this nature is rare in its context as reviewing the literature in the Iranian contexts by itself prove how limited our understanding of learners' and teachers' attitudes is. This study is also of importance as it employs a triangulation approach in statistical analysis.