Challenges in Promoting EFL Learners' Autonomy: Iranian EFL Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

Learner autonomy (LA) has always been a controversial issue among applied linguists. Several studies have been carried out to investigate the teachers' and learners' perceptions of learner autonomy as well as the feasibility of learner autonomy. Despite the importance of learner autonomy and the existence of several related studies, the challenges in promoting LA in Iranian institutes to the researcher s best of knowledge have not been explored appropriately, yet. The main objective of the present study was to investigate the challenges in promoting learner autonomy from Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives. To do so, a qualitative research design was used. In doing so, 23 Iranian EFL teachers employed as full time teachers in different universities in Tehran, Iran were selected through purposive sampling. The data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed through content analysis following Randor model. Based on the content analysis of the interviews, three different themes were extracted. The first most frequent observed theme, institution related challenges, consisted of prescribed objectives, materials, and assessment methods. The second theme, learner related challenges, consisted of seven sub-themes. However, the third extracted theme was teacher related challenges which consisted of four sub-themes. The findings can be used by teacher trainers, teachers, as well as EFL learners. It can be concluded that EFL teachers should receive training in learner autonomy through both pre-service and in-service training courses

INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy (LA) has been seen as the learner attitudes towards assuming responsibility for learning process and taking control of the language learning process. In order to be autonomous, the learner should understand the nature of language learning and the role s/he plays in the learning process. Teachers understanding of learner autonomy as an attitude or ability rather than as action is very important because the educators want to conceive of learners practicing and manipulating learning autonomy in contexts such as teacher-centered classroom teaching and self-directed learning. Therefore, autonomy is perceived as something internal to the learner but not tied to specific learning settings (Balçıkanlı, 2010).

LA has been an interesting area in foreign language (FL) teaching over the past thirty years. There are quite many studies on practicing learner autonomy in language learning situations. The review of literature shows that there have been several edited collections related to the topic (Barfield & Brown, 2007; Benson, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2011; Kagan, 1992; Kuchah & Smith, 2011; La Ganza, 2001, 2002; Lamb & Reinders, 2008; Vieira, 2009). Quite a lot has been written about what learner autonomy is, its implications for teaching language, and the rationale for promoting it.

LA is based on the idea that if students are involved in decision making processes regarding their own language competence, they are likely to be more enthusiastic about learning and learning can be more meaningful and purposeful for them (Camilleri, 1997; Dam, 1995; Little, 1991. Additionally, the idea that learners have the power and right to learn for themselves (Smith, 2008) is viewed as a necessary component of learner autonomy. There is promising evidence in review of literature to verify the claim that increasing the level of learner control will increase the level of self-determination, thereby increasing overall motivation in the development of learner autonomy (Chan 2001, p. 506). Therefore, in order to promote learner autonomy in language classrooms, it is very important that students be engaged in making decisions about their own learning (Balçıkanlı, 2010). Teachers play an important role in this process since the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted (Barfield et al., 2001, p. 3)

It is claimed (e.g. Camilleri, 2007; Cotterall, 1995; Palfreyman, 2003) that learner autonomy promotes democratic societies, improves language learning quality, and prepares learners for life-long learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012, Rao, 2006). It is also claimed that LA is a human right and it allows learners to benefit from learning opportunities in and out of classroom. Teachers perceptions about the difficulties of practicing LA have, however, been largely absent from such analyses, and little is actually known about what learner autonomy means to language teachers with different teaching experiences (Rao, 2006). The teachers and learners beliefs about learner autonomy impact how students learn, how language teachers teach, and whether and how teachers of general English at language institutes and Iranian universities seek to promote learner autonomy. This study addresses this gap by examining what challenges EFL teachers might face while trying to promote learner autonomy.

Teachers beliefs about LA have been of great interest in ELT in the last three decades. There exists an extensive literature on this issue. It has been discussed in relation to various concepts such as its underlying dimensions (Cotterall, 1995), its impact on language teaching (Graham, 2006), language learning strategies (Wnden, 1985, 1991; Yoshiyuki, 2011), language proficiency (Johnson, 2006), and learners and teachers beliefs about LA (Al Shaqsi, 2009; Balçkal, 2010; Camilleri, 1999; Chan, 2003).

The analysis of the aforementioned studies show that almost all of them were carried out through quantitative research designs and it seems that EFL teachers perceptions about challenges in promoting EFL learners autonomy has not been investigated appropriately. Thus, there seems a need for a qualitative study on EFL teachers perceptions about the challenges in promoting EFL learners autonomy.

REVIEW OF LITEARATURE
Learner Autonomy
In the narrower definition, learner autonomy refers to the use of self-study materials (Benson, 2007a). In the broader sense, it refers to the situation in which learners study entirely or largely on their own without the help of any instructor (Benson, 2007b). There are various approaches to promote learner autonomy. Benson (2001) proposes six approaches including Resource-based , Technology-based , Teacher-based ,

Classroom-based ,   Curriculum-based ,   and   Learner-based approaches . The three approaches which seem to be closely related to the title of this study are illuminated as follows.

Resource-based approach focuses on the interplay between learner and learning material (Benson, 2001). This approach gives the learners the opportunity to control the process of learning, selecting materials, and self-evaluating (Oxford, 2003). Thus, learners can take more responsibility for their own learning. Self-access, self-instruction, and distance learning are grouped within this approach.

Technology-based approach includes computer assisted language learning (CALL). This approach is mainly concerned with the usage of technology in language instruction (Abraham, 2008). Learners benefit freedom to control and direct their learning which affirms the efficiency of this approach in the development of autonomy (Benson, 2001).

Teacher-based approach is concerned with teachers professional development in terms of gaining knowledge on how to develop and encourage learner autonomy in their learners (Gökgöz, 2008). This knowledge is important to the development of learner autonomy since teachers are mostly the initiators of autonomy (Abraham, 2008). It is assumed that teacher autonomy is a prerequisite for the development of learner autonomy (Balçıkanlı , 2010).

Teachers' Beliefs about LA

Teacher cognition as the second theoretical component of LA focused in the present study is defined as the study of what teachers think about, know and believe in (Borg, 2006, 2011). Johnson (2006) in the review of recent trends in language teacher education described teacher cognition as a research area which has contributed significantly to our understanding of teachers and teaching in the last 40 years. It has been a very well explored research area in language teaching since the mid-1990s. Thus, this work has established several insights about the nature of teachers beliefs and the widely accepted roles they play in language teaching and teacher learning (Phipps & Borg, 2009). For the purposes of this study, two particular points are important.

First, teachers beliefs can powerfully shape both what teachers do and, consequently, the learning opportunities learners receive. Therefore, the extent to which learner autonomy is promoted in language learning classrooms is influenced by teachers beliefs about what autonomy

actually is as well as their perceptions about the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy. Second, teacher education seems to greatly influence teachers practices when it is based on an understanding of the teachers beliefs (Borg, 2011). Therefore, understanding teachers beliefs about autonomy is   an important element in the design of continuing professional development activities which aim at promoting learner autonomy.

The importance of the role which the teachers play in the autonomous learning environment is highlighted by Barfield et al. (2001) who argue that learner autonomy depends on teachers who create a learning environment in which autonomy is accepted. In the same vein, Camilleri (1999) lists three characteristics needed by teachers in an autonomous learning environment including understanding pedagogy, self-awareness, and skill in classroom management. In this context, as mentioned by Camilleri (1999), the teacher shifts the role from information imparter to a manager, a counselor, and a resource person. As a manager, teachers manage the learning activities and make clear the proper paths which students can take to achieve their goals. As a resource person, the teacher prepares the learning conditions by raising learners awareness of different learning strategies. As an example, teachers help learners become aware of learning styles. Camilleri (1999) also argues that the teacher as counsellor has can accompany individual learning processes (p. 38) and to react in an efficient manner usually before students feel a need to learning problems.

Little (1995) argues that learners find it difficult to take responsibility for their own learning in the new autonomy oriented learning situation. Therefore, teachers are required to encourage learner autonomy in the classrooms.

 Nunan (1997) talks about levels for encouraging learner autonomy including awareness , involvement , intervention , creation , and transcendence . In the awareness level, learners become aware of the course goals and materials. In the involvement level, learners select their own goals from among alternatives and in the intervention level they modify and adapt the course goal and content. In the creation level, learners create their own goals and in the final level, transcendence, learners apply the course content to the real world context.

Cotterall (2000), in his article about promoting learner autonomy through curriculum development, names five principles which contribute

to the transfer of responsibility for decision making about learning issues form teacher to learners. These principles include a) the course reflects learners goals in its language, tasks, and strategies, b) course tasks are explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language learning process, c) course tasks either replicate real-world communicative tasks or provide rehearsal for such tasks, d) the course incorporates discussion and practice with strategies known to facilitate task performance, and e) the course promotes reflection on learning.

Phipps and Borg (2009), in their review of literature on teacher beliefs both in general education and specifically in relation to language teaching, hold that teachers beliefs about teaching and learning: a) may be negatively or positively influenced by teachers previous experiences as learners and are well formed by the time they enter university b) are used by teachers for interpretation of new information and experience c) may be more powerful in effecting teachers action in the classroom than their teacher training courses/ teacher education d) are not always reflected in teachers practice e) can influence and be influenced by practices , and f) greatly influence teachers pedagogical decisions.

In addition to the above mentioned theoretical studies on LA, several studies on exploring teachers beliefs about LA have been recently done in different countries. As an example, Borg and Al-busaidi (2012) shed light on teachers positive theoretical dispositions to learner autonomy and their views about the feasibility of promoting it in practice. They also explored teachers views on the factors which hinder the development of learner autonomy. The most salient finding of their study was that learners lack motivation and have limited experience of independent learning. They also found that institutional factors such as a fixed curriculum were barriers to learner autonomy.

Balçıkanlı (2010) investigated student teachers beliefs about learner autonomy in the Turkish educational context. The study aimed to find out student teachers beliefs about learner autonomy, the areas of learner autonomy they perceived as important, and the constraints in the way of development of autonomy. The results of the questionnaire showed that the participants considered autonomy essential for nearly all areas particularly methodology and classroom management. They thought positively about the involvement of learners in selecting materials and deciding on methodology consisting of individual/pair group work, use of materials, type of class activities and type of homework activities,

classroom management issues such as arranging the position of desks, seating of students, and discipline matters, assessing themselves and setting short and long term objectives.

Al Shaqsi (2009) examined beliefs held by teachers of English in Oman about the extent to which their learners are autonomous. The study was conducted with 100 teachers of English (55 were male and 45 female) who were teaching Grades 10-12 (the last three years of secondary school), where learners were aged 15-17. The findings showed that teachers assessed heir students positively in all behaviors. The three highest scaled behaviors were learners ability to ask the teacher to explain in cases of ambiguity, to express their opinions about topics talked about in the classroom, and to use their dictionary properly. The female participants voted for the Give their point of views on topics in the classroom while the male counterparts gave the highest priority to Ask the teacher to explain when something is not clear . Female teachers thought their learners possessing a more autonomous character than did the male ones toward their learners.

Nicolaides (2008) investigated language learners beliefs about the roles they believed they had in the development of their language learning including autonomy.

Benson (2008) analyzed the differences between teachers and learners perspective on learner autonomy and how these differences may be related to the technical, psychological, and political versions of autonomy. The researcher claimed that since the concept of autonomy in learning derives its meaning from the concept of personal autonomy, it mainly involves the kind of learning which best helps people to lead autonomous lives. In other words, the issue of autonomy can be fundamentally interpreted as the outcome of the relationship between broader views of autonomy in life and teaching and learning issues. In spite of this fact, the theory of autonomy in language learning is largely formulated and extended by teachers perspective in the classroom, resulting in a focus on the development of the internal capacity for autonomy at the expense of external freedom in the learning process (p. 30).

In sum, majority of the related studies focused on the EFL teachers perceptions about the feasibility and desirability of involving learners in making decisions about different components of curriculum through quantitative research tools. However, the challenges and barriers in

promoting learner autonomy from EFL teachers perspectives were not deeply studied qualitatively.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study was an attempt to investigate Iranian EFL teachers perceptions about learner autonomy. More specifically, it aimed at exploring the challenges which Iranian EFL teachers find while attempting to promote learners autonomy in different components of curriculum. More specifically, the following research question was raised:

What challenges do Iranian English language teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?

METHOD
Participants

The participants of the study were 23 (13 male and 10 female) EFL teachers employed as full time teachers in different universities in Tehran, Iran. They were all Ph.D. holders of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). They were selected from state and Islamic Azad universities in Tehran and Ahwaz (15 from state universities and 8 from Islamic Azad University branches). Purposive sampling was used for selecting the participants for individual interviews. For the individual interviews a non-random stratified sample of participants was selected based on the criteria that they were EFL teachers employed in English Language and Literature departments, and they had more than one year of teaching experience.

Instrumentation

To understand and interpret participants own descriptions of the phenomenon which they individually and directly experience, a phenomenological approach was used. Phenomenology is a strategy of enquiry which examines how human beings construct and give meaning to their actions in concrete social situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 204). It focuses on understanding the meaning events have for people being studied (Patton, 1990). In phenomenological study, the researchers try to first understand how people within a context collectively and individually understand and interpret phenomena. They also aim to

record, interpret and explain the meanings which these individuals make of their experiences. This study required qualitative instruments which would deeply explore the perspectives of learner autonomy and their justifications for difficulties and problems of promoting learner autonomy. Hence, data collection was initiated with the intent of conducting semi-structured face to face individual interviews. The initial questions addressed the participants experiences of learner autonomy. They were also asked to mention whether there was anything wrong while they wanted to promote learner autonomy or not.

Data Collection

The data of the study were collected through semi-structured face-to face-interviews. Bearing in mind a researcher sstatus can impact on participants responses, the researcher tried to establish a trusting professional relationship with the participants. At first, each individual was asked a general question about autonomy. Then, more detailed questions were asked. In order to increase the trustworthiness of the participants responses, firstly, all participants were provided with the same questions which were carefully worded (Robson, 2002). Secondly, interviews were transcribed as accurately as possible and returned to participants for verification. Finally, according to Randor (2001), all procedures of the research including transcripts, drafts and final reviews of data were documented, according to which the study could be replicated or reconstructed. Each individual interview was audio-taped. The data saturation occurred when the 23rd participant was interviewed. the researcher attempted to the best of his capability to present an accurate, complete, detailed, and bias free account of participants views, perceptions, and feelings they were revealed to researchers and as they were experienced by participants.

Data analysis

Radnor s (2001) step by step guide to qualitative data analysis was followed. Interviews were first transcribed and multiple copies of the transcripts were printed. The transcripts for topic ordering to draw out and list topics that are linked to original research questions were then read. These were listed on an A4 sheet of paper and color coded for use as a reference guide for subsequent readings of the transcripts. The themes which were extracted from the interviews were color coded. In

case of more than one category in a topic, numeric coding was used. A third reading for content helped to identify quotes that were aligned with each category within the topics. The quotes according to the category they represented were labeled. Keeping the master copy intact, the researcher then used the word processor to copy and paste the categories and quotes on separate Microsoft Word documents representing each topic. These were printed and read again to look for subtitles of the themes, in order to understand, interpret, and write down the interpretation of the extracted themes and subthemes.

RESULTS

This research addressed the Iranian EFL teachers challenges in promoting learners learning autonomy. In doing so, 23 of the participants were interviewed to comment on the challenges they faced in seeking to do so. The interviewees responses were content analyzed and the data saturation point was reached when the 23rd participant was interviewed. The results of the content analysis of the data showed that the challenges Iranian EFL teachers face in promoting learners to become autonomous are divided into three main themes: institution, learner, and teacher challenges. Each of these themes consists of some subthemes and explained in details in the following parts.

Institute-Related Challenges

The subthemes of this theme are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Institute-related challenges in promoting learner autonomy

Institute related challenges	N	Percent
Ignoring the role of learner in the curriculum	20	86
Prescribed objectives	19	82
Prescribed materials	18	78
Prescribed assessment system	17	74

About 86 percent of the participants stated that some of their challenges in promoting autonomy among their EFL learners are related to the institutions in which they teach. Institute-related challenges include

limited space within the curriculum, prescribed curricula and materials, and prescribed assessment system.

a. Ignoring the role of learner in the curriculum

Eighty-six percent of the participants argued that curriculum is selected by the institutions and policy makers provide no space and chance for the learners to become autonomous**.** The following quotation exemplifies the theme:

"We are always recommended to follow the guidelines and instructional objectives of course. Therefore, we have limited chance to involve the learners in developing curriculum; therefore, the role of the learners is ignored (P 7)."

b. Prescribed objectives

Eighty-two percent of the participants argued that instructional objective are determined by institutes and organizations. They also believed that neither the teachers nor the students are involved in decision making about the objectives of the courses.

"Objectives are determined by institutions without taking into account the learners' preferences and needs" (P 12).

c. Prescribed materials

Seventy-eight percent the participants argued that instructional materials are prescribed to the teachers and they are forced to follow the curricula step by step. Even, the daily lesson plans are prescribed.

"Even we as teachers are not allowed to determine materials for our classes. Then how can we let the learners to select the materials" (P15).

d. Prescribed assessment system

Seventy-four of the participants argued that institutions prescribe how language learners should be evaluated. Even types and contents of the tests are determined and prescribed by institutions**.**

"Sometimes language learners' achievements are evaluated by institutes themselves. Even I have no role in developing achievement test for my student. In such a system it is really hard to involve students in decision making about the tests they take" (P9).

Learner-Related Challenges

The subthemes of this theme are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Learner-related challenges in promoting learner autonomy

Learner related challenges	N	Percent
Lack of motivation among learners	19	82
Learners dependence on the teacher	18	78
Learners limited exposure to English	17	74
Learners focus on test results	16	70
Learners low proficiency in English	15	65
Learners lack of experience in autonomous learning	14	60
Learners inability in identifying needs	13	56

About 82 percent of the participants argued that there are learner related factors that do not let them promote learner autonomy easily. The main learner-related problems include: Lack of motivation among learners, learner dependence on the teacher, limited learner exposure to English outside the classroom, learners focus on test results, limited learner proficiency in English, learners lack of previous experience of autonomous learning, and lack of needed materials. Each of these subthemes is explained and exemplified as follows:

a. Lack of motivation among learners
About 70 percent of the participants argued that students do not have enough motivation to study by their own and become autonomous. Therefore, teachers do not help learners to become autonomous. The following quotation exemplifies the theme.
"Several times I asked my students to read some chapters of a book and summarize them, but none of them liked that" (P 8).
"Once searching the net I found some interesting and useful websites for EFL learners. I introduced them to my students. Surprisingly, none of them followed my requests" (P6).

b. Learners' dependence on the teacher
Majority of the participants argued that in Iran language learners are dependent on their teachers due to some factors such as lack of basic

knowledge in English. They also argued that it is very hard for language learners with low proficiency level to become autonomous. The following

"How can one except a beginner language learner to become autonomous while s/he knows nothing about vocabulary, grammar, etc. I think without direct help from the teacher beginner language learners cannot learn successfully" (P 4).

c. Learners' Limited exposure to English

Majority of the participants argued that in Iran English is taught a foreign language and language learners do not have enough exposure to English language outside the classroom. Therefore, it is not easy for language learners to learn language alone in such a setting.

Iranian EFL learners do not have enough practice in English language skills outside the classrooms. They may have the chance to develop their writing and reading outside but they need at least a minimum practice is speaking skill in the classroom" (P5).

d. Learners' focus on test results

In Iranian schools and universities, learners need to pass the test. Therefore, they do not need to develop their language proficiency because a minimum knowledge is enough for passing the local language tests.

"Most of the time language learners ask us to teach them testing strategies so that they can answer the test items easily. Teachers can be of much use to help them pass the test".(p 21)

e. Learners' week proficiency in English

The next learner related factor is learner's limited proficiency in English. Participants argued that teachers cannot help students with low proficiency levels to become autonomous.

"It is possible to promote learner autonomy among intermediate and advanced EFL learners but beginner language learners need to pass some courses with the teachers, I think "(P 10).

f. Learners' lack of experience in autonomous learning

Majority of the participants argued that in Iran, all classrooms in primary, junior high schools, high schools, and universities are teacher-

oriented. Language learners do have previous experience of autonomous learning.

"Autonomous learning should be practiced from the earlier years of education. Students should be trained to become autonomous" (P13).

g. Lack of appropriate needs analysis

Language learners need to have access to different types of software and hardware learning materials for all language skills and sub-skills for language learners with different proficiency levels. Language learners do not have chance to find and use needed materials.

"Some language learners complain about difficulties of finding the sources the teachers introduce to them. They sometimes argue that these materials are not suitable for them" (P 1).

h. Learners' inability in self-study activities

About 50 percent of the teachers believed that EFL learners particularly elementary students are not able to apply self-study strategies to develop their own learning achievement. The following quotation exemplifies this subtheme.

"Rarely have I seem my students doing activities other than the textbook exercises. They are dependent on the textbooks and hardly read newspapers, supplementary textbooks on grammar, vocabulary, etc."(p.23).

Teacher-Related Challenges

The most frequently reported teacher related challenges in promoting LA are presented in Table three and discussed in the following subsections.

Table 3: Teacher related challenges in promoting LA

Teacher related subthemes	Number	Percent
Lack of relevant resources for teachers	16	70
Lack of teacher autonomy	15	65
Teachers fear of losing authority	14	61
Teachers lack of experience in LA	13	56

a. Lack of relevant resources for teachers

About 70 percent of the teachers argued that there is lack of relevant resources for teachers. Therefore, they cannot promote learner autonomy. The following quotation exemplifies the theme:

"The only educational resource available to me is the textbook, no other option such as CDs, films, etc. Then, how can I help students to become autonomous" (p.1).

b. Lack of teacher autonomy

Sixty-five percent of the participants argued that they do not have autonomy for designing the course, determining the objectives and selecting the materials. All are prescribed by the institutes.

"Teachers have to follow the policies prescribed to hem by administrators and education department, they have to teach the formal textbook and finish it within the school schedules. The test format and types are also determined by education department" (p.20).

c. Teachers' fear of losing authority

About 61 percent of the participants argued that if the teachers turn to learner-centered approaches to teaching and help the learners become autonomous, they lose their authority in the classroom and their status as teachers might be devalued. One of the participants argued that:

"If the students are allowed to select the materials, set the schedules, and determine evaluation method, the teachers will lose their authority and the students no longer respect them"(p.22).

d. Teachers' lack of experience in LA

About 56 percent of the participants argued that teachers lack of experience in LA is one of the challenges in promoting LA. One of the participants argued**:**

"Iranian teachers are used to following the teaching procedures which they learned during teacher training courses. They have little experience in LA and it is very difficult for them to practice LA" (p.8).

DISCUSSION

The main objective of the present study was to explore the factors which limit the teachers to promote learner autonomy. Twenty three teachers were interviewed to comment on the main challenges which they face in

promoting learner autonomy. The participants responses were content analyzed and three main themes were extracted. The main challenges were reported to be related to learners, institutions and teachers, though institute related factors were most widely cited by the teachers. One of the findings of this study was that institutes and policy makers are the main challenge for teachers to help learners become autonomous. The institutes do not involve teachers and learners in selecting materials, objectives of the curriculum, teaching styles, and assessment methods. Due to the policy and guidelines of the institutes, the participants of the present study felt that they were not able to promote learner autonomy. This finding is in line with a body of the related studies (to name just a few, Balçıkanlı, 2010; Benson, 2011; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Phipps & Borg, 2009) who believe that that there are some constraining factors involved in the formal learning environment that may be viewed as hindrances to the development of learner autonomy. The results are also in line with Reinders and Lazaro (2011), who argued that teachers believed that learners did not understand the importance of developing autonomy, lacked the skills to learn independently, and were not accustomed to being asked to take responsibility for their own learning.

The results also showed that there are some institution related factors which hinder the promotion of learner autonomy. The main reason for institution related challenges is that education system is centralized and ministry of education makes all decisions about different components of a curriculum such as types of materials which are used and assessment system, etc. (Alibakhshi & Rezaei, 2013). The institute related challenges extracted from the interviews with the participants of the present study are in line with Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) who argued that institutes force the teachers to follow their own policies and to teach in line with the guidelines which were developed for teachers. Therefore, it could be discussed that institutes should give more autonomy to the teachers and learners to make a change in the objectives, types of materials used, and the way they are evaluated.

The second extracted theme was labeled as learner related challenges. The participants believed that they find it challenging to promote learner autonomy because learners are not motivated, they are dependent on teachers, and they are less proficient in English language skills. As the learners were trained to develop their own language proficiency through exposure to language outside of the EFL classrooms,

it is very difficult for teachers to develop learner autonomy in crowded EFL classrooms which consist of heterogeneous students. These findings are in line with the findings of some related studies (e.g. Benson, 2011; Borg & Al-Busaidi; Balçıkanlı, 2010).

The third extracted theme of the study was labeled teacher related challenges. EFL teachers found it challenging to promote learner autonomy because they had lack of relevant sources, lack of autonomy and authority in practicing learner autonomy, lack of experience in LA, and fear of losing authority. This finding is consistent with Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) who argued that teachers also felt hindered by a full curriculum in which content and assessment were centrally defined. That the teachers are afraid of losing authority if they let the learner become autonomous was also reported by Nunan (1997).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In line with the findings of the present study, it could be concluded that teachers and learners should get rid of the factors which block learner autonomy in EFL settings. They should also know that learner autonomy does not lead to the teachers lack of respect and authority. In addition, educational institutes and schools should adopt the model of LA. They should also help teachers and learners become autonomous and encourage both teachers and learners to play important roles in selecting the materials, setting the objectives, and proposing appropriate evaluation procedures. It could be also concluded that institutions and trainers should try to remove the factors which might cause learner autonomy difficult and challenging. In order to promote learner autonomy, the administrators should adopt teacher autonomy model and if needed teachers should take some required courses to develop their own profession. The other influential factors which hinder learner autonomy should be explored and removed and the standards of learner autonomy should be developed by the related organizations such as education department**.**

As this study was carried out through a qualitative research method in an EFL context, the findings are specific and should therefore be generalized with great care. In this study, the variables of teachers gender, experience, degree, as well as teaching literacy which might make a change in the findings were not controlled. The other researchers are recommended to replicate the same study viewing the mentioned

variables. They are also recommended to make use of a mixed method research design to verify or modify the findings.

Bio-data

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