

EFL Teachers' Conceptions of Learner Autonomy: Developing a Glocalized Model*

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Abstract

Learner autonomy (henceforth LA) has become a buzz word in education in general and language education, in particular, for more than a decade now. Focusing on investigating Iranian EFL teachers' conceptions of LA, the current study, taking a mixed method approach, attempted to illustrate how Iranian EFL teachers' conceptions of learner autonomy mapped out. To that end, 7 teachers, purposefully cluster sampled, were interviewed. After data saturation, the result of the interviews and the data gleaned from the literature were fed into the development of a questionnaire. The questionnaire, having being validated through a pilot study, was administered to 585 EFL teachers snowball-sampled, 2 of whom were, later on through negative case analysis, interviewed, and were required to provide the researchers with a narrative. Running a number of factor analyses, the researchers modeled the participants' mindsets toward LA, which can be quite significant as it can have some theoretical and pedagogical implications, including, inter alia, situating LA promotion into the pedagogy of TEFL in Iran by running LA promotion workshops as well as developing a pool of LA promotion activities and software programs available to the stakeholders, especially the teachers.

Key words: Learner autonomy, teachers' conceptions, glocalized model.

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Introduction

Not unlike many other places are traditional teacher-fronted approaches to teaching still prevalent in Iran (Afkhami, & Davari-Ardakani, 2006). It is still thought that the main duty of the teacher is to feed the students rather than help them learn how to feed themselves. Technically speaking, the transmission approach toward teaching and learning is still prevalent. However, ever since the Socio-Cultural Theory of mind proposed by Vygotsky (Swain, Kinner, & Steinman, 2011) gained momentum in education in general and language education in particular, new definitions for language, language learning, language teachers, and language teaching have been proposed. This shift of attention has resulted in a call for the “death of method” and in placing the locus of focus on what is commonly known as “the Post-method Pedagogy” (see, for example, Brown, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006, 2012). Within post-method pedagogy, LA is claimed to be an indispensable tenet if post-method pedagogy is to be realized. With the significance of LA and the conflict at work here in mind and the fact that teachers’ stance on LA is an indispensable part of post-method pedagogy which has remained an under-researched area (Benson, 2006, 2011; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Lam, 2008), the researchers have dwelled the niche in research by mapping out EFL teachers’ conceptions of LA. To this end, an overview of the key concepts as well as the existing literature informing the current study is presented first. Then, in the methods section the informants of the study, the instruments used to collect data, the data collection and analysis procedures followed in the study are discussed. Finally, the study concludes with the results and discussion and some closing remarks.

Review of The Literature Learner Autonomy

The word autonomy is derivationally made up of the two Greek root words *autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule) (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2002, p. 84). In Greek history, *autonomia* existed “when citizens were governed by laws of their own making, rather than by laws or force of a foreign or conquering power” (Rosenbaum, 1986, p. 109).

With the etymology of the word autonomy in mind, it is time to get into what LA has been used to mean.

While such concepts as learning strategies and motivation are being endangered by self-regulation and investment, i.e. they had to undergo a change in meaning (Tseng, Dornyei, & Schmitt, 2006). The term LA, first coined by Henry Holec and defined as “the ability to take charge of one's own learning” (1981 p. 3, as cited in Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012), has shown a lot of persistence in what is meant to be an autonomous learner.

In this study, following Chan (2003) and Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), the researchers operationalized LA as the learner's willingness and ability to take responsibility to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate his/her learning in tasks that are constructed in negotiation with and support from the teacher.

Teachers' Conceptions

In education in general and language education, in particular, various labels are used by different scholars to refer to what is called “conceptions” in this study. A brief explanation of how the term is employed here is as follows:

In his modular model of teacher education, which is made up of five modules, i.e. Knowing, Analyzing, Recognizing, Doing, and Seeing, Kumaravadivelu (2012) subsumes conceptions under the model of knowing which he defines as encompassing three types of knowledge: professional, procedural and personal knowledge. Based on this terminology, this study is to focus on the three dimensions of teachers' knowing as consisting of *professional*, *procedural*, and *personal* knowledge which are operationally defined as “received wisdom that emanates mostly from experts”, “classroom management”, and “the individual endeavor of the teacher”, respectively (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p.24). Moreover, heading off the confusion that might arise when assigning one kind of learning to any of the three kinds above, the researchers have opted for

the umbrella term “conceptions” as encompassing all the three above-mentioned kinds of knowledge.

The Literature on Teachers’ Conceptions of La

Over the last three decades, the field has witnessed a surge of interest in the concept of LA and its promotion. This is clearly corroborated by the increasing number of publications made on the concept in scholarly journals (Benson, 2006). Despite this large body of research on LA from the point of view of learners and learning (Benson, 2006; Candy, 1991; Cotterall, 1995; Kohonen, 1992; Lai, et al. 2013; Lewis, 2013; Lier, 1996; Little, 1991, 2002; Oxford, 2003; Sheerin, 1991), teachers’ stance on the issue has remained a relatively under-researched one (Borg, 2003; Crabbe, et al. 2013; Dam, 2003; Feryok, 2013).

It has now become an accepted assertion that what teachers believe can influence their practice (Borg, 2003) and that understanding teachers’ conceptions is an important part of understanding teaching and of supporting the professional development of teachers which has remained the uncharted territory and little is known about what LA means to language teachers in various contexts and educational settings around the world (Borg, 2011) with the exception of Balcikanli (2010), Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), Camilleri (1999), and Chan (2003), who have endeavored to investigate teachers’ conceptions in promoting LA from various aspects or fields.

Chan’s (2003), for instance, large-scale study examined teachers’ views of LA in china, whose results indicated that teachers felt responsible for the methodological choices they made within the classroom. Furthermore, the participants showed a clear awareness of autonomy as a goal of teaching and were more or less in favor of students’ having a voice in decision-making in aspects of the language learning process. Teachers did feel, however, constrained by curriculum limitations and consequently did not provide decision-making opportunities for learners in areas of autonomous learning (e.g. learning objectives, activities). This study is particularly relevant to the current study as the present researchers first developed the questionnaire for the current study from that study. The development

and design of Chan's questionnaire were clearly based on the literature and theory of LA. A similar 'mixed method' methodology of gathering both quantitative and qualitative data has been adopted by the researcher. Chan's study highlights the fact that LA cannot be encouraged without support from the teacher. In addition, it shows that thinking about our beliefs and teaching practices is important as it allows for reflection and change if necessary. The weakness, however, in Chan's study is that she does not provide sampling procedures for her qualitative data. Explication of sampling procedures is very important because it could have had some influence on the results.

In a similar attempt, Al-Shaqsi (2009, as cited in Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012) conducted a survey of 120 English teachers' beliefs of LA in state-run schools in Oman. For that purpose, a questionnaire was devised which asked respondents about (a) autonomous learners' characteristics (b) their learners' ability to carry out a number of tasks which were each taken to be an indicator of LA, and (c) how to promote LA. The three autonomous learners' characteristics the teachers identified were: first, they can use computers to find information; second, they use a dictionary, and finally, they ask the teacher for help when they have a problem. These results should, however, be taken with reservations for two reasons. First, there is no qualitative data gathered (from interviews, for instance) to further explain and/or clarify the questionnaire findings. This weakness is acknowledged by the researcher when it is mentioned that some of the findings from the study were unclear and needed further exploration so as to clarify teachers' responses. Second, teachers may have responded in ways to reflect what the current educational policy in Oman encouraged them to do, i.e. to promote autonomous learning.

Another study along similar lines would be that of Balcikanli (2010), exploring student teachers' conceptions of LA in the Turkish educational setting. The researcher explored LA with regard to student involvement in classroom management, assessment, homework tasks, and so forth from the student-teachers' perspective by administering a questionnaire and conducting follow-up interviews, whose results

indicated that student-teachers maintained positive attitudes and a “clear view of LA and the involvement of students in the learning process”, and “the student teachers would probably feel ready to pass onto their future students some responsibilities and choices” (Balcikanli, 2010, p. 98). However, “the teacher-centered approach to teaching in which the traditional teaching methods are widely utilized” (p. 99) and the fixed course time and place, as well as, the high teacher authority in the teaching and learning process were iterated as some of the factors militating against LA development in the Turkish educational context.

In the thick literature on teachers’ views of LA, Camilleri (1999, pp. 28-30) seems to be the first researcher to carry out multiple studies in various European countries, which yielded some interesting findings: First, teachers showed “willingness ... to change and develop practice.” Second, they strongly supported the incorporation of “LA in different areas of teaching (material selection, areas of classroom management, learning strategies, learning styles)”. Next, they were reluctant “to involve learners in aims and methodological decisions”. Finally, teachers felt that “constraints from higher authorities made it hard to encourage LA or offer more learner choice”. In this study, there was a high number of incomplete responses which raises the question of whether the instrument was piloted which can, in turn, threaten the validity of the findings. However, there are some important implications we can take from this study. First, situations beyond teacher control could result in teachers’ resistance to LA initiatives (e.g. syllabus constraints, exam schedules). Next, teachers need to be ‘educated’ in LA through pre-service and/or in-service professional development programs. Finally, teachers and teacher trainers need to examine the feasibility of different areas of LA in their educational system. Only then are they able to plan professional development activities around these topics and finally move on to classroom implementation.

Investigating contextual effects, Camilleri (1999) examined 328 teachers’ views about LA from six European countries (Malta, The

Netherlands, Belorussia, Poland, Estonia, and Slovenia). A replication of the same study was carried out (Camilleri, 2007) with 48 informants in Malta. Some other examples are the studies reported on in the edited title "Learner Autonomy across Cultures" by Smith and Palfreyman (2003). Manzano Vazquez (2016) report on many studies carried out in Western contexts such as Breen, Candlin, Dam, and Gabrielsen., (1990) in Denmark, Galiniene (1999) in Lithuania, Gatt (1999) in Malta, Jimenez Raya (2011, 2013) in Spain, Jimenez Raya and Vieira (2015), and Ushioda, Smith, Mann, and Brown (2011) in the UK. Scholars such as Benson (2011), Little (1991), Nunan (1997), Oxford (2003) have proposed models of LA based on their own readings of LA within a western setting. They were all initiated or carried out in a western context.

Given that the majority of the studies on LA have been conducted in western cultural contexts, such that the available models of LA are largely constructed following a western understanding of the concept, one can easily recognize the need for a local investigation of the concept. This is not to say that no studies have been carried out in an Eastern context. Contrarily, researchers such as Balcikanli (2010) examined 112 student teachers' views in a Turkish context, Al-Shaqsi (2009, as cited in Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012) investigated 120 teachers' conception of LA in Oman, and Lee (2010) investigated 163 informants' views in a Japanese context. Among all the studies carried out in Asian settings, almost no one has endeavored to develop a model for LA.

To conclude, this review indicates a need for more research into contextual factors which could be conducive or debilitating to LA promotion. One of the key players in each teaching-learning context is the teacher. Therefore, exposing teachers' conceptions in this area and their variation and similarities across such factors as "age, gender, cultural context and setting" is an important gap (Benson, 2006, P. 34) this study is going to fill. In other words, modeling teachers' mindsets becomes indispensable if one wants to promote LA. How middle-eastern EFL teachers conceive autonomy in the unique Iranian setting

is yet to be known. Mindful of this, the researchers tried to unveil EFL teachers' conceptions of LA, as a specific domain of inquiry, by posing the following questions whose results and implications will be further discussed toward the end of the report.

1. What 'LA' means to English language teachers in Iran?
 - 1a. To what extent, according to the teachers, can LA contribute to foreign language learning?
 - 1b. How desirable and feasible did teachers feel it was to promote LA?
 - 1c. To what extent did teachers feel their learners were autonomous?
 - 1d. To what extent did teachers say they actually promote LA?
2. What challenges did teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?
3. How are various factors (if any) contributing to LA development weighted in the Iranian context?
4. How could these beliefs be facilitative or debilitating to the development of LA?

Method

Participants

This study comprised of multiple phases including questionnaire development, the nationwide survey, narrative inquiry and the interviews. Each of these phases had its own participants with their sometimes-distinct characteristics.

Participants and sampling for the initial interview phase

The informants in the interview phase were high school teachers from the two cities of Bukan, and Mahabad in Iran from different education levels, ages, genders, and educational backgrounds. This group was chosen for accessibility reasons. The interview participants included 7 EFL teachers (see Table 1). Only after data saturation was reached was this number determined.

Table 1. *The descriptive statistics of the interviewees based on their level of teaching, i.e. junior or senior high school, their gender, academic degree, years of experience.*

		Frequency
		EFL
Level of Teaching	Junior high school	4
	Senior High school	3
Gender	Male	4
	Female	3
Academic Degree	Associate	1
	BA	2
	MA	4
	PhD	0
Years of Experience	1-5	1
	6-11	1
	12-17	2
	18-23	1
	24	2
Total		7

Participants and sampling for the large-scale-survey

As for the second data collection method, the researchers opted for snowball/chain, or network sampling to get access to the potential participants. The participants for the nationwide survey comprised of 585 EFL Iranian teachers from different age groups, genders, language proficiency levels, cities, and provinces, holding different academic degrees. The reason for doing so was to accomplish diversity and hence the generalizability of the findings (see Table 2)

Table 2. *The descriptive statistics of the EFL vs. non-EFL participants based on their level of teaching, i.e. junior or senior high school, their gender, academic degree, years of experience.*

		Frequency		Percentage
		EFL	EFL	Total
Level of Teaching	Junior high school	283	56.48	100
	Senior High school	302	61.75	100
Gender	Male	311	57.38	100
	Female	274	61.16	100
Academic Degree	associate	78	59.09	100
	BA	241	56.97	100
	MA	212	62.35	100
	PhD	54	56.84	100
Years of Experience	1-5	101	72.66	100
	6-11	106	60.22	100
	12-17	168	50.75	100
	18-23	121	57.07	100
	24	89	67.42	100
Sub-total		585	59.09	100

Participants and sampling for the narrative analysis and the second interview phase

The final group of the participants comprised of two teachers selected by the researchers based on their comments in the first interview phase, those who strongly agreed or strongly disagreed with LA which is technically referred to as negative case analysis (Ary et al., 2010), and who were also willing to provide the researchers with narratives of their experiences. Furthermore, following the questionnaire analysis, there was another round of interviews, i.e. online interviews, with five of the teachers who had expressed in the questionnaires administered that they were strongly for or against LA promotion.

Instruments

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

In the current study, the interviews were held in 2 groups, one 3 and the other 4 strong, in two separate sessions lasting about twenty and thirty-five minutes, respectively. The items of the interviews were extracted from the literature (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Chan, 2003; Lamb & Reinders, 2008), but they were tentative and open to change. That is, as the title reads, the interviews were semi-structured; thus, there were at times additions to the questions as each focus group interview unfolded. The reason why the interviews were not conducted individually was that “individual attitudes, beliefs, and choices of action do not form in a vacuum” (Ary et al., 2010, p. 439). By listening to others, the participants were helped to form ideas and at the same time, the researchers could become aware of any possible interactions of ideas. Moreover, by carrying out the interviews in focus groups, the researchers tried to keep the interviews more socially-oriented as well as remaining more economical with time and money. Focus group interviews also put the researcher in a better position to further probe into some ambiguities of the interactions that arose during the interview whose analysis would have been impossible with a one-on-one interview.

Narrative inquiry

Employing this tool, the researchers chose two of the participants who had sat for the interviews and were strongly for or against LA promotion, and asked them to elaborate on episodes of their conception/experience(s) of LA. These recounts were recorded. The recorded recounts were transcribed taking care of the nuances of meaning noted by the researchers such as stressing a word or phrase by a certain interviewee. The transcriptions were rechecked with each individual to make sure nothing was missing from their stories. Then, the researchers, following Polkinghorne's (1995) guidance on thematic analysis went through the stories, looking for the major elements of time, place, plot, scene, and themes. The stories were retold by the researchers, minding the sequence, setting, characters, actions, problems, and resolutions. Finally, the retold story and its accuracy were validated with the individual who originally had told the story by inviting them to go through the retold story and to cross out anything in the story which they did not mean to but was inferred and thus added by the researchers.

A researcher developed questionnaire

Since the responses to the questionnaire were going to constitute one of the major sources of data for this study, a number of professional and academic measures were taken to develop a reliable instrument. The review of existing instruments and scales revealed that the ready-made instruments were not viable for use in the current study because of the distinct design and research questions formulated. On the other hand, the questionnaire developed and validated in this study adds to the innovative aspect of this research making it distinct from other studies that simply adopted ready-made questionnaires.

As Dörnyei (2010) puts it "developing a questionnaire is a stepwise process, and the quality of the final instrument depends on the cumulative quality of each sub-process" (p. 111). To that end, the researchers took a number of steps (see Figure 1) to construct a reliable and valid questionnaire based on the guidelines proposed by Brown (2001), and Dörnyei (2010).

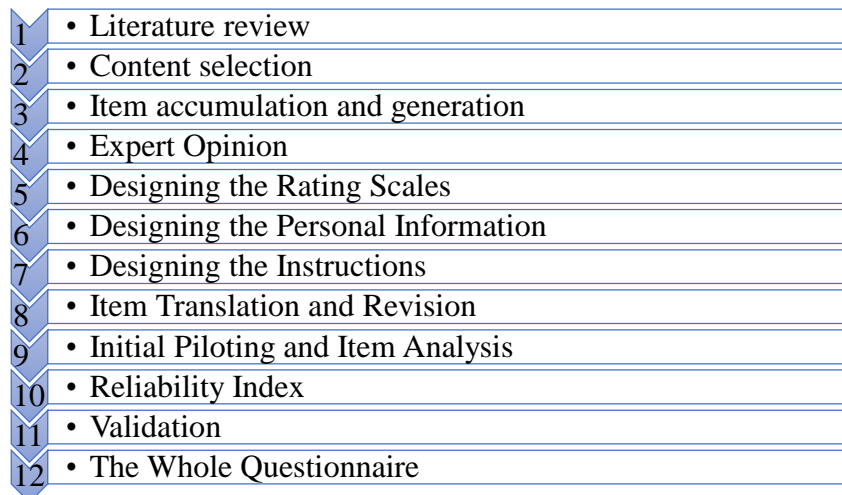


Figure 1. Questionnaire development and validation steps (Brown, 2001; Dörnyei, 2010)

Data Collection Procedure

At the outset of the study, the participants were briefed on the aims and objectives of the project. Some semi-structured interviews were held with the participants, based on whose data, two of the participants were asked to provide the researchers with an oral narrative of their experiences of LA and through a thorough analysis of the literature and the collected data, a questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was made online and whereby administered to the target participants. Following the questionnaire administration, another set of interviews were held with the outliers, i.e. those participants who were at the two extreme poles of the spectrum with regard to their conceptions of LA were interviewed. The results of the questionnaire administrations, the two sets of interviews, as well as the narrative inquiry, were qualitatively as well as quantitatively analyzed to see what the participants' conceptions of LA were. However, it is worth mentioning that all data collection procedures were conducted in Persian because the participants were not at the same level of English language proficiency. However, later the results were rendered, double- and crossed-checked, and finally publicized in English. Furthermore, to

make the study rigorous, the researchers took a number of measures including *data* and *methods triangulation*, *investigator triangulation* (inter- and intra-coder reliability) *thick*, and *rich description* as well as *participant feedback* (Ary et al., 2010).

Data Analysis Procedure

The data collected through the interviews were transcribed, translated, and double-checked for any possible data loss, and then organized. That is, the researchers, following Dornyei's (2007) advice, read and reread the transcriptions to get familiar enough with the data. What followed that phase was data reduction and provisional coding, which, in turn, was followed by categorizing and interpreting. Put more simply, in these two phases, the researchers actually counted and grouped the instances of words and phrases of meaning which could fall into specific categories. However, these categorizations, as Ary et al. (2010) have warned, were tentative at the outset, thus, open to change as the study unfolded. That is, some of them, which were thought to be different at the outset of the study by the researchers, were later on, i.e. after expert feedback was received, merged into a more general category and subsumed under a new and general label. This whole process of provisional coding, categorizing and theme development was not linear rather conversely it was what Creswell (2007, as cited in Ary et al., 2010) calls "spiral" or what Dornyei (2007, p. 243) calls "iterative". Next was the analysis of the narratives. The stories told by the teachers were analyzed and interpreted by the researchers to see how LA was framed and formed in the minds of these participants by looking for such things as epiphanies. In other words, the narrative analysis phase was an iterative process whereby data analysis was ongoing in tandem with data collection.

Following Polkinghorne's (1995) guidance, the researchers utilized the oral reports of the participants to produce each narrative by focusing on the "uniqueness of the individual case" for "an understanding of its idiosyncrasy and particular complexity" (p.15). All the critical incidents or events the informants found influential in how they saw LA promotion in their teaching practices over the years were collected in

one file. When reconstructing their stories, the researchers intended to uncover how the participants dealt with LA promotion in the classes over time. In other words, the participants' stories were "narratives of explanation" (Polkinghorne, 1988). The researchers tried to make it clear how each event was significant to each participant by drawing on their past events and putting them together into a whole account.

As Ary et.al (2010, p. 362) pointed out, "researchers use factor analysis to determine the characteristics or underlying structure of a measuring instrument such as a measure of intelligence, personality, or attitudes." Therefore, following these phases of data analysis came the analysis of the questionnaire data through factor analysis.

Finally, the content of the second set of interviews was thematically analyzed to dwell further into the issue at hand and help come up with any further modifications in the conclusions, i.e. to see whether they were confirming, contradicting or adding to the existing themes developed after analyzing the first round of interviews.

Results and Discussions

The first section of the questionnaire as well as the first two items of the interviews were to yield an answer to the first research questions, i.e. a definition of LA. When the interviews were held and the questionnaire was administered, results indicate that the respondents were rather widely dispersed with their definitions of the LA. That is, many of the participants held the misconceptions that LA means learning in the absence of the teacher or that it was a teaching methodology. Little (1991) addressed this misconception, explaining that autonomy is not synonymous with self-instruction nor is it a teaching methodology. That is, it does not entail an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher nor is it a method of teaching; quite conversely, LA development depends crucially on the initiatives the teacher implements.

In other words, the majority of the informants found LA promotion to be desirable yet not feasible. They seemed not to consider their learners as legitimate decision-makers. And finally, they may not actually have taught the way they said they had done. These might be

traced back to their lack of knowledge of the concept and its implementation, which is what Kumaravadivelu (2012) refers to as professional knowledge. They seemed to feel more comfortable with how they had once been taught and tried not to take risks trying new approaches out. However much provisional these answers might be, there seems to be some truth value to them. By no means does this deny the need for further research to tap further into any of the above-mentioned possibilities.

The second research question guiding the current research was the possible challenges the participants faced in helping their learners become autonomous. In other words, teachers' conceptions about constraints they faced when fostering LA in their teaching contexts were examined in the second research question. Analyzing the responses across the six items of the questionnaire, which were set up to field the second question, one can see some variability. That is, approximately 61.2% of teachers agreed (52% agreed & 9.2% strongly agreed) that autonomy is only achieved by certain learners, which may indicate teachers' lack of understanding of the construct of LA. This was largely substantiated by the results of the narratives and interviews. Interestingly this result is broadly consistent with the overall result on the next section of the questionnaire, i.e. the section tapping into the teachers' attitudes toward their students' abilities in learning autonomously where almost 63% of the respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that their students had the ability to act autonomously. (27.35% strongly disagreed & 35.58% disagreed). Teachers' responses across the remaining five items of the subscale fell within a range of 44.1% to 76.3% agreement with the statements. Specifically, approximately 44% of teachers agreed (35.7% agreed & 8.4% strongly agreed) that the teachers' low level of knowledge about LA was a constraint to fostering LA; approximately 60% (43.9% agreed & 16.6% strongly agreed) believed that low level of technology application hinders fostering LA; 66% (49.9% agreed & 16.6% strongly agreed) thought that the centralized educational governmental policy was the main hindrance to fostering LA in Iran; a sizeable 75.9% (64.3% agreed & 11.6% strongly agreed) indicated that they believed poor access to references on how

to foster autonomy was a constraint; and finally an overwhelming 76.3% agreed (57.8% agreed & 18.5% strongly agreed) that classroom limitations are barriers to the development of LA in Iran (see Table 3)

Table 3.

The EFL participants' beliefs about constraints to LA promotion in frequencies and percentages

Section 4: What constraints have you faced when fostering LA in your educational context?	constraints			
	Strongly disagree	disagree	agree	Strongly agree
1. Poor access to references on how to foster autonomy	92 15.7 %	49 8.4 %	376 64.3 %	68 11.6 %
2. Learner autonomy is only achieved by certain learners.	48 8.2 %	179 30.6 %	304 52.0 %	54 9.2 %
3. Low level of technology application hinders fostering LA	104 17.8 %	127 21.7 %	257 43.9 %	97 16.6 %
4. Classroom limitations are barriers to the development of LA in Iran.	26 4.4 %	113 19.3 %	338 57.8 %	108 18.5 %
5. Governmental educational policy is the main constraint of fostering LA in Iran	51 8.7 %	145 24.8 %	292 49.9 %	97 16.6 %
6. The teachers' low level of knowledge about LA is a constraint to fostering LA.	59 10.1 %	268 45.8 %	209 35.7 %	49 8.4 %
7. Overall attitudes toward constraints	10.81 35.91 %	25.1 64.08 %	50.6 negative	13.48 positive

Of particular interest in this third subscale of the survey are the results that a substantial proportion of respondents, i.e. about 61.2% (52% agreed and 9.2% strongly agreed, see Table 4.1.), indicated that they believed only certain learners were able to achieve LA. However, they did not find their low level of knowledge about LA as a constraint to fostering LA, i.e.

55.9% (see Table 3) had a negative view whereas 44.1 had acknowledged their lack of knowledge of LA development. It is interesting that as previously mentioned, the results of the interview and narrative analyses indicated a degree of uncertainty and conflict among the respondents over what was required of them to help develop more autonomous learners, what their roles as teachers should be and finally what abilities they contend their students had with regard to LA promotion.

This is in line with what Nguyen, Tangen, and Beutel (2014, p. 208) found in the Vietnamese context. That is, their study revealed that “there was a lack of understanding by the participants about the concept of LA, which may have been due in part to the complexities of the construct”. In the current study, the participants did not have a clear idea of the concept of the LA. This calls for action on the part of both policy makers and teacher educators to help teachers improve their understanding of the concept by running in-service developmental programs or courses. This is understandable as these participants appear to act on their personal knowledge when approaching the new concept of LA. To borrow Kumaravadivelu’s (2012) term, policy makers and teacher educators need to work on the professional knowledge of the teachers. Now that the first two research questions are analyzed and discussed, it is an opportune time to see how all those factors weigh in the Iranian context; hence, the third research question.

By posing the third research question, the researchers tried to understand how various factors contributing to LA are weighted in the Iranian context. However, it seems that adding up the data collected by various sections of the questionnaire and putting it under one single title is impossible because a cumulative score would not be meaningful. To put it another way, when high LA is sought, one might expect both highly positive and highly negative results across the sections, e.g., positive beliefs about students’ desirability and negative beliefs about learner abilities can counterbalance the ratings, making the adding up virtually redundant. Moreover, since the respondents were asked to choose one cell for each definition provided, i.e. to choose more than one item, in this section of the questionnaire, the mere comparison of

percentages would be misleading. Thus, the researchers tried to run a number of factor analyses to see if there were any underlying factors explaining the the informants' views toward LA.

The KMO and Bartlett's Test results indicated that KMO measure was above 0.6, i.e. 0.762, 0.807, .0710, 0.822, and 0.601 for the definition, desirability, feasibility, constraints and abilities sections of the questionnaire, respectively, and that the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, i.e. $p=.00$ for all sections of the questionnaire. These two values indicated that there were some significant factors to be extracted from the data for those sections which in turn legitimated running factor analysis as a data analysis method.

Before presenting the output of the factor analysis, it is worth mentioning that in order to develop the model, a set of systematic and research-based steps were taken. Having reviewed the literature, the researchers pre-specified a number of components, encapsulating LA. So as to see to the credibility, transferability, trustworthiness, confirmability of these components, two important steps were taken, i.e. consulting some experts who have internationally published on LA and reviewing the literature. The correspondences with the experts and the literature review pivoted on the components of LA. Accordingly, a tentative list of components was formed based on these suggestions. As discussed previously, the list was further investigated through some interviews whose results were made into a questionnaire with five major sections: definition of autonomy, the desirability and feasibility of LA, the constraints on LA promotion, and the learners' abilities in developing LA.

Based on the results of all the factor analyses, five major sections were identified: definition of LA, limitations to LA promotion, students' abilities in LA development, LA promotion desirability and feasibility. In order to test the model, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was run, whose results showed Goodness of Fit (GFI) = 0.961 and RMSEA= 0.00 which were both acceptable.

As for the components, of the possible definitions and misconceptions that were extracted from the literature, the interviews, and the narratives, the participants found that LA is a capacity, which makes up the first cell of the model.

Analysis of the constraining factors indicated that LA was only achieved by certain students. It is partly driven by their definition of the concept. That is why when they were invited to comment on their students' abilities in different areas of LA development, the teachers maintained that their students were able to evaluate the course, decide the learning objectives and evaluate their learning.

Interestingly enough, these were further probed into rather indirectly, when the teachers were asked about the desirability and feasibility of student participation in certain decision-making acts. They checked "deciding the teaching methods used" and "the how of assessment" as most desirable and "deciding the topics discussed" and "the assessment methods used" as the most feasible aspects of LA promotion in their classes. All these components are framed into the provisional model for LA promotion in Iran. Figure 2 depicts them:



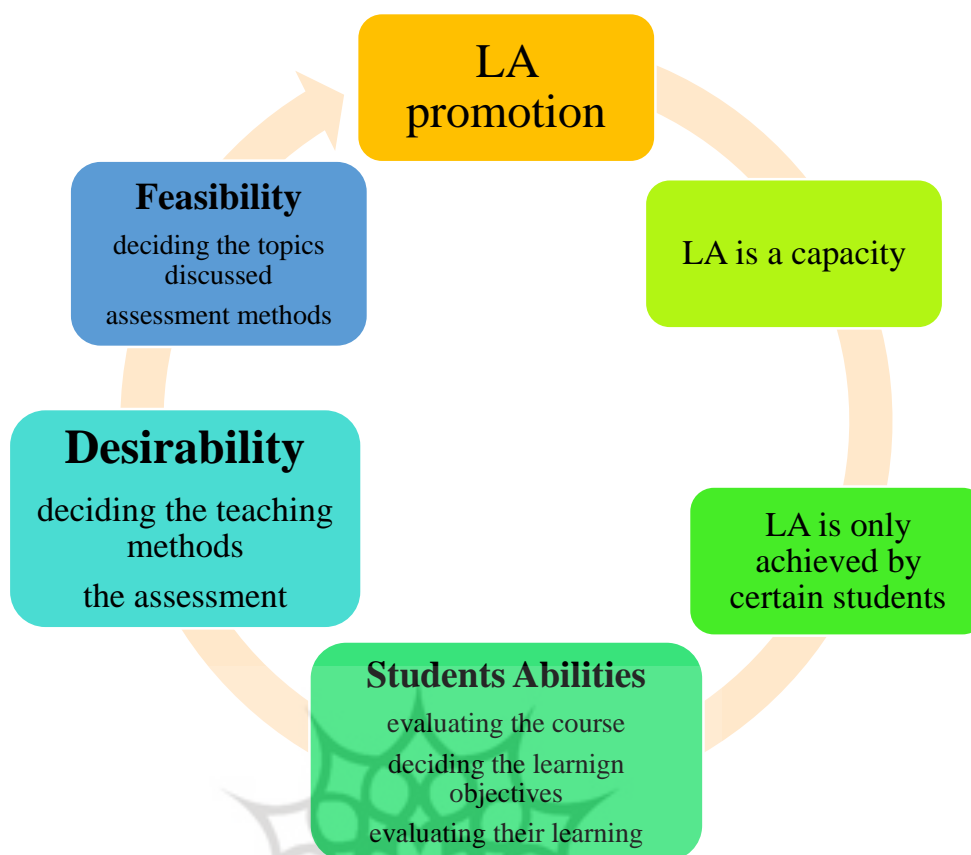


Figure 2. The tentative globalized Learner Autonomy model

Finally, posing the last research question, the researchers tried to find an answer to how the beliefs indicated in the previous sections may be facilitative or debilitating to the development of LA. As discussed previously, so as to successfully foster LA, Iranian teachers should be made conscious of their roles and responsibilities and the fact that they need to move from a transition view of education to a transformationist's perspective. With this in mind, it becomes imperative that teachers be keen on changing themselves, and start to negotiate the syllabus with their students. That is, for such a change to come about, teachers need to involve the learner in the selection, modification, and adaptation of both the content and process of the learning material, which can be realized by the employment of

subjective needs assessment instruments such as the one developed by Nunan (1997).

Additionally, the data from the narratives, the interviews, as well as the questionnaire clearly indicated that teachers did not demonstrate a clear understanding of LA so did not take it to be a significant factor in their teaching practices. This result concurs with what was found by several studies (e.g. Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Mansour, 2013; Nguyen, et al., 2014; Zheng, 2013). For example, in the narrative analysis done with the data collected from the two informants, it can readily be deduced that they believed LA and self-instruction or self-study were synonymous. Consequently, they mentioned that in their practices, they did not need to promote LA since, to them, it was their students who were responsible for developing their own learning out of class. They also stated that they could only provide the students with self-study materials. One of the informants indicated that to foster LA in her context, the students should be provided with resources for self-study; however, it is interesting that despite describing this solution, she abdicated any responsibility and did not attempt at all to pursue this mode of student learning but quite conversely maintained that it must come from the education office officials, not her.

In a nutshell, the results of this study showed that teachers' actual teaching practices were primarily traditional, teacher-centered teaching with little, if any, inclusion of LA. It was found that teachers did not foster LA in their classes partly due to their lack of understanding about LA and partly due to the very powerful impact of the traditional teaching environment on them (Afkhami & Davari-Ardakani, 2006). It was also found out that the participants' views were in line with their actual teaching practices. That is, they clearly showed a lack of an informed understanding of the term LA, hence, their subsequent teaching practices lacked any systematic LA promotion. It is, therefore, important to promote more understanding of how to incorporate new ideas such as LA in Iranian teacher training courses so that they can then be utilized effectively in the classroom.

This study, also, indicated that the participants were fairly comfortable with LA promotion and had an above average level of interest in it. This is an important finding because it provides a foundation from which LA promotion implementation can move forward. Had the results shown that the participants carried with them a negative or lethargic attitude toward LA promotion and were not willing to help their learners become autonomous life-long learners, it would have been much more difficult to promote the growth of LA with these participants.

In conclusion, the current research has provided a more in-depth examination of EFL teachers' conceptions of LA whose results yielded a model. Even though there might be both perceived and genuine obstacles that preclude teachers from employing or implementing LA in their classes, it can be concluded that there is still some hope that the teachers will, with support, be able to do as such. The current study found it imperative for education policy makers to foreground the importance of LA, and that it should be clearly outlined in the Iranian education. Furthermore, these policies should be formally introduced in order that teachers can appreciate them and their benefits. Finally, in order to help teachers, the government needs to not only provide teacher training through workshops and seminars on how to foster LA but also provide teachers with a bank or pool of LA development and promotion activities. This may promote LA indirectly but it for sure encourages teachers to develop materials to contribute to the bank, enriching it by sharing their own activities, tasks, and experiences.

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