

Learner Autonomy: English Language Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has been a key theme in the field of foreign language learning for over 30 years. Only limited space in the extensive literature available, though, has been awarded to the study of what learner autonomy means to teachers and this project addressed this gap. The beliefs and reported practices regarding learner autonomy of 61 teachers of English at a large university language centre in Oman were studied via questionnaires and interviews. The findings highlighted a range of ways in which teachers conceptualised learner autonomy, though it was commonly seen in terms of strategies for independent and individual learning. The study also shed light on both teachers' positive theoretical dispositions to learner autonomy as well as their less optimistic views about the feasibility of promoting it in practice. Teachers' views on the factors that hinder the development of learner autonomy were also explored and most salient among these were what the teachers saw as adverse learner attributes such as a lack of motivation and limited experience of independent learning. Institutional factors such as a fixed curriculum were also seen to limit learner autonomy. In addition to this empirical work, this project involved professional development workshops on learner autonomy for the participating teachers; these workshops were informed by the empirical phase of the project and we believe that this model of linking research and in-service teacher education can be effective in supporting institutional development in relation to a wide range of issues in foreign language learning.

1

Introduction

Learner autonomy has been a major area of interest in foreign language (FL) teaching for some 30 years. Much has been written about what learner autonomy is, the rationale for promoting it, and its implications for teaching and learning. In terms of its rationale (see, for example, Camilleri Grima, 2007; Cotterall, 1995; Palfreyman, 2003) claims have been made that it improves the quality of language learning, promotes democratic societies, prepares individuals for life-long learning, that it is a human right, and that it allows learners to make best use of learning opportunities in and out of the classroom. Teachers' voices have, however, been largely absent from such analyses, and little is actually known about what learner autonomy means to language teachers. This is a significant gap given the influence that teachers' beliefs have on how they teach, and, of particular interest here, on whether and how they seek to promote learner autonomy. This study addressed this gap by examining what 'learner autonomy' means to language teachers in a large university English language centre in Oman. Additionally, these insights into teachers' beliefs were used to design and deliver teacher professional development workshops about learner autonomy.

2

Theoretical background

Learner Autonomy

A large literature on autonomy in language learning now exists, with Holec (1981) commonly cited as a seminal contribution to the field. Benson (2011) provides a comprehensive analysis of key issues in learner autonomy, while there have also been a number of edited collections dedicated to the topic (Barfield & Brown, 2007; Benson, 2007b; Benson & Voller, 1997; Lamb & Reinders, 2008; Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2003; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Pemberton, Li, Or, & Pierson, 1996; Pemberton, Toogood, & Barfield, 2009; Sinclair, McGrath, & Lamb, 2000; Vieira, 2009). Our analysis of this work highlights a number of key and often interlinked themes:

- The nature of learner autonomy – how to define it and what it involves
- The rationale for promoting learner autonomy in FL learning
- The role of the teacher in learner autonomy
- Institutional and individual constraints on learner autonomy
- The meanings of learner autonomy in diverse cultural contexts
- Individualistic vs. social perspectives on learner autonomy
- The kinds of learning opportunities that foster learner autonomy.

It is not our intention here to enter into a detailed theoretical discussion of these issues. However, a broader commentary will suffice to illustrate the complexity which characterises discussions of learner autonomy and the implications this has for teachers' own understandings of this concept. To start with definitional matters, Holec's (1981: 3) early and still influential definition of learner autonomy was 'the ability to take charge of one's learning ... to have,

and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning' and the specific decisions he listed were:

- determining the objectives
- defining the contents and progressions
- selecting methods and techniques to be used
- monitoring the procedure of acquisition
- evaluating what has been acquired.

As Benson (2006) notes, variants on this definition appear in the literature, with 'ability' sometimes replaced with 'capacity' (for example, in Little, 1991) and 'take responsibility for' or 'take control of' substituting for 'take charge of'. Some definitions (e.g. Dam, 1995) also include the notion of 'willingness' to stress the point that irrespective of their capacity, learners will not develop autonomy unless they are willing to take responsibility for their learning. These broad understandings of what learner autonomy is, then, seem to be well-established in the literature (but see also Benson, 1996 for an analysis of the complexities involved in defining what learner autonomy means); additionally, following Little (1991) some accounts of learner autonomy start by defining what it is *not*; Esch (1998: 37), for example, states that

it is not self-instruction/learning without a teacher;... it does not mean that intervention or initiative on the part of a teacher is banned; ... it is not something teachers do to learners; i.e. a new methodology; ... it is not a single easily identifiable behaviour; ... it is not a steady state achieved by learners once and for all.

Any consensus in the literature about what learner autonomy is or is not, however, does not imply that teachers will necessarily hold analogous understandings of the concept; in fact, given the limited knowledge we have of such understandings, we find questionable some of the pronouncements in the literature about the existence of generally accepted views about learner autonomy. Holec (2008: 3), for example, suggests that the following list of issues in learner autonomy have been ‘provisionally settled’:

does self-direction simply mean that the learner will do here what the teacher does in traditional other-directed learning environments? What new roles for teachers are defined in the approach? What should materials suitable for self-directed learning look like? How can learners be adequately trained to achieve learning competence? How can teachers be trained to adequately play their roles? What are the defining features of self-evaluation? What are the appropriate representations on language and language learning that both learners and teachers should base their actions on?

Sinclair (2000) similarly suggests 13 aspects of learner autonomy which ‘appear to have been recognised and broadly accepted by the language teaching profession’ (see Table 1).

| | |
|-----|--|
| 1. | Autonomy is a construct of capacity |
| 2. | Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning |
| 3. | The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate |
| 4. | Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal |
| 5. | There are degrees of autonomy |
| 6. | The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable |
| 7. | Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent |
| 8. | Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process – i.e. conscious reflection and decision-making |
| 9. | Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies |
| 10. | Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom |
| 11. | Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension |
| 12. | The promotion of autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension |
| 13. | Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures |

Table 1: Defining learning autonomy (Sinclair, 2000)

We would agree, to qualify the above claims about consensus, that such understandings are generally accepted by academics and researchers working in the field of learner autonomy; the extent to which teachers also embrace such positions remains, however, unknown; there is actually some evidence (albeit limited) that teachers may hold positions about learner autonomy which are at odds with those listed above. Benson (2009), for example, notes that misconceptions identified by Little (1991) persist, especially that autonomy is synonymous with self-instruction and that any intervention on the part of the teacher is detrimental to autonomy (see also the conclusions of Martinez, 2008, which we discuss below).

Palfreyman (2003) does acknowledge the gap that may exist between theoretical discussions of learner autonomy and teachers’ own understandings of the concept and makes the point with specific reference to the manner in which learner autonomy has been conceptualised from technical, psychological, and political perspectives (see Benson, 1997) and, additionally, from a sociocultural perspective (Oxford, 2003). Each of these perspectives is seen to be underpinned by different theoretical assumptions; for example, while a technical perspective focuses on the physical settings of learning (often outside formal educational contexts), a psychological orientation is concerned with the mental attributes that permit autonomy; and while a political (or critical) perspective focuses on issues of power and control, a sociocultural perspective has a central interest in the roles of interaction and social participation in the development of learner autonomy. Palfreyman (2003: 4) notes that ‘while it is useful to distinguish the different perspectives mentioned above ... in real educational settings such perspectives are not black-and-white alternatives’.

One key argument for us here, then, is that although there has been substantial theoretical discussion of learner autonomy in the field of FL learning, and even though this has generated some broadly accepted understandings of this concept, what learner autonomy means to teachers remains largely unstudied. This, of course, is not to suggest that the volume of existing literature available did not contribute to this project. It played a central role in allowing us to define key issues in the field of learner autonomy and in suggesting topics that we could explore from teachers’ perspectives.

Teachers' Beliefs

The second strand of our theoretical framework draws on research in the field of language teacher cognition, which is defined as the study of what teachers think, know and believe (Borg, 2006). In her review of trends in language teacher education, Johnson (2006) described teacher cognition as the area of research which has made the most significant contribution in the last 40 years to our understandings of teachers and teaching. It has been a very productive field of research in language teaching since the mid-1990s and this work has established a number of insights about the nature of teachers' beliefs and their role in language teaching and teacher learning which are now widely accepted (for a summary of these insights, see 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 and manner in which learner autonomy is promoted in language learning classrooms will be influenced by teachers' beliefs about what autonomy actually is, its desirability and feasibility. Second, teacher education is more likely to have an impact on teachers' practices when it is based on an understanding of the beliefs teachers hold (Borg, 2011). Understanding teachers' beliefs about autonomy is thus an essential element in the design of professional development activities aimed at promoting learner autonomy (one goal of this project, as we describe later, was to design such activities).

Only a few studies addressing language teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy were available when we embarked on this study and we will comment on each of them in turn. Camilleri (1999) presents questionnaire data collected from 328 teachers in six European contexts (Malta, The Netherlands, Belorussia, Poland, Estonia and Slovenia). The instrument used consisted of 13 items each asking about the extent to which learners, according to the teachers, should be involved in decisions about a range of learning activities, such as establishing the objectives of a course or selecting course content. Although this project was supported by the European Centre for Modern Languages, it is unclear what proportion of the participating teachers actually taught languages (some of the Netherlands sample, for example, taught Economics). In terms of the findings, teachers were found to be positive about involving learners in a range of activities, such as deciding on the position of desks, periodically assessing themselves and working out learning procedures. In contrast, teachers were not positive about learner involvement in the selection of textbooks and deciding on the time and place

of lessons. The latter findings are hardly surprising given that many respondents worked in state schools. Camilleri Grima (2007) replicated this study with a group of 48 respondents made up of student teachers and practising teachers of modern languages in Malta. She compared her results to the Malta cohort in the original study and found much similarity both in terms of the positive overall views expressed by teachers as well as in the specific aspects of autonomy they were more and less supportive of. The more recent group of teachers, though, were seen to be more positive than those in the earlier study towards particular aspects of autonomy, such as learners setting their own short-term objectives, their involvement in the selection of materials, and self-assessment.

The instrument from the above studies was used once again by Balçikanlı (2010) to examine the views about learner autonomy of 112 student teachers of English in Turkey. Additionally, 20 participants were interviewed in focus groups of four teachers each. The results suggested that the student teachers were positively disposed towards learner autonomy – i.e. they were positive about involving students in decisions about a wide range of classroom activities, though, again, they were less positive about involving students in decisions about when and where lessons should be held. Rather uncritically perhaps, given the limited teaching experience the respondents had and the typically formal nature of state sector schooling in Turkey, the article reports that 'these student teachers felt very comfortable with asking students to make such decisions' (p.98). More realistically, though, the study does conclude by asking about the extent to which respondents' positive theoretical beliefs about promoting learner autonomy would actually translate into classroom practices. This observation reminds us that in using self-report strategies such as questionnaires and interviews to study teachers' beliefs we must always be mindful of the potential gap between beliefs elicited theoretically and teachers' actual classroom practices.

Al-Shaqsi (2009) was another survey of teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. This was conducted with 120 teachers of English in state schools in Oman. A questionnaire was devised specifically for this study and it asked respondents about (a) the characteristics of autonomous learners (b) their learners' ability to carry out a number of tasks (each of which was assumed to be an indicator of learner autonomy – e.g. deciding when to use a dictionary or identifying their own weaknesses) and (c) how learner autonomy might be promoted. The three characteristics of autonomous learners most often identified by teachers were that they can use computers to find information, use a dictionary and ask the teacher to

explain when they do not understand. The teachers in this study also assessed their learners positively on all of the indicators of learner autonomy they were presented with, with the three most highly rated being asking the teacher to explain when something is not clear, giving their point of view on topics in the classroom and using the dictionary well. Finally, teachers made several suggestions for promoting learner autonomy; what was interesting about these is that in several cases the connection between the pedagogical activity being proposed and learner autonomy was not evident; for example, teachers suggested that they could use different types of quizzes and challenging tasks, increase learner talking time or reward learners for good performance. Interviews would have been useful in this study to explore the connections that teachers felt there were between such activities and the development of learner autonomy.

The final study we discuss here is Martinez (2008), who examined, using a predominantly qualitative methodology, the subjective theories about learner autonomy of 16 student teachers of French, Italian and Spanish. These students were studying at a university in Germany and were taking a 32-hour course about learner autonomy at the time of the study. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and observations during the course; copies of the instruments were, though, not included with the paper and it was not possible therefore to critique or draw on these in our study. Results showed that the student teachers had positive attitudes towards learner autonomy and that these were informed largely by their own experiences as language learners. The conceptions of autonomy held by the student teachers generally reflected the view that (a) it is a new and supposedly better teaching and learning methodology; (b) it is equated with individualisation and differentiation; (c) it is an absolute and idealistic concept; (d) it is associated with learning without a teacher. Such perspectives do not align with those currently promoted in the field of language teaching (and actually reflect several of the claims Esch, 1998, above, made about what learner autonomy is not).

Methodologically, none of the studies of teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy reviewed here provided any firm direction for this project. The sole qualitative study generated interesting findings but did not publish the instruments used. The remaining four studies were based on questionnaires which were rather limited, methodologically; that used in three of the studies seemed particularly prone to generating socially desirable responses rather than insights which reflected teachers' classroom practices (and it did not actually ask any questions about what

teachers do). For the purposes of our study, therefore, although we consulted the instruments available, a new questionnaire was developed. Additional sources, such as Benson (2007a), entitled 'Teachers' and learners' perspectives on autonomy' and a collection called 'Learner autonomy: Teacher and learner perspectives' (Benson, 2007b) were also initially consulted but were found to be largely lacking in empirical data about what learner autonomy means to teachers.

To conclude this discussion of the theoretical background to this study, then, the points we want to emphasise are that:

1. Learner autonomy is established as a central concept in the field of FL learning.
2. There is a large literature on learner autonomy which, though, awards limited attention to FL teachers' beliefs about this concept.
3. Understanding such beliefs is central to the process of understanding and promoting changes in the extent to which teachers' promote learner autonomy in their work.

It is also worth noting here that since we conducted this study some additional literature on teachers' perspectives on learner autonomy or facets of it has appeared. Bullock (2011) is a small-scale study of English language teachers' beliefs about learner self-assessment which highlights a gap between teachers' positive theoretical beliefs about this notion and their beliefs in its practicality. Yoshiyuki (2011) compares English language teachers' (positive) theoretical views about the value of learner autonomy with their (less positive) reported classroom practices (and finds a substantial gap between the two). Both these studies, then, add to existing concerns in the literature that learner autonomy is a notion around which theoretical ideals and pedagogical realities may not always concur. A third recent paper here is Reinders & Lazarou (2011), which examined, via interviews, the beliefs about autonomy of teachers working in 46 self-access centres in five countries. We return to this study later when we summarise the findings of our project. These recent studies are encouraging in that they suggest a recognition of the point we made above regarding the need for more empirical attention to what learner autonomy actually means to teachers. Finally, a recent special issue of *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* (Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2011) was also dedicated to learner autonomy, and although the papers are predominantly learner-oriented in their focus, there are also some interesting qualitative insights into the work of teachers seeking to promote learner autonomy (e.g. Burkert, 2011; Kuchah & Smith, 2011).

3

Context for the study

In addition to the theoretical motivation for the study discussed above, this project was also driven by a concrete practical need – i.e. a desire, in the institution where this project was conducted, to promote learner autonomy more consistently. The institution involved here was the Language Centre (LC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman. This centre employs 200 teachers of over 25 nationalities who teach English to around 3,500 Omani students preparing for undergraduate study at the university.

In common with similar university-based language centres around the world, the LC at SQU offers both foundation pre-sessional general English language courses as well as post-foundation EAP courses. The foundation courses follow a skills-based curriculum covering the four language skills together with study and research skills. These courses are taught in six levels ranging from beginner to upper intermediate. Each level lasts eight weeks and (at the time of the study) consisted of 20 weekly contact hours. Assessment involves a range of formative and summative measures. The post-foundation courses are tailor-made based on the requirements of each college in the university – e.g. English for commerce.

One of the goals of the LC is to support the development of autonomy in its learners and a curriculum document used in the LC states that many ‘students come to the university with limited study skills, and with an over-dependence on the teacher for their learning. We therefore need to equip students with the skills and techniques which will enable them to develop more independence and become more effective learners’ (English Foundation Programme Document 2010-11, p4). Activities for promoting learner autonomy, such as independent study projects and portfolios, are built into LC courses. However, there was a concern, among both the management and the teachers, that existing strategies for promoting learner autonomy were not achieving the desired results. This provided the stimulus for our project.

4

Methodology

Research Questions

This project addressed the following questions:

1. What does 'learner autonomy' mean to English language teachers at the LC?
2. To what extent, according to the teachers, does learner autonomy contribute to L2 learning?
3. How desirable and feasible do teachers feel it is to promote learner autonomy?
4. To what extent do teachers feel their learners are autonomous?
5. To what extent do teachers say they actually promote learner autonomy?
6. What challenges do teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?

Additionally, it was our goal here to use the insights obtained through systematically studying these issues as the basis of a series of professional development workshops for the LC teachers. We discuss this latter component of the project later in this report.

Two strategies for data collection were used – a questionnaire and interviewing.

The Questionnaire

As noted earlier, our review of existing studies of teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy did not point to the existence of a robust instrument which we could adopt for this study. We therefore developed our own instrument. Questionnaires are, mistakenly, often seen to be an easy option for collecting data in research with teachers. It is true that they offer several advantages compared to, for example, interviews: questionnaires can be administered relatively economically, can reach a large number of participants in geographically diverse areas and can be analysed quickly (see Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010 for a discussion of these and other benefits of questionnaires). Such benefits, though, are pointless if the questionnaire is not well-designed. We thus invested a significant amount of time (over two months) at the start of the project on developing the questionnaire and throughout this process we were guided by a number of principles. In terms of content,

we needed to ask questions relevant to our research questions; technically, it was essential for items to be well-written (avoiding many of the design flaws noted, for example, in Brown & Rodgers, 2002); and in terms of the user experience, we wanted the instrument to be relevant, interesting, professional-looking and easy to complete. The final version of our instrument is in Appendix 1 and below we explain the stages we went through in developing it.

a. Reviewing the literature

We engaged with the literature on learner autonomy in FL learning in order to identify the kinds of themes which characterised debates in this field (we listed some of these earlier). As a result of this process we started to draw up lists of topics that our questionnaire might address and to organise these under headings. One immediate challenge that emerged here was that the list of potential issues that could be covered was very long; it was clear from the outset, then, that we would need to be selective about questionnaire content.

b. Drafting questionnaire items

In order to explore teachers' beliefs about what learner autonomy entails, we wanted to include questionnaire items which addressed the different perspectives on autonomy highlighted in the literature. One set of distinctions that we worked with was that related to technical, psychological, sociocultural and political views of learner autonomy that we noted earlier. In addition, we also drafted items which addressed various other debates in relation to learner autonomy, such as the following:

- Institutional and individual constraints on learner autonomy.
- The role of the teacher in learner autonomy.
- The relevance of learner autonomy to diverse cultural contexts.
- The extent to which autonomy is influenced by age and FL proficiency of the learner.
- The implications of learner autonomy for teaching methodology.
- Individualistic vs. social perspectives on learner autonomy.

- The contribution of learner autonomy to effective language learning.
- The extent to which learner autonomy is an innovative trend.
- Learner autonomy as an innate vs. learned capacity.
- The role of strategy training in promoting learner autonomy.

These issues were included in Section 1 of the questionnaire, which, by our third draft, consisted of 50 Likert-scale items on a five-point scale of agreement. Additionally, in this draft, we included a section on the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy; teachers were asked, for example, how desirable it was to involve learners in decisions about course objectives and how feasible they thought, in their context, it was to do so. A further section in our draft asked teachers more specifically about how autonomous they felt their learners were and about the extent to which they, as teachers, promoted learner autonomy in their teaching. Spaces were included for teachers to explain their answers to these questions (e.g. to give examples of how they promoted learner autonomy).

c. Critical review

We asked an academic colleague with experience of working with questionnaires to review draft 3 of the questionnaire and their comments contributed to its continuing development. One important point they raised concerned the extent to which the 50 Likert-scale items in Section 1 of the questionnaire formed one or more scales. A scale, as defined by Bryman (2008: 698) is a 'multiple-indicator measure in which the score a person gives for each component indicator is used to provide a composite score for that person'. The question for us, then, was whether we saw the Likert-scale items as 50 individual and conceptually unrelated items or whether sub-groups of items addressed common concepts.

d. Further drafting and review

We thus returned to Section 1 of the questionnaire in order to be explicit about the concepts we were covering and the items that related to each. As part of the process, several items were rewritten and others deleted; the result, in draft 4, was a list of 54 items covering the following constructs (the numbers in brackets indicate the number of items in this draft that addressed each construct):

1. Technical perspectives on learner autonomy (5)
2. Psychological perspectives on learner autonomy (5)
3. Social perspectives on learner autonomy (7)
4. Political perspectives on learner autonomy (9)

5. The role of the teacher in learner autonomy (6)
6. The relevance of learner autonomy to diverse cultural contexts (3)
7. Age and learner autonomy (3)
8. Proficiency and learner autonomy (3)
9. The implications of learner autonomy for teaching methodology (5)
10. The relationship of learner autonomy to effective language learning (3)
11. Learner autonomy as an innate vs. learned capacity (4)
12. The extent to which learner autonomy is an innovative trend (1)

This version of the questionnaire was once again reviewed by our academic colleague, whose comments directed us to think further about the extent to which the items in some of the above groups were actually addressing the same underlying construct.

e. Piloting

Following further revisions to the instrument (by which point we had arrived at draft 7), there were 42 Likert-scale items in Section 1, addressing concepts 1-10 in the list above. Section 2 focused on teachers' views about the desirability and feasibility of various learner abilities (e.g. self-evaluation) and learner involvement in language course decisions (e.g. in setting objectives). Section 3 focused on teachers' beliefs about how autonomous their learners were and on the extent to which they promoted autonomy in their teaching. The final section asked teachers for demographic information.

At this point we were ready to pilot the questionnaire and were assisted in this process by colleagues working at a university English language centre in Turkey. Despite the different geographical setting, this institution fulfilled a purpose (as a university preparatory school) similar to that of the LC at SQU and similarly employed staff from a range of international contexts. The pilot questionnaire was completed by 18 teachers.

The analysis of these teachers' responses and suggestions led to considerable further revision of the instrument; in particular, our analysis of the ten scales described earlier showed that in several cases the items in each scale were not addressing a common underlying concept (and thus did not provide a valid measurement of this concept). The statistic that is commonly used to assess the extent to which scales display 'unidimensionality' is Cronbach's alpha and

according to Bryman & Cramer (2005), 0.8 is the alpha level which indicates a good level of conceptual relatedness among items (see also Field, 2009 for a discussion of this statistic). Thus, for example, while the three items in the pilot questionnaire on the relationship of learner-centredness to learner autonomy produced an alpha of 0.83, that for the three items related to the cultural universality of learner autonomy was only 0.40. Although we were mindful that the statistical results here would have also been influenced by both the small number of items in each scale and the small pilot sample, these results nonetheless stimulated us to engage in further revision of the Likert-scale items in Section 1 of the questionnaire.

f. Preparing the final version

The final version of Section 1 consisted of 37 Likert-scale items, covering the same ten concepts in learner autonomy addressed in the pilot study, though with several changes to the individual items. Sections 2-4 were as previously described, while Section 5 asked teachers to volunteer for the second phase of the study. Once this version was finalised, it was also converted into a web-based format, using SurveyMonkey. Before the web-based version of the questionnaire went live, it was trialled independently by each of us and revised further; an additional colleague was also asked to work through it online.

g. Administration

The population of respondents for this study consisted of all 200 teachers of English in the LC at SQU in Oman. Before being invited to complete the questionnaire, the teachers were primed – i.e. they were sent an email with information about the study and told that they would be receiving a request to complete a questionnaire. This request followed a few days later and teachers were given the option of completing either the web-based version of the questionnaire or a version in Word which they could return as an email attachment. They were asked to respond within ten days. Two days before this deadline, the response rate was 16 per cent and teachers received a second email to thank those who had responded and to remind those who had not. Two days after the deadline, the response rate was 25 per cent and a further email of this kind was sent. The questionnaire was closed a week after the original deadline, with a response rate of 33.5 per cent, which was later revised down to 30.5 per cent (i.e. 61 responses) when questionnaires which were substantially incomplete were discarded. The vast majority of respondents completed the web-based version of the questionnaire.

Interviews

Phase 2 of the study consisted of follow-up interviews with teachers who had completed the questionnaire and volunteered to speak to us. The purpose of the

interviews was to explore in more detail teachers' responses to the questionnaire. Teachers who agreed to do an interview wrote their names at the bottom of their questionnaire and we were thus able to personalise the interviews by asking teachers about their own individual questionnaire responses.

Of the 61 questionnaire respondents, 42 volunteered to do an interview. Given that we were seeking to conduct semi-structured interviews lasting around 30 minutes each, it was not feasible (given our resources) to interview all of these volunteers and we decided to speak to 20. These 20 teachers were selected using criteria from two specific questionnaire responses: (a) teachers' beliefs about how autonomous their students were and (b) teachers' years of experience in ELT. Interviewees were then chosen using stratified random sampling (see Bryman, 2008). In a stratified sample the criteria for selection are represented in the same proportions as they are in the larger group the sample comes from.

The next stage in preparing for the interviews was to develop an interview schedule. Our aim was to use teachers' individual questionnaires as prompts for the interviews, and in this sense each schedule was, as noted above, personalised. We, did, though, develop a common framework of questions which could then be tailored to each interview depending on what the teacher said in the questionnaire (i.e. whether they agreed or disagreed with a particular statement). An example of an interview schedule is included in Appendix 2.

The 20 interviews took place over a month; ten were conducted by telephone from the UK and ten face to face in Oman. All interviews were, with teachers' permission, audio recorded. We recognise the socially co-constructed nature of interviews (for a recent discussion of this issue in applied linguistics, see Mann, 2011) and acknowledge that teachers' interactions with us will have been shaped by their perceptions of our agenda in conducting the project. The positions held by the interviewers – one was the teachers' manager and the other was a UK-based academic – and the different forms of interview (face-to-face vs. telephone) will have also influenced (perhaps in distinct ways) how teachers' responded to our questions about learner autonomy.

Data Analysis

The closed questionnaire data were analysed statistically using SPSS 18. Descriptive statistics (i.e. frequency counts and percentages) were calculated for all questions. Inferential statistics were also used to examine relationships between variables and differences among them.

The open questionnaire responses and the interview data (after they had been transcribed in full) were categorised through a process of qualitative thematic analysis (see, for example, Newby, 2010). This process involves reading the data carefully, identifying key issues in them, and then organising these issues into a set of broader categories. The questions in the questionnaire and the interview schedule provided an initial structure within which specific answers could then be further categorised. For example, one of the interview questions asked teachers about their views on the contribution of learner autonomy to L2 learning. The question itself thus constituted the broad category within which answers (i.e. about the different contributions of learner autonomy) were then analysed.

Given the mixed methods nature of this study, data analysis also involved a comparison of the questionnaire and interview data; this allowed us to corroborate particular conclusions from two perspectives, to illustrate quantitative findings with qualitative examples, and to obtain a more meaningful understanding of why teachers answered particular questionnaire items in the ways they did.

Ethics

The study was approved by the first researcher's institutional ethics committee. Participants were provided with enough information to make an informed decision about whether to take part in the study, participation was voluntary, and the data collected were treated confidentially and in such a way to protect respondents' identities. The results of the research phase of the study were fed back to the participants in the form of professional development activities, thus giving them an opportunity to benefit from the project; this was a particularly positive ethical dimension of this work.

5

Results

Profile of Respondents

The respondents constituted a non-probability sample of 61 teachers of English working at the LC in SQU (30.5 per cent of the teacher population there). Ten nationalities were represented, almost 59 per cent of the respondents were female, over 81 per cent had a Master's and 8.5 per cent a Doctorate. Experience in ELT varied from four years or less to over 25 years, with 15–19 years being the largest group (25.9 per cent).

Some of the key findings from this study have been reported in Borg & Busaidi (2011) and we will elaborate on these here. In addition, descriptive statistics for the closed questionnaire items in Section 1 are included in Appendix 3. We earlier listed the six research questions for this study and we will now summarise our results in relation to each.

RQ1: What does 'learner autonomy' mean to English language teachers at the LC?

There are various ways of answering this question. One is to consider whether questionnaire responses revealed a tendency to favour any one of the four orientations to learner autonomy discussed earlier. Of course, the strength of any conclusions here depends on the extent to which the Likert-scale items representing each orientation functioned effectively as a scale. Using Cronbach's alpha, as described earlier, the results for the four scales were as follows: technical (0.57), psychological (0.63), social (0.51) and political (0.53). What these figures suggest – although they represent a marked improvement on those achieved in the pilot - is that these scales would benefit from further development (including, perhaps, increasing the number of items in each). In terms of the support expressed by the teachers for each perspective, the results are shown in Figure 1.

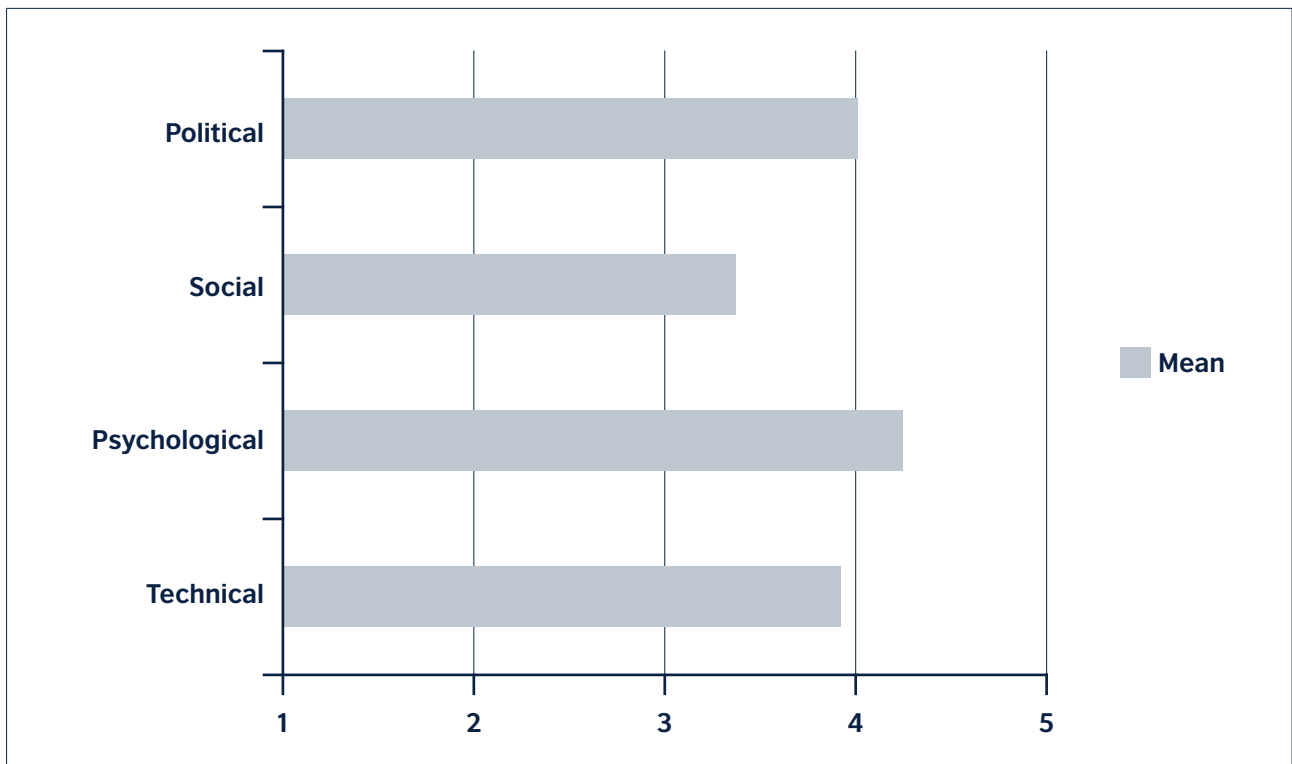


Figure 1: Mean levels of support for four orientations to learner autonomy

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 reflects strong disagreement with a position and 5 reflects strong agreement, this figure shows that, while there was support for each orientation, that most supported was the psychological orientation (with a mean of 4.2); this was represented in the questionnaire by the following statements:

- Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.
- The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.
- To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.
- Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.
- Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.

These statements focus on individual learner mental attributes. A critical look at these items suggests that those about confidence and motivation do not address the same underlying concept as the first three; in fact, if we focus on just these three, the Cronbach alpha is actually 0.81. This points to ways in which this particular scale could be improved and is an example of the kind of further review and development that each of the scales used here would benefit from.

The political orientation was the second most supported (mean = 4.2), followed by the technical (3.93) and finally the social (3.3). The relatively low mean on the social dimension of learner autonomy reflects uncertainty among the teachers here about the role that co-operation and social interaction (as opposed to individual work) play in promoting learner autonomy. This may point to an underlying individualistic view of learner autonomy (in contrast, for example, Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander, & Trebbi, 1990: 102, define learner autonomy as 'a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a social, responsible person').

One answer to our first research question, then, is that, overall, teachers' notions of learner autonomy were most strongly associated with a psychological orientation – particularly one that relates to 'learning to learn' (on the individual items, the statement 'Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy' did in fact receive the joint highest level of agreement from teachers – see Appendix 3); political notions of learner autonomy – i.e. associated with

giving learners choice in decisions about their own learning – also received considerable support (for example, 95.1 per cent agreed that autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn). We are not arguing that in agreeing or disagreeing with particular questionnaire items teachers were consciously advocating, for example, psychological or political notions of autonomy – it is very possible that teachers were in many cases unaware of the various conceptions of autonomy implied in the beliefs they were expressing. In fact, our sense from the interviews is that where teachers were advocating, for example, the idea that learners should be given the freedom to make choices about aspects of their learning, such views were not explicitly ideological and there were no references, for example, to learners' human right to autonomy or the development of democratic societies. Teachers' beliefs seemed to have a more immediate grounding in the positive impact that, for example, choice would have on learner motivation and subsequently on their learning.

Further insight into teachers' views about learner autonomy emerged from the interviews where, as Appendix 2 shows, our opening question invited teachers to elaborate on what learner autonomy meant to them. Five concepts which recurred in the teachers' answers were responsibility (six mentions), control (five), independence (five), choice (four) and freedom (four). The comments below from different teachers illustrate the prevalence of these ideas:

I believe the learner must be given a lot of freedom to develop his own style.

Learner autonomy to me means giving independence to students, to learners. Also giving chances to learners to choose the kinds of materials they want to use, the kinds of objectives they want to achieve.

... for students to be able to take responsibility for their own learning, to function independently as learners. Make their own decisions about their learning, their own choices.

... not depending exclusively on the teacher for your learning and your learning outcomes, but to take responsibility yourself and decide what it is that you need to learn.

... it's just trying to help students take charge of their own learning, it's as much as possible. Helping them being more independent and developing their own strategies.

... autonomy for me is an opportunity to work independently.

The recurrent concepts noted here are common, as noted earlier, in the literature about learner autonomy and in this sense the teachers' views were well-aligned with this literature. A bias towards individualist views of learner autonomy was again evident here, though.

RQ2: To what extent, according to the teachers, does learner autonomy contribute to L2 learning?

In the questionnaire, 93.4 per cent of the teachers agreed that learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner, while 85.2 per cent agreed that learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would. Overall, then, the teachers expressed strong positive views about the contribution of learner autonomy to language learning. In the interviews we asked the teachers to elaborate on these positive views and they suggested a number of relationships between learner autonomy and successful language learning. These are listed below with a supporting quote after each.

- Autonomous learners are more motivated:

I think it's very important and I think it has a huge effect on motivation. And, the more autonomous the learners are, the more motivated they are. And then of course that affects their ability to learn the language, to learn the language well.

- Autonomous learners are more committed:

... rather than the teacher just imposing on the students what they thought, that actually involving the students meant that they were more committed to it, that they could identify with what they were doing because they'd decided it.

- Autonomous learners are happier:

So, I think if the learner is in charge they know what they're doing and on a day-to-day basis, or task-by-task basis understand why they're doing something, why it's important to them, then they're going to be happier learners and they're going to be more motivated, and more willing to do what's necessary to reach their goals.

- Autonomous learners are more focused:

... language learners who are independent, they're the ones who are very focused

- Autonomous learners benefit from learning opportunities outside the classroom:

I know that classroom time is not enough, and if I use some additional opportunities outside the classroom, like watching TV, reading books, reading the website, and just communicating with people, just involving myself in different activities, so just working autonomously, it will have a more positive effect on me as a language learner, so definitely it will bring me to a successful career as a language learner.

- Autonomous learners take more risks:

... and they often were much more risk taking ... they would decide to do things that maybe the teacher would never have dreamed that they could do, and they would make a stab at it, maybe it wasn't perfect, but they would, it showed that in the long run they seemed to have, developed a much more sophisticated use of the language.

A number of the benefits of learner autonomy noted here have been discussed in the literature; the link between learner autonomy and motivation is one in particular that has been the focus of much discussion. Benson's (2001: 86) review of this issue concludes that 'the link between autonomy and motivation is well-established at a theoretical level', although the precise nature of this link is a focus of continuing empirical activity (see Ushioda, 2011 for a more recent discussion).

RQ3: How desirable and feasible do teachers feel it is to promote learner autonomy?

Section 3 of the questionnaire addressed two issues. The first was the desirability and feasibility, according to the teachers, of involving learners in a range of language course decisions. Figure 2 summarises the teachers' responses and shows that in all cases teachers were more positive about the desirability of student involvement than they were about its feasibility. On three of the items (objectives, assessment, and materials) these differences were statistically significant (as shown by the Wilcoxon signed ranks test¹). Student involvement in decision-making was seen to be most feasible in relation to materials, topics and activities and least feasible (and indeed not particularly desirable) in relation to choices about objectives and assessment.

¹ The Wilcoxon signed ranks test is used to compare differences on two sets of data from the same respondents. It is the non-parametric equivalent of the dependent t-test (see Field, 2009).

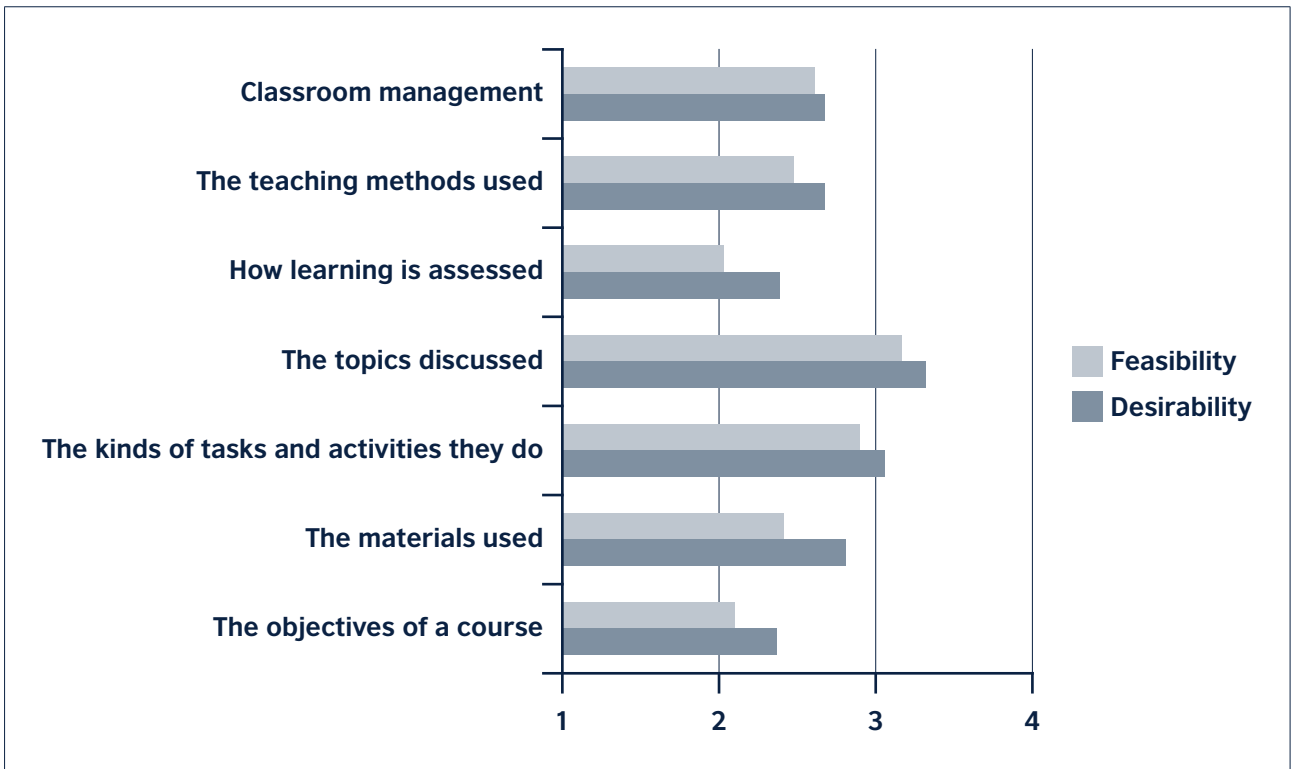


Figure 2: Desirability and feasibility of student involvement in decision-making (1=undesirable/unfeasible; 4=very desirable/feasible)

The second part of this question asked teachers how desirable and feasible they felt it was for their students to develop a range of abilities that are commonly seen as indicators of learner autonomy. Figure 3 shows the results for this comparison. Once again, desirability was consistently higher than feasibility here and in all cases the differences

between the two ratings were statistically significant. In contrast to the previous set of items, though, all those listed here were considered desirable for learners. Reasons why teachers did not feel it was feasible to develop in their learners the abilities listed in Figure 3 are discussed under RQ4 and RQ6 below.

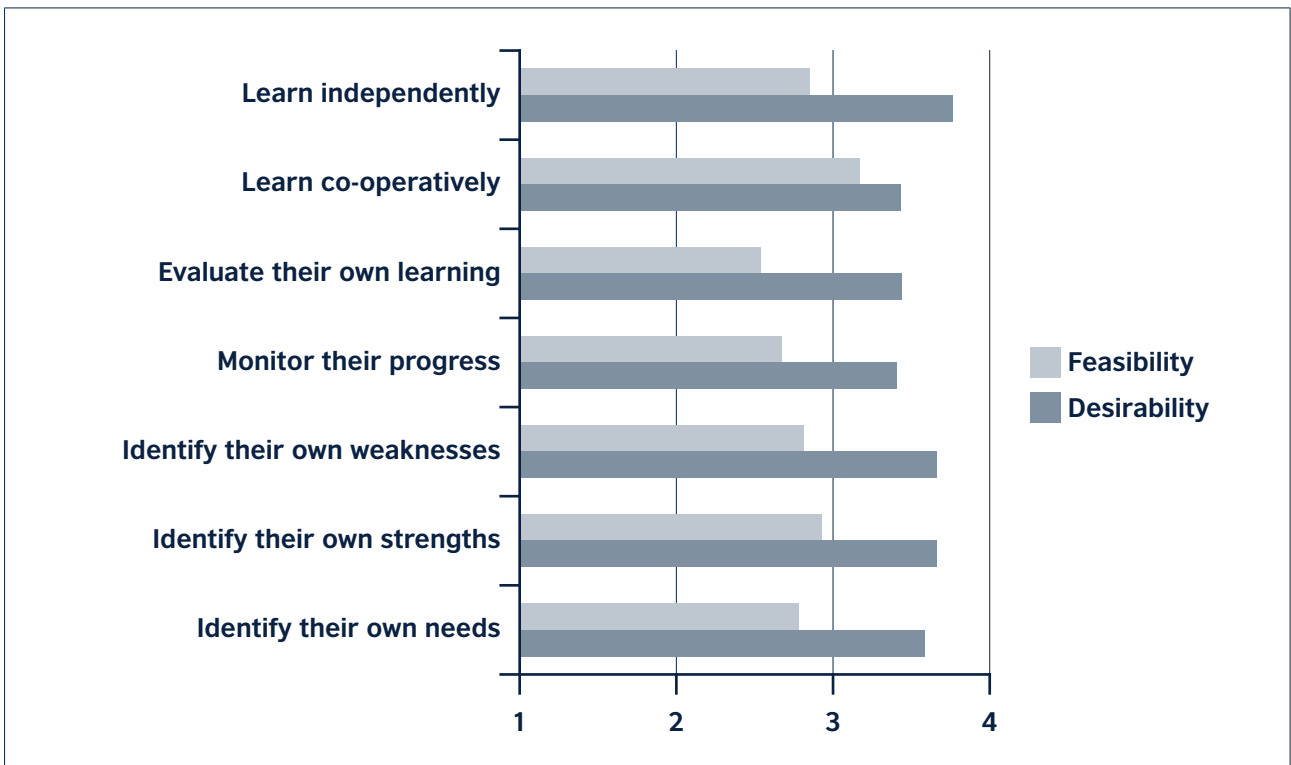


Figure 3: Desirability and feasibility of learning to learn skills in students (1=undesirable/unfeasible; 4=very desirable/feasible)

RQ4: To what extent do teachers feel their learners are autonomous?

In the questionnaire we asked teachers about the extent to which they feel their students are autonomous. We avoided a yes/no approach to this question (i.e. are your students autonomous?) given that, as Nunan (1997) argues, autonomy is not an absolute concept but, rather, can exist in different degrees. Our prompt thus asked teachers about the extent to which they felt their students had a fair level of autonomy. Also, because we were aware that the teachers taught students on different programmes at the LC, we asked them to respond to this question with reference to the programme they worked on most.

The results here were interesting: 41.7 per cent of the teachers disagreed that their learners were autonomous, 18.3 per cent were unsure, and 40 per cent agreed. Also, teachers' opinions did not correlate with the level of learners they taught. These findings suggest that the teachers had differing expectations of what autonomous learners were able to do and there was also some evidence of this in the interviews. One teacher, for example, explained that she felt her students demonstrated some autonomy because

At least, they're aware of the ideas, whether it's 'OK, I need to make my own schedule', or 'I need to plan', things like this. Or 'I need to be doing more outside of the classroom than just the required homework'. I see students that are at least aware of that, and at least they claim to be doing those things, even though maybe not all of them surely are.

In this case, the teacher felt that autonomy was manifest through the awareness students displayed of what they needed to do (even if they did not actually do it). Another teacher cited more concrete evidence of her students' autonomy:

Once you have introduced skills like skimming and scanning and getting the meanings of vocabulary and you give them certain approaches to the way you can do it, some like looking up the difficult vocabulary first, introducing them, others like just reading and guessing the vocabulary at the end. So I have given these possibilities to them and so what I do is, because different students have different ways of doing it, I would put them into groups and say, 'Ok who likes to study the vocabulary first and then read?' and, so I find that students are able to make decisions like that. It is because they have seen how best they can operate with certain abilities.

In this example, the teacher's judgement that her students had some autonomy came from their willingness and ability to make choices about how

to carry out classroom activities. The activities themselves were defined by the teacher, but the students had some say in the procedures they adopted.

One final example here of the evidence teachers cited to support the view that their students had some autonomy was the following:

I would say, with Level 5 because that's the level of class that I have experience with, students do have [autonomy], because they're doing the presentations and they're doing some of the essay writing choosing the topic. They weren't able to choose the main topic, the main structure I chose that but then they had the freedom to choose within that something that interests them and so there's some structured autonomy there. And with the Moodle [an online learning environment] it's a lot heavier than the Level 2 so there's a lot of extra stuff that if they feel they want more practice with lectures or something else then they can get that. So there are a lot of services there.

This example, like that before it, describes student autonomy which occurs within a structured environment – 'structured autonomy', as the teacher calls it. In this case, students had some say in the specific issues they write essays about even though the general theme is chosen by the teacher. Here, too, the teacher refers to opportunities for independent learning that their learners have via Moodle, and an association is implied between these opportunities and learner autonomy. It is important to remember, though, that *opportunities* for independent learning neither guarantee the development of nor constitute evidence of learner autonomy.

As noted above, though, almost 42 per cent of the teachers did not feel their learners had a fair degree of autonomy. Here are examples of how they explained their view:

I teach second and third year students who are already in college but their level of autonomy is really low. They don't like to do things on their own. They 'expect' to cover everything in class and most of them indeed struggle with tasks to be carried out in small groups, let alone homework assignments ... assigned by the teacher to be carried out by individual students! It's the learning culture the students here are used to.

Most students come to us without having sufficient background in independent learning. That's why we have to start with the very basic ideas of this notion.

Most students wait to be spoon-fed by the teacher. About 50 per cent of them don't have the incentive to develop.

SQU students still expect to ‘absorb’ a lot of language from their teacher and their teacher’s instruction. The majority do not seem to initiate new ways of improving their language skills, and most are not that motivated to really strive to engage with this language in meaningful ways. Most see it as an unfortunate requirement rather than an opportunity which will be an asset throughout their lives.

The learning outcomes which must be covered and the length of the block, especially when there are holidays and piloted tests, etc, which take time away from learning do not leave time to mentor students’ learning to be autonomous.

These comments highlight factors which teachers felt contributed to what they saw as a lack of autonomy in their learners: a lack of motivation, expectations of the roles of teachers and learners that were incongruent with learner autonomy, and prior educational experience which did not foster independence. The final comment also cited curricular constraints which meant time for fostering autonomy in learners was limited.

One of the comments above also suggested that students’ learning culture presented a challenge for developing learner autonomy. In the questionnaire we did ask teachers whether that the feasibility of autonomy was a cultural matter: almost 69 per cent of the teachers agreed that ‘Learner autonomy can be achieved by learners of all cultural backgrounds’ while over 86 per cent disagreed that ‘Learner autonomy is a concept which is not suited to non-Western learners’. Overall, then, the teachers did not believe that autonomy was only achievable by learners from particular cultural (i.e. national or ethnic) backgrounds (see Palfreyman, 2003 for a collection of papers exploring this issue). What they did often believe, though, was that the learning cultures of secondary schools in Oman did not promote learner autonomy.

RQ5: To what extent do teachers say they actually promote learner autonomy?

Teachers were also asked about the extent to which they feel they promote learner autonomy in their own work. In response, 10.2 per cent of the teachers disagreed that they promote LA with their students, 79.6 per cent felt they did and 10.2 per cent were unsure. Teachers who felt they did promote learner autonomy were also asked to give examples of the kinds of strategies they used to do so. Our analysis of these activities (for a list see the materials for Workshop 2 in Appendix 4) suggested five broad strategies through which the teachers felt they encourage autonomy. These are listed below, with an illustrative teacher quote for each:

- talking to students about autonomy and its value (‘I mainly focus on explaining and demonstrating to my students why it is important for them to be autonomous learners’).
- encouraging learners to engage in autonomous behaviours (‘Encouraging students to go the extra mile and not be afraid to make mistakes, goes a long way in making them confident to work by themselves’).
- getting learners to reflect on their learning (‘give them assignments that encourage them to reflect on their goals, needs, progress, weaknesses, values’).
- using activities in class which promote autonomy (‘I try to give my students frequent opportunities for independent (student-centred) learning in class, usually in small groups or pairs’).
- setting activities out of class which promote autonomy (‘I assign students tasks that require them to use internet sources outside the class time’).

These options were not presented by teachers as being exclusive and in several cases teachers suggested that they were seeking to promote learner autonomy using a range of strategies. Overall, both the percentage of teachers who felt they (at least to some extent) promoted learner autonomy in their work and the range of examples they gave of how they sought to do so was further evidence that (even given the limited manner in which some teachers defined learner autonomy) the teachers were positively disposed to the concept.

The small percentage of teachers who did not feel they promote learner autonomy in their teaching generally explained their position with regret and with reference to the constraints they felt that were imposed by the structured system they worked in. A typical comment here was the following:

Sadly, at the moment I feel I do not do this enough. Although I take them to the lab to introduce them to the language learning possibilities available there and actively encourage weekly discussion in the Moodle discussion forum, it is not enough. I choose their graded readers for them ... I assign tasks to complete outside the classroom ... I decide the lesson plan ... To encourage more autonomy, teachers need less pressure from pacing schedules and from testing.

RQ6: What challenges do teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?

To counterbalance the above analysis of the ways in which the teachers said they promote autonomy, we also invited them to comment on the challenges they felt they faced in seeking to do so; unsurprisingly, they identified several adverse factors, some of which have already been signalled above:

- Limited space within the curriculum
- Learners' lack of previous experience of autonomous learning
- Lack of incentive among learners
- Learner reliance on the teacher
- Limited learner contact with English outside the classroom
- Learners' focus on passing tests
- Lack of relevant resources for teachers and learners
- Lack of learner ability to exploit resources
- Limited learner proficiency in English
- Prescribed curricula and materials
- Lack of teacher autonomy
- Teachers' limited expectations of what learners can achieve.

Such factors reflect three sets of concerns related to learners, the institution, and teachers. Although the teachers felt strongly that institutional factors (e.g. the curriculum) did hinder the extent to which they could promote learner autonomy, most of the limiting factors they identified pointed (as also indicated in the discussion of RQ4 above) to what they saw as problems with learners' attitudes, abilities, knowledge and motivation. Additional examples of such teacher views are:

I can't say that the current system at the LC gives students chances of self-regulated or self-directed learning nor that students have necessary skills for this.

Students are strongly advised to follow up on grammar points on their own, however most never do this. With regards to the vocabulary book, students never pick it up on their own unless the teacher discusses the words in class.

I try to promote this [autonomy] as much as I can, but the desire of students may not be there.

As noted above, some teachers suggested a connection between learners' proficiency in English and their ability to develop as autonomous learners (as one teacher explained, 'It depends on the students' proficiency level: the higher it is, the more autonomy the students' have'). Three questionnaire items addressed this issue: 82 per cent disagreed that 'It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners', 70 per cent disagreed that 'Promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners', while fewer than 58 per cent of the teachers agreed that 'The proficiency of a language learner does not affect their ability to develop autonomy' (over 26 per cent disagreed). Overall, these figures lend some weight to the view that autonomy was associated with higher levels of proficiency. Replacing 'harder' with 'easier' in the first of these three items may have provided added clarity on this issue.

6

Summary

The insights reported here into language teachers' beliefs and reported practices regarding learner autonomy are a valuable addition to the literature. As argued earlier, despite a substantial volume of research over some 30 years, research on learner autonomy has paid limited attention to the sense teachers make, theoretically and in practice, of this concept. Yet, without such insights, we lack a basis for understanding how teachers interpret the notion of learner autonomy and, where necessary, for encouraging them to make it a more central aspect of their work. Below is a summary of the salient findings to emerge here:

1. The teachers were positively disposed (as in Bullock, 2011; Camilleri, 1999; Yoshiyuki, 2011) to the notion of learner autonomy and to its benefits specifically for language learners; less evident in teachers' comments were references to the broader and longer-term advantages (e.g. in contributing positively to society) that learner autonomy has been argued to have.
2. Teachers' definitions of learner autonomy reflected those prevalent in the literature, with recurring support for concepts such as freedom, control, responsibility, choice and independence. There is some overlap here with the notions of autonomy identified by Reinders & Lazaró (2011) in their interviews specifically with teachers who worked in self-access centres, although differences in the two studies were also evident. For example, our teachers did not (unlike the self-access teachers in the above study) discuss autonomy as a process of seeking equality and respect between teachers and learners.
3. The 'learning to learn' (i.e. psychological) orientation to learner autonomy was that which received most overall support in teachers' questionnaire responses. Many of the teachers' comments on learner autonomy implied that they viewed it as a set of skills or abilities that learners need to master in order to learn independently.
4. There was a significant gap between the extent to which teachers felt it was desirable to involve learners in a range of decisions about their learning and teachers' beliefs about the feasibility of doing so, particularly in relation to objectives, assessment and materials. Such a gap between theory and practice confirms insights from other studies of FL teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy (Bullock, 2011; Reinders & Lazaró, 2011; Yoshiyuki, 2011).
5. Similarly, there was a significant gap between the extent to which teachers felt it was desirable for their learners to develop a range of abilities associated with autonomy and their beliefs about the feasibility of doing so.
6. The teachers had diverging views about the extent to which their learners were autonomous; such views were underpinned by different conceptions of what counted as evidence of autonomy in their learners. Teachers often associated autonomy with opportunities for independent learning, irrespective of whether learners engaged with these.
7. The majority of the teachers believed that they promoted learner autonomy in their teaching. Their descriptions of how they did so highlighted a range of pedagogical strategies from advocacy and awareness-raising to independent out of class language learning activities.
8. The teachers highlighted a range of factors which limited the extent to which they felt they were able to promote learner autonomy. These related to learners, the institution and teachers, though learner-related factors were those most widely cited by the teachers. Again, there are parallels here with the findings of Reinders & Lazaró (2011), where teachers felt 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 learning.

Overall, then, what emerges here is a picture of a group of well-qualified and mostly experienced English language teachers who are, in theory, positively disposed towards learner autonomy and familiar with key concepts commonly used in defining it. In relation to their working context, though, these teachers are much less positive about the extent to which autonomy can be productively promoted with their learners. Opportunities for learners to exercise their autonomy do exist, it was felt, both within and outside the institution; however, there was a general sense that the learners lacked the capacity and willingness to take advantage of these opportunities. Teachers also felt hindered by a full curriculum in which content and assessment were centrally defined. Nonetheless, the majority of the teachers felt that they did, to some extent, promote autonomy in their work. It is clear, though, the practices they adopted in doing so varied significantly as did their judgements about what constituted evidence of learner autonomy among the students they worked with.

Limitations

Before we move on to discuss the professional development phase of this project, we would like to acknowledge some of the limitations of the research reported above. We have already noted the need for further development of the scales in the questionnaire through which teachers' beliefs about different orientations to learner autonomy were assessed. We must also acknowledge, of course, the fact that we did not observe teachers' classroom practices and for this reason had to rely on their reports of whether they promoted learner autonomy and how. The response rate to the questionnaire, too, was not as high as we had hoped for, though we feel that there was little more we could have done here to secure a greater level of voluntary participation. Notwithstanding these factors, we believe that the study is methodologically sound, that the instruments we developed provide the basis for further research of this kind, and that the findings will be of general interest in the field of FL learning.

7

Professional development materials

As we explained earlier, this project was motivated by a desire within the institution studied to promote learner autonomy more effectively. In the final phase of this work, therefore, we used the results of the research as the basis of a series of professional development workshops about learner autonomy. In using local research findings in this manner, our work was underpinned by a number of principles relevant to teacher professional development and institutional change derived from the literature (e.g. Goodall, Day, Lindsay, Muijs, & Harris, 2005; Wedell, 2009) and our own experience. These principles (which we listed in Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2011) were:

1. Institutional change needs to be driven by teachers themselves.
2. The change process is likely to be more effective if it involves teachers in collaborative forms of reflection and action.
3. Collective change is facilitated when teachers have a shared understanding of the change desired (e.g. of what learner autonomy is and why it is important).
4. Lasting change in what teachers do cannot occur without attention to the beliefs teachers have in relation to the change desired.
5. For this reason, top-down directives for change (e.g. simply telling teachers how to promote learner autonomy) will have limited impact on what they do.
6. Proposed changes need to be feasible and grounded in a clear understanding of the context in which they are to occur.
7. Effective institutional change depends not just on creating initial enthusiasm but on sustaining this momentum over the longer term.

Five workshops in total were conducted², and details of them are listed in Table 2 below.

| Workshop | Topic | Goals |
|----------|--|---|
| 1. | What is learner autonomy? | To engage teachers in defining LA in ways which are contextually feasible. |
| 2. | Learner autonomy in the Language Centre | To enable teachers to learn about LA practices used by their colleagues. |
| 3. | Implementing learner autonomy | To introduce teachers to a framework for describing LA; to engage them in using it to analyse activities for promoting LA. |
| 4. | Developing a strategy for promoting learner autonomy | To discuss obstacles to LA in the LC and ways of responding to them productively; to identify strategies for sustaining the work started through these workshops. |
| 5. | Teacher research on learner autonomy | To introduce teacher research as a strategy through which teachers can explore LA in their own classrooms. |

Table 2: Focus of learner autonomy workshops

² In our earlier report of this work (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2011), four workshops were described; the fifth workshop was conducted after that paper had been written.

These workshops followed the principles listed above by giving teachers opportunities to explore their understandings of learner autonomy and, equally importantly, of how the concept might be defined in a way that was of practical use to the institution (Workshop 1). The workshops also gave teachers the chance to share ideas about how they promoted learner autonomy (Workshops 2 & 3) as well as to focus on the challenges involved and responses to them (Workshop 4). The focus of the final workshop was on how teachers might, individually or in groups, explore learner autonomy in their own classrooms through teacher research. While not devoid of theoretical input, the workshops had a primary focus on teachers' practices and beliefs in relation to learner autonomy.

The handouts used in all five workshops are enclosed in Appendix 4. One key feature of these is that data from the prior research phase of the project were used as a stimulus for the workshop activities. In this manner, a strong link was made between this prior research and professional development and we believe that this is a productive model for designing contextually-relevant in-service teacher education. Clearly, the research dimension in this model needs to be rigorous and to generate data which are credible and trustworthy, while the professional development phase is likely to be most effective when it reflects the principles we outlined above (as opposed, for example, to input sessions in which teachers are presented with the research results).

Another feature of the workshops was that ideas generated by teachers early in the sequence were incorporated into later sessions, thus creating a clear sense of direction, coherence and momentum in the work we were doing. For example, in Workshop 1 the teachers drafted definitions of learner autonomy that they felt would be workable within their centre; in Workshop 4 we fed these back to the teachers for further analysis and discussion.

Teachers' written feedback on the workshops was very positive. They appreciated the opportunity to discuss their beliefs and practices with one another and found it interesting that very different views were being expressed by colleagues in the same organisation. For example, after Workshop 1, one teacher wrote it was 'Interesting to see and hear how different we are in one place, doing the same job'.

Another reflected that 'when you discuss a problem you have a chance to see a different view'. For Workshop 2, a teacher felt that the activities 'inspired new ideas for promoting learner autonomy' and another noted that it was 'amazing to see just how many practical possibilities there are to encourage learner autonomy'. Less positively, one recurrent point teachers made in their comments was that they needed more time for further discussions of the kinds they were having in the sessions – but we would also construe that as evidence of the value the teachers felt such discussions had.

For logistical reasons, the first four workshops were conducted over a period of five days, with the final workshop some months later. The intensive phase worked well in terms of creating energy among the group, though there are also good arguments for a more staggered schedule of workshops so that teachers have opportunities to make concrete connections between the issues being discussed and their classroom practices.

The professional development phase of this project, then, was an integral part of it. It extended far beyond telling teachers about the results of the prior research phase and used these results as the basis of interactive sessions in which teachers were able to reflect, individually and collectively, on their own beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy. We acknowledge that without concrete evidence of changes in these beliefs and practices we cannot claim that the workshops had a demonstrable impact on the teachers or on their learners. However, we feel that the model we adopted here for combining research and professional development provides a strong basis for such impact. Institutions adopting such a model, we would advise, should also build in space for the kind of continuing support and review that will allow for judgements about impact to be made.

In conclusion, we thank all the teachers who took part in this project for making it a success. We trust that language teaching colleagues around the world will find this report helpful both in further research into teachers' understandings of learner autonomy and in the more practical activity of supporting teacher development for learner autonomy.

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Appendix 1 – The Questionnaire

English Language Teachers’ Beliefs about Learner Autonomy

This questionnaire is part of a study about learner autonomy in ELT being funded by the British Council and which is being conducted by Dr Simon Borg, University of Leeds and Dr Saleh Al-Busaidi, Sultan Qaboos University. The goal of the study is to support the development of learner autonomy within the Language Centre at SQU and the first stage in the project is exploring what ‘learner autonomy’ means to Language Centre staff. Participation is voluntary and

all teachers of English in the Centre are being invited to contribute. Your responses are important as they will inform the later stages of the study, culminating in a series of workshops on learner autonomy. There are no right or wrong answers here – what we are interested in are your views about learner autonomy. Thank you.

It will take about 20 minutes to complete this questionnaire. To answer, please use your mouse to click on grey boxes (click a second time if you change your mind) or type into grey spaces.

Section 1: Learner Autonomy

Please give your opinion about the statements below by ticking ONE answer for each. The statements are not just about your current job and in answering you should consider your experience as a language teacher more generally.

| Statement | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Unsure | Agree | Strongly agree |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Language learners of all ages can develop learner autonomy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. It is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. Learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. Learner autonomy can be achieved by learners of all cultural backgrounds. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centred classrooms. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 16. | Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 17. | Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 18. | Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 19. | Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 20. | Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 21. | Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access centre. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 22. | Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 23. | Learner autonomy is a concept which is not suited to non-Western learners. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 24. | Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 25. | Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 26. | Promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 27. | Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 28. | Learner-centred classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 29. | Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 30. | Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 31. | Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 32. | The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 33. | Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 34. | The proficiency of a language learner does not affect their ability to develop autonomy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 35. | The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 36. | Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 37. | To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
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Section 2: Desirability and Feasibility of Learner Autonomy

Below there are two sets of statements. The first gives examples of decisions **LEARNERS** might be involved in; the second lists abilities that learners might have. For each statement:

- First say how **desirable** (i.e. ideally), you feel it is.
- Then say how **feasible** (i.e. realistically achievable) you think it is for *the learners you currently teach most often*.

You should tick **TWO** boxes for each statement – one for desirability and one for feasibility.

| | Desirability | | | | Feasibility | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Undesirable | Slightly desirable | Quite desirable | Very desirable | Unfeasible | Slightly feasible | Quite feasible | Very feasible |
| <i>Learners are involved in decisions about:</i> | | | | | | | | |
| The objectives of a course | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The materials used | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The kinds of tasks and activities they do | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The topics discussed | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| How learning is assessed | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The teaching methods used | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Classroom management | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Learners have the ability to:</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Identify their own needs | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Identify their own strengths | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Identify their own weaknesses | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Monitor their progress | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Evaluate their own learning | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Learn co-operatively | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Learn independently | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Section 3: Your Learners and Your Teaching

This section contains two open-ended questions. These are an important part of the questionnaire and give you the opportunity to comment more specifically on your work at the Language Centre at SQU.

1. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Choose ONE answer:

In general, the students I teach English most often to at SQU have a fair degree of learner autonomy.

Strongly disagree Disagree Unsure Agree Strongly agree

Please comment on why you feel the way you do about your students' general degree of autonomy:

2. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Choose ONE answer:

In general, in teaching English at SQU I give my students opportunities to develop learner autonomy.

Strongly disagree Disagree Unsure Agree Strongly agree

Please comment. You may want to explain why and how you promote autonomy, if you do, or to explain why developing learner autonomy is not an issue you focus on in your work:

Section 4: About Yourself

Please tell us about your background.

3. Years of experience as an English language teacher (Tick ONE):

0-4 5-9 10-14 15-19 20-24 25+

4. Years of experience as an English language teacher **at SQU** (Tick ONE):

0-4 5-9 10-14 15-19 20-24 25+

5. Highest qualification (Tick ONE):

Certificate Diploma Bachelor's Master's Doctorate Other

6. Nationality:

7. Gender (Tick ONE):

Male Female

8. At the Language Centre, which English programme do you teach most hours on? (Tick ONE):

English Foundation Programme (Levels 1, 2, or 3)

English Foundation Programme (Levels 4, 5 or 6)

Credit English Programme

Section 5: Further Participation

9. In the next stage of the study we would like to talk to individual teachers to learn more about their views on learner autonomy. Would you be interested in discussing this issue further with us?

Yes No

10. We are also planning to run a series of training workshops on learner autonomy for teachers at the SQU Language Centre. Would you be interested in attending these workshops?

Yes No

If you answered YES to questions 1 and/or 2 above, please write your name and email address here.

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Name: | |
| E-mail: | |

Thank you for taking the time to respond.

Appendix 2 – Sample interview schedule

1. Let's start by talking about what 'autonomy' means to you. In a few words, how would you sum up your views on what learner autonomy is?
2. What for you are the key characteristics of an autonomous language learner?
3. In item 36 – 'Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner' – you agreed. Can you tell me a little more about how you see the relationship between learner autonomy and language learning?
4. How have you come to develop the views you hold today about learner autonomy and its value? [Prompt as required – the aim here is to explore the roots of their current views on learner autonomy]:
 - a. Is it an issue you have focused on in your training as a language teacher?
 - b. Have you worked in other contexts where autonomy has been considered an important issue to develop with learners?
 - c. What about your own experience as a language learner – do you feel autonomy was/has been an issue you were aware of?
5. Focus on Section 2: Desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy.
 - a. In terms of decision-making, you were quite positive both about the desirability and feasibility of learner involvement. But to what extent are learners actually involved in such decisions?
 - b. You were also positive about the feasibility and desirability of learners having certain abilities. Again, does this mean you have a positive view of the situation you work in?
6. Focus on Section 3 Question 1 – 'In general, the students I teach English most often to at SQU have a fair degree of learner autonomy'.
 - a. Your answer to this question was strongly agree. Could you say more about why you feel this way?
 - b. What is it that learners do to make you feel that they have a fair degree of autonomy?
 - c. Are there any other particular factors at the LC that hinder learner autonomy?
7. Focus on Section 3 Question 2 – 'In general, in teaching English at SQU I give my students opportunities to develop learner autonomy':
 - a. Firstly, what role if any, do you feel the teacher has in promoting learner autonomy?
 - b. Your answer was strongly agree. Can you say more about what you do to encourage autonomy in your learners?
 - c. What changes in the way the LC operates would allow you to promote learner autonomy better?
8. As part of this project we will be running some training workshops on learner autonomy for LC teachers. Do you have any suggestions for the kinds of issues the workshops might cover?

Appendix 3 – Descriptive statistics for Section 1 of Questionnaire

| Statement | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Unsure | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|--------|-------|----------------|
| 1. Language learners of all ages can develop learner autonomy. | 3.3% | 11.5% | 9.8% | 44.3% | 31.1% |
| 2. Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy. | 1.6% | 1.6% | 11.5% | 49.2% | 36.1% |
| 3. Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone. | .0% | 4.9% | 11.5% | 45.9% | 37.7% |
| 4. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn. | .0% | 1.6% | 3.3% | 57.4% | 37.7% |
| 5. Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners. | 1.6% | 16.4% | 21.3% | 49.2% | 11.5% |
| 6. Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom. | .0% | 27.9% | 19.7% | 42.6% | 9.8% |
| 7. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy. | .0% | .0% | 6.6% | 60.7% | 32.8% |
| 8. Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher. | 8.2% | 62.3% | 18.0% | 9.8% | 1.6% |
| 9. It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners. | 32.8% | 49.2% | 11.5% | 4.9% | 1.6% |
| 10. It is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults. | 1.6% | 1.6% | 8.2% | 67.2% | 21.3% |
| 11. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence. | 1.6% | 6.6% | 13.1% | 47.5% | 31.1% |
| 12. Learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would. | 1.6% | 3.3% | 9.8% | 47.5% | 37.7% |
| 13. Learner autonomy can be achieved by learners of all cultural backgrounds. | .0% | 4.9% | 26.2% | 39.3% | 29.5% |
| 14. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do. | .0% | 1.6% | 1.6% | 59.0% | 37.7% |
| 15. Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centred classrooms. | 3.3% | 31.1% | 23.0% | 32.8% | 9.8% |
| 16. Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other. | .0% | 3.3% | 4.9% | 67.2% | 24.6% |
| 17. Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching. | 6.6% | 47.5% | 9.8% | 31.1% | 4.9% |
| 18. Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher. | 3.3% | 44.3% | 9.8% | 37.7% | 4.9% |
| 19. Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together. | .0% | 3.3% | 16.4% | 62.3% | 18.0% |
| 20. Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners. | 31.1% | 60.7% | 6.6% | 1.6% | .0% |
| 21. Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access centre. | .0% | 4.9% | 4.9% | 67.2% | 23.0% |

| | | | | | | |
|-----|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 22. | Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed. | 3.3% | 16.4% | 29.5% | 45.9% | 4.9% |
| 23. | Learner autonomy is a concept which is not suited to non-Western learners. | 39.3% | 47.5% | 4.9% | 8.2% | .0% |
| 24. | Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher. | 13.1% | 75.4% | 8.2% | 3.3% | .0% |
| 25. | Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy. | .0% | 3.3% | 4.9% | 63.9% | 27.9% |
| 26. | Promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners. | 13.1% | 57.4% | 26.2% | 3.3% | .0% |
| 27. | Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials. | .0% | 6.6% | 21.3% | 57.4% | 14.8% |
| 28. | Learner-centred classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy. | .0% | .0% | 13.1% | 67.2% | 19.7% |
| 29. | Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy. | .0% | 3.3% | .0% | 45.9% | 50.8% |
| 30. | Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy. | 3.3% | 24.6% | 18.0% | 34.4% | 19.7% |
| 31. | Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy. | .0% | .0% | 13.1% | 60.7% | 26.2% |
| 32. | The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy. | .0% | 3.3% | 4.9% | 50.8% | 41.0% |
| 33. | Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated. | 1.6% | 4.9% | 6.6% | 44.3% | 42.6% |
| 34. | The proficiency of a language learner does not affect their ability to develop autonomy. | 6.6% | 19.7% | 16.4% | 44.3% | 13.1% |
| 35. | The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy. | .0% | .0% | .0% | 57.4% | 42.6% |
| 36. | Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner. | .0% | .0% | 6.6% | 42.6% | 50.8% |
| 37. | To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning. | .0% | 3.3% | 1.6% | 60.7% | 34.4% |

Appendix 4 – Workshop materials

Workshop 1: What is Learner Autonomy?

Objectives

Through this workshop participants will:

- gain insight into the views about learner autonomy held by teachers at the SQU Language Centre
- compare these views about learner autonomy with one commonly cited in the literature
- draft a definition of learner autonomy which has potential practical value for the work of the Language Centre.

Task 1: A ‘Classic’ Definition of Learner Autonomy

‘the ability to take charge of one’s learning ... to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning,

- i.e. – determining the objectives
- defining the contents and progressions
 - selecting methods and techniques to be used
 - monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking
 - evaluating what has been acquired’.

(Holec 1981:3)³

What are your views about the suitability of this definition as one which can guide your work as teachers in the Language Centre?

Task 2: Giving Learners Choice

Here are some results from our study of language centre teachers’ views about learner autonomy:

- **96 per cent** of teachers agreed that learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do.
- **93 per cent** agreed that involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.
- **95 per cent** agreed that autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.

Here are some teachers expressing similar views:

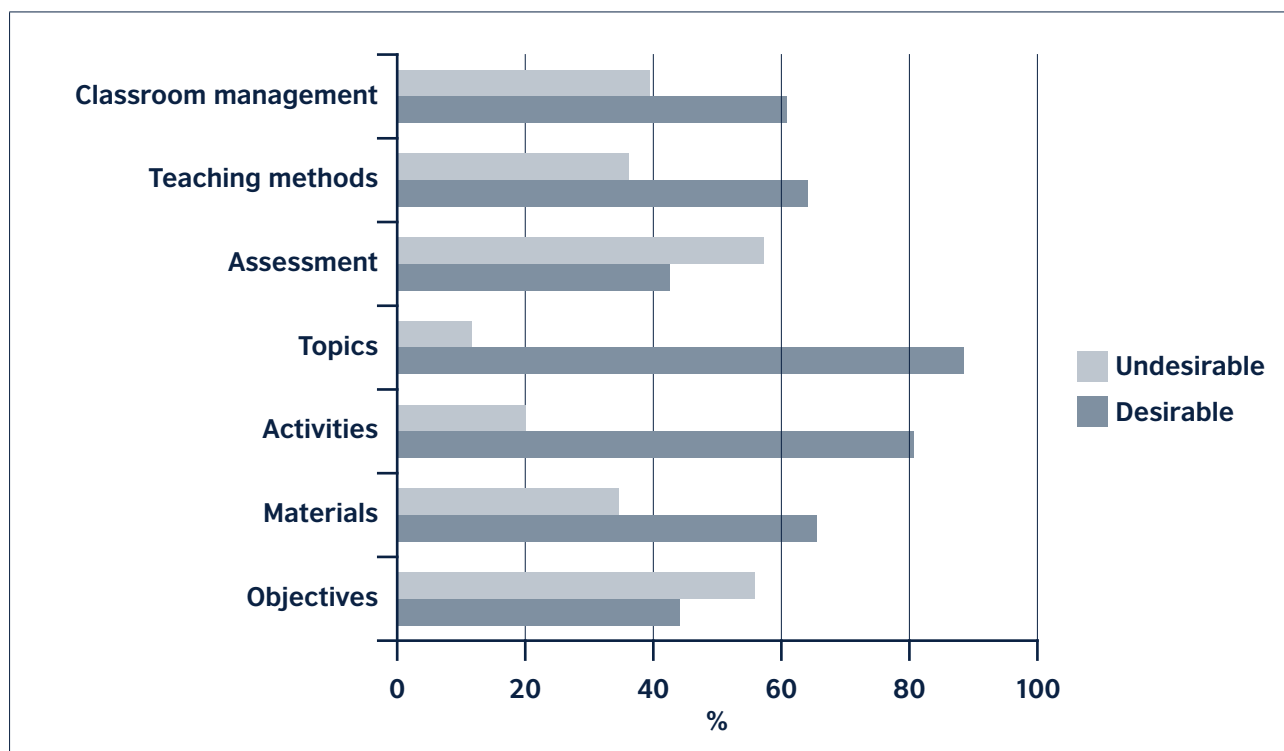
to me, learner autonomy means the ability of an individual to self direct their learning, and to make decisions about how they will learn, what kinds of things they will learn, for what reason they are learning.

learner autonomy means that the learner has full responsibility and right to choose what to learn how to learn and when to learn, and to be able to assess.

- a. How do you feel about these results?
- b. To what extent is allowing learners some choice of content and activities feasible in the language centre?

³ Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy in foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Task 3: Involving Learners in Decision-Making



We asked teachers to say how desirable it was for students to be involved in certain course decisions. The chart shows the percentages of teachers who felt student involvement was desirable for each course area.

- How do you feel about these results?
- Which course areas do teachers feel student involvement in is desirable?
- What do these results suggest about the ways in which learner autonomy might be usefully defined in the language centre?

How desirable is it for learners to be involved in decisions about these issues?

Task 4: Teacher Role

Dam (2003:135)⁴ says that 'it is largely the teachers' responsibility to develop learner autonomy'.

100 per cent of survey respondents also agreed that the teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy. How might we define that role in the context of your work in the language centre? Complete this stem with some options:

'In order to better promote learner autonomy in the LC, teachers need to ...'.

Task 5: Defining 'Learner Autonomy' for the Language Centre

Autonomy is not an absolute concept. There are degrees of autonomy, and the extent to which it is feasible or desirable for learners to embrace autonomy will depend on a range of factors to do with the personality of the learner, their goals in undertaking the study of another language, the philosophy of the institution (if any) providing the instruction, and the cultural context within which the learning takes place. (Nunan 1996:13)⁵

On the basis of our discussion so far, draft a definition of learner autonomy which you feel has **practical potential for the work of the language centre**. It should be **aspirational yet feasible**.

⁴ Dam, L. (2003). Developing learner autonomy: The teacher's responsibility. In Little, D., Ridley, J., & Ushioda, E. (Eds.). *Learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom: Teacher, learner, curriculum and assessment* (pp. 135-146). Dublin: Authentik.

⁵ Nunan, D. (1996). Towards autonomous learning: some theoretical, empirical and practical issues. In Pemberton, R., Li, E. S. L., Or, W. W. F., & Pierson, H. D. (Eds.). (1996). *Taking control: Autonomy in language learning* (pp.13-26). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Workshop 2: Learner Autonomy in the Language Centre

Objectives

Through this workshop participants will:

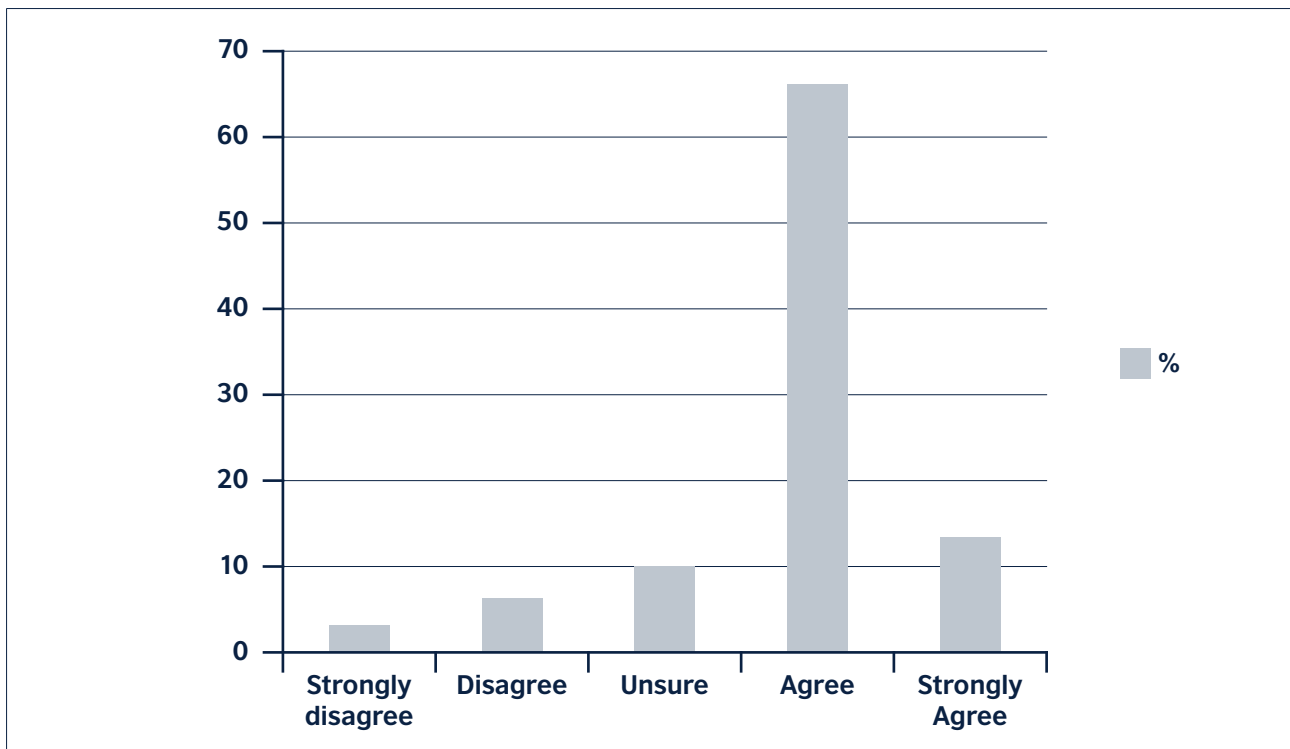
- learn about the extent to which teachers at the SQU Language Centre feel they promote learner autonomy
- become aware of strategies that teachers say they use to promote learner autonomy at the Language Centre
- discuss the extent to which such strategies can be applied to the work of the Language Centre more generally.

Task 1: Learner Autonomy in the Language Centre

In the study, we gave teachers this statement to respond to:

In general, in teaching English at SQU I give my students opportunities to develop learner autonomy.

Below is what the teachers said. What are your reactions to these results?



Task 2: How LC Teachers Promote Autonomy

We also asked teachers who said they promoted learner autonomy to give examples of how they do so. They highlighted different approaches to autonomy which involve:

- a. talking to students about autonomy and its value
- b. encouraging learners to engage in autonomous behaviours
- c. getting learners to reflect on their learning
- d. using activities in class which promote autonomy
- e. setting activities out of class which promote autonomy.

Here are 20 practices LC teachers said they use to promote autonomy. Quickly go through them and decide which of the groups A–E above each belongs to. If you feel that you need to create or rename a group, you can.

1. Going to the library, doing Moodle assignments are part of learning that develops autonomy.
2. Co-operative and peer learning is promoted wherever possible.
3. Encouraging students to go the extra mile and not be afraid to make mistakes, goes a long way in making them confident to work by themselves.
4. Encouraging them to be more responsible about what they do in class.
5. I actively promote learner autonomy in my lessons using worksheets.
6. I ask students to tell me the mark they hope to get in their presentations and how they can get that mark.
7. I ask them to find out about certain topics and be ready to discuss them in the next lesson.
8. I constantly give homework and tasks to be completed and brought back to the classroom.
9. I do my best to involve my students in reflection into their individual learning preferences and strategies.
10. I encourage them to further their learning of English in situations outside the classroom without help from any teacher.
11. I have the class choose which activities they want to do in some cases.
12. I negotiate with students on deadlines for assignments, topics for presentations and speaking as well as readers (they can change a reader assigned to them if they don't like it).
13. I spend quite a lot of time with my students explaining the benefits and the different ways of developing autonomy.
14. I talk to them regularly about why we are doing what we are doing and the bigger picture.
15. I tell them that knowledge is always available around you, but all that you need are the incentive and the method to find it.
16. I try to promote it by not answering the questions they have sometimes and by telling them to go find the answer themselves.
17. I usually encourage them to visit the library and practice different tasks on extensive reading.
18. Independent Learning Projects in the courses I have taught are good examples of promoting the learners' autonomy.
19. Peer assessments of students' work at classroom level is encouraged.
20. Sometimes (especially on Wednesdays) I ask students to tell me what they have learned during the week, what they have found, easy, difficult, and what they should do to improve.

Task 3: Your Practices in Promoting Learner Autonomy

1. Do you use any of the practices listed above to promote autonomy in **your** classes? If yes, what exactly do you do? How effective do you find these practices in encouraging learners to be autonomous?
2. Are there any additional ways of promoting learner autonomy that characterise your teaching? If yes, explain what you do.

Task 4: Feasible LA Practices in the LC

Looking critically at the list above, and at any items you added in Task 3, which practices are likely to be most feasible in promoting learner autonomy in the LC? Choose FIVE practices and consider how they contribute to LA.

| Practices | Contribution to LA |
|-----------|--------------------|
| | |

Workshop 3: Implementing Learner Autonomy

Objectives

Through this workshop, participants will:

- gain insight into a framework for developing learner autonomy.
- critically evaluate the effectiveness of common learner autonomy activities.
- compare the activities with those used in the Language Centre.

Task 1: Analysing a framework for implementing learner autonomy

Nunan (1997, p.195)⁶ proposes a framework for developing autonomy among learners in a language programme. The framework is based on the assumption that learner autonomy is not an absolute concept and that there are degrees of autonomy. The five levels are divided into two domains, content and process.

| Level | Learner action | Content | Process |
|-------|----------------|---|---|
| 1. | Awareness | Raising learners' awareness of the pedagogical goals of the materials used. | Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred learning styles/strategies. |
| 2. | Involvement | Learners are involved in selecting their own goals from a list of alternatives given. | Learners make choices among a range of options. |
| 3. | Intervention | Learners take part in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the programme. | Learners adapt tasks. |
| 4. | Creation | Learners create their own goals and objectives. | Learners create their own tasks. |
| 5. | Transcendence | Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between what they learn in class and the outside world. | Learners become teachers and researchers. |

To what extent might this framework guide the way learner autonomy is promoted in the Language Centre?

⁶ Nunan, D. (1997). Designing and adapting materials to encourage learner autonomy. In Benson, P., & Voller, P. (Eds.). *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning* (pp.192–203). London: Longman.

Task 2: Strategies for implementing learner autonomy

Below is a list of strategies for promoting learner autonomy.

1. Which of these are familiar to you and which are new?
2. Which of these opportunities for promoting learner autonomy are available in the Language Centre? To what extent are they used effectively?
3. Using the above framework, what kinds of learner action do the opportunities for learner autonomy available in Language centre promote?
4. If an activity is not available in the Language Centre, do you think it should be introduced? Why or why not?
5. Are there additional ways of promoting learner autonomy in the Language centre which might be added to the list below?

List of Strategies

1. Reflective activities/journal (in and out of class, individually or with others)
2. Learner training (e.g. learning strategies, study skills)
3. Project-based learning
4. Self access centre with appropriate materials and guidance/training
5. Writing centre
6. Tutorial centre
7. Teacher-student conferences during office hours
8. E-learning tools
9. Alternative assessments
10. Learner generated materials

Workshop 4: Developing a Strategy for Promoting Learner Autonomy

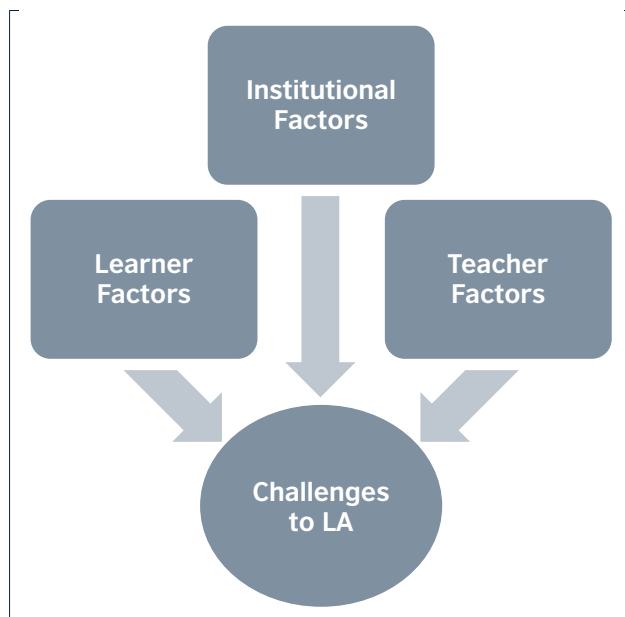
Objectives

Through this workshop participants will:

- identify (perceived) challenges which exist in the Language Centre to the development of learner autonomy
- consider feasible ways of responding to these challenges
- review definitions of learner autonomy developed in Workshop 1 in the light of issues covered in subsequent workshops
- discuss ways of sustaining the development of a strategy for the promotion of learner autonomy in the Language Centre.

Task 1: Challenges in Promoting Learner Autonomy

In the study, Language Centre teachers highlighted a number of challenges to promoting learner autonomy. These can be grouped into three broad categories:



Here are some examples of what teachers said. Discuss your reactions.

I teach second and third year students who are already in college but their level of autonomy is really low. They don't like to do things on their own. They expect to cover everything in class and most of them indeed struggle with tasks to be carried out in small groups, let alone homework assignments, self-study components or course work which is assigned by the teacher to be carried out by individual student! It's the learning culture the students here are used to.

Although I take them to the lab to introduce them to the language learning possibilities available there and actively encourage weekly discussion in the Moodle discussion forum, it is not enough. I choose their graded readers for them (to prevent cheating), I assign tasks to complete outside the class room (to consolidate course material), I decide the lesson plan (to cover the pacing schedule) etc. To encourage more autonomy, teachers need less pressure from pacing schedules and from testing.

Students who wish to take charge of their own learning are able to do so, but there is little effort to promote this.

I don't feel students like to be independent in their learning. I think it is because of the general culture of learning that most Arab students have.

because of their low level, they are not able to do anything alone.

A strategic approach to promoting learner autonomy in the Language Centre needs to be based on an understanding of these kinds of issues. For example, is it really the case that Omani students do not like to be independent?

Task 2: Responding to Challenges in Promoting Learner Autonomy

One challenge to learner autonomy commonly mentioned by teachers was the 'pacing schedule'. Let's use this as an example here:

1. How exactly does the current pacing schedule hinder the development of learner autonomy?
2. What responses to this challenge are available? Think big initially, then consider which options are most feasible in your context.

Task 3: Revisiting Definitions of Learner Autonomy for the Language centre.

In Workshop 1 teachers drafted some definitions of learner autonomy with particular reference to the work of the Language Centre. We will circulate these in full for further discussion. For now, here are some extracts:

Which particular elements of these extracts might be usefully incorporated into a working definition of learner autonomy which can guide the work of the Language Centre?

1. Learners have to be conscious of why they are in LC and what goals they have to achieve.
2. Learner autonomy involves conscious and deliberate efforts to develop individuals who have ability to participate to some extent in all aspects of their studies.
3. Learner autonomy is taking some responsibility for one's learning in order to develop into a life-long learner.
4. Learner autonomy refers to learners' ability and willingness to benefit from the teacher's input/expertise/institutional knowledge and take it beyond the prescribed plan/curriculum/material/methodology to improve his/her learning.
5. Autonomy involves the learner taking responsibility of one's own learning while enjoying the freedom of choice in a classroom setting where the teacher as a facilitator controls the trajectory and promotes a gradual process of independence and inter-dependence.
6. Learner autonomy is the ability to 'take charge' of one's learning, to a reasonable extent, through relevant decision-making concerning some aspects for language learning.
7. Learner autonomy entails creating a learner-centred environment where the learning outcomes and learning process are negotiated by students and teachers with learners assuming more and more responsibility for their own learning.

8. Learner autonomy is an attitude and a philosophy which is gradually developed among teachers and learners in the Language centre in which they both have a shared perspective to decide on responsibilities, choices and ways of implementing them in the process of assessing needs, monitoring progress and continuing to learn.
9. Learner autonomy involves helping learners to (a) understand the learning outcomes of the course (b) identify their own weaknesses and (c) work independently to overcome their weaknesses and (d) realistically self-evaluate themselves.

Task 4: Sustaining Momentum

The ELT Conference and the workshops have created some momentum around the discussion of learner autonomy in the Language Centre. It is important to sustain that momentum.

1. What suggestions do you have for keeping teachers engaged in discussions of learner autonomy in the months ahead?
2. What would seem to be realistic goals for the Language Centre to achieve regarding learner autonomy in the next three, six and 12 months?

Workshop 5: Doing Teacher Research on Learner Autonomy

Key Questions

1. What is teacher research?
2. What kinds of questions about learner autonomy can teachers research?
3. What research strategies can teachers use to explore such questions?
4. How can teachers do teacher research collaboratively?

1. What is Teacher Research?

Teacher research is *systematic inquiry* conducted by *teachers*, individually or collaboratively which aims to deepen their understandings of some aspect of *their own professional context* and which is *made public*.

Given this definition, in what ways is teacher research similar and different to the following forms of research?

- a. Action research
- b. Classroom research
- c. 'Academic' research.

2. Investigating Learner Autonomy

- a. We can break the research process down into three phases:
 - *planning* research
 - *conducting* research
 - *reporting* research.
- b. An important part of the planning phase is defining the focus of the study. Our broad topic is learner autonomy in foreign language learning, but within that what kinds of more specific issues might you be interested in exploring?

Defining the focus of teacher research on learner autonomy

- c. The focus will normally be expressed as a topic; the next stage is to express our interest in that topic through one or more questions that we would like the research to answer. For example:

Focus: learners' attitudes to self-access centres

Research questions: How often do learners (at a certain level) visit the self-access centre? What do they do when they visit the self-access-centre? If they do visit, to what extent do they feel the self-access centre supports their learning? If they do not use the self-access centre, why not?

Now look back at the topics defined above and define research questions for them.

d. Research questions allow us to be clear about the purpose of our study. They are, however, difficult to write and normally need to be revised several times. Here are some criteria you can use in evaluating research questions (see Bryman, 2008)⁷. Are they:

- Clear?
- Specific?
- Researchable/answerable?
- Worthy of your time and effort?
- Linked (where there is more than one)?

e. Beware of questions of the ‘what is the effect of X on Y?’ variety because in classroom-based educational research it is practically impossible to control variables in a way that permits conclusions about causality.

3. Collecting Data

a. A wide range of options (qualitative and quantitative) are available for collecting data:

- Classroom observation
- Interviews
- Questionnaires
- Documentary evidence (e.g. students’ work)
- Forms of assessment (e.g. test scores)
- Reflective writing (e.g. learning journals)
- Visual methods (e.g. photographs).

A key question for us is: **how do we decide which methods to use?**

b. However we collect data, we must maximise the likelihood that the information we get is **trustworthy** (i.e. reliable and valid). Poor quality data – even large amounts of it – can never lead to a good quality study.

c. The same applies to the analysis of our data. We need to conduct the analysis in a way that gives us confidence in the findings. Some suggestions for enhancing analysis are:

- using respondent validation
- avoid subjective interpretations
- using appropriate statistical tests
- avoiding poor coding of qualitative data
- avoid inferences and generalisations not supported by evidence
- avoid equating correlation and causes.⁸

d. Ethics also needs to be considered when we are doing research in our own context. What kinds of ethical issues might arise when we are doing research in our own classrooms?

4. Collaborative Teacher Research

A collaborative approach to teacher research offers various benefits:

- The workload can be shared
- A sense of isolation can be avoided
- The group creates a community with a shared purpose
- Peer support can sustain motivation
- Individuals may feel greater responsibility to the group
- Data collected from different classrooms on a similar theme can be compared
- Group discussions can be more productive in creating ideas about how to take the research forward.

Collaborative work can of course create challenges too. To minimise these it helps if the group draw up clear guidelines to support their work together.

⁷ Bryman, A. (2008). *Social research methods* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research Methods in Education* (6th ed.). London: Routledge.

5. Next Steps

If you would like to take the work we have done today forward here are some issues to consider:

- Decide whether you would like to do an individual or collaborative teacher research project on learner autonomy.
- Identify your topic. For example, are there particular issues in your teaching that you want to explore? Do you need to do some reading to help you define your focus?
- Specify your targets for presenting the results of your work. The next SQU ELT conference? A professional away day? Start with your target then plan backwards.
- Develop a timetable for the study, ensuring it is feasible.
- Do some reading on research methods to help you with the design of your study.
- Create mechanisms through which different research groups can share resources, provide mutual support, and meet periodically to provide updates on their work.

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