

Learner Autonomy: Investigating Iranian English Teachers' Beliefs

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Abstract—Learner autonomy is a key element in language learning process which enables the learners to act more effectively. It is necessary to investigate English language teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy to be able to promote it in language learning situation. The purpose of this study was to investigate Iranian English teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. To do this, 35 English teachers were selected to answer the question items in a questionnaire. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted in the form of percentage level for related items and questions. The results of the study showed that teachers are familiar with the concept of learner autonomy and believe that it has essential role in effective language learning.

Index Terms—learner autonomy, teachers' beliefs, autonomous learning, effective learning

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of learner autonomy has been a key area of research in foreign language (FL) teaching in recent years. There are a lot of remarks about the rationale for its promotion and its implications for language teaching and learning. Some scholars like CamilleriGrima, 2007 and Palfreyman, 2003 claim that it improves the language learning quality and makes individuals ready for learning during their life. It is also argued that it helps learners to use learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom in a best way.

We are now more familiar with the complicated nature of learner autonomy and of the learner and learning process with the work in language learning in the last half of the century. Research in different related areas to learning process such as multiple intelligences, individual learning styles, strategies, motivation and cognition have provided us with the knowledge about different factors that influence learners and their way of learning. Furthermore, with the development of learner-centered classrooms, students were given opportunity to become active participants in the learning process, make decisions about the learning objectives and materials and the evaluation process, therefore they started to move toward becoming independent and autonomous learners.

Teachers ought to help their students realize and develop the skills which allow them to have control of their own learning and be able to use what they have learned outside the classroom, when the teacher is not present for help. However; language teachers' have been somehow ignored in these areas of research, and their attitudes and beliefs about learner autonomy is actually not known. There is a significant gap about the influence that teachers' beliefs have on how they teach and in particular, on whether and how they search for promoting learner autonomy. The purpose of this study was to investigate English language teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy, so to be able to investigate this area we need to define some key terms first and then begin our work of teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researches have been done about the concept of learner autonomy in literature (for example Dang, 2012, Summer, 2010, Chitashvili, 2007) but few have dealt with the teachers' perspectives and beliefs on learner autonomy and what it means for language teachers, especially for English language teachers. English as a foreign language (EFL) has been taught for many years in different countries which it is not their native language. In this context it gains more importance because the language teachers may not be native speakers of English, so there is a need to train teachers who are capable of dealing with this special issue. Learner autonomy is an important element in foreign language learning which helps both teachers and learners become more efficient participants in learning process.

A. Definitions of Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy has its root in the concept of autonomy and freedom in philosophy and the work by the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project in the early 1980s. It has many definitions regarding different aspects of language learning but the original definition was the one given by Holec, 1981, as "the ability to have responsibility of one's own learning" (Dang, 2012).

Cited in Barillaro (2011), Holec (1981) argues that learner autonomy is generally defined as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’. This concept of learner autonomy is broadly used; however, providing an accurate and acceptable definition of it is not simple. Teachers and learners have different backgrounds and learning experiences and different views on the process of learning, so they will have different interpretations of learner autonomy. It is clear that learner autonomy can have different meaning for people in several cultures because of difference in beliefs. It is possible to reach to a definition of learner autonomy by using cooperation and discussion between all elements that are involved in the learning process (i.e. teacher, learner and educational institution), together with suggestions for classroom implication appropriate to the local context.

Learner autonomy has some bases on theories of language learning, one is that when learners are involved in the decision making process on their language competence, they will be more interested in learning and it will be more purposeful for them. Research shows that learners are more motivated and self-determined when they have control of their learning. So for the development of learner autonomy in language classroom, students must get involved in decision making about the learning (Balçkanlı, 2010). Learner independence in the literature is considered as counterpart of successful language learning. Autonomous learners are learners who can overcome the obstacles to the learning related to educational and cultural background and their previous experiences. The amount of independence that is when learners feel comfortable is a main indicator that they are ready for autonomy (Cotterall, 1995).

B. Social and Personal Demand for Learner Autonomy

In investigating different aspects of learner autonomy, we should pay attention to the need and necessity for its development. There are some social and personal demands: The College English Teaching Syllabus (1999) defined that teachers should help their students become autonomous learners to promote language sense, to attain proper language learning methods and to better self-learning abilities. Furthermore, in today’s modern world which technology, science, economy and culture are changing rapidly and almost everyone needs new knowledge about the new coming things, autonomous learning is a very significant requirement. In such a developing society, if one does not keep up-to-date by achieving high educational degree, he/she will definitely left behind. In the world of changes, the successful learner is considered a person who can gain knowledge directly from life experience rather than class instruction. So people need to learn the necessary skills to deal with the globalization and dynamism of the world that has evidence for necessity of language learning (Wang, 2011).

In addition to social demands, there are personal demands for career and life development. Studying a number of skills in university or any other educational occasion does not provide the learner for life, he/she needs to experience new things and learn continuously to complete himself/herself for future life situations. Thus, people must have parallel development in all kind of skills and new patterns of life together. When the learner is aware of self-learning in the absence of the teacher, he/she will be more qualified on the social life. (Wang, 2011)

C. Definitions of Autonomous Learning

Henri Holec (1981) first introduced the concept of autonomous learning in foreign language teaching (Zhuang, 2010). He states that learner autonomy is the learner’s ability to control his/her own learning and make use of appropriate learning strategies for setting objectives, choosing the content of learning, finding methods, monitoring the process of learning and self-evaluating (Zhuang, 2010). Hence, we can say that learners should realize that success in learning relies on the student as on the teacher. We must develop a sense of responsibility among learners and encourage them to have active role in the process of their learning to foster learner autonomy. (Scharle, Szabo, 2000)

D. Autonomy in the Classroom

There are three main pedagogical principles that emphasize autonomy in language learning, they are: learner involvement (taking learners to have responsibility for the learning process), learner reflection (encouraging critical thinking about planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning) and expedient use of target language (using the target language as the essential means of language learning). Autonomous learners realize their learning program goals, take the responsibility for their learning, take part in the process of activity planning and monitor and evaluate its effectiveness (Najeeb, 2013). Recent approaches for teaching like task-based language teaching admit that being autonomous learners of foreign language is a key purpose of this approaches and take it into account when they want to design their frameworks (Errey&Schollaert 2007). Kumaravadivelu (1994) in introducing his notion of post-method argues that language learning to a large extent is autonomous activity emphasizing learner autonomy as a very essential element in the process of learning. It involves teaching learners how to learn and how to use learning strategies, raising their consciousness and help them self-direct their learning (Summer, 2010).

E. Learner Autonomy and the Teacher

In the development of learner autonomy teachers’ and learners’ perspectives and beliefs are fundamental. Benson (2008) argues that from teachers’ point of view learner autonomy is mainly related to institutional and classroom learning arrangements within definite educational programs. What autonomy means for teacher should be defined in the classroom for the learners (Barillaro, 2011).

The learning process involves not only learners but also an interactional relationship between students and teachers and we should examine these participants, their characteristics, perspectives and expectations in order to explore the in-teraction (Devine, 1999). Benson (2008) argues that teacher has a very essential role in the development of learner au-tonomy (Barillaro, 2011). Teachers have to create an atmosphere that supports learner autonomy and raise their awareness of independent learning. They also should state their beliefs about teaching and learner autonomy.

In autonomous learning, teacher does not have the only role of knowledge transferor, they also have the roles of consultant and facilitator who provide psychological, social and technical support for their learners (Zhuang, 2010). The learner autonomy teacher helps his/her learners become aware of their role in the process of learning and encourages independence in their learning. The teachers need readiness and support for this challenging task. They can get these from teacher workshops which educational institutions provide for them (Barillaro, 2011). Teachers should understand the difficulties of foreign language learning, change the teaching materials and syllabuses and as the final and main point change their beliefs about language learning. Usually when they accept the role of being a teacher, they try to adjust their methodology with what they have learnt in their formal training as new techniques and ideas about teaching. But when they face with the reality in the real world, they come back to the traditional role of the teacher in the classroom and teacher-centeredness and like other teachers follow the textbooks and fixed syllabuses or asking for help from experienced teachers. They are mostly reluctant and resistant to give the responsibility of learning to their students. So changing teachers' beliefs is not easy and needs time and effort (Tütünis, 2011). If we have a critical look at teachers' perspectives, it is assumed that teachers and students consider learning process and learner autonomy from different perspectives. Teachers view autonomy within the framework of institutional and classroom arrangements and it is accepted this way. But learners view autonomy in a broader sense beyond the environment of classroom and deals with the relationship between learning and their lives (Shakouri&Bahraminezhad, 2012).

F. Teachers' Beliefs on Learner Autonomy

When we say people are autonomous, we mean that they are both capable and free to lead autonomous lives. But there is a concern of knowing teachers' perspectives about autonomy in learning, what does it mean to teachers? Does it mean that learners do their own learning individually or they should take part in the process of learning with the help of their teachers and concurrent with classroom program? (Benson, 2008).

Teachers' beliefs can be defined as 'assumptions about all aspects of their work which teachers consider to be true or false' (Phipps and Borg 2009: 381, cited in Barillaro, 2011). In other words, teachers' beliefs are beliefs that they have about education, teaching and learning which conduct their actions and behaviors as teachers. Teachers' perspectives and beliefs about learning and how it takes place can be affected by many factors like their cultural and educational background. With investigating and in necessary cases changing their beliefs we can improve and refine the process of learning and help learners become good language users and autonomous. These days the expanding demand to teach students to become autonomous learners has changed the ideas about teachers' and learners' role in language learning and teaching. The new perspectives concentrate on the activities that teachers can do to assist and simplify the students' learning (Yang, 1998).

In this study we are investigating Iranian English teachers' perspectives and beliefs about learner autonomy. So two points are important to be considered: first, teachers' beliefs have very great impact on their performance and therefore on the opportunities they give to their learners for learning. Second, knowing about these beliefs can influence teacher education and the way they are trained for becoming English language learners. Thus, understanding teachers' beliefs about autonomy is an essential part of designing activities with the purpose of learner autonomy promotion.

G. Studies on Learner Autonomy

Najeeb (2013) conducted a study of learner autonomy in language learning and reported that learners must be able to understand their own learning styles and use them for their benefit. They should be willing to adjust themselves to an autonomous method of learning. They will be able to monitor their own learning as they gain confidence and this will give them a sense of achievement. Dang (2012) in a synthesized study of autonomy reported that learner autonomy is shaped socially and for investigating this concept, a combination of socio-cultural theory and community of practice is recommended. He also suggests that we should consider personal and contextual aspects, and the interactions between the two. Macaro (2008) in his research of the shifting dimensions of language learner autonomy has argued that auton-omy settles in being able to say what you want to say instead of producing the language of others. This may involve risk of both error and incomprehensibility. That risk, can be minimized by the learner's strategic behavior against a numbers of tasks and the teacher's effort in facilitating and coordination of learning strategies.

Oxford (2003) provided a systematic model for learner autonomy and argued that this model of L2 learner autonomy consists of four perspectives: technical, psychological, sociocultural, and political-critical. Each of these perspectives has four strands or themes: context, agency, motivation, and learning strategies and without one of these issue and perspectives, the model would be incomplete.

H. Studies on Teachers' Beliefs

Many studies have been conducted about learner autonomy, but there has been few research about teachers' perspectives and beliefs. Duong (2014) in his study about EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Their

Classroom Practices found that the teachers realize the meaning of learner autonomy as the students' freedom to choose how and what they learn and monitoring their learning process and confirm its value but it is quite difficult for them to apply it in practice. Al Asmari (2013) conducted a study on Practices and Prospects of Learner Autonomy: Teachers' Perceptions. Findings showed that both male and female teachers agreed with involvement of students in making decisions about their language learning. Findings also showed that there was a great tendency for autonomous learning among teachers and they believed that the autonomous learner has an active and positive role in learning process and making use of learning opportunities. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) investigated language teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and found that the teachers were positively willing to the notion of learner autonomy and its particular benefits for language learners. They also found that most of the teachers believed that they could promote learner autonomy in their teaching and among their learners. Barillaro (2011) conducted a research on teachers' perspective about learner autonomy in language learning. The findings of his study showed that teachers feel responsible for decisions about teaching and language-related issues inside the classroom. Teachers had positive attitudes towards autonomous learning activities both inside and outside the classroom. They believed that using English outside the classroom is essential in the learning process. Joshi (2011) in his study of Learner Perceptions and Teacher Beliefs about Learner Autonomy in Language Learning concluded that teachers believed that their role in learning process should be facilitator and that autonomy is the basis of higher proficiency and performance and very beneficial in this process. In another study Balçıkanlı (2010) investigated student teachers beliefs about learner autonomy. He found that student teachers had clear ideas about learner autonomy and the involvement of students in the learning process. In general, they agreed that students should be involved in the process of decision making regarding the objectives of the course, classroom management, homework tasks, and the selection of materials.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study tries to find answers for these research questions:

1. What is Iranian English teachers' perception of learner autonomy?
2. What is the contribution of learner autonomy to L2 learning?
3. What factors influence learner autonomy in teachers' view?
4. What is the role of teacher in promoting learner autonomy?

A. Participants

The participants of this study were 35 English teachers of private language institutes which were selected randomly from different institutes. They consisted of 7 males and 28 females with the teaching experience of 1 to 25 years for all levels of children, teenagers and adults. Also their educational qualification was in the range of B.A to Doctorate.

B. Instrument

The instrument used for gathering information was a questionnaire which was originally developed by Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012), but some modifications were done to the questionnaire according to the purpose of the study. It consisted of 2 sections. Section one consisted of 30 questions which were in the form of Likert-scale items on a five-point scale of agreement. Questionnaire items include information about:

What is meant by learner autonomy?

The teacher's role in promoting learner autonomy.

The amount of influence which age and FL proficiency have on the learner autonomy

How does learner autonomy can improve effectiveness of language learning?

The relationship between independent study and decision making and learner autonomy

In section two, there were questions about teachers' personal profile.

C. Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed among the teachers with referring to the language institutes. They could complete them at that time or take it back in 2 days. The collected questionnaires then were analyzed to get the results.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

After collecting data from the participants, they were analyzed and changed into descriptive data. The mean and percentage were calculated using SPSS software (version 19) to draw conclusions about teachers' beliefs. The questionnaire items with the related content were grouped together and after that mean and percentage was calculated for them. They are shown in the form of bar charts.

A. Teachers' Beliefs about the Main Concept of Learner Autonomy

Fig. 1 shows the teachers' answer to the question of whether autonomy means learning without a teacher. 62.85 per-cent of the teachers believed that autonomy does not mean learning without the teacher.

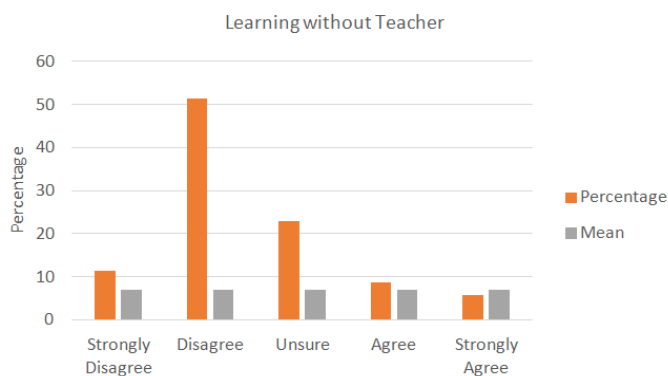


Fig. 1: The Percentage level for beliefs about learning without a teacher

B. Teachers' Beliefs about the Influence of Learner Autonomy on L2 Learning

Teachers were asked questions about the influence of learner autonomy on L2 learning. This figure shows that 72.38 percent of the teachers had the opinion that learner autonomy influences the second language learning. Teachers be-lieved that autonomy has positive effect on success of language learners and allows them to learn more effectively.

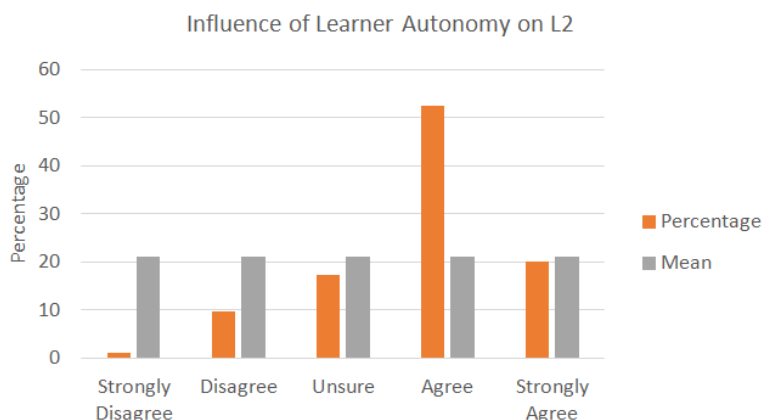


Fig. 2: Percentage level for teachers' beliefs about influence of learner autonomy and L2 learning

C. Teachers' Beliefs about Learner Autonomy and the Role of Independent Study and Activities

Among the questions which were asked from teachers, there were questions about independent study and working alone on tasks and activities. This figure shows that the majorities of the teachers (73.71 percent) agrees and strongly agree that independent study and working on tasks and activities alone is a key element in promoting learner autonomy. The obtained data are presented as following:

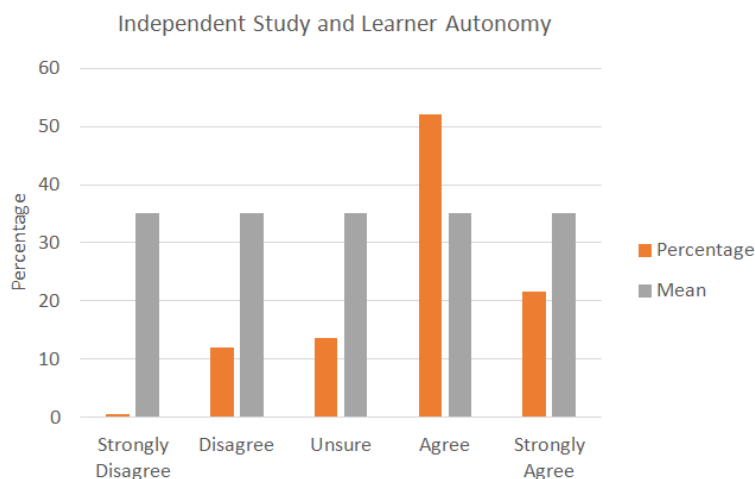


Fig. 3: Percentage level for teachers' beliefs about independent study

D. Teachers' Beliefs about Learner Autonomy and Opportunity of Making Choices

Some questions were asked from the teachers about the role of giving the learners opportunities to make decisions about how to learn, how to be assessed, choice of materials and choice of activities. This figure shows that most of the teachers (68.56 percent) agree and strongly agree that giving the learners opportunities to make decisions about their own learning process is an important factor in promoting learner autonomy. The results are:

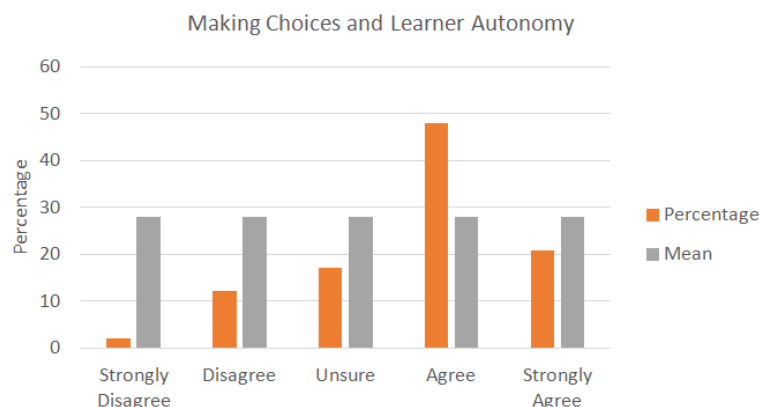


Fig. 4: Percentage level for teachers' beliefs about opportunities for making choices

E. Teachers' Beliefs about the Role of the Teacher in Promoting Learner Autonomy

Teachers' perspectives were elicited about the role of the teacher in promoting learner autonomy. Fig. 5 shows that about 69.99 percent of the teachers have the idea that the teacher has an important role in supporting learner autonomy and there is a need for teacher's help in promoting learner autonomy.

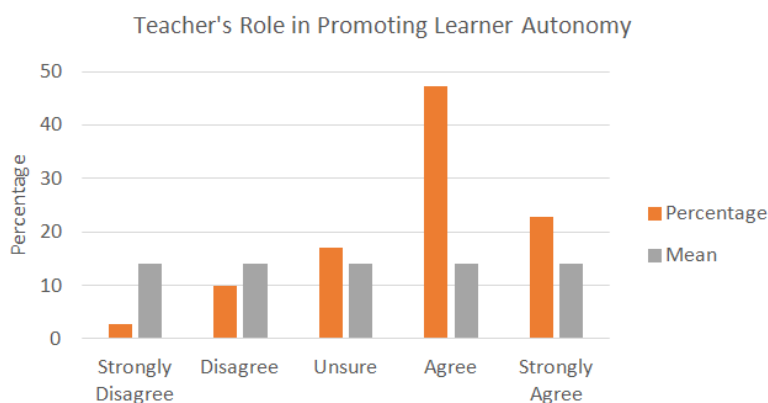


Fig. 5: The percentage level of teachers' beliefs about teachers' role

V. DISCUSSION

This study was trying to find answers to research questions which were mentioned earlier in chapter 3. According to obtained data we can discuss:

RQ1: What is Iranian English teachers' perception of learner autonomy?

To answer to this question, many factors were considered in the questions that were asked. Regarding the teachers' answers in questionnaire we can say:

- Learner autonomy does not mean learning without the teacher.
- Autonomy means that learners have the chance of decision making about how they learn.
- Learners of all cultural background can develop learner autonomy.
- Language learners who are confident can develop autonomy more than less confident ones.
- Self-monitoring and self-assessment in the process of learning are central to development of learner autonomy.
- Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have the opportunity to work together and learn from each other.

Overall, it can be said that from the teachers' perspective learner autonomy means that learners have the important role and responsibility in the process of learning.

RQ2: What is the contribution of learner autonomy to L2 learning?

In the questionnaire, 94.28 percent of the teachers agreed that learner autonomy has positive effect on language learners' success, while 74.28 percent agreed that learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively. Altogether, the teachers showed positive views about the influence of learner autonomy to L2 learning and it can be inferred that if learners lack autonomy, they probably are not effective language learners.

RQ3: What factors influence learner autonomy in teachers' view?

Teachers were asked some questions that showed teachers' ideas about different factors influencing learner autonomy. From their point of view, independent study including working alone outside the classroom and in library, completing task alone and using internet to do out-of-class tasks has very great effect on promoting learner autonomy. Also having the opportunity to make decisions and choices about what to learn, the kind of activities, learning materials and the assessment process are factors which play essential role in promoting learner autonomy.

RQ4: What is the role of teacher in promoting learner autonomy?

Teachers in this study believed that teachers should help their learners in developing and promoting learner autonomy, and the teacher's role in supporting learner autonomy is very important.

A. Conclusion

Regarding the results of data analysis, this study showed that learner autonomy for the Iranian teachers' means that the only participant in the process of learning is not the teacher and learners also have important role in this process. Learners must be given the opportunities to work alone outside the classroom and study independently in the library, and work with their peers to learn from each other to promote learner autonomy. Teachers also agreed that if the learners have the choice of learning method and materials and assessment procedure, learner autonomy will be promoted more. According to teachers, learner autonomy has considerable effect on L2 learning and autonomous learners are more effective learners. They stated that teachers should help and support their learners to promote autonomy and become autonomous learners.

The findings of this study are in line with the findings of previous studies such as Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012) and Balçıkanlı (2010) which found that teachers are aware of the concept of learner autonomy and are likely to promote it for more effective learning.

B. Limitations and Pedagogical Implications

With regard to the results of this study, there are some limitations to be taken into account. The number of participants would be increased and they would be chosen from different institutes. Then, the age and proficiency factors were included in the questionnaire used in this study, but because of the obscurity and ambiguity of the items it was not possible to draw a clear conclusion about these factors and further research is needed to investigate these factors' influence and relationship with learner autonomy.

This study suggests that learner autonomy must be considered during teacher training programs and courses and teacher educators must familiarize the trainees with the concept of learner autonomy and try to make them equipped with the best strategies of promoting autonomy. Teachers also need to improve their knowledge about learning process and not to be resistant to new approaches. They should know that if learners take the responsibility for their learning, they will learn more effectively. So the teachers should introduce the concept of autonomy to the learners and try to improve learner autonomy among their students.

APPENDIX. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Iranian English Language Teachers' Beliefs about Learner Autonomy

This questionnaire is part of a study about learner autonomy for a project in M.A course of ELT which is aimed at finding Iranian English teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and its effects on learning English as a foreign language. It consists of two parts: in part one there is some questions about teachers' viewpoint of learner autonomy and in part two some questions about the teacher's personal information. There are no wrong or right answers considering the questions, please read the questions and answer them carefully. Thanks for your time.

	Strongly disagree ^a	Disagree ^a	Unsure ^a	Agree ^a	Strongly Agree ^a
Part One					
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.
5. Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners.
 6. Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning Outside the classroom.
 7. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.
 8. Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher.
 9. It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners.
 10. It is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults.
 11. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence
 12. Learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would.
 13. Learner autonomy can be achieved by learners of all cultural backgrounds.
 14. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do.
 15. Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms.
 16. Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.
 17. Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher.
 18. Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.
 19. Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners.
 20. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.
 21. Promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners.
 22. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.
 23. Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy.
 24. Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy.
 25. The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.
 26. Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.
 27. The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy.
 28. Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner.
 29. To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability

- to evaluate their own learning.
30. The proficiency of a language learner does not affect their ability to develop autonomy.

Part Two

1. Years of experience as an English language teacher (Tick ONE):
0-4 5-9 10-14 15-19 20-24 25+
2. Highest qualification (Tick ONE):
Certificate Diploma Bachelor's Master's Doctorate Other
3. Nationality :
4. Gender
Male Female
5. At the Language Centre, which age levels do you teach most hours on? (Tick ONE):
Children Teenager Adults

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