

## Learner Autonomy in Language Learning: Teachers' Attitudes.

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### Abstract

Learner autonomy has attracted much attention in foreign language education in the past decades especially in relation to lifelong learning skills. Learner autonomy is defined as situations in which learners take charge of their own learning. This study investigating teachers' attitudes towards promoting learner autonomy at Iraqi preparatory schools. To achieve this aim, a rating questionnaire has been constructed and administered to (60) teachers of English of the preparatory schools at Baquba and AL-muqadadya district in Diyala Directorate General of Education for the academic year 2016-2017. The overall study findings indicate that the teachers of English at the preparatory school have positive attitudes towards promoting learner autonomy. The results of this study are truly promising since most Iraqi teachers of English at the preparatory schools are positive regarding promoting learner autonomy. This indicates that they seek for a change to replace the traditional teacher-centered classrooms to some more learner-centered ones.

**Key words:** Learner autonomy, Teacher attitudes

### INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy has gained a significant emphasis in recent years as a result of the increasing pedagogical emphasis on learner-centered language teaching which has been described by Scrinver (2012) as it is having trust in your students' abilities to learn and in their abilities to make decisions about how to learn. Hole(1981:3) asserts that learner autonomy in the classroom means encouraging the students to "determine the objective, to define the contents and progressions, to select methods and techniques to be used, to monitor the procedures of acquisition and to evaluate what has been acquired."Bocanegra (1999) mentions that there are other terms which are frequently used interchangeably with learner autonomy, for instance self-management, self-learning, learner training. Self-access learning, self-directed learning, individualization, independent language and self-instruction. Autonomous learners are then those who start to speed their performance by doing their own things (Ur,2012).

It is worth mentioning that raising the students' awareness of ways of identifying goals, specifying objectives and identifying resources will help them to realize their goals in learning (Cotterell, 2000). Nunan (1997) and Brajich (2000) state that most language teachers have difficulty in coming up with the main methods that can encourage learner autonomy in the classrooms. The main reason behind such difficulty has stated by (sert,2006) that many language teachers don't have any autonomy-oriented training. Therefore; they may influence negatively on the development of autonomy in their students.

From the researchers' best knowledge and long experience in teaching, they find that English education in Iraq appears to fail to meet the demands for English as a means of communication, instead, it puts heavy emphasis on grammatical structures, teacher-oriented classrooms and standardized exams. Therefore; this study has been tackled to investigate Iraqi teachers' attitudes towards promoting learner autonomy in the English language learning classroom and particularly at the preparatory schools. So, the main objectives of this study are identifying and classifying Iraqi teachers' attitudes towards promoting learner autonomy at the preparatory schools.

#### -Research Question:

This research aims to answer the following:

1-What is teachers' attitudes towards promoting learner autonomy at the preparatory schools?

#### 2-Literature Review:

##### 2-1-Learner Autonomy:

Barillaro (2011) defines learner autonomy as the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning. Some others define it in another way, simply by stating what is not learner autonomy: "It is not learning without a teacher, it is not something teacher do to learners i. ea new methodology. It is not a single easily identifiable behaviour, it is not a steady state achieved by learners once and for all "(Borg,2012)

Harmer (2012) emphasizes the need of the teachers to encourage learner autonomy i.e., the students' learning on their own and relying on their own abilities. This can be done by offering learner training where we get the students to think about how they learn best, for example, how can they remember vocabulary best, what is the best way of studying at home, etc. Hedge (2000) presents learner training as a distinction between psychological and practical preparation. The first can be described as a change in perception about what language learning involves and a change in the expectation that language can only be learned through the careful control of a specialist teacher. The second involves acquiring a range of techniques with which learners can enhance their learning. Both these two kinds of preparation can be called "learner training "which Hedge defines as "a set of procedures or activities which raise learner's awareness of what is involved in learning a foreign language, which encourage learners to become more involved, active and responsible in their own learning".

##### 2-2- Characteristics of Autonomous Learners:

It is believed that a self-directed or autonomous learner is one who is self-motivated, one who takes the initiative and one who has a clear idea of what he wants to learn. So, there are many characteristics of self-autonomous learner presented by Hedge (2000):

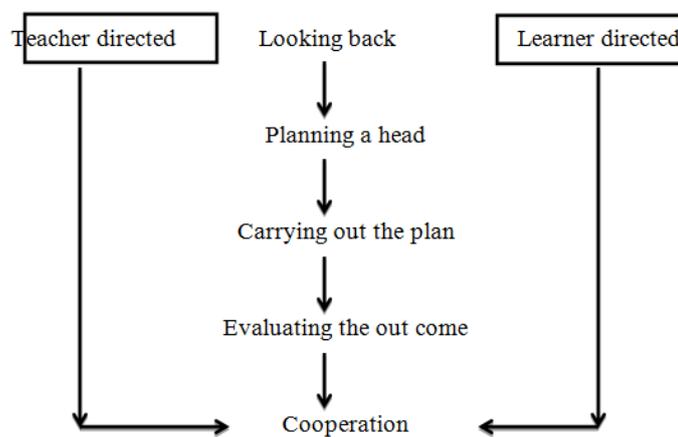
- 1- They are fully aware of their needs and work cooperatively with the teachers to achieve their objectives.
- 2- They learn inside and outside the classroom i.e they don't have specific time for learning
- 3- They know how to use resources independently.
- 4- They can take classroom-based material and can build on it.
- 5- They learn with active thinking.
- 6- Adjust and modify their learning strategies when necessary to learning.
- 7- Manage their time and divide it properly.
- 8- They don't think that the teacher is a god who can teach them everything and never go wrong.

Autonomy and responsibility both require active involvement and they are apparently very much interrelated. If the teacher wants to foster learner autonomy, she /he needs to develop a sense of responsibility in his/her students. So, it is one of the highly effective characteristics of autonomous learner. (Scharle&S zabo, 2000)

### 2-3-Developing Learner Autonomy:

People often connect the concept of learner autonomy which chaos and imagine doing what they want to do without control; nothing could be more wrong. We are talking about the development of the autonomy in an institutional context. This might imply that it is not a question of help yourself-menu, for what to do, neither for teachers nor for learner.

Learner autonomy can be seen as a more from often totally teacher-directed teaching environment to a possible learner-directed learning environment.



Developing Learner Autonomy (( simple model))

The teacher must think of the skills and attitudes that the learner needs to identify to take charge of their own learning. (Gardner, 2011)

#### 1- motivation and self-confidence:

It is essential to encourage intrinsic motivation. Intrinsically motivated learners are more able to identify the goals of learning and that make them more autonomous. Self-confidence contributes to the development of responsibility. The learners must believe that they are capable of managing their own learning and can rely on themselves not on the teacher.

#### 2- monitoring and evaluating:

Students are preferable to be encouraged to focus on the process of their learning, not on the outcome. This will help them to examine their own contribution to their learning. Self-evaluation requires learners to judge their own work as objectively as they can.

#### 3- Cooperation and group cohesion:

Promoting cooperation affects learner attitudes in several ways. It encourages the learner to rely on each other and not only on the teacher. Group work also creates opportunities for feedback from peers. Students are of course not trained teachers and cannot take over any teacher role, but they are surely able to cope with some of the teacher's roles. It is important that the teacher should respect the ways they handle these tasks and expect learners to deal with the consequences of their decisions, support them but do not be afraid to let them make mistakes. (Scharle & Szabo, 2000)

#### 3- Methodology:

The population of this study consists of the teachers of English at the preparatory schools in general Directorate of Education in Diyala Governorate.

The choice is random in selecting a representative number of teachers from the sub directorates of Al-muqadaya, Al-khalisprovinces and the centre of Baquba.

Sixty teachers were the sample of the teachers of the preparatory schools distributed between the two provinces of Districts and the centre of Baquba (20 teachers for each).

To achieve the aim of this study which is identifying and classifying Iraqi teachers' attitudes towards promoting learner autonomy in the English language learning classrooms, a questionnaire has been constructed by the researchers. It is a rating scale questionnaire which elicit responses to specific questions in the form of scaled, quantifiable data which can be subjected to powerful statistical analysis. (Bachman & palmer, 1996)

It should be noted that most of the items of the questionnaire of this study has been collected on the basis of the previous studies, open-ended questionnaire and the books which relate to the topic of the intended questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of (13) items which represent positive and negative attitudes relating to the promoting of learning autonomy. They supposed to elicit teachers' attitudes by the three rating scales: 1- I agree 2-I partially agree 3- I refuse

It is worth mentioning that the items of the questionnaire were submitted to the jury of experts in the field of methodology and linguistics to assess their face validity. Accordingly, some items have been modified and other have excluded. The remaining are which constitute the final version of the questionnaire. See table (1)

**Table 1:** Questionnaire Items

Items	I agree	I partially agree	I refuse
1- Increasing the level of learner control will increase the level of self – determination and overall motivation towards learning.			
2- Involving students in decision making process makes them enthusiastic about learning.			
3- Encouraging students to set up directions in the planning, pacing, monitoring and evaluating the learning process cause struggle to the teacher.			
4- Encouraging students to access and use their own authentic material in the classroom can develop a sense of ownership and control over their learning.			
5- Taking the students' needs and interests into considerations in the process of learning will promote their self-esteem.			
6- Encouraging students 'ability to think and act independently allow them to become critically and socially aware member of their own lives.			
7- Enhancing learner autonomy will help students to become more proficient and creative.			
8- Developing and promoting the sense of learner autonomy will enable the learner to become aware of their own process of learning.			
9- Being an autonomous enables the learner to apprehend and adopt any learning situation at any time or place.			
10- Giving the learners an opportunity to determine the time, place and pace of the course will provide them with a sense of self –confidence.			
11- language teachers without any autonomy-oriented training may experience difficulties in creating such classroom culture where autonomy is accepted.			
12- Developing learner autonomy requires the use and sometimes the inversions of certain strategies that most teachers are not familiar with.			
13- Promoting learner autonomy may be faced with many obstacles as crowded classroom and lack of equipment in the classroom.			

After ensuring the validity of the questionnaire items, the questionnaire has been administered to a sample of (20) teachers were chosen randomly from the Directorate of Education in Diyala.

To calculate the reliability of the questionnaire, has been used split –half method. Thus, the scores of the pilot sample have been divided in to two halves :those represent even number items and those represent odd ones. The correlation between the two halves is (0.819). This value represents half of the test, therefore, Spearman- Brown coefficient is used for correction purpose.It yields (0.889) for the whole questionnaire which is considered acceptable.

\*The names of jury experts arranged alphabetically:

- 1-Arwa Abdul Rasool. ph.D. University of Diyala –college of Education.
- 2- Fatima Al – Mosawi.ph.D. University of Myssan. College of Basic Education.
- 3- Liqaa Habeeb. ph.D. University of Diyala. College of Education.
- 4- Salam Hamed. ph.D. University of Baghdad. College of Education (Ibn Rushd).
- 4- Shaymaa Al- Bakri.Ph.D. University of Baghdad. College of Education (Ibn Rushd).

The final form or version of the questionnaire was given to the teachers at the end of April 2017. They were asked to give their views on the items according to the scale of three dimensions, then their responses have been utilized by the researchers.

#### 4-Results:

To investigate the hypothesis of the study which reads "Iraqi teachers have positive attitudes towards promoting learner autonomy at the preparatory schools", the responses of the subjects were investigated by calculating the mean and the theoretical mean formula and by using the weighted mean. The mean score of the subjects was (46) compared with the theoretical mean (26). This result indicates that the mean is higher than the theoretical mean. This proves that Iraqi teachers of English have positive attitudes towards promoting learner autonomy at the preparatory schools. So, the hypothesis mentioned above is verified and accepted. See table

**Table 2:** Weighted Mean of the Questionnaire Items.

I tem	I agree	I partially agree	I disagree	Weighted mean
1	58	2	0	0 %
2	59	1	0	0 %
3	20	10	30	50 %
4	48	10	2	3 %
5	51	7	2	3 %
6	48	10	2	3 %
7	50	5	5	7 %
8	60	0	0	%
9	40	5	15	25 %
10	48	10	2	3 %
11	30	2	28	46%
12	30	3	27	45 %
13	32	3	25	41 %

After presenting teachers' attitude towards promoting learner autonomy at the preparatory school through the procedures at this study, the researchers considered the weighted mean 50% as an item that fail to gain positive attitude from teachers. Consequently, five items were gain negative attitude from teachers.They are pointed out as follows :

- 1- Item number (3) which refers to "encouraging students to set up directions in the planning, pacing, monitoring and evaluating the learning process cause struggle to the teacher" gains the most negative attitudes from teachers. It got a weighted mean 50%.
- 2- Item number (11) which refers to "language teachers without any autonomy-oriented training may experience difficulties in creating such classroom culture where autonomy is accepted" gains the second negative attitude from teachers. It got a weighted mean 46%.
- 3- Item number (12) which refers to "developing learner autonomy requires the use and sometimes the inversion of certain strategies that most teachers are not familiar with" gains the third negative attitude from teachers. It got a weighted mean 45%.
- 4- Item number (13) which refer to "promoting learner autonomy may be faced with many obstacles as crowded classroom and lack of equipment in the classroom" gains the fourth negative attitude from teachers. It got a weighted mean (41%).
- 5- Item number (9) which refer to "Being an autonomous enables the learner to apprehend and adopt any learning situation at any time or place" gains the fifth negative attitude from teachers. It got a weighted mean 25%.

#### *Discussion and Conclusions:*

It should be noted that the findings of this study come in line with the results of Balcikanli's study which indicates that student-teachers are positive towards the adoption of learner autonomy principles. It also come in accordance with Kodak's study (2003) which indicates that the majority of students have positive beliefs towards learner autonomy.

It can be concluded that Iraqi teachers of English language are positive towards promoting learner autonomy in the English language classroom at the preparatory schools. This indicates that Iraqi teachers seek for a change to replace the traditional teacher-centered one. They also encourage learners to take charge of their own learning and to participate in setting up the direction of the planning, monitoring and assessing their learning process. It also indicates that Iraqi teachers view learner autonomy as important prerequisite for language learner. They also assert the fact that the main aim of the preparatory school teaching is to realize learner autonomy of English learners. This means that Iraqi learners of English are now increasingly encouraged and expected to play a more active role in the process of learning English as a foreign language especially at the preparatory schools. It is worth mentioning that the findings of this study will provide a general picture of language teachers' attitude towards promoting learner autonomy at the preparatory schools. It can also be expected that these findings will help foreign language teachers and learners further understand the main principles of promoting learner autonomy which may enable them to achieve successful preparatory English teaching and learning.

#### *Recommendations:*

Based on the findings of the study, it would be useful to offer some recommendations for both teachers and learners to promote learner autonomy:

- 1- Spoon-feeding is not the correct way of teaching a foreign language. Thus, students have to take responsibility for their own learning.
- 2- One way of helping students to sustain their motivation towards learning is to enable them to be the doers rather than the recipient of learning action.
- 3- Teachers should encourage their students to be autonomous learners by increasing their awareness of the importance of being autonomous ones and by making them engage in outside the classroom tasks.
- 4- Training courses for teachers at the preparatory schools are necessary to be familiar with the strategies that are required in promoting learner autonomy.
- 5- Learner autonomy should be an important goal of all learning and not just a goal for highly committed students completing course.

#### *Limitations:*

Due to the constrains on time and available equipment, only a small number of teachers could participate in this study. It is therefore; not necessarily representative of all the teachers of this study is from Diyala Governorate, so it is possible that the teachers from other governorates in Iraq may show different results.

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