

Teachers' beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy

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This paper describes a project about the beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy (LA) held by English language teachers in a university language centre. A distinctive feature of this project was the manner in which professional development workshops for the teachers were informed by prior research about these teachers' perspectives on LA. Following a brief rationale for the project, we outline its research component before illustrating how this shaped the teacher workshops. The model for relating research and professional development we illustrate here is one that we believe can be applied more generally in supporting teacher development and institutional change in ELT.

Introduction

Much has been written about the concept of autonomy in language learning since pioneering work by the Council of Europe in the 1980s. More recently, texts such as Lamb and Reinders (2008) and Benson (2011) have highlighted the many different theoretical perspectives from which autonomy has been defined and applied, together with a range of benefits autonomy is seen to offer learners (for example an enhanced ability to make independent decisions about their learning). It is clear from this work, though, that language teachers' perspectives on what autonomy means have not been awarded much attention. Yet it is now well established in the teacher education literature (see, for example Phipps and Borg 2007) that teachers' beliefs influence their instructional choices; it is also widely acknowledged that an understanding of teachers' beliefs needs to be an integral part of initiatives that aim to promote change in what teachers do in the classroom (Wedell 2009). This lack of attention to teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy (LA), then, provided the theoretical motivation for the project we discuss here.

There was also, however, a practical motivation for this work: a desire, in the institution where this project was conducted, to promote LA more widely and consistently. We thus wanted the research dimension of the project to have concrete impact by feeding into professional development activity and strategic planning within the institution. The strong link between prior localized research and subsequent professional development work is, we think, a key strength of this project.

Context for the project

The project was conducted at the Language Centre (LC) of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman. The LC employs 200 teachers of over 25 nationalities who teach English to around 3,500 Omani students preparing for undergraduate study at the University.

LC students do two types of English language courses: foundation pre-sessional general courses and post-foundation EAP courses. The foundation courses follow a skills-based curriculum that covers 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 consists of 20 weekly contact hours. A range of formative and summative assessments is employed. The post-foundation courses are tailor-made based on the requirements of each college in the University, for example English for medicine or 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 2010–2011: 4)

Activities for promoting LA, such as independent study projects and portfolios, are built into LC courses. However, there was a general sense within the LC, among both the management and the teachers, that existing strategies for promoting LA were not achieving the desired results. This provided the stimulus for this project, which was supported by a British Council English Language Teaching Research Partnership Award.

The research component

Research questions

The research component of this project investigated 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 To what extent do teachers feel their learners are autonomous?
- 4 How desirable and feasible do teachers feel it is to promote LA?
- 5 To what extent do teachers say they actually promote LA?
- 6 What challenges do teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?

Data to address these issues were collected via a questionnaire and interviews.

The questionnaire

Significant time was invested in the development of the questionnaire, in the belief that research findings are of little value unless the means through which they are generated are sound. We drew on a range of sources in constructing the instrument. For example, we reviewed the literature on LA (for example Little 1991; Pemberton, Toogood, and Barfield 2009) in order to identify salient debates in the field, such as ways of defining LA, the role of the teacher in promoting LA, the cultural relativity of LA, and the links between LA and L2 learning. Items addressing all these issues were included in the questionnaire. We also reviewed the few existing studies of teachers' beliefs about LA (for example Camilleri 1999) for further insight into the kinds of questions we might ask. One final source of guidance was

the research methods literature, where much advice is available on how to improve the design of questionnaires (for example De Vaus 2002).

A version of the questionnaire was piloted with 18 teachers of English at a university LC in Turkey where the first author had existing contacts. The analysis of these teachers' responses and suggestions led to considerable further revision; some questionnaire items were deleted, others reworded, and there were also cases where, while the question remained unchanged, the options for answering it were revised.

The final version of the questionnaire (see online supplementary data) had four sections. Section 1 contained 37 Likert scale items addressing key themes relevant to LA and which teachers responded to on a five-point scale of agreement; Section 2 asked teachers for their views about the desirability and feasibility of (a) involving learners in a range of course decisions (for example about course objectives) and (b) developing in learners certain abilities associated with LA (for example monitoring their own progress). Section 3 asked teachers two questions about their work at the LC: how autonomous they felt their learners were and whether they felt they promoted LA in their own teaching; for both questions teachers were also asked to provide examples or explanations to support their answer. The final section collected background information about teachers and their work (for example experience and qualifications).

The instrument was made available to all 200 LC teachers both online (using SurveyMonkey) and via an email attachment. Sixty-one teachers (30.5 per cent) completed the survey.

The closed questionnaire items were analysed using SPSS 18 to calculate descriptive statistics (for example frequency counts and percentages) as well as to look for associations between variables (for example between students' level of English and how autonomous teachers felt they were). The responses to the open-ended questions were subjected to content analysis through which common themes (for example different obstacles to LA perceived by teachers) were identified and categorized.

Interviews

In the questionnaire, teachers were also asked if they would like to participate in a follow-up interview and 42 volunteered. Twenty teachers were selected using two criteria:

- a** teachers' beliefs about how autonomous their students were and
- b** teachers' years of experience in ELT.

Interviewees were 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. This makes the sample more representative of the larger group. Thus, for example, in the larger sample of teachers in the study, 30 teachers (just under 50 per cent) had four years' or less experience in ELT; in the sample of 20 interviewees, there were ten teachers (50 per cent) with this range of experience.

The purpose of the interviews was to explore in more detail issues addressed in the questionnaire. Interview volunteers wrote their name on their

questionnaire, so it was then possible to personalize each interview based on teachers' individual questionnaire answers. Ten interviews were conducted face-to-face (by the researcher based in Oman) and a further ten over the phone (by the researcher based in the UK); the interviews lasted on average 30 minutes and were (with permission) recorded and transcribed. They were then analysed qualitatively, with interview comments being categorized under headings derived from the research questions listed earlier (for example definitions of LA or obstacles to LA).

Key findings

The analysis of the questionnaire and interview data highlighted the following key findings for each of the six research questions listed earlier:

- 1 Teachers held a range of beliefs about what LA means, but one recurrent concept widely acknowledged was that it involved learners in having the freedom and/or ability to make choices and decisions. In the questionnaire, 95.1 per cent agreed that autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn. Similar views were expressed in the interviews; for example one teacher said that LA was the ability 'to make decisions about how they will learn, what kinds of things they will learn, for what reason they are learning'.
- 2 In terms of the role of LA in L2 learning, 93.4 per cent of teachers agreed that LA has a positive effect on success as a language learner, while 85.2 per cent agreed that LA allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would.
- 3 In all, 41.7 per cent of the teachers disagreed that their learners were autonomous, 18.3 per cent were unsure, and 40 per cent agreed. Teachers' opinions did not correlate with the level of learners they taught.
- 4 Figure 1 shows teachers' views about the desirability and feasibility of involving learners in a range of language course decisions. In all cases, teachers were more positive about the desirability of student involvement than they were about its feasibility. 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.
- 5 In total, 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. In elaborating on their answers, teachers provided many concrete

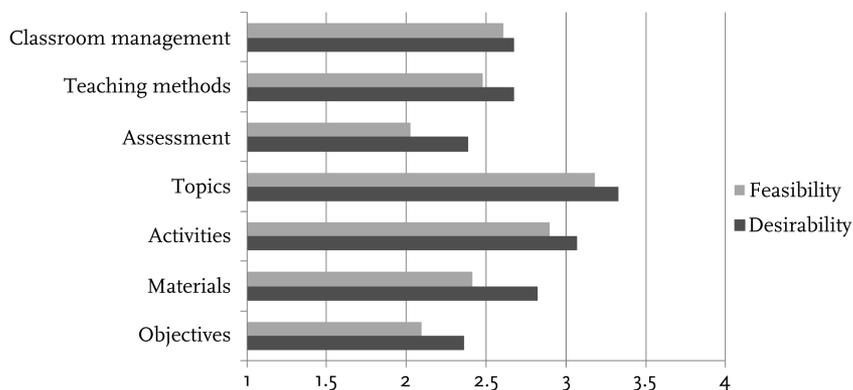


FIGURE 1
Desirability and feasibility of student involvement in decision making ($N = 61$)

(1=undesirable/unfeasible; 4=very desirable/feasible)

examples of activities and strategies they used to promote LA (see details of Workshop 2 below) and of factors they feel hinder them from doing so (see the next point).

- 6 The challenges identified by teachers in promoting LA can be grouped into learner factors (for example lack of motivation; lack of skills for independent learning), institutional factors (for example an overloaded curriculum; limited resources to promote LA), and teacher factors (for example lack of teacher autonomy; low expectations of what learners can achieve). For example, in relation to institutional constraints, one teacher wrote that ‘in the short time that I have to teach such an overwhelming amount of material, there is very little I can do to promote true learner autonomy’.

These findings are in themselves interesting; they indicate that the teachers were in theory positive about the potential of LA to support L2 learning and that they strongly associated LA with the concept of learner choice; however, they were more cautious (as in Bullock 2011, where teachers reflected on the feasibility of learner self-assessment) in assessing the extent to which learners could in practice be involved in course decisions. Teachers were split on the issue of how autonomous their learners are but they generally agreed that to some extent they did promote LA in their teaching. A more detailed discussion of these findings is beyond our scope here and at this point we will move on to illustrate how the research component of the project informed the subsequent professional development work.

The professional development component

The goal of the second phase of this project was to utilize the above research findings to inform the development of an institutional LA strategy at the LC. As part of the process of developing this strategy, we arranged a series of four, 90-minute workshops for LC teachers in which the research findings provided a stimulus for discussions of various aspects of LA (see Table 1 for the workshop topics and goals). The sessions started with a discussion of what LA is, then moved on to focus on LC teachers’ current practices regarding LA, and concluded with an analysis of barriers to promoting LA in the LC and how to address these. These were all issues addressed by the research questions listed earlier. The final workshop also focused on ways of sustaining within the LC the interest in LA created by these four workshops.

Workshop	Topic	Goals
1	What is LA?	To engage teachers in defining LA in ways which are contextually feasible.
2	LA in the LC	To enable teachers to learn about LA practices used by their colleagues.
3	Implementing LA	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 LA	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.

TABLE 1
Focus of LA workshops

To illustrate how we used the research findings, we now present the materials for one workshop. Tasks 1, 2, and 3 here use as stimuli data generated during the research phase of the study.

Workshop 2: learner autonomy in the Language Centre

Objectives

Through this workshop, participants will:

- learn about the extent to which teachers at the S Q U Language Centre feel they promote learner autonomy;
- become aware of strategies that teachers say they use to promote learner autonomy at the Language Centre; and
- 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 S Q U I give my students opportunities to develop learner autonomy.

Figure 2 shows what the teachers said. What are your reactions to these results?

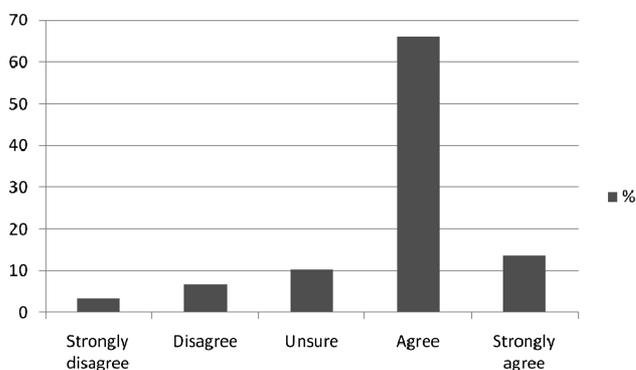


FIGURE 2
Extent to which LC teachers say they promote LA with their students

Task 2: how Language Centre 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 Language Centre 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. [For reasons of space we list only the first ten items here.]

- 1 Going to the library, doing Moodle assignments are part of learning that develops autonomy.
- 2 Cooperative and peer learning are 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.

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 characterize your teaching? If yes, explain what you do.

Task 4: feasible learner autonomy practices in the Language Centre

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 Language Centre? List FIVE practices and consider how they contribute to learner autonomy.

Workshop principles

These materials are representative of the approach we took in linking the research project to professional development work. In each workshop, we identified from the research phase of the project key issues of relevance to LA in the LC, selected data relevant to these issues, and used these data in tasks that stimulated teacher discussion. In the case of the workshop illustrated here, the focus was practical strategies for promoting LA, with an emphasis not on external input but on ideas suggested in the research phase by the teachers themselves. The teachers thus had the opportunity to become aware of the range of existing practices already (reportedly) being used in the LC as well as to reflect on the extent to which they already did or might use such activities in their work. Teachers were also asked to respond critically to the activities listed in Task 2; for example we discussed the extent to which simply encouraging learners to be autonomous was likely to be productive. The final task asked teachers, in groups, to identify a smaller set of LA activities that they felt had most potential to be productive in their context.

In using local research findings in this manner to stimulate teacher reflection, our work was underpinned by a number of principles—drawn

from the literature (see, for example, Goodall, Day, Lindsay, Muijs, and Harris 2005) and our own experience—relevant to teacher professional development and institutional change:

- 1 Instructional 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 (for example of what LA 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 (for example simply telling teachers how to promote LA) 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.

The workshops adhered to these principles. They provided extensive opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative explorations of the meaning and implementation of LA in their context (a recurrent theme throughout the workshops was in fact the need to develop a *shared understanding* among staff about a *contextually feasible* way of defining LA). Propositional input during the workshops was not wholly absent (in Workshop 3, for example, teachers were introduced to a framework of degrees of LA proposed by Nunan 1997); but the focus was squarely on using the research data to stimulate teachers to voice, share, and debate their own beliefs and practices. This was in fact the aspect of the workshops that teachers appreciated most. For example, in written feedback after Workshop 1, one teacher wrote that it is ‘Interesting to see and hear how different we are in one place doing the same job’; after Workshop 2, teachers also wrote that they valued the ‘opportunities to discuss on the basis of shared practices at the Language Centre’ and that ‘the discussion, I think, was very productive, it promotes thinking about what we are doing in classrooms’.

There was also an emphasis throughout on enabling the teachers to generate ideas that could inform the LC’s strategic planning in relation to LA. For example, in Workshop 1, teachers drafted working definitions of LA which they felt could provide direction for LC policy; in Workshops 2 (see Task 2 in the workshop described above) and 3, the teachers generated lists of strategies they use or could use to promote LA in their classrooms (here too teachers were surprised to find out about the range of LA activities their colleagues said they were already using; a teacher wrote after Workshop 2 that it was ‘amazing to see just how many practical possibilities there are to encourage learner autonomy’); and in Workshop 4, teachers developed a list of strategies for sustaining, in the short and medium term, the momentum created by the series of workshops (for example making LA a regular item in staff meetings, considering how more space could be created for LA in a packed curriculum, compiling examples of LA practices in the LC into a booklet for teachers). All the material generated by the teachers during the

workshops was collated, typed up, and circulated back to them; materials from the earlier workshops were also fed into the later ones to create a greater sense of continuity and teacher involvement in the sessions.

Teachers' responses to the workshops, both during the sessions and in their written feedback, were very positive. As already noted, they valued the opportunity to talk to each other about their beliefs and practices, to examine research data generated in their own context, and to recognize that the sizeable challenges they faced in promoting LA were ones they could productively address together. By the end of the workshops, the participating teachers had created a sense of joint purpose and momentum, which they were keen to take forward in continuing to explore how LA might be promoted more productively in their work.

Conclusion

We believe that the research component of this project has empirical value in its own right; our emphasis here, however, has been less on the specific research findings and more on the strategy we adopted for linking research and professional development. This strategy represents a model that can be applied to a variety of pedagogical issues that institutions or departments want to engage their staff in exploring. It is, of course, essential that the research dimension of any such project meets basic quality criteria (see Borg 2010); for example questionnaires need to be appropriately developed and data analysed systematically. There is also value in collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, given that the latter can supply real quotations from colleagues (or indeed from learners) that can provide a productive stimulus for discussion during workshops (as we saw here, it was this interactive element and the opportunities it provided for the voicing and sharing of beliefs and practices that teachers valued most). Adequate time for the research thus needs to be built into projects of this kind. However, once data have been collected from within an institution on an issue of particular interest, these allow for the preparation of professional development work that has very high local relevance to teachers and their institution.

In this project, the workshops were conducted intensively (four over a period of five days). This was dictated by logistical factors within the institution. An alternative to such an approach would be to run the workshops over a longer period so that teachers have space for reflection and action in their classrooms in between each session. This might allow for the workshops to impact more immediately on teachers' classroom practices. Having said that, the intensive option taken here certainly created a strong sense of energy and continuity among the teachers, which augured well for their continued engagement with promoting LA in their institution.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *ELT Journal* online (<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org>).

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