

# Saudi EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Learner Autonomy

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## Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study that investigated the perceptions on learner autonomy of 136 English teachers in Saudi Arabia. Using a mixed-method approach that utilized a survey and an interview, teachers' beliefs were explored considering their interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy and its role in foreign language learning, the sense of responsibility that those teachers have in helping their learners become autonomous, the extent to which they feel that their learners are autonomous, and the challenges that they face in promoting their learners' autonomy. Descriptive statistics (i.e., frequency counts and percentages) were calculated to determine the study findings. These findings revealed that the teachers in this study conceptualized the construct of learner autonomy according to four main orientations: technical, psychological, social, and political; the teachers' notions of learner autonomy were most strongly associated with the psychological orientation. These teachers also emphasized that they were responsible for their students' learning, and they perceived their students as passive, dependent and lacking initiative. They further identified several factors related to the learner, the institution, and the teacher as barriers that challenge them in their facilitation of learner autonomy, with some Saudi learner-related factors being the teachers' main challenges in this regard.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, EFL teacher, Teacher beliefs, Teacher role, Teaching methodology

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 *The Concept of Learner Autonomy*

Holec (1981) provided a simple definition of learner autonomy: the ability to take charge of one's own learning. However, taking charge of one's own learning should not be understood as complete independence from one's teacher and peers, as learner autonomy does not mean learning in complete isolation from teacher support. According to many earlier studies (see Benson, 2001; Little, 1991), autonomous learners do not learn a language without interacting with a teacher or peers; rather, they develop a sense of interdependence and work together with teachers and other learners to achieve shared goals. Nguyen (2014) provided a definition for learner autonomy that recognizes the teacher's role in the development of learner autonomy, hypothesizing that learner autonomy is the "learner's willingness and ability to take responsibility to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate his/her learning in tasks that are constructed in negotiation with and support from the teacher" (p. 190). This definition acknowledges not only the learner's responsibility to learn independently but also the teacher's responsibility in supporting learners as they develop learner autonomy.

Murase (2009) acknowledged the multidimensionality of the learner autonomy construct. By reviewing related literature on this concept (e.g., Benson, 1997; Holliday, 2003; Oxford, 2003; etc.), she categorized the autonomy construct into four main orientations: technical, psychological, political, and social orientations. While the technical perspective of learner autonomy implies a positivist approach to knowledge and entails technical skills (e.g., learning strategies and task implementation) that are needed to manage one's own learning (Ikonen, 2013), the psychological orientation refers to learner autonomy as an "internal" or innate capacity that is associated with cognitive aspects (e.g., attitudes and abilities that affect learning). The political perspective emphasizes the learner's control over learning processes and content (Ikonen, 2013). According to Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), the social perspective refers to interaction and social participation in the development of learner autonomy. Murase (2009) clarified that these four perspectives/orientations are considered to be interrelated with one another and that each of these categories can be divided into subcategories; for instance, technical autonomy can be divided into two subcategories: behavioral autonomy and situational autonomy.

### 1.2 *The Teacher's Role in Learner Autonomy*

The teacher plays a central role in learner autonomy. Little, Hodel, Kohonen, Meijer, and Perclova (2007) proposed that the teacher's role in autonomous learning involves deploying the pedagogical principles of *learner development* ("teachers involve their learners in their own learning like giving them the ownership of learning objectives and the learning process"), *learner reflection* ("teachers get their learners to reflect about learning and about the target language"), and *appropriate target language use* ("teachers engage their learners in appropriate target language use").

Tudor (1993) highlighted that a teacher who is willing to involve his/her students in

autonomous learning settings must make an essential shift in his/her role in traditional learning, in which he/she works as a supplier of knowledge and a figure of authority who decides what will be learned and how it will be learned, who establishes the learning objectives and activities, and who provides authoritative feedback on students' performance. According to Tudor (1993) and Joshi (2011), an autonomy-supportive teacher should move from his/her traditional role as an authority into a new role in which he/she becomes a counselor who works as a guide, a facilitator, an organizer, a creator of a learning atmosphere and space, and an initiator; in doing so, he/she can help learners take significant responsibility in setting their own goals, planning practice opportunities, or assessing their progress. In addition to this role, Yan (2012) identified two additional characteristics of autonomy-supportive teachers; they are both managers (mapping out and managing the most likely paths available to the students and the consequences of following each particular path) and resource people (optimizing learning conditions by helping learners develop an awareness of the whole range of alternatives, strategies, and learning styles and by providing them with feedback and encouragement).

### *1.3 EFL Teachers in Saudi Arabia*

Before joining the EFL teaching profession, English teachers in Saudi Arabia are prepared via four-year English programs, which are offered by the English departments of Education and Arts colleges at various Saudi universities. These programs prepare Saudi instructors to teach English in public schools at the elementary, intermediate, and secondary levels. Al Malihi (2015) described EFL teacher preparation programs in Saudi Arabia as non-systematic and inadequate. While colleges of Education emphasize various educational aspects in preparing would-be EFL teachers, colleges of Arts prepare students to be English or English-Arabic translation specialists—not necessarily English teachers (Al Malihi, 2015). For this reason, graduates of colleges of Arts are currently required to enroll in a two-semester program that equips them with pre-service education and training to be English language teachers. Al-Seghayer (2011) highlighted the lack of pre-service training that is offered to prospective Saudi EFL teachers. He noted that English teaching pre-service training programs represent only 10% of the total courses offered by English departments in colleges and universities. He clarified further that such programs are inadequate with regard to disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and technological pedagogical knowledge.

Because of this poor pre-service preparation, Al-Seghayer (2014) emphasized the need for in-service training for those teachers. He clarified that Saudi EFL teachers are inadequately trained to prepare students to be good English learners. He added that the proficiency level of most Saudi English teachers is publicly acknowledged to be insufficient such that they barely understand the materials that they are attempting to teach to their students. Al-Seghayer added that, due to the lack of proper training, questions have consistently been raised regarding these teachers' competency and their capability to effectively address the critical aspects of teaching, including classroom management, progress monitoring, clinical assistance, and caregiving.

While in service, Saudi EFL teachers receive the textbooks of the prescribed curriculum and a statement of their objectives, and they are required to implement and teach them in the time allotted (Almutairi, 2008). This implies a lack of teacher autonomy in designing and implementing the teaching curriculum. These teachers also lack autonomy with regard to many other aspects of the EFL teaching process in Saudi Arabia, such as decisions regarding lesson objectives, classroom activities, the time allotted for English class, and the assessment and evaluation criteria). Saudi educational institutions usually impose these issues.

#### *1.4 Previous Research on Teachers' Beliefs about Learner Autonomy*

Surveying the literature on teachers' perspectives on learner autonomy yielded only a handful of studies (Al Asmari, 2013; Balçıkanlı, 2010; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Chan, 2003). Chan (2003) conducted a large-scale mixed-method study in an institute in Hong Kong, which investigated 41 English teachers' perspectives on their roles and responsibilities in learner autonomy and their assessment of their learners' ability to make decisions about learning. The study concluded that the teachers thought that they were responsible for the methodological decisions (such as setting objectives and designing assessments) and less responsible for both the students' engagement in activities and their progress in learning English outside of class.

Utilizing a questionnaire, Al-Shaqsi (2009) investigated the beliefs of 120 English teachers in state schools in Oman about learner autonomy in terms of (a) the characteristics of autonomous learners, (b) their learners' ability to carry out a number of autonomy-related tasks (e.g., by identifying their own weaknesses), and (c) the ways in which learner autonomy might be promoted. The teachers in this study positively assessed their learners on all learner autonomy indicators, with the three most highly rated indicators being when students asked the teacher to explain something that was unclear, when they gave their opinion on topics in the classroom, and when they used the dictionary well.

Balçıkanlı (2010) conducted a study that surveyed 112 student teachers in a Turkish university about their beliefs regarding learner autonomy. A total of 20 interviews were also conducted to assess these student teachers' overall attitudes toward learner autonomy. Although the teachers in this study had positive attitudes toward learner autonomy and the student teachers agreed that they involved their learners in most of the areas of teaching and learning, most of these teachers expressed unwillingness about involving their students in the decision-making process regarding the course time and place and the textbooks.

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) used a questionnaire to explore 61 teachers' learner autonomy beliefs and practices in a university language center in Oman. Teachers held favorable theoretical views about the importance of learner autonomy in second language learning. However, teachers' actual practices showed that they were less confident about their learners' autonomy. The study further explained that, while the teachers favored the promotion of learner autonomy, they were less sure about the feasibility of inculcating learner autonomy in their students. The researchers identified several possible hindrances to the facilitation of learner autonomy in English classrooms in the study setting, which included learner factors

(e.g., inadequate levels of motivation), teacher factors (e.g., low expectations of learners), and institutional factors (e.g., curriculum overload).

Using semi-structured interviews, Al-Busaidi and Al-Maamari (2014) conducted a qualitative study at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman to examine the ways in which teachers defined learner autonomy and the origins of their views. Their findings revealed that teachers perceived learner autonomy from different perspectives, reflecting the complexity of teachers' thoughts in describing the concept. Teachers' views of learner autonomy were influenced by factors such as their backgrounds, education, teaching experience, and classroom practices.

Nguyen (2014) investigated the extent to which Vietnamese teachers understood the concept of learner autonomy and the ways in which their beliefs regarding this concept were actually applied in their teaching practices. Both quantitative methods (a researcher-generated survey) and qualitative methods (interviews, stimulated recall interviews, and video observations) were used to collect data during the two phases of the study. The study found that teachers generally lacked an understanding of learner autonomy and that teachers' beliefs and actual teaching practices regarding learner autonomy were aligned, thus revealing little evidence of learner autonomy in any of the classrooms studied.

Few studies have investigated how teachers' beliefs are translated into teaching practices in the Saudi EFL context. Al Asmari (2013) used a survey to examine the learner autonomy notions, practices and prospects of 60 EFL teachers in a language center at Taif University in Saudi Arabia. The teachers were found to provide low assessments of their learners' ability to learn autonomously. The study also found that the teachers favored strategies for teaching communicative skills, organizing group discussions, and adopting a learner-centered approach to promote learner autonomy. The teachers suggested continuous professional development, reflections on the teaching-learning process, and learner learning as ways of improving the current state of learner autonomy in Saudi settings. However, this study did not utilize a mixed-method design with both qualitative and quantitative data collection, which would have allowed for a better understanding of learner autonomy. Moreover, the study explored the beliefs of a small population of teachers from a single institution in only one region of Saudi Arabia; thus, any general conclusions drawn from this study should be considered speculative. This study also left many issues unexplored, such as the roles of learners and teachers in learner autonomy and teachers' perspectives of the challenges faced in promoting learner autonomy.

## **2. Research Design**

### *2.1 Aims and Scope of the Study*

A paucity of research addresses the concept of learner autonomy from the perspective of English language teachers in the Saudi EFL context. Understanding what learner autonomy means to teachers is crucial to effectively integrate this concept into the language learning and teaching. Research of this nature will help bridge the gap between the theoretical

interpretation of learner autonomy and the teachers' perceptions of the concept. Therefore, this study aims to explore learner autonomy from the perspectives of English teachers in Saudi Arabia by asking the following research questions:

- A. How do Saudi EFL teachers interpret the concept of learner autonomy?
- B. To what extent do these teachers consider themselves responsible for developing learner autonomy in their classes?
- C. To what extent do these teachers feel that their learners are autonomous?
- D. What do they view as obstacles to the deployment of learner autonomy?

## 2.2 Instruments

The tools used in this study were a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Through a comprehensive review of the literature on learner autonomy in foreign language learning, various themes of learner autonomy were identified and compiled to be scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The final version of the questionnaire included 71 items that were divided into four subscales: teachers' understanding of learner autonomy (30 items), teachers' sense of responsibility in promoting learner autonomy (5 items), teachers' evaluation of learner autonomy (13 items), and the challenges that teachers experience in helping their learners become autonomous (23 items). The last section of the survey was designed to provide demographic information about the participating teachers. Most items in the questionnaire were adapted from similar studies (e.g., Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Nguyen, 2014) with slight modifications. Other items in the questionnaire were added for the purpose of the current study.

The study also conducted semi-structured interviews. Interviews were used because previous research (e.g., Borg, 2001) has hypothesized that beliefs cannot be directly observed or measured; they must be inferred from what people say, intend, and do. The interviews were thus conducted to make inferences that would allow for a better understanding of teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. During the interviews, participating teachers were asked the following four questions to explore their questionnaire responses in greater detail:

How do you define the term "learner autonomy"?

To what extent you consider yourself responsible for developing learner autonomy in your class?

To what extent do you feel that your learners are autonomous?

What challenges do you face in helping your learners become autonomous?

## 2.3 Participants

Because this research focused on exploring EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy in Saudi Arabia, participants had to be teaching EFL in a Saudi institution at the time of the

study. In total, 136 EFL teachers took part in the study. Participating teachers represented a wide range of nationalities, ages, and EFL teaching experience.

Of the 136 teachers who responded to the questionnaire, 38 teachers volunteered to do a follow-up interview. Due to time constraints and to make the sample of interviewees more representative of the larger group, the interviewees were further winnowed using stratified random sampling (see Bryman, 2012), in which the selection criteria are represented in the same proportions as they are in the larger sample. Fourteen teachers met these criteria, and they comprised the final sample of interviewees in this study.

#### *2.4 Procedures*

Ethical considerations were considered when conducting this study. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants were allowed to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was ensured throughout the different stages of the study.

An electronic (internet-based) survey was used because it is easily accessible, resulting in a high response rate, and is a fast and easy tool for collecting large volumes of data, thus providing high-quality responses in a short period of time. An email with information about this study was first sent to participants to prime them for the study. They were then invited to complete the web-based questionnaire. They were asked to respond to the survey within two weeks. Three days before this deadline, teachers received a second email to thank those who had responded and to remind those who had not to respond. The questionnaire was closed a week after the original deadline, with a response rate of 58 percent of the population that was invited to take part in the study.

Follow-up interviews were then conducted with teachers who had completed the questionnaire and who had volunteered to take part in the interview. The 14 interviews were conducted over a one-month period. Male teachers were interviewed face to face, while female teachers were interviewed over the phone. Each interview took approximately 15 minutes. Because most of the teachers in the current study were not sufficiently confident and proficient to speak English, all interviews were conducted in Arabic and were, with the permission of teachers, audio-recorded.

#### *2.5 Data Analysis*

The analysis of the collected data was conducted in reference to the research questions above to develop an understanding of Saudi teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy.

The closed questionnaire data were statistically analyzed using PASW Statistics Software (formerly SPSS). A preliminary analysis of Cronbach's alpha was conducted to check the questionnaire's reliability, which was found to be satisfactory (.73). Descriptive statistics (i.e., frequency counts and percentages) were calculated for all questions in the survey to determine the study findings.

The analysis of the qualitative data derived from the interview data was performed using

NVIVO Software. Before analyzing the interview data, they were translated into English, fully transcribed, organized, and prepared for the main analysis. To check the reliability of these data, the researcher had an independent Arabic-speaking person listen to the interviews and check the transcripts to ensure that the transcripts matched the audio-recorded interviews. Then, the researcher and the independent Arabic speaker listened to the tape together to arrive at the final transcript. The coding functions in NVIVO (Nodes) were used to code segments of information from the interviews, and the codes were categorized into four themes: teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy, teachers' sense of responsibility, teachers' assessments of learner autonomy, and autonomy-deployment challenges.

Given the mixed-method nature of this study, data analysis also involved a comparison of the questionnaire and interview data, which allowed us to corroborate particular conclusions from two perspectives, to illustrate quantitative findings with qualitative examples, and to obtain a more meaningful understanding of teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The results of this study are described and discussed in four sections: (1) Teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy, (2) Teachers' sense of responsibility in promoting learner autonomy, (3) Teachers' beliefs about students' autonomy, and (4) Constraints that teachers face in promoting learner autonomy.

#### 3.1 Teachers' Interpretations of Learner Autonomy

The figures in Table 1 indicate that teachers held a wide range of the interpretations of learner autonomy. Teachers' perspectives on learner autonomy ultimately fell into four categories: psychological, social, technical, and political perspectives. They interpreted autonomy predominantly in terms of psychological orientation ( $M = 4.23$  out of 5), indicating that autonomy pertains to individual learners' pre-existing mental attributes. Perceiving learner autonomy primarily as a psychological construct is line with Little's (1991) claim that learner autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relationship with the learning process and content. This finding also reveals the teachers' solid understanding of learner autonomy.

Table 1. Mean levels (M) and standard deviations (SD) of the four orientations of learner autonomy

No.	Construct	M	SD
1	Political orientation	3.63	.35
2	Technical orientation	3.86	.46
3	Psychological orientation	4.23	.51
4	Social orientation	4.03	.55
5	Proficiency and learner autonomy	3.43	.64



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6	Age and learner autonomy	3.79	.88
7	Culture and learner autonomy	3.75	.84
8	Teacher's role in learner autonomy	4.44	.62
9	Learner autonomy and effective language learning	4.41	.56

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Teachers also recognized the importance of the social dimension of learner autonomy ( $M = 4.03$ ), acknowledging the role that co-operation and social interaction (as opposed to individual work) play in promoting learner autonomy, as hypothesized in previous research (e.g., Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). This perspective on learner autonomy is theoretically consistent with what Dam (1995) hypothesized, i.e., that learner autonomy entails “a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person” (p. 1). This view could reflect teachers’ anticipation of the potential benefits of cooperative learning, which could enhance learner autonomy if properly implemented. However, it contradicts the actual current situation in Saudi EFL classes, where the traditional teacher-centered approach that undermines the practical values of cooperative learning is still dominant (see e.g., Alshammari, 2015).

In comparison to the relatively high importance that teachers attached to the psychological and social aspects of learner autonomy, teachers have attached lower importance to the technical and political dimensions of learner autonomy. Compared with the other orientations, the political orientation of learner autonomy obtained the lowest mean score ( $M = 3.63$ ), which indicates the lack of the teachers’ awareness of a very important aspect of learner autonomy (i.e., learners’ independence, power, and control over learning). The low importance that teachers attached to the political element of learner autonomy opposes the view that learner autonomy mostly concerns individual freedom of choice and control, especially in educational contexts (e.g., Dam, 1995; Littlewood, 1996; Reinders, 2010). However, this finding also reflects these teachers’ actual practices, in which most of the control over the learning-teaching process is in the hands of teachers rather than learners.

Technical autonomy, which involves the learners’ ability to use learning strategies and certain skills to learn a language, also obtained a low mean score ( $M = 3.86$ ). Teachers likely perceived that, in the absence of the political aspect of learner autonomy, the technical aspect did not apply to their teaching practice.

In addition to the four orientations of learner autonomy identified and categorized above, teachers recognized that the teacher is a key player in learner autonomy ( $M = 4.44$ ) and also noted that autonomy plays a significant role in effective language learning ( $M = 4.41$ ). They also acknowledged a reasonable relationship between age-related and cultural factors and learner autonomy ( $M = 3.79$  and  $3.75$ , respectively). However, they reported a quite weak relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency. This view is not consistent with the findings of some previous experimental studies (e.g., Dafei, 2007; Zhang & Li,

2004), which revealed a strong relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency, whereby the more autonomous a learner is, the more the higher his/her language proficiency. The data in Section 1 of the Appendix show teachers' responses to the items pertaining to their interpretations of autonomy.

Interviewees interpreted learner autonomy in a variety of ways. Most teachers misinterpreted learner autonomy as the learner's ability to learn on his/her own with no teacher support and as the learner's responsibility to learn fully independently (without the teacher). Other teachers perceived the concept of autonomy in similar orientations as those that were reported in the questionnaire. For example, one interviewee referred to learner autonomy as a student's willingness to work with his peers while learning (i.e., social orientation). Another interviewee highlighted the relationship between learner autonomy and motivation (i.e., psychological orientation), stating that "...learner autonomy means that the learner has to be motivated and inspired in order to learn effectively".

### *3.2 Teachers' Sense of Responsibility in Developing Learner Autonomy*

The results reported in Section 2 in the Appendix indicate that most of the teachers thought that they bore the primary responsibility for all aspects of the teaching-learning process in their classes. The overall findings in this section reveal that 84.1% of teachers perceived themselves as being responsible for most of aspects of learning; 14.08% disagreed with this perception; and 1.76% remained neutral.

Teachers' responses across the five items in this subscale indicated that more than 88% of the teachers (47% agree (A) & 41.1% strongly agree (SA)) believed that they were responsible for taking charge of the teaching-learning process in their class. For example, approximately 88% (58.8% A & 29.4% SA) agreed that they were responsible for determining the objectives of each lesson in their classroom. More than 67% (35.3% A & 32.4% SA) believed that they were responsible for choosing the learning content; 85.3% (44.1% A & 41.2% SA) believed that they were responsible for choosing the teaching methods and techniques for learning; 91% (52.9% A & 38.2% SA) believed that they were responsible for evaluating their students' progress; and 88.2% (44.1% A & 44.1% SA) indicated that they were responsible for monitoring the learning process during each lesson.

In light of these results, teachers seemingly believed that they were responsible for student learning, which reflect the controlling rather than facilitating nature of Saudi EFL teachers. Alkubaidi (2014) stated that, in the Saudi academic culture, teachers dominate the learning process, and students rely on them as their main source of knowledge. Likewise, Fareh (2010) clarified that English teachers spend most of their lessons talking and rarely allow students the chance to speak or ask questions; thus, classes are usually quiet, as students take a passive role in the learning process. Moreover, Al-Johani (2009) stated that, in English classes, teachers spend most of their time talking, illustrating, and explaining the items in a new lesson (verbally or by writing on the board); students are passive listeners who are responsible for recording what has been taught and copying down what has been written on

the board. In the Saudi context, teaching practices are mostly influenced by restrictions imposed by institutional authorities, which could be one reason for the controlling character of EFL teachers (Shah, Hussain, & Nasseef, 2013). According to Hall (2011), such teachers are usually bound by social conventions, learners' expectations and school and ministry policies about how to teach and what methodology to follow. As such, these teachers are not autonomous in various aspects of teaching, which, in turn, results in a lack of learner autonomy. Grami (2012) emphasized that most teaching styles and teaching approaches in the typical Saudi classroom are pre-communicative, content-focused and, most importantly, teacher-dependent. He added that both local culture and available textbooks advocate teaching styles that mainly position the teacher as the only source of knowledge.

The data from the interviews revealed findings that are consistent with those derived from the survey with regard to the interviewed teachers' sense of responsibility. These teachers reported that they were mostly responsible for their students' learning. They indicated that they are primarily responsible for classroom management, determining the objectives of each lesson in their classroom, evaluating student progress, choosing the teaching methods and materials for learning, and monitoring the learning process during each lesson. Some teachers noted that they are not responsible for choosing some aspects of learning, such as the learning objectives, learning tasks, and methods, as these aspects are already incorporated into the pre-designed curriculum. They emphasized that neither they nor their students are responsible for making decisions regarding these issues. These findings confirm the lack of both teacher and student autonomy in the Saudi context.

### *3.3 Teachers' Evaluation of Learner Autonomy*

The figures in Section 3 reveal that the teachers in the present study held negative beliefs regarding their students' abilities to be autonomous learners. The teachers' responses across the thirteen items in this subscale indicated that more than 60% of these teachers (54.21% A & 6.78% SA) believed that their students were not autonomous EFL learners, with more than 50% of them responding negatively to all the items in this section. In their responses to item 13, approximately 81% of the participating teachers alleged that their students were unable to learn independently. Moreover, 73.6% (61.8% A & 11.8% SA) perceived that their students were unable to make decisions regarding the objectives for each lesson, and 70.6% (55.9% A & 14.7% SA) proposed that their students were unable to choose their learning materials for lessons. Similarly, 61.8% of the teachers (50% A & 11.8% SA) agreed that their students were not involved in deciding the teaching methods used in their classes, and 63% (57.1% A & 5.9% SA) emphasized that their students were not involved in classroom management. These results suggest that teachers do not hold strongly positive beliefs about their students' abilities to be autonomous learners. Because of their beliefs, teachers may be unwilling to utilize teaching and learning approaches that would encourage their students to take greater responsibility for their learning (i.e., to be more autonomous learners).

Only approximately 28% of the teachers (24.53% A & 3.35% SA) alleged that their students had the ability to be autonomous learners. Approximately 42% (36.2% A & 5.9% SA) agreed

that their students were able to identify their needs, and 38.2% (35.3% A & 2.9% SA) agreed that their students were able to evaluate their own learning.

Many teachers were “undecided” (U) or “not sure” in their evaluations of students’ abilities; for example, 20.6% were undecided about their students’ abilities to evaluate their own learning; 18.5% indicated that were uncertain about their students’ abilities to monitor their progress; and 17.6% were not sure about their students’ abilities to choose learning activities and to learn independently. These results might indicate teachers’ lack of awareness about these aspects of learner autonomy.

The interview data in this section were mostly in line with those derived from the survey. Interviewed teachers indicated that their students had low levels of autonomy because they were mostly unmotivated during the learning process and had relatively low levels of English language proficiency. One teacher said, “I have the feeling that my students are not interested in learning...they just do what I ask them to do and never think of doing anything else”. Another teacher considered autonomy to be linked with a higher level of English language proficiency, clarifying that her students lacked autonomy because they were not proficient English learners and that when they became more proficient, they would be more autonomous. A third teacher explained that his students were not autonomous due to institutional barriers (e.g., the ready-made curriculum and overcrowded classes), which made it almost impossible for him to care for his learners’ autonomy. A fourth teacher explained that learner autonomy could not be fostered among her current students because of their insufficient background in independent learning, their experience with formal lecturing, their willingness to be spoon-fed, the learning culture that the students were accustomed to, and Saudi students’ general lack of openness to new things and new ways of learning.

In sum, the findings of both the survey and the interviews indicated that these teachers believed that their current learners had a very limited degree of autonomy and, in turn, were not ready to take control of their learning. These perceptions may be attributed to these teachers’ keen awareness that Saudi EFL learners do not usually have a say in the learning process and their very limited opportunities, if any, for independent learning.

### *3.4 Teachers View of the Challenges They Face in the Deployment of Learner Autonomy*

The teachers’ responses to the items in Section 4 indicated that more than 73% of them agreed (47.44% A & 25.61% SA) that 23 items constrained their promotion of learner autonomy in Saudi EFL classes. By contrast, 13.52% disagreed (11.62% D & 1.9% SD) that the listed items were constraining, and 13.42% of teachers were undecided. More than 50% of the teachers believed that all these items hindered the promotion of learner autonomy. The participating teachers’ responses fell into three distinct categories of learner autonomy constraints that were related to the learner, the teacher, and the education system.

Teachers considered some characteristics of Saudi EFL learners as a constraint that hindered the promotion of learner autonomy. A very high percentage of teachers (97%; 38.2% A & 58.9% SA) acknowledged that learners’ focus on passing exams rather than on actual learning

was the main constraint to the promotion of learner autonomy. This focus is a well-documented trait of Saudi EFL learners. Alhammad (2010) claimed that the academic approaches at Saudi schools encourage students to develop a system of ineffective memorization and a superficial understanding of facts for the sole purpose of passing exams rather than constituting proper approaches to learning. Al Alhareth and Al Dighrir (2014) agreed with this claim, emphasizing that the Saudi education system focuses on subjects that do not appeal to students and that the reliance on rote learning leads to memorization rather than understanding. They concluded that the teaching-learning process in the Saudi context usually narrowly focuses on passing exams rather than developing deep understanding. In addition, approximately 88.5% of teachers (50% A & 38.2% SA) believed that learners' over-reliance on the teacher is a barrier to the promotion of learner autonomy. Furthermore, 80% of the teachers regarded Saudi EFL learners' attitudes toward the English language, the lack of relevant resources for teachers, and learners' lack of previous experience with autonomous learning as major challenges in the promotion the autonomy of Saudi EFL learners.

Teachers perceived the lack of teacher training in learner autonomy as a major challenge in the promotion of learner autonomy. Additionally, more than 82% of them regarded their limited expectations of what learners could achieve as another obstacle to learner autonomy.

More than 82% of the teachers perceived Saudi EFL learner's limited exposure to English outside the classroom and overcrowded classes as two institutional factors that hindered the development of learner autonomy.

The factors that teachers perceived as major challenges in the promotion of learner autonomy had a negative impact on different aspects of students' learning, including their achievement. As such, these factors need to be addressed to minimize their detrimental effects.

Teacher showed a high level of agreement on other items in the list that they regarded as factors that challenged the promotion of learner autonomy.

The interviewees' responses to this question contributed to our understanding of the challenges that teachers face in promoting learners' autonomy in the Saudi context. Some teachers referred to teacher-related challenges, indicating that they usually had very little knowledge about the nature of learner autonomy. One teacher stated, "I had no idea about what learner autonomy means when I first joined the service. It only recently when I started to get to know the very basic ideas of this notion". Other teachers identified the lack of teacher training in learner autonomy as another obstacle that hindered the promotion of learner autonomy. They emphasized that such training was important because it increased their awareness of the concept and also equipped them with useful strategies for promoting their learners' autonomy.

Interviewees also identified institutional barriers that they encountered in the promotion of learner autonomy, such as the density of the prescribed curriculum, the insufficient time allotted to English classes, the activities and tasks in the curriculum, the overcrowded classes,

the norms imposed by academic institutions, the lack of teacher autonomy, and the major impact of the traditional teaching environment. Some interviewees attributed the challenges in promoting learner autonomy to the lack of students' motivation and interest in their class, their low level of English language proficiency, their lack of self-confidence, their hesitancy and passivity, their over-reliance on the teacher, their unwillingness to take part in discussion, and their dislike for performing learning tasks on their own.

To conclude this section, many obstacles hinder the development of learner autonomy, including the traits of Saudi EFL learners, which teachers reported as the main challenge in promoting autonomous learning. We must acknowledge that the learner-related obstacles are the consequence of obstacles related to the education system in Saudi Arabia and the EFL teachers themselves. To achieve positive changes in learner-related problems, fundamental changes must first be made at the institutional and teacher levels.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks and Suggestions**

The present study aimed to explore English teachers' perspectives on learner autonomy in Saudi Arabia with regard to (1) their perceptions of this concept, (2) their beliefs regarding their responsibility for developing learner autonomy, (3) their evaluations of their learners' autonomy, and (4) the constraints that they perceive as obstacles to deployment of learner autonomy.

The study significantly contributed to the literature by identifying Saudi EFL teachers' beliefs in relation to learner autonomy. The study findings revealed that these teachers regarded learner autonomy as a learner attribute that enables him/her to learn independently (with the teacher's support) by the means of psychological, social, technical, and political orientations. The findings further indicated that teachers' teaching practices in Saudi Arabia were primarily traditional and teacher-centered and that they did not include learner autonomy. In this respect, participating teachers reported that they controlled most of the learning-teaching process in their classes and that they accordingly evaluated their students as non-autonomous EFL learners.

Teachers also identified several certain factors, such as learner factors (e.g., an over-reliance on the teacher), teacher factors (e.g., a lack of knowledge about autonomy) and institutional factors (e.g., overcrowded classes and curriculum overload), as barriers that challenged the development of learner autonomy in the context of the present study.

In addition to this study's methodological contribution in using a mixed-method research design to provide a better understanding of the research problem and to increase the validity of the research findings, several practical pedagogical implications can be drawn from the present research.

This study provides some recommendations for teacher professional development and for further research in the field of learner autonomy. Because developing learner autonomy appears to be well beyond the capabilities of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia at present, the

Saudi government and related institutions must lead the charge in this direction by laying the foundation for teacher autonomy, as the development of learner autonomy and teacher autonomy is constantly influenced by contextual factors (Nakata, 2011). The principal step in this regard concerns making the promotion of learner autonomy a key educational goal of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia and supporting teachers in the development of learner autonomy by removing the constraints that they face in promoting this trend. Training to ensure teachers' readiness to promote learner autonomy must be given due consideration, as a lack of training might result in teachers' negative attitudes toward the implementation of learner autonomy. For this reason, these institutions should provide teachers with professional development programs in learner autonomy in the form of workshops or seminars on learner autonomy. These professional training workshops will be a very effective channel through which to help them obtain up-to-date knowledge and information and improve their awareness of learner autonomy and the ways in which to incorporate learner autonomy into their teaching practices.

In the Saudi education system, involving teachers in decisions in areas such as the time and location of the course seems impractical, as they are generally regarded as administrative issues. Teachers should be involved in decision making regarding these issues.

Both teachers and students rely heavily on pre-designed textbooks in Saudi EFL classes. These textbook designers should also be aware of the role of learner autonomy and integrate scenarios into the lessons that will enhance the learner's development of skills that allow them to become more active in their learning. Having students and teachers involved in the design of these materials may help to make them more authentic and, in turn, more relevant to students' needs.

Since the education system in Saudi Arabia is considered to be teacher-centered, where the teacher is the authority rather than the facilitator, most learners experience the learning process through widely used traditional teaching methods; individuality and creativity are less encouraged, and teachers are tasked with overcoming the barriers associated with learner autonomy. Teachers should be allowed more room to encourage greater motivation, negotiation and decision making on the part of learners. One best option in this regard is the Communicative Language Teaching which is usually linked to a greater level of learner engagement and independent learning.

One limitation of this study was that it did not investigate the actual autonomy-supporting teaching practices of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. We recommend that future research investigate such practices to examine whether teachers' beliefs and their actual teaching practices are aligned. We also suggest that further research examine how teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy can be manifested in improved teaching practices and, in turn, the development of learner autonomy. This study did also not try to determine the factors that influenced teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy in this study (e.g., their prior teaching experience). Future research might examine this point.

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## Appendix A

### Descriptive statistics for questionnaire items

#### Section 1. Teacher's interpretations of the term "learner autonomy"

No	Statement	SD	D	U	A	SA
1.	Learner autonomy is a situation in which learners are totally responsible for their learning	0	32.4	5.8	50	11.8
2.	Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn	2.9	11.8	8.8	55.9	20.6
3.	Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks independently	0	20.6	5.9	52.9	20.6
4.	Individuals who lack autonomy are unlikely to be effective language learners	8.8	26.5	14.7	35.3	14.7
5.	Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom	0	17.6	11.8	52.9	17.7
6.	Independent study in the library is an activity that develops learner autonomy	0	5.9	2.9	61.8	29.4

7.	Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes their autonomy	2.9	5.9	2.9	58.8	29.5
8.	Promoting learner autonomy is possible with both young language learners and adults	2.9	5.9	14.7	61.8	14.7
9.	Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence	2.9	0	0	47.1	50
10.	Learners from all cultural backgrounds can achieve learner autonomy	5.9	5.9	14.7	50	23.5
11.	Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choices in the types of activities that they do	0	5.9	2.9	58.8	32.4
12.	Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms	0	20.6	5.9	50	23.5
13.	Learner autonomy is promoted through activities that give learners opportunities to learn from one another	0	2.9	8.8	61.8	26.5
14.	Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led methods of teaching	0	35.3	5.9	41.2	17.6
15.	Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together	0	8.8	5.9	61.8	23.5
16.	Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be evaluated	5.9	17.6	11.8	47.1	17.6
17.	Learner autonomy is a concept that is not suited to non-Western learners	20.6	41.2	29.4	5.9	2.9
18.	Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher	14.7	52.9	5.9	23.6	2.9
19.	Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy	2.9	5.9	5.9	61.8	23.5
20.	Promoting autonomy is easier with novice language learners than with more proficient learners	14.7	52.9	14.7	14.8	2.9
21.	Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials	2.9	17.6	5.9	55.9	17.7
22.	Learner-centered classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy	2.9	5.9	0	44.1	47.1
23.	Learning how to learn is a key to developing learner autonomy	0	2.9	8.8	41.2	47.1
24.	Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy	2.9	20.6	14.7	50	11.8
25.	Out-of-class activities that require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy	0	11.8	5.8	55.9	26.5
26.	The ability to monitor one's learning is central to	2.9	5.9	11.8	64.7	14.7

learner autonomy						
27.	Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated	0	5.9	5.9	35.3	52.9
28.	The proficiency level of a language learner does not affect his/her ability to develop autonomy	20.6	41.2	8.8	23.5	5.9
29.	The teacher plays an important role in supporting learner autonomy	0	0	5.9	44.1	50
30.	Learner autonomy has a positive effect on language learners' success	0	0	2.9	52.9	44.2
		3.91	16.28	8.33	47.36	24.12

## Appendix C

### Section 3. Teachers' Beliefs about Students' abilities to be Autonomous

No	Statement	SD	D	U	A	SA
	<i>My students are able to...</i>					
1.	decide the objectives for each lesson	11.8	61.8	2.9	23.5	0
2.	choose the learning materials for each lesson	14.7	55.9	14.7	14.7	0
3.	choose the learning activities for each lesson	5.9	50	17.6	26.5	0
4.	evaluate their study outcomes for each lesson	8.8	52.2	2.9	33.2	2.9
5.	be involved in deciding the teaching methods used in each lesson	11.8	50	8.8	23.5	5.9
6.	be involved in classroom management	5.9	57.1	5.9	25.2	5.9
7.	identify their needs	2.9	46.2	8.8	36.2	5.9
8.	identify their strengths	2.9	59.6	8.8	25.8	2.9
9.	identify their weaknesses	5.8	55.4	8.8	24.1	5.9
10.	monitor their progress	2.9	49.1	18.5	23.6	5.9
11.	evaluate their learning	2.9	38.3	20.6	35.3	2.9
12.	learn cooperatively	5.9	54.1	8.8	25.8	5.4
13.	learn independently	5.9	75.03	17.6	1.47	0
		6.78	54.21	11.13	24.53	3.35

### Section 4. Teachers' Beliefs about Constraints to Fostering Learner Autonomy

No	Challenge	SD	D	U	A	SA
1.	The rules imposed to run Saudi schools	0.00	2.9	38.2	44.1	14.8
2.	The limited knowledge (awareness) of learner autonomy among EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia	0.00	8.8	14.7	47.1	29.4
3.	Learners' lack of previous experience with autonomous learning	0.00	2.9	17.6	55.9	23.6

4.	Learners' over-reliance on the teacher	0.00	5.9	5.9	50	38.2
5.	Saudi EFL learners' attitudes toward the English language	2.9	8.8	8.9	50	29.4
6.	Saudi EFL learners' social and cultural backgrounds	2.9	2.9	20.6	55.9	17.7
7.	The limited exposure of Saudi EFL learners to English outside the classroom	0.00	8.8	2.9	44.1	44.2
8.	The prescribed curricula	0.00	17.6	11.8	44.1	26.5
9.	The learning materials used in Saudi EFL classes	5.9	23.5	17.6	38.2	14.8
10.	The exam mechanism employed in Saudi EFL classes	8.8	8.8	11.8	44.1	26.5
11.	Learners' focus on passing exams rather than on actual learning	0.00	0.00	2.9	38.2	58.9
12.	The lack of technological application in Saudi EFL classrooms	5.9	14.7	23.5	38.2	17.7
13.	The lack of relevant resources for teachers and learners in the Saudi EFL context	2.9	8.9	8.8	52.9	26.5
14.	The limited English proficiency of Saudi learners	0.00	17.6	5.9	47.1	29.4
15.	The lack of teacher autonomy	0.00	14.7	17.6	47.1	20.6
16.	The teachers' limited expectations of what learners can achieve	0.00	8.8	8.9	64.7	17.6
17.	The lack of teacher training in learner autonomy	0.00	2.9	8.8	58.8	29.5
18.	The teaching methods utilized in Saudi EFL classes	0.00	20.6	2.9	50	26.5
19.	Overcrowded classrooms	0.00	14.7	2.9	41.2	41.2
20.	The density of the EFL curriculum	2.8	11.8	26.5	47.1	11.8
21.	The limited hours (periods) of weekly contact for English courses	2.9	23.5	17.6	38.2	17.8
22.	The insufficient time assigned for English language classes	2.9	29.4	11.8	47.1	8.8
	Overall beliefs about constraints	1.9	11.62	13.42	47.44	25.61

Note. (SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, U: Undecided, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree)

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