

Learner Autonomy: Perception of Engineering Students of University of Gujrat

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Abstract

The ability of learner autonomy is considered as rudimentary in EFL students for the successful process of language learning. The language learning process does not begin and end in any academic setting rather it is a lifelong process. Learner autonomy enables learners to regulate their learning and such involvement leads to successful and better learning. In recent times, it has become an important question that how students access available resources and how they use these resources to achieve their goals. This study examines the perception of EFL students about learner autonomy. It also investigates what perception students have towards learner autonomy regarding their study semester. This research is conducted on 110 students from 3rd, 5th and 7th semesters of the Electrical Engineering department at the University of Gujrat. As a quantitative study, the questionnaire is used to collect data that consists of 28 items about learner autonomy. Findings expose that students have a high perception of learner autonomy. Furthermore, the study semester and students' perception of LA has a direct relationship. Students from higher semesters have a high perception that students should be autonomous in their learning.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, English as a Second Language, Independent Learning

1. Introduction

The notion of learner autonomy or learner independence plays an increasingly significant role in language learning, therefore, it attracts the researchers' attention to observe this phenomenon in language classrooms (Yasmin and Sohail, 2019). Autonomously learning a language leads to an

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optimistic and extended choice of learners and not only focusing on teacher and an institution choice but also learners' decision making. It is a learner-centered method in which learners develop and practice responsibility for their learning. Benson and Voller (1997) and Wright (2005) defined learner autonomy as a learning environment in which learners improve their foreign language learning abilities.

Foreign language learning is considered as a social and communicating phenomenon and this social aspect involves willingness and capability to perform autonomously as a social and cooperative person (Dam et al. 1990). On the side, Holec (1981) entails that learner autonomy enables learners to implement their knowledge and skills independently other than learning context. Therefore, independent learning is a life-long process and it goes beyond an academic setting. He also noted that the ability of learner autonomy is not inherent rather it is an acquired ability by natural settings or by formal learning, for example, systematic and deliberate way.

Little (1991) states that "learner autonomy emphasizes interdependence over independence in learning", however, Dickinson (1994) associates, "independence with active responsibility for one's Learning and autonomy with the idea of learning alone" (p. 1239). According to him, the learner autonomy is an ability to work with language freely as well as communicating particular meanings in a real and uncertain situation. Holec (1981), Wright (1990) and Little (1991) hypothesize that autonomous learners are voluntarily learning in association and they can operate their leaning. Such learners set their aims regarding learning, accept their responsibilities and also take a part in designing and implementing activities about language. Gremmo and Riley (1995) stated that the development of strategies regarding autonomous learning and their practice in the learning environment were triggered by humanistic tactics emphasizing on "self-standing" and "self-initiated" learning as cited in Yasmin and Sohail, (2019).

2. Literature Review

The term "learner autonomy" has different meanings among academic researchers; however, many explanations give a clear description of learner autonomy (Zou, 2011). Holec (1981) is considered as a father to introduce the concept in learning language field, he said, the ability of learner autonomy

enables the learners to consider their responsibilities in learning. Autonomy is fundamental for humans because it refers to ones who are voluntary and independent in their actions (Deci, 1995).

Researchers like Cotterall (1995), and Littlewood (2000) have conducted their studies to observe the relationship between autonomy and readiness. The learners' ability to taking decisions independently, learners' views regarding their own and their teachers' responsibilities and learning strategies are important and powerful factors that affect autonomy and readiness. All of these factors enable learners to take part in autonomous learning. Learners are free to take the decision, set their learning aims and select the available resources as well as their utilization (Holec, 1981).

2.1. Teachers' Beliefs

Besides this, a number of studies have been conducted on learner autonomy in language learning. Teachers' beliefs are of significant value in language learning. Farahi (2015) investigated the ELT students' perceptions as well as teachers' perceptions regarding learner autonomy. Data were collected through a questionnaire from 69 ELT students and 11 teachers at Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus. Outcomes indicated that both ELT teachers and students perceived autonomy as a progressive and useful tool in learning a language. Teachers believed that students must be independent in taking decisions about learning and they must have the ability to become autonomous learners. Teachers are suggested to promote learner autonomy among learners by providing opportunities and freedom in selecting topics for projects and assignments.

A study on 48 Indonesian English teachers was conducted to examine their perception of learner autonomy and the significance of learner autonomy in professional development (Lengkanawati, 2017). This questionnaire study encompassed four perspectives: technical (internet, self-assess center and use of library), political (opportunities, choices, decisions, freedom, and teacher-centeredness), psychological (age, motivation, confidence, learning effectiveness and learner-centeredness) and social (background, collaboration, social issues). One of the questions led the misconception about learner autonomy that LA means learning without teachers. 70% of responses opposed this statement and proved that LA cannot be possible

without teachers. Overall findings of this study showed that teachers have encouraging views about learner autonomy and the majority of teachers desired to apply learner autonomy method in language learning and teaching context. Although the concept of autonomy was not yet common among students of Indonesia many research determined that autonomy plays an important role and it is considered an essential factor for EFL learners in Indonesian contexts.

Teachers' beliefs and practices of LA are observed in the Asian context also (Yasmin & Sohail, 2018a). The study used semi-structured interviews to explore the teachers' beliefs about their practice to stimulate learner autonomy in Pakistani universities. They revealed that there is a strong relationship between English language learning and learner autonomy. Participants agreed with learner autonomy plays an effective role in learning the English language. Results imply that learner autonomy can be attained by offering training to teachers to realize the importance of learner autonomy and teachers make their students autonomy. This study confirms the findings of previous studies conducted by Farahi (2015), Lengkanawati (2017) and Dogan and Misici (2017) that LA improves learners' abilities and learning skills, therefore, the teacher should promote LA among students. Hence it is proved that teachers from different geographical areas considered LA as a progressive technique in learning and want to encourage LA among students.

2.2. Learners' perception

Similar to teachers' beliefs, learners' perception is also important in the learning process as research indicated. Henri, Morrell, and Scott (2018) conducted a study on 635 BSc students from three different schools i.e. Biological, Biomedical, and Environmental Sciences at the University of Hull, UK. They measured the students' perception of their autonomy at university. They used the Autonomous Learning Scale designed by Macaskill and Taylor (2010) to quantify the student's responses. Findings revealed that progress through courses does not increase students' perception about autonomy and students do not realize themselves as autonomous as they perform well by their courses. Results suggest that students need to provide opportunities to become autonomous in their learning that make them more confident and successful in learning.

Another experimental study in the same context by Danilenko, Kosmidis, Shershneva, and Vainshtein (2018) was conducted within four years at Siberian Federal University, the UK to investigate the significance of implementation of educational technology and comparison of the academic record of a control group and experimental group. They, in their study, categorized learner autonomy into three stages: proficiency level assessment, plunging students into learner autonomy and oral speech. An Utest was designed between such groups and applied before starting studying, during and after studying. Students were asked to attempt a placement test and a final test evaluated in points at each stage. Results revealed that the experimental group performed 95% better academic record in foreign language learning and personal traits e.g. self-sufficiency, responsibility, and confidence were also developed in one's abilities. Moreover, the application of learner autonomy technology development at Siberian Federal University showed such personal traits developed during the second stage and they help in the future grasping a foreign language. In sum, learner autonomy is a beneficial method in language learning.

Gamble, et al. (2011) analyzed Japanese Learners' perception of LA in terms of responsibilities and capabilities to become autonomous in English learning. He selected 399 students from seven universities in Japan to answer the questionnaire of 22 items. This work observed the perception of Japanese students Results contrasted with the misconceptions that Eastern students are non-autonomous and proved that students are motivated and have abilities of autonomy. High motivated students perceived themselves as capable of directing their learning as compared to less motivated students for autonomy. However, learners do not perform as autonomous maybe because they are not confident and maybe their teachers do not encourage them to be independent in their learning process. Another research by Hrochová (2012), surveyed 75 students of Grammar secondary school in Pilsen, Middle East, to find the opinions about outside class activities, selection of particular activities, time duration spent on these activities and students' grades in English. It also examined what kind of activities are more effective and what kind of language skills are more complex. Learners who are involved in activities other than the classroom were assigned as autonomous and they achieved language skills easily. They believed that their independent activities cause their higher grades to mean an

autonomous learner is more successful rather than non-autonomous. Both studies on Eastern students proved the abilities and responsibilities of students regarding autonomous, moreover, they are motivated and show a willingness to become autonomous.

Learners' perceptions of autonomy were examined in the Saudi context also. Alrabai's (2017) study on Saudi learners at King Khaled University examined the level of learner autonomy of Saudi students in language learning. It was the first attempt in the Saudi context to investigate the EFL learners' level of being autonomous. 360 students were surveyed to fulfill the questionnaire to conclude. It was clarified in findings that learners lack both factors i.e. autonomous learning and self-effort. They need to be aware of autonomy in learning and realize the important role of autonomy in the learning process. The basic step to encourage autonomy among learners is students' training of self-government, self-sufficiency, and self-assessment. Such a skill will help to promote LA among students. Teachers are also needed to encourage students to become autonomous. Additionally, Asiri and Shukri (2018), also worked at Saudi King Abdul-Aziz University on 50 English teachers were asked to evaluate their knowledge about learner autonomy and discover the factors that stop them to promote the learner autonomy in classrooms. Findings exposed that 48% of teachers deny that the students can determine their objectives rather students are entirely dependent on them because students do not have the ability and knowledge of learner-autonomy. Only 28% of teachers agreed that students can monitor their learning strategies and set their goals. Both studies in the Saudi context disclosed that Saudi learners are non-autonomous and they need proper training and professional development to promote learner autonomy just like the study of Henri, Morrell, and Scott (2018), they also suggest providing training to the learner to motivate the students.

Another study on learners' attitudes towards readiness for autonomous learning was conducted in Turkey (Yildirim, 2008). He concluded that taking accountabilities of learning must be because of high perception, which means, without the high perception of learner autonomy, readiness for autonomy is not possible. Students with low perception are not ready to take charge of their learning. These outcomes also discovered a significant relationship between students' and teachers' responsibilities towards LA.

They thought teachers have great responsibilities for inside class activities, similarly, students are responsible to decide what they learn outside the classroom.

Altunay and Bayat (2009) investigated the relation of autonomy perception of students and their classroom behavior regarding EFL. This descriptive study selected 560 students at Dokuz Eylul University in Turkey to investigate using Autonomy Perception and Classroom Behaviour Scale. Outcomes exposed that students show a willingness to become autonomous and they want to improve their skills in their effort. It also revealed the direct relation of autonomy perception and classroom behavior means students who have high perception show more concerning behavior to enhance learning independently. Another research in Turkey by Ünal, Çeliköz, and Sarı (2017), they gathered the perception of English learners regarding LA as well as its relation with English language learning proficiency. 326 ELT students from ten different classes in Istanbul were selected to attempt the American Language Course Placement Test (ALCPT). Results indicated students' positive perception of LA that LA enhances their learning and students believed in a direct relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency, for example, a more autonomous language learner will use language more proficiently. Studies of Altunay and Bayat (2009) and Ünal, Çeliköz and Sarı (2017) support each other that students with high perception are ready to behave autonomously.

Additionally, Bozkurt and Arslan (2018) conducted mixed-method research on two hundred and fourteen Syrian Refugee EFL learners (136) female students and (78) male from 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. The purpose of this study was to measure the perception of EFL learners about learner autonomy regarding their gender as well as their grades. It also measured whether there is a significant relationship between students' perception and readiness for learner autonomy. The findings underlined that there is a direct relationship between students' perception of autonomy and their grades. For example, students from 8th grade perceived autonomy as a more supportive factor in learning as compared to students from 7th and 6th grades. It also discovered that there is a significant relationship between learner autonomy and their readiness to become autonomous, even their readiness is slightly higher than perception these judgments are inconsistent

with the study of Yildirim (2008) that students with low perception do not show a willingness to become autonomous. They are ready to take charge of their learning these findings are also consistent with the findings of Altunay and Bayat (2009), in their findings, learners realized that they` are capable of becoming independent learners and taking responsibility of their learning. Yildirim and Yigit (2018) interviewed 20 ELT students (5 students from each study year) enrolled in Turkey University to examine the effects of study year on students' perceptions regarding responsibilities, abilities, and activities as well as gender effects on learner autonomy. Mostly, students' responses revealed that students should responsible for their language learning but some students said, teachers should be more responsible for LA because teachers are more experienced in selecting what to learn and how to learn. It leads to a strengthened relationship between teachers and students because a student can't perform autonomously without a teacher. It also disproves the question item used by Lengkanawati (2017) that "Learner autonomy means learning without teachers". Interviewees stated that learners must have the ability to evaluate themselves to improve their learning. Students' ability to observe themselves and assess themselves are considered as basic components in language learning. Additionally, data revealed no difference between males' and females' responses related to responsibilities and abilities. Analysis approved that females more apply activities other than the class as compared to males.

2.3. Learner Strategies for LA Development

Learner strategies were also explored to encourage LA among the students of higher education (Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2011). This study explored the methods that enable the learners to become active learners from passive learners and also measure the students' attitudes about autonomy. They asked 80 students and 20 teachers with different background i.e. Albanian, Macedonian, Turkish and Roma at southeast Europe University to mark the questionnaire. An attitudinal questionnaire was given to students and teachers were asked about the techniques that can help to promote learner autonomy. Findings discovered that 80.57% of students want to monitor their learning on their own but mostly they do as their teachers direct them. They believed learner autonomy is helpful in learning and autonomous learners perform better as well as they are well aware of their learning goals and objectives. On the other hand, teachers' questionnaire highlighted the strategies that can encourage learner autonomy. Teachers should use

different activities in the classroom and they should use portfolios because portfolios may activate the students to control their learning. Furthermore, students should analyze their diaries regularly and track their progress as well as students should prepare their vocabulary notebooks to grasp the new and creative terminologies.

The above review of previous researches on LA exhibited that most of the studies were investigated about the perception of foreign learners in, UK, US, Saudi Arabia, Turkish and Syria. No research has been conducted on Pakistani students, particularly on students from pure sciences like engineering, physics, and statistics and so on. Thus, the absence of such a study encouraged the researcher to consider the perception of Pakistani learners about LA. on students from towards LA. The current study intends to fill this gap by addressing the following questions:

1. What is the perception of engineering students about LA at UOG?
2. How far do the learners' perceptions vary regarding their study year?

3. Research Design

The present study follows a quantitative approach and a survey was conducted to collect learners' perceptions.

3.1 Population/Sampling

The population of the current study was all the students (145 students) of the Department of Electrical Engineering at the University of Gujrat. 110 Students (17 to 21 years old as well as non-native speakers) were asked to participate as a sample in this research. Students were selected from three different semesters: 3rd (43), 5th (37) and 7th (30) to collect data. This sample was supposed to answer the given questionnaire according to their perception.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

As a quantitative study, a survey questionnaire was conducted to get data from the selected sample. This questionnaire was a modified version of the various instrument developed by (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Camilleri, 1999; Chan, 2001; Demirtaş & Seri, 2010; Joshi, 2011; Littlewood, 1999) and is

comprised of 28 items related to perception about LA. As far as question items were concerned, all the questions were answered according to the 5-point Likert scale: 1-Strongly Agree, 2-Agree, 3Neutral, 4-Disagree, and 5-Strongly Disagree. The survey was conducted during class timing to ensure the findings. All the students voluntarily involved in this study. Their responses were statistically analyzed to conclude.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

All the question items were analyzed to measure the students' perception in terms of learner autonomy. Furthermore, SPSS software is used to measure the students to answer quantitatively. Independent sample T-Test and one sample T-Test were also used to draw descriptive analysis.

4. Results and Discussions

As far as the result of the first question is concerned, One-Sample T-test is applied to show the overall mean score of students' perception as shown below:

4.1 Perception of Students about Learner Autonomy

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Sum	110	89.3275	14.8353

The above results exposed the learners' high perception of LA. The mean score (89.3275) is more than 50 that is significant. Students strongly agreed with "students should use self-study material to learn English" as well as "students should be selected in their project and activities selection". Most of the students agreed with the items like "students should be responsible for findings their ways of language learning" and "students should evaluate themselves and set their goals for learning". This shows students of the University of Gujrat want to be autonomous in their language learning. Some of the students disagreed with the statement, "a lot of learning can be done without a teacher". Students considered the teachers as an authority figure and where the students are responsible for learning, teachers, too,

have some responsibilities for students learning, like, teachers should highlight the students' error and teachers should give some group tasks that engage the student to achieve a common goal. Results revealed that students considered themselves responsible for their learning and teachers also have some stuff to do to become the students autonomous. These findings are in line with the findings of studies by Cottrell (2000), Xhaferi and Xhaferi (2011), Gamble et al. (2011), Hrochora (2012), Hooyeman Wulf Lewthwaite (2017), Farahi (2015) and Lengkanawati (2017) that students admitted their responsibilities regarding their learning and they perceived autonomy as an effective tool to enhance their learning. Other than this, teachers also have some duties to become students autonomous. These findings opposed the study of Alrabi (2017) and Asiri and Shuki (2018) that students are not autonomous in their learning.

4.2 Students' Perception regarding their study level

The results of the second research question revealed the student perception regarding their semester as shown in the table below:

Semesters	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
3rd	40	79.153	11.436
5th	37	82.365	12.761
7 th	30	89.156	14.243 s

After data analysis, students' responses, showed that student perception and semester have a direct relationship. As the semester higher the perception of students becomes more positive. A noteworthy difference has been seen between the 3rd, 5th, and 7th-semester students' perceptions. The mean score (89.156) of the 7th semester is higher than the mean score (82.365) of the 5th semester that is higher than the 3rd-semester students' mean score (79.153). Students from the 3rd study semester were found the least positive perception and 7th-semester students were found the most positive perception about LA. Thus, students become more autonomous in their learning as they forward to the higher semesters or study year. They set their learning strategies to meet their goals and objectives.

The current study looks at the learners' perception of learner Autonomy and it also calculates the students' perception regarding their study semesters in university. Results are contradicted with the research of Alrabi (2017) and Asiri and Shuki (2018) that underlined that students are not autonomous in learning rather they are dependent on their teachers. Present research supports the findings of researches conducted by Cottrell (2000), Khaferi and Khaferi (2011), Gamble et al. (2011), Hrochora (2012), Hooyeman Wulf Lewthwaite (2017), Farahi (2015) and Lengkanawati (2017). According to them, learners perceived autonomy as progressive in learning and it enables the students to govern their learning and to modify the learning process. On the other hand, the analysis showed the direct relationship between the perception of students regarding LA and their study semesters that students from higher semesters considered autonomy more helpful in learning as compared to lower semesters. It may be because of their study experience that they have throughout previous semesters or maybe they observed their progress in learning that they have through autonomous learning. This study implies that teachers who teach the starting semesters students must include different kinds of activities in their course that help the students to understand the autonomy and help the students to become autonomous.

5. Conclusion

The current study reports on research that measured the perception of ELT students about learner autonomy as well as regarding their semester in university. Results exposed that overall students perceived LA as important in learning because autonomy helps them in evaluating and directing their studies. Monitoring themselves enables them to modify their learning strategies according to their goals. Findings also highlighted that students from the 7th semester perceived LA more positively than the 5th-semester students and students from the 5th semester are more ready to become autonomous than 3rd-semester students.

This study adds to previous literature on Pakistani learners' perception from an artists' view. The present research contributes to understanding the ELF learning and teaching in the Pakistani context and implies, students should be autonomous in language learning. As autonomy enables the students to assess their learning as well as point out their errors that occur during learning. Moreover, findings of this study regarding the study semester of

students are not static, this research does not look at reasons like, why the students from low semesters have low perception regarding LA. The researcher who is interested in such kind of topic can explore the reasons and discover the ways that can help the students to become independent in language learning.

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