

Taiwanese EFL Language Teachers' Beliefs and Actual Practices Related to Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

In the last few decades, learner autonomy has been considered a vital indicator of successful language learning. Most language teachers likely do not deny the importance of learner autonomy, as learning is ultimately the learner's responsibility. However, to what extent do teachers value this concept? To what extent do teachers actually promote learner autonomy in their classrooms? Are there any differences between teachers' perceptions of the importance of learner autonomy and their actual practices? To explore these questions, the current research study adopts a mixed-method design involving quantitative questionnaire data, qualitative open-ended responses and interview data. The results reveal that teachers unanimously agree on the importance of learner autonomy in language learning. However, the questionnaire data indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between teachers' beliefs and their practices. The qualitative data also support the existence of this discrepancy and suggest that it results from students' low motivation and passive learning attitude and the pressure teachers' face due to teaching demands. Implications regarding how teachers can better promote learner autonomy in the classroom are discussed.

Keywords: English learning; learner autonomy; teacher beliefs; university EFL teachers

In the last few decades, learner autonomy has been considered a vital indicator of successful language learning. Several researchers, such as Benson (2011), Lamb (2008), Little (2004), Sinclair (2008), Smith (2003) and Ushioda (1996, 2011), have dedicated themselves to investigating learner autonomy. Due to the conceptual breadth of the notion of learner autonomy, slightly dissimilar definitions of learner autonomy have been proposed. Despite the concept's complexity, various theoretical definitions of learner autonomy share some significant characteristics: learners being in charge and taking responsibility for their learning (Holec, 1981), including identifying effective learning strategies (Oxford, 2003), having some control over learning contents or processes (Palfreyman, 2003), and identifying learning goals (Benson, 2011). However, the levels of autonomy that language learners are expected to exhibit and the various forms (or versions) of autonomy are still under scrutiny by researchers (Benson, 2006). As Benson (2006, p. 26-27) summarizes, learner autonomy can be exhibited in two primary ways: a.) beyond the classroom (e.g., self-access, computer-assisted language learning

(CALL), distance learning) and b.) in the classroom (e.g., student involvement in selecting learning materials or establishing learning objectives). The second aspect, which involves promoting autonomy in the classroom, can be achieved only through instructors' teaching practices, and these practices are influenced by the instructors' teaching beliefs. The majority of language teachers do not deny the importance of learner autonomy. However, to what extent do teachers value this concept? To what extent do they actually promote learner autonomy in their classrooms? Are there any differences between their beliefs on the importance of learner autonomy and their actual practices? These are some of the questions that this research project aims to answer.

In sum, this study has the following key purposes:

1. To explore university EFL teachers' views on promoting learner autonomy in their classes.
2. To explore how these teachers actually engage in teaching practices that promote learner autonomy.
3. To examine whether a discrepancy exists between these teachers' teaching beliefs and their actual practices in the classroom, and if a discrepancy exists, to explore the underlying reasons.

Literature Review

Learner Autonomy

Most learner autonomy researchers do not refute the importance of learner autonomy in language learning, and there are several reasons that learner autonomy is important for second language (L2) learners. For instance, autonomous learners have a better sense of control over their own learning. This control could manifest in how they assess their learning needs, evaluate their progress, attempt to solve learning problems, seek learning resources, and identify suitable learning strategies, among other activities (Benson, 2011). All these steps eventually lead to creating responsible language learners who eventually have a higher likelihood of success in language learning. This success could further be enlightened through the connection between learning autonomy and L2 motivation. Ushioda (1996) was among the pioneering researchers to contend that these two theoretical constructs – learner autonomy and L2 motivation – are interconnected. Numerous empirical studies also support this connection between autonomy and motivation. Spratt, Humphrey and Chan's (2002) study of Hong Kong builds on Ushioda's (1996) beliefs that autonomy and motivation are highly interrelated because they form a virtuous cycle. Their study concluded that autonomous learners are essentially motivated learners. More recently, in Turkey, Tilfarlioglu and Ciftci's (2011) study of over 200 university students supported a significant positive relationship between learner autonomy and self-efficacy – an indicator of L2 motivation. The study concluded with the assertion that “self-efficacy and learner autonomy affect academic success in a positive way” (p. 1291). In short, researchers have generally agreed that promoting learner autonomy is important because it helps to facilitate the growth of individual motivation, thus helping students reach their educational goals and potential. As Ushioda (2011, p. 224) concluded, promoting autonomy can “facilitate the alignment of individual student motivation with the broader goals and values of the educational process”.

While much of the literature focuses on the benefits learner autonomy offers to language learners, relatively few studies pay attention to teachers' individual beliefs on learner autonomy and their role in helping these learners develop their ability to be more autonomous (Dam, 2003). This lack of attention to teachers' beliefs and roles in developing learner autonomy continued until rather recently, as Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012, p. 283) clearly pointed out, "language teachers' perspectives on what autonomy means have not been awarded much attention". Voller (1997) listed three roles of teachers in promoting learner autonomy: facilitator (providing support), counsellor (providing one-to-one interaction), and resource (providing knowledge and skills). Elaborating on these ideas further, Dam (2003, p. 140) clarified specific examples of what teachers can do in the classroom: introduce useful and various activities for learners to choose from, present various ways in which learners can monitor their learning progress, and support learners' choices and decisions in their learning process. However, to what extent do language teachers believe in the value of these roles and classroom practices? Do their beliefs translate into effective classroom behaviours? The next section explores the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices in greater depth.

Teacher Beliefs and Practices

Research on teachers' beliefs has received considerable attention in the field of language teaching over the past 20 years. The discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices is one of the sub-areas of this research topic, and it is the focus of the present research project. Borg, one of the leading researchers on teachers' beliefs in language teaching, and his colleague Phipps, illustrate the importance of language teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning (Phipps & Borg, 2009, p. 381):

- They have a powerful effect on teachers' pedagogical decisions
- They can be deep-rooted and resistant to change
- They are not always reflected in what teachers do in the classroom.

Their study (*ibid.*), which focused on the tensions between teachers' grammar teaching beliefs and practices, found that many teachers do not implement what they believe are the best teaching practices in the classroom due to "student expectations, preferences, and classroom management concerns" (p. 387). The authors also discovered that positive teaching experiences play a key role in teachers' pedagogical choices. Teachers may be aware of teaching strategies that are theoretically supported by research, but if they do not have positive first-hand experience with the success of those methods, the strategies may remain ideals in the teachers' minds. Instead, teachers may prefer to adopt practices that they know will generate positive and effective outcomes based on their prior experiences. Chan (2003) and Lai, Gardner and Law (2013) found similar results regarding how prepared teachers are to promote autonomous language learning in their classrooms in Hong Kong. Lai *et al.* (2013) indicate that teachers generally have positive attitudes towards promoting language learners' self-directed learning ability. Although Chan (2003) discovered similar results – that most language teachers value the importance of autonomous language learning – the author found that there is still a strong preference for a relatively dominant teacher role among teachers, which compromises the student's role in autonomous learning. Thus, the author concludes that certain limiting factors in the education environment in Hong Kong may impede the promotion of learner autonomy in the classroom. This echoes Borg's (2003) notion that determining the contextual factors and

underlying reasons for the discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and practices is important to advancing our knowledge of these phenomena. These concepts are also supported empirically.

Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) discovered that in Saudi Arabia, most university English language teachers believe learner autonomy as an important and desirable goal, yet, there were less successful in promoting it in the classroom due to curricular, societal and learner factors. Similar results were also present in Japan. A study of Japanese EFL high school teachers (Nakata, 2011) provides evidence that there is a discrepancy between teachers' views on the importance of autonomy and their implementation of classroom practices that support autonomy. The study concludes that due to the social/cultural context, high school EFL teachers in Japan are not fully prepared to promote learner autonomy in their classrooms, even though teachers fully understand the importance of doing so. Another study in the Ukrainian context also reported similar results (Bullock, 2011), and the author concluded that "teachers' overall attitudes to self-assessment were positive but implementation posed problems" (p. 121). The problems associated with implementation may be the result of classroom management problems, students' attitudes, or insufficient time and support. A recent study in Mainland China (Wang & Wang, 2016) indicated similar problems as well. The findings showed that most EFL teachers understood the features and important learner autonomy, yet for real implementation it was inhibited by various contextual challenges regarding students, teachers, the institution, and even due to the Chinese culture.

Although research studies of learner autonomy in language classrooms in the local context are scarce, there have been related studies in other fields. Chen (2008) explored why high school teachers do not implement practices that reflect their beliefs regarding reading technology integration. Chen (*ibid.*) discovered that although teachers believe in the importance of technology integration, very few implement those beliefs in the classroom. This discrepancy is the result of a lack of sufficient support, a lack of additional time, and a lack of professional knowledge regarding actual implementation. The author notes that "all participants reported high levels of agreement on constructivist concepts, but the participants' instruction remained teacher centred and lecture based, and their technology use was to support such instruction" (p. 72). Liu (2011) conducted a similar study with more than one thousand elementary school teachers regarding their beliefs about learner-centred teaching and the extent to which they integrated technology into learner-centred instruction. The results indicated that there are conflicts between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. Both of these studies – one using a qualitative method with a small sample of high school teachers and the other using a quantitative research instrument with more than one thousand participants – observed conflicts between teachers' beliefs on the importance of technology integration in the classroom and the teachers' classroom practices. It is not implausible to presume that similar conflicts could also exist in language classrooms; thus, there is a need to examine whether such conflicts exist, and if they do, to explore the causes and to identify suggestions for implementing improvements.

Research Questions

In sum, the following three research questions guided the current research project:

1. To what extent do language teachers at the research site believe in the value of learner autonomy?
2. To what extent do these language teachers engage in learner autonomy-supported teaching practices in their classrooms?

3. Are there any discrepancies between the language teachers' beliefs and their actual teaching practices? If so, what are the causes of these differences?

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study explores Taiwanese EFL teachers' beliefs and actual practices regarding promoting learner autonomy in the classroom. To this end, this study adopted a sequential quan-qual MMR design: a mixed methods research design that collects quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data. To collect the quantitative data, a survey questionnaire was utilized and was particularly effective for the psychological constructs (e.g., learner beliefs, learning strategies, and learner motivation) at the focus of this study (Brown, 2001). Since this study aims to explore EFL teachers' beliefs and self-reported classroom practices, a survey research study is better able to "provide valuable insights" for researchers and thus allow them to "operationalize these constructs" (Wagner, 2015).

While the survey questionnaire was suitable to gain insights on these teachers' beliefs on EFL autonomy and the possible discrepancies between their beliefs and actual classroom practices, relying solely on quantitative data for a deeper understanding of such discrepancies may be insufficient. The limitation of quantitative data, as Muijs (2004) explains, is that "it is difficult to come to a deeper understanding of processes and contextual differences" (p. 45). To complement the quantitative survey, semi-structured interviews were employed to explain richer and more elaborate research findings from different angles. As Ivankova and Greer (2015) concluded,

A sequential quan-qual MMR design is used when there is a need for follow-up qualitative data to elaborate, explain, or confirm initial quantitative results (p. 71).

Research Instruments and Steps

The data collection process was divided into two phases – quantitative data collection (survey questionnaire) and qualitative data collection (semi-structured interviews). In the first phase, a survey questionnaire was distributed to a target group of research participants. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended questions using Likert-type scales and open-ended questions. The goal of the questionnaire was to explore how teachers view the role of learner autonomy and to what extent they implement relevant teaching practices in their classroom to support learner autonomy. The pilot version of the questionnaire was administered to the teachers in September 2015. Cronbach's alpha values were calculated to assess the consistency and reliability of the closed-ended items. Any item with a value under .80 was removed; the remaining items in the final questionnaire all reached or exceeded .85. In December 2015, 55 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to EFL teachers in a private language university in Taiwan; 33 questionnaires were returned.

The second phase of the data collection involved conducting classroom observations and/or semi-structured interviews with selected participants. In the original research design, the researcher planned to conduct classroom observations to determine what teachers actually implement in the classroom and to evaluate to what extent the teachers' practices support learner autonomy in the classroom. However, none of the teachers who filled out the questionnaire consented to participate in classroom observations; thus, no classroom observations were conducted. Instead, 5 of the teachers agreed to participate in semi-structured

interviews. These 5 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the interviewees' native language – Mandarin Chinese – and each interview lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. The interviews were conducted using a list of questions from an interview guide, and the interviewer followed up on the information mentioned in the interviews. These interviews helped the researcher clarify some issues that emerged from the questionnaires and further explore the teachers' answers in terms of the practices they actually implement in the classroom.

It should be noted that the instrument and procedure adopted in this research study was reviewed and approved by Human Research Ethics Committee at National Cheng Kung University (HREC). The committee confirmed that the study is in conformity with the ethical guidelines for ensuring that the rights and welfare of research participants are adequately protected.

Research Participants

The research participants were EFL teachers in a language university in southern Taiwan. All the participants were teaching 1-2 general, integrative-skills English courses at the time of the study (each course is 4-6 hours per week). Most of the teachers had been teaching these courses for at least 2 years and were experienced in teaching English to university students. All the participants were from Taiwan and spoke fluent English.

Research Findings and Discussion

Questionnaire Findings

Thirty-three valid questionnaires were received. Section A of the questionnaire measured the language teachers' beliefs regarding the importance of learner autonomy (left column) and their actual practices in the classroom (right column). The participants responded to the items using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (low) to 4 (high). The Cronbach's alpha for the internal consistency of the multi-item sections was evaluated, and both sections reached the satisfactory level (Autonomous beliefs, alpha = .81; Actual practices in the classroom, alpha = .85). The raw data were entered into *SPSS* to perform the statistical analyses.

Research question 1: To what extent do language teachers at the research site believe in the value of learner autonomy? The first research question – relating to the extent to which language teachers at the research site believe in the value of learner autonomy – can be answered based on the statistical results for sections A and B. In section A, the mean score for teachers' beliefs on the importance of learner autonomy (left column) is 3.24 out of a possible 4.00 (see table 1 below), which indicates that most of the research participants value the importance of learner autonomy.

Table 1. Descriptive data for autonomous beliefs

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. D.
Autonomous beliefs	33	2.60	4.00	3.25	.36
Valid N.	33				

In section C, the participants had the opportunity to comment on why they consider learner autonomy important, and the reasons they mentioned can be classified into three main categories:

A. Promote life-long learning (8 participants); a few examples include the following:

- It [learner autonomy] is important because students can't depend on teachers for their lifetime (participant No. 8).
- Students should cultivate learner autonomy so they can learn how to depend on themselves (participant No. 32).

B. Enhance learning motivation (5 participants); a few examples include the following:

- Through learner autonomy and the desire to learn, students could be more motivated to improve (participant No. 13).
- Learner autonomy is vital, and it is highly connected with the students' level of motivation (participant No. 10).

C. Improve self-reflection ability (5 participants); a few examples include the following:

- Learner autonomy is important because it helps students become more aware of their learning problems (participant No. 2).
- It is important for students to reflect on their own learning and be aware of and responsible for their learning progress (participant No. 28).

In addition, the participants' beliefs regarding the importance of learner autonomy were also assessed in section B of the questionnaire. The following statements received the highest mean scores among the items in section B:

Statement No. 6 – Teachers should encourage learners to engage in autonomous behaviours.
(*mean = 3.82, Std. = .392*)

Statement No. 5 – Teachers should talk to students about autonomy and its value in the classroom.
(*mean = 3.67, Std. = .540*)

Statement No. 7 – Teachers should use activities in class that promote autonomy.
(*mean = 3.55, Std. = .506*)

Statement No. 9 – Teachers should encourage students to reflect on their learning.
(*mean = 3.55, Std. = .506*)

Based on these results, we can conclude that the participants generally recognize the importance of learner autonomy and believe that they should promote it for the benefit of their students.

Research question 2: To what extent do these language teachers engage in learner autonomy-supported teaching practices in their classrooms? In section A, the mean score for teachers' practices in the classroom (right column) is 2.44 out of a possible 4.00 (see table 1 below), which suggests that most of the research participants do not engage in many autonomous practices in the classroom.

Table 2. Descriptive data for autonomous practices in the classroom

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. D.
Autonomous practices	33	1.80	3.50	2.45	.43
Valid N.	33				

In section C, the participants had the opportunity to provide examples of the practices they implement in the classroom to promote learner autonomy, and the examples can be classified into two main categories:

A. Introduce learning resources

- Introduce online resources (4 participants)
- Introduce Language Diagnosis & Consulting Centre (LDCC) (3 participants)
- Introduce library (1 participant)

B. Enhance students' in-class participation

- Share videos or articles they personally enjoy in class (4 participants)
- Designate free time for students to read whatever they prefer in class (2 participants)
- Have students select their own writing or presentation topics (2 participants)

Research question 3: Are there any discrepancies between the language teachers' beliefs and their actual teaching practices? If so, what are the causes of these differences? To explore whether there are discrepancies between the teachers' autonomous beliefs and their actual classroom practices, the researcher conducted a paired samples t-test between the two variables, and the results are presented below (tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Paired samples t-test statistics

		Mean	N	Std. D.	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Autonomous beliefs	3.2485	33	.36	.06
	Autonomous practices	2.4455	33	.43	.07

Table 4. Paired samples t-test results

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. 2-tailed	
		Mean	Std. D.	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Upper	Lower			
Pair 1	Beliefs – practices	.80	.57	.098	.60	1.00	8.16	32	.000

The tables indicate that there is a significant difference between the teachers' beliefs regarding the importance of learner autonomy and their actual classroom practices. The result was significant at the $p < .001$ level. This implies that although the language teachers may agree on the importance of promoting learner autonomy to facilitate language learners' autonomous learning ability, these beliefs are not always reflected in the teachers' actual classroom practices. Reasons for this discrepancy can be found in the teachers' responses to the open-ended questions. In section C of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to comment on whether the teaching environment in Taiwan helps or hinders the development of autonomy. Most of the participants (15 of 16) who answered this question answered that it does not, and they reported the following reasons for their response:

A. Students have low motivation to learn English. (2 participants)

B. Teachers are under pressure because of established curriculum demands; hence, there is a lack of time. (8 participants)

C. Students lack appropriate interest in autonomy. (5 participants)

Interview Findings

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted from March to April 2016. The teachers who participated in these interviews expressed their willingness to be interviewed when they filled out the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted in the interviewees' native language – Mandarin Chinese – and lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. Each interviewee was asked the questions included in the interview guide first, and they were encouraged to expand on their answers. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. This section presents the interview results according to the order of the research questions.

A. The extent to which the teachers value learner autonomy in language learning.

Generally, all of the interviewees value the importance of learner autonomy. All of them expressed the belief that learner autonomy is vital for students' learning. The reasons given for the importance of learner autonomy correspond with the results from the questionnaire data (open ended questions). A few examples are as follows:

- **Promote life-long learning**

"Learners should be responsible for their learning; we, as teachers, can't be around them all the time." (Interviewee C)

"We can't always tell them what to do after they graduate." (Interviewee B)

- **Enhance learning motivation**

"Only autonomous learners have the real desire and motivation to learn, hence, reach better results." (Interviewee A)

- **Improve ability for self-reflection–**

"They need to learn to think about their own learning and know what works for them." (Interviewee E)

Other than sharing how much they value learner autonomy, the interviewees also shared their perceptions of what learner autonomy is:

Interviewee A: *Learner autonomy refers to students finding out more information about what they want to learn without teachers telling them what to do.*

Interviewee B: *Learner autonomy refers to teachers providing resources for students to explore by themselves.*

Interviewee C: *Learner autonomy refers to students knowing what they want to learn.*

Interviewee D: *Learner autonomy refers to students finding out what they're interested in and learning more than what is provided in the classroom.*

Interviewee E: *Learner autonomy refers to students previewing before the class and reviewing the lessons after the class.*

It appears that although all of the interviewees value the importance of learner autonomy, not all of them have a clear understanding of what learner autonomy means. Interviewee B and interviewee E demonstrate a limited perception of the spectrum of learner autonomy and appear to confuse learner autonomy with effective learning strategies (e.g., previewing and reviewing).

B. The extent to which the teachers help language learners develop learner autonomy in the classroom. During the interviews, all of the interviewees shared examples of the practices they implement in the classroom to promote learner autonomy. The teachers' practices are separated into two main categories based on the questionnaire data: introduce learning resources and enhance students' in-class participation. The practices these teachers mentioned in the interviews further support these categories:

- **Introduce Learning Resources-**

1. Share effective English language learning strategies (Interviewee A).
2. Share relevant games students can play online that are related to English learning (interviewee A).
3. Provide English language learning resources or websites that students can utilize (Interviewee B).
4. Encourage students to attend LDCC (Interviewee B).
5. Provide English language learning resources or websites that students can utilize (Interviewee C).

- **Enhance Students' In-class Participation –**

1. Give students time in the classroom to practice for exams (e.g., GEPT) by themselves (Interviewee B).
2. Ask students to go online and find answers by themselves. (Interviewee C).
3. Require students to give a group presentation on the reading assignment (Interviewee C).
4. Provide a chance for students to develop their creative thinking skills (Interviewee D).
5. Design an assignment around something in which students are interested (e.g., design a travel itinerary) and encourage them to explore on their own (Interviewee D).
6. Require students to give a group presentation on the reading assignment (Interviewee E).

Although the 5 interviewees engaged in some classroom practices that may encourage students to develop learner autonomy, the practices are rather limited. Most of the classroom practices focus on providing English language learning resources (e.g., websites, games, learning strategies) to students. Some of the teachers appear to confuse adopting a student-centred teaching approach (e.g., students give a presentation) with developing students' learner autonomy. Although the two concepts are not entirely contradictory, requiring students to give presentations on a reading assignment or designating time for them to prepare for an exam do not align with the spirit of learner autonomy, since these tasks are assigned by the teacher and are not tasks the learners desire to accomplish. Hence, the interviews revealed that the teachers may not have clear perceptions of how to appropriately guide their students to become autonomous and may confuse the notion of autonomy with the student-centred teaching approach.

C. The discrepancy between the teachers' beliefs and their actual practices. A synthesis of the 5 interviewees' opinions highlights the following drivers of the wide discrepancy between the teachers' beliefs on the importance of learner autonomy and their actual practices related to promoting learner autonomy in the classroom:

A. Low student motivation (Interviewees A, B, C)

B. Students' low level of English (Interviewee B)

C. Curriculum demands (Interviewees B, C)

D. Students' passive attitude (Interviewees D, E)

Overall, the reasons mentioned here in the interview data generally match the results of the open-ended questionnaire items. However, from the open-ended questionnaire data, we learned that curriculum demand was the main reason many teachers did not engage in more autonomous practices in the classroom. By contrast, in the interviews, most teachers cited students' low motivation as the main reason. The teachers feel that their students are not interested in language learning and are unlikely to want to invest more time and effort into language learning outside the classroom. Thus, the teachers feel that encouraging autonomous learning is a waste of time. Additionally, the teachers are further discouraged by their students' passive learning attitude and the demands of the university's fixed curriculum. Consequently, the teachers have very little interest in identifying strategies to promote learner autonomy. Hence, to synthesize the questionnaire and interview data, it appears that students' motivation was the main reason teachers lack interest in promoting learner autonomy in the classroom, especially while facing the challenge of a fixed curriculum.

Discussion and Suggestions

Overall, the following three themes emerged from the data analysis.

A. EFL teachers' high regard for learner autonomy

The results from the quantitative and qualitative analyses were combined here to provide a triangulated interpretation of these English teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy (Ivankova & Greer, 2015). Both sets of results indicate that the teachers in this study highly value the importance of learner autonomy in language learning. Most of teachers do not refute the importance of learner autonomy and believe it is an important ability for language learners

to cultivate. This result is consistent with findings from Chan (2003), Lai, Gardner, and Law (2013), and recent study from Melvina and Suherdi (2019) in Indonesia.

B. The discrepancy between EFL teachers' beliefs regarding the importance of learner autonomy and their actual practices in the classroom.

The EFL teachers' beliefs regarding the importance of learner autonomy do not, however, translate into appropriate actions in the classroom. The questionnaire results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between the teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. The qualitative data also support the existence of this discrepancy and suggest that it results from either the learners' constraints, such as low motivation and a passive learning attitude, or institutional constraints, such as the pressure to follow a set curriculum. These results echo the research findings from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). In their research projects, which investigate the factors that hinder teachers from promoting learner autonomy in the classroom, the dominant causes were "learner factors (lack of motivation; lack of skills for independent learning) or institutional factors (overloaded curriculum, limited resources)" (p. 287). Borg and Alshumaimeri's (2019) study also highlights the learner characteristics (e.g. lack of motivation, or lack of proper skills) as one main reason that discourages EFL teachers to promote learner autonomy even when they agree with the importance of it.

C. EFL teachers' limited perspectives on how they can promote learner autonomy in the classroom.

The data obtained from the open-ended questions and from the interviews suggest that although teachers engage in some classroom behaviours that promote autonomy, these practices are rather limited. Additionally, many teachers may confuse the notion of promoting learner autonomy with that of adopting a more student-centred teaching approach. Benson (2011, p. 123), in his work synthesizing the important, well-tested studies in the area of learner autonomy, points out five different types of practice associated with the development of autonomy:

- Resource-based (independent interaction with learning materials)
- Technology-based (interaction with educational technologies)
- Learner-based (direct production of behaviour and psychological changes)
- Classroom-based (learner control over the planning and evaluation)
- Curriculum-based (planning and evaluation of curriculum)

In terms of the practices teachers implement in the classroom to promote learner autonomy, most of the teachers in the current study focus on the first method – introducing relevant language learning resources (self-access centre, websites, games, etc.) to students and encouraging them to participate in their own time. However, I suggest that teachers can engage in more classroom-based practices (e.g., giving learners some control over the lesson topic, types of activities, content, etc.) or curriculum-based practices to promote learner autonomy. I believe that these practices could increase engagement and motivation among language learners here in Taiwan.

In addition, to inspire language teachers to engage in more autonomy-promoting practices in the classroom, professional development workshops could be a viable option. In Borg and Al-Busaidi's study in Oman (2012), they also found a discrepancy between language teachers'

value of autonomy and their actual practices in the classroom. In an attempt to address the issue, a series of four, 90-minute workshops were conducted for these teachers that gave them the opportunity to engage in various discussions defining learner autonomy, learning about practices that promote learner autonomy, sharing successful strategies with their colleagues, and working on their own plans to implement learner autonomy in their classrooms (p. 287). The study concludes with positive feedback from the teachers who attended the workshops expressing a feeling of readiness and “a sense of purpose and momentum” (p. 291) to take on the task of implementing more learner autonomy practices in the classroom. Since teachers here in Taiwan similarly hold a high regard for learner autonomy but lack feasible and concrete ideas on how to actually promote it, these workshops might offer strong inspiration to initiate a change.

Conclusion

The aim of this research project was to explore university EFL teachers’ beliefs on the importance of learner autonomy and the classroom practices they implement to promote learner autonomy. Additionally, it endeavoured to determine whether there is a discrepancy between teachers’ beliefs and their classroom practices. This research study adopts a mixed-method design involving quantitative questionnaire data, qualitative open-ended responses and interview data. A questionnaire with both closed-ended and open-ended questions was distributed to 33 EFL teachers at a university in southern Taiwan. In addition, 5 semi-structured follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify the questionnaire responses. The results reveal that there is unanimous agreement among the teachers regarding the importance of learner autonomy in language learning. Most of the teachers in this study do not refute the importance of learner autonomy and believe that learner autonomy is an important ability for language learners to cultivate. However, the questionnaire results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between the teachers’ beliefs and their classroom practices. The qualitative data also support the existence of this discrepancy and suggest that it results from students’ low motivation and passive learning attitude and the pressure teachers’ face due to the university’s teaching demands. The data obtained from the open-ended questions and from the interviews suggest that although teachers engage in some classroom behaviours that promote autonomy, these practices are rather limited. Additionally, many teachers may confuse the notion of promoting learner autonomy with adopting a more student-centred teaching approach. Consequently, EFL teachers should endeavour to broaden their autonomy-supporting classroom practices. Based on these empirical findings, I suggest that instead of simply offering language learning resources, they can engage in discussions with learners regarding why they are learning the language, what they expect to achieve, and how they plan to attain their goals. In addition, teachers can design classroom activities or tasks that inspire students’ interests and increase their motivation. Higher-level students could conduct English learning activities since they better understand the themes and tasks in which their classmates are most interested. Institutions could also offer workshops for language teachers, where they can share their successful autonomy-supported classroom practices and inspire other teachers to follow suit. Overall, more diverse classroom practices may lead to better outcomes regarding the promotion of learner autonomy in the classroom.

About the Author

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