



## **Autonomous language learning: teachers' beliefs and practices in Saudi universities**

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### **Abstract**

Learner autonomy plays a key role in the field of foreign language learning. Recent studies related to learner autonomy have attempted to explain learner autonomy's relation to different cultures and contexts. Previous studies have not investigated what learner autonomy means to teachers in much detail; this study was an attempt to fill this gap. This study aimed to examine the concept of learner autonomy among Saudi teachers of English, particularly how they define it and how it is reflected in their teaching practices. A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was used in the data collection and analysis stages of the study. The respondents to the questionnaire were 31 teachers of English working at King Saud University and King Abdul-Aziz University in Saudi Arabia.



The interview's respondents were four female teachers working at King Saud University. The findings show the existence of theoretical knowledge regarding the concept of learner autonomy that might affect the respondents' teaching practices. Teachers agreed with and supported most of what has been written about the concept, such as its definition and the general relevance of learner autonomy in language learning. Their general instructional behaviour indicated their support for learner autonomy and a willingness to encourage their students to become more autonomous. As far as students' responsibilities and abilities were concerned, most of the teachers believed in their students' decision-making skills, but were less trusting about involving learners in determining the objectives of their courses, choosing learning material to use inside the classroom, and determining how learning is to be assessed. Teachers' views on the factors that might hinder the development of learner autonomy were also explored. Most important among these were the dominance of a teacher-centred approach, lack of flexibility in the curriculum, and other factors related to the poor responsibility of learners. Finally, this study has identified ways to create opportunities for greater autonomy in language learners in Saudi Arabia, including the role of professional development for teachers to meet the needs of students and the rapid technological changes underway in language teaching/learning. In addition, adopting different kinds of activities inside and outside the classroom can help learners develop habits of self-directed learning and continue to improve on their own. These findings provide important insights into teachers' beliefs and practices related to learner autonomy, the challenges they face in promoting learner autonomy, and the ways in which they can help learners become more autonomous in Saudi Arabian universities.



## Introduction

There has been considerable interest in the theory and practice of autonomy in language teaching and learning in recent years (Benson, 2007, p. 21). There is a growing body of literature that recognises the importance of the classroom environment in building learners' responsibility. Moreover, in language learning, the learner's development does not end in the classroom. Therefore, it is important for any educational institution to develop a practice of teaching and learning that focuses on improving learners' responsibilities and decision-making, which in turn will help to improve the results of the educational institution as a whole.

In Saudi Arabia, learning English is considered a priority in higher education. As a result, students must enrol in preparatory year programmes before beginning their bachelor majors. English is a central subject during the entire preparatory year. Students partake in an intensive course to improve their skills in language learning. Besides English courses, the preparatory year programme offers an opportunity for students to improve a variety of skills that can help and support them in overcoming the difficulties they will face in their university studies. These skills include using the library, learning about available resources, research skills, reading and listening skills, note-taking skills, and personal skills such as time management and communication to guide them towards achieving success at the university (Smith and Abouammoh, 2013, p. 58). This research seeks to better understand issues relevant to the learning process during and the outcomes of students' preparatory year at Saudi universities by investigating teachers' beliefs about autonomy in language learning.

The importance of investigating teachers' beliefs about autonomy stems from the fact that teachers can provide a clear image about what happens in the classroom (Hawkes and Olson, 1984, cited in Freeman, 2002, p. 5). Exploring the beliefs and practices of teachers about current issues in teaching and learning could provide English Foreign Language (EFL) planners and educators with a clear view of the current and real situation in classrooms, as well as details that could assist them in developing and adopting appropriate methodologies, language pedagogies, and educational materials.



In accordance with this goal, and with the changes to the Saudi educational system and the new direction of the Saudi government (as reflected in the Saudi vision 2030), this research investigates teachers' beliefs about autonomy. This is important because learner autonomy carries with it the notion of independence, which in turn can promote and encourage learners to work well and produce the results they want. Improving learner autonomy at educational institutions, which requires the involvement of students in the processes of learning and making decisions, may lead to better learning and a more effective educational experience. Consequently, this method of learning has the potential to extend beyond the classroom and have a positive influence throughout the learner's life.

This study has shown that English language learners have many limitations placed upon them, resulting in them not being as good as they should be. Some of these limitations are caused by the lack of effective applications of English in academic or real-life settings. Although they have studied English for six years at school, many undergraduate students have poor proficiency levels in English, which hinders their academic studies. Al-Hazmi (2015) discussed some of the reasons for this problem; while some are related to the curricula, materials, teaching and learning strategies, and the dominance of a teacher-centred approach over a learner-centred approach, the most important problem is the lack of qualified teachers. Because of this lack, students often need intensive English courses and programmes to develop their language skills. In addition, employers have complained about the mistakes their employees make when writing reports or communicating in English, an indication of their poor proficiency levels (Al-Hazmi, 2015, p. 131).

This dissertation will examine the following four research questions:

- 1-Among English language teachers at preparatory year in Saudi universities, how is learner autonomy defined by teachers?
- 2-Do English teachers promote learner autonomy in their teaching practices?
- 3-What are the main challenges that teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?



4-In this context, how can teachers provide opportunities for greater autonomy in language learning?

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 aims to introduce the dissertation. Chapter 2 begins by laying out the theoretical parameters of the research and examining the key theoretical concepts involved in explaining the meaning of autonomy. Following this, a brief overview of the history of autonomy is provided, specifically in the field of education. Subsequently, there is an attempt to assess the impact of autonomy in other contexts and to examine teachers' beliefs about autonomy in language learning based on previous studies. Chapter 3 is concerned with the methodology employed in this study. Qualitative data was gathered from 30 teachers and combined with quantitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews. Chapter 4 analyses the data gathered, the results of the semi-structured interviews, and addresses each of the research questions in turn. Chapter 5 compares and contrasts the findings of this study to those of the studies discussed in the literature review. The final chapter reflects on the extent to which this study has provided a clear vision about the present issues with regard to autonomy in teaching and learning English in Saudi universities. In addition, it outlines particular implications of the research by revisiting the research questions, discussing the limitations and drawbacks of the research, and outlining future research possibilities.

## **2-Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

A considerable amount of literature has investigated the role of autonomy in language learning. Over the last 30 years, the classroom (which is considered the setting for the teaching and learning process) has changed from a traditional, teacher-centred classroom to a more communicative environment, which has required changing other elements of the environment. First, there has been a shift from focusing on a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred one (Tudor, 1993). Consequently, the role of the teacher has changed to facilitate the appropriate use of different activities (Harmer, 1991, p. 63).



The teacher's role has changed from that of being the activity organiser and sole source of knowledge (Tudor, 1993, p. 24) to being advisor, counsellor, performer, observer, tutor, prompter, and facilitator (Harmer, 1991). The second changed element in such a setting is the learner, who can contribute to classroom decision-making instead of being a passive recipient of information who does only what the teacher says. In the past, knowledge was transmitted from teacher to learner with minimal interaction between the students and the teacher (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Lörcher, 1986, cited in Anton, 1999). The shift away from this paradigm resulted from the adoption of constructivist theories of learning, which 'describe how people transform and organise reality according to common intellectual principles as a result of interactions with the environment' (Paris and Byrnes, 1989, cited in Benson, 2011, p. 38). In other words, effective learning is linked to the active participation of the learner. This process is based on applying social interaction to construct knowledge in the minds of learners, and through involving them in making decisions about their own learning (Benson, 2011, p. 38–39).

In response to the personal construct theory movement, the notion of learner independence or learner autonomy was introduced. This involved an expectation for students to have more responsibility in order to encourage more effective language learning. To this end, the teacher should prepare students to be independent.

## **2.2 How the concept of 'learner autonomy' arose**

The concept of autonomy and independence is derived from the fields of politics and philosophy, and has deep historical roots in both Western and Eastern philosophies. Benson and Voller (2014, p. 4) pointed out that, in philosophy and psychology, the use of the terms 'autonomy' and 'independence' were connected to the ability of a person to behave as a responsible member of society. In a political context, these terms were considered rights rather than capacities, indicating freedom from external control (2014, p. 4). Benson (2011, p. 26) offered a comprehensive analysis of the factors and effects of the theory of autonomy in language learning and presented some of its more important sources. The theory has been used in connection with, first, educational reform, calling for freedom in learning (Rousseau, 1712, cited in Benson, 2011);



second, research and practice in the field of adult self-directed learning and education (Knowles, 1975); and third, the psychology of learning, which developed within Kelly's (1963) personal construct theory and Vygotsky's (1978) idea of the 'zone of proximal development'. The final influence on the theory of autonomy was the political philosophy of the twentieth century (Benson,2011).

Benson (2011, p. 57) concluded that the theory of autonomy in language education and learning should consider the pedagogical dimension instead of the political or philosophical influences. This means that to understand the meaning of learner autonomy in language education, the philosophical and political roots should be considered only to better understand the basis of pedagogical decisions in learner autonomy.

In the field of language education, learner autonomy was first developed at the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL), University of Nancy, in France by the Council of Europe's Modern Languages, which led to the publication of the most important report about autonomy and had a strong influence on its later developments (Smith, 2008).

### **2.3 Definitions**

Autonomy is a commonly used phrase in language learning, yet, it is difficult to define precisely. As the meaning of autonomy in language learning embodies a multitude of philosophical, political, and psychological perspectives, it is necessary to examine the connection between different meanings and concepts of autonomy and its broad development to understand its application in language education.

Holec (1981) is considered the first scholar in Europe to suggest that there is a need for a word or group of words that is used to indicate a person's ability to take charge of his/her own learning. He wrote a report on the theory and practice of adult education and defined learner autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (p. 3).



Dickinson (1987) suggests that autonomy ‘is the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of these decisions’ (p. 11).

Commenting on Holec and Dickinson’s definitions, Oxford (2003) argues that the two espouse completely different beliefs. Dickinson (1987) described autonomy as a state of individual responsibility, in which self-direction is an ability inherent in responsibility. This definition is clearly different from that of Holec (1981), who defines autonomy as learners’ attitudes of responsibility and self-direction as a situation of learning in which autonomy can be exercised.

According to Little (1991, p. 4), autonomy includes the abilities of making critical reflection, decision-making, as well as working independently. It depends mainly on the development of a psychological relationship between the learners and the educational environment to create the capacity for autonomy

While Holec’s definition has been the most commonly cited and generally accepted definition, it has been a matter of ongoing discussion and debate among researchers. Little (2007, p. 16) argues that Holec’s definition does not completely examine the relation between autonomy and construction theories. Benson (2011, p. 60–63) considers Holec’s definition ‘problematic’, as the ability to make decisions about learner autonomy was described in ‘technical terms’ without considering the psychological features of the learners. Little’s definition was complementary to Holec’s, but added an important psychological orientation of learner autonomy (Benson, 2011). Both Holec’s and Little’s definitions capture important aspects of autonomy, specifically those related to control over learning management and cognitive processes. However, control over learning content and the situational aspects of learning do not receive attention in their definitions. Due to this insufficient definition of autonomy, Benson (1996) attempts to expand the description of autonomy to include social aspects, as learning language requires interactions with others and is not achieved by learning in isolation. Thus, decision making and control over learning the process both rely on an awareness of the social aspects of language learning.





## 2.4 Versions of autonomy

Benson (1997, p. 19) is considered to be the first person who tried to explain the versions of autonomy in order to achieve a better definition of the term. He suggests that autonomy has three identified versions in language learning: technical, psychological and political (Benson, 1997). The technical version focuses mainly on learning management, learning strategies, and learner training. This approach is linked to the theory of positivism. The psychological version focuses mainly on cognitive processes and the characteristics of the individual learner, such as behaviours and attitudes. This approach is linked to the theory of constructivism. The political version is linked to critical theory, where the political and social ideologies affect the appearance of the knowledge. The political approach focuses on controlling learning context and deals mainly with different ideas that form the basis of the social and political system.

Oxford (2003) argues that Benson's definition is not totally complete. She suggests that Benson does not mention the social perspective and includes learning strategies in the technical version, whereas she believes it should be part of each version. In light of this, she expanded Benson's model and proposed a model that contains four perspectives on autonomy, each with a different focus: a technical perspective, which focuses on the physical situation; a psychological perspective, which focuses on the characteristics of learners; a sociocultural perspective, which focuses on mediated learning; and a political-critical perspective that deals with competing ideologies, access, and power structures.

Oxford (2003) suggests that each perspective is supported by different themes. The first is the context, which refers to the environment surrounding second language learning. The second theme includes agency, the ability of doing or leading something; an agent learner has an important effect on a situation. The third theme is motivation, which in second language learning means the desire to learn another language. The fourth theme is related to learning strategies and the plans learners make to achieve their goals, like taking notes or trying to find a conversation partner, as well as unobservable strategies such as analysing words to improve the ability to retain and locate information that has been stored.



Smith (2003, p. 130) draws a distinction between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ pedagogies for autonomy. The weak version assumes that students are not ready to be autonomous and need to be trained to improve autonomy. The strong pedagogy is based on the belief that learners are already autonomous and have adequate power and skills to make use of learner autonomy. According to Benson (2011), weak and strong versions of autonomy are related to the ‘presence and absence of control over learning content’.

## 2.5 Levels of autonomy and measuring autonomy

A great deal of previous research on autonomy has focused on defining and describing autonomy with respect to the presence of control over learning. In describing the various aspects of control over learning, it is important to measure the extent to which learners are autonomous by ‘measuring autonomy’ Benson (2011, p. 65) and identifying the degree of autonomy by recognising the ‘level of autonomy’ (Benson, 2007, p. 23).

One of the most influential frameworks for implementing learner autonomy in foreign language learning contexts is Nunan’s (1997, p. 192) framework for developing learner autonomy. He considers autonomy to exist in degrees rather than being a binary concept. That is why he suggests a framework to help others to better understand the concept of autonomy. In Nunan’s (1997, p. 195) framework, ‘autonomy is divided into five levels: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence’. These learner actions are promoted through identified content and processes for each level. This kind of framework could be useful for providing teachers with a guide to help promote learner autonomy and improve understanding of this concept, as it is the subject of considerable debate.

Another model of autonomy is Littlewood’s (1996, p. 432) framework for developing autonomy in foreign language learning and teaching. It involves three dimensions: autonomy as *communicator*, *learner*, and *person*. The first dimension involves autonomy as a ‘*communicator*’ in language acquisition, which is based on the ability to use language and employ specific learning and communication strategies to communicate with others; the learner in this dimension would be able to deal with different kinds of texts and interact with others in social situations. The Second, autonomy as a ‘*learner*’, depends on the ability to work independently inside and outside the classroom through self-directed learning.



The Third, autonomy as a *‘person’* is mainly concerned with a learner’s interaction outside the classroom. According to Benson (2011, p. 64), this level is ‘a higher-level goal’ that may possibly come from autonomy in the *communicator* and *learner* approaches.

Littlewood (1999, p. 75) identifies a distinction between two levels of self-regulation: ‘proactive’ and ‘reactive’ autonomy. These two levels relate to four domains of autonomy in second language learning: communicating with other people in the second language, collaborating (which includes supporting and respecting other people), performing tasks individually or with others, and a focus on managing one’s learning.

A further model is provided by Benson (2001), who classifies levels of learner autonomy in relation to control over learning and teaching according to three dimensions: the first is the control over learning management, which includes the adult self-directed learner and learning strategies in relation to metacognitive, social, and effective strategies. The second is the control over cognitive processing, which includes attention, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge that covers the work’s planning, monitoring, and evaluation. The third is the control over the content of learning, which is considered an aspect of control over learning management concerned with the ‘what’ and ‘why’ instead of the ‘when’ and ‘how’ of language learning.

These debates regarding levels of autonomy outline the critical roles of high levels of autonomy as seen from multiple perspectives. Given the lack of agreement, describing and demonstrating autonomy as a model and determining the levels of autonomy are subjects for further debate.

## **2.7 Autonomy and teaching practices**

In language and teaching practices, teachers need a guide or method to direct them towards the best approach for developing or fostering autonomy inside and outside the classroom. Before dealing with this, it is necessary to highlight three terms relating to autonomy: ‘autonomy as a learner attribute, autonomous learning as a mode of learning, and autonomous learning programmes as educational practices designed to foster autonomy’ (Benson, 2011, p. 123).



A considerable amount of literature has been published on learner autonomy. Benson (2011, p. 125) provided a good summary of the classifications of practices associated with the development of autonomy. These are classified under six headings:

1-**Resource-based approaches** give special importance to independent interaction with learning materials, such as the self-access language learning of Gardner and Miller (1999), which is considered an approach to learning language instead of teaching language. According to Benson (2011, p. 128–130), the most important principle of self-access is the validity of the learning resources available for free access. This kind of learning, often called ‘language resource centres’ or ‘independent language learning’, might be useful in creating opportunities for self-instruction within environments including advisors, teachers, and other learners. Together, they create face-to-face interactions that are effective and easy to achieve.

2-The second approaches are **Technology-based approaches**, which put emphasis on independent interaction with educational technologies (Benson, 2011). Benson (2011, p. 145) suggests that these approaches could fall under the heading of resource-based approaches, but because he discussed the role of new technologies in the development of autonomy, they are considered an essential part of self-access, tandem learning, distance learning, self-instruction, and out of class learning. Benson (2011) includes computer-assisted language learning, the internet, technology and self-directed learning, and mobile language learning among the technology-based approaches.

3-**Learner-based approaches** emphasise the direct production of behavioural and psychological changes in the learner. These approaches aim to provide learners with the skills and abilities necessary to take control of their learning by, for example, reflective discussions. According to Kolb (2007), the using of reflective discussions helps learners to be more aware of their language learning beliefs, thus allowing them to develop their learning skills and be better able to control their learning process. Reflective discussions also make the teacher more aware of the need of learners, which can help the teacher choose appropriate learning activities. Esch (1997) indicates the role of workshops in developing learner autonomy, in which learners are involved in selecting the syllabus and feedback is given by the whole group through conversation.



4-**Classroom-based approaches** include involving learners in the process of managing their learning, such as planning and evaluating classroom learning (Benson, 2011). Involving learners in the process of evaluating themselves, known as ‘self-assessment’, includes reflection on goals and learning activities like self-marked tests, progress cards, diary logs, and portfolios (Benson, 2011). This approach helps make learners more responsible for their own learning (Natri, 2007, p. 108).

5-**Curriculum-based approaches** are characterised by giving more freedom to learners to choose the contents of a particular course of study (Benson, 2011). The effectiveness of such an approach ‘depends on the implicit and explicit scaffolding structure that supports learners in the decision making progress’ (Benson, 2011, p. 184).

6-The sixth approach is **Teacher-based approaches**, which pay special attention to the role of teachers and teacher education in the practise of developing learner autonomy (Benson, 2011). Benson (2011) outlines the effectiveness of three complementary facets of this approach. First, teachers should receive strategies for teaching autonomous students. Second, teachers should reflect on pedagogical strategies as teachers of autonomy. Finally, they should try to apply these strategies when teaching language.

### **Studies on autonomy in relation to different cultures and contexts**

Palfreyman and Smith gathered a number of papers regarding the topic of learner autonomy in relation to different cultures and contexts. Palfreyman (2003) provides different interpretations of this term ‘culture’ as it relates to this context, as it usually refers to national/ethnic cultures like ‘Chinese culture’ or ‘Western culture’. The relevant interpretation refers to the different behaviours, values, and customs in different contexts or institutions, such as schools and classrooms (Palfreyman, 2003). The third concept of culture explains the differences in meaning between learners in a sociocultural context and learners in isolation. By describing the meaning of autonomy in a cultural context, Autonomy has the meaning of controlling or limiting the freedom of the individual or another meaning that is completely not connected to the real meaning for autonomy. Palfreyman suggested this explanation of the meaning of culture, in the context of autonomy, to highlight the ways in which autonomy and culture interact in a variety of learning contexts.



This concept of autonomy is considered a ‘Western ideal’ (Benson, 2007). It is useful to offer a variety of interpretations of the concept to make it adaptable to different contexts (Sinclair, 1997).

Numerous studies have attempted to explain autonomy’s relation to different cultures and contexts. For example, Aoki and Hamakawa (2003) claim that the development of teacher autonomy can be supported by examining issues of autonomy from a feminist perspective. Their research discusses autonomy from a gender perspective, which differs from the concept of autonomy as it is relation to ethnic or social groups. Gao (2003) examines the changes in Chinese students’ use of a vocabulary-related learning strategy after their arrival in the UK. The findings of the study revealed that changes in academic culture, particularly assessment methods like open-book exams and assignments, have a significant impact on the strategies used to help Chinese students learn vocabulary; they tend to use dictionaries more often. Even more significantly, these strategies help learners develop their ability to utilise technologies effectively for independent learning purposes. These studies and others that have examined the idea of autonomy in students from China (Huang, 2006), Hong Kong (Littlewood, 1999, 2000), and Japan (Smith, 2001) provide important insights into the meaning of autonomy in the context of a particular culture and the approaches used to improve autonomy in that culture.

## **2.8 Previous studies on language teachers’ beliefs about autonomy**

In a study investigating learner autonomy, Camilleri (1999) examines teachers’ view regarding learner autonomy. The data was collected from 328 teachers from six European countries. The findings highlight the importance of involving students in making decisions about selecting courses and identifying the objectives of those courses. Teachers were found to be less supportive of involving learners in the selection of the study materials, textbook, and decisions regarding the time or place of the learning process. In a follow-up study,

In a study that set out to determine teachers’ perspectives on autonomous language learning, Chan (2003) assessed the perspectives of students and teachers in five major areas: (a) responsibilities and abilities in learning/teaching English, (b) students’ motivation level, (c) learners’ autonomous learning practices and behaviour,



(d) autonomous learning activities recommended by teachers, and (e) the awareness of the importance of learner autonomy for effective language learning. Data was collected through questionnaire surveys of 508 undergraduates at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and 41 English teachers from the department of English, followed up by conducting interviews with a selected group of students. For the teachers, there was a follow-up including open-ended questions; both methods helped in gathering qualitative and quantitative data, preventing a narrow interpretation and understanding of learner autonomy. The findings indicate that teachers were not positive about learner involvement in the selection of materials; they claimed to regard autonomy as important, but they preferred to take responsibility for language-related decisions. This is an indication of the dominance of a teacher-centred approach, which might indicate a less autonomous student role. By the end of the study, Chan pointed out that there are many constraining factors that could hinder the development of learner autonomy, such as teachers being less motivated regarding learner autonomy and teachers not being ready to develop learner autonomy in a tertiary classroom (2003).

Martinez (2008) aims to explore to what extent the analysis of subjective theories of student teachers about learner autonomy, and their experiences as both learners and student teachers, can help researchers to re-examine professional scientific theories of learner autonomy and approaches to teacher education. She collected data from 16 student teachers of French, Italian, and Spanish studying at a university in Germany. The research data in this study is drawn from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and observations of classes. She paid special attention to the verbal data, as she believed that learner autonomy would be legally acceptable if we are able to provide basic knowledge about autonomy through empirical research. By combining qualitative and interpretive research, she was able to broaden the interpretations of the concepts.

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) provide a more detailed view of teachers' beliefs. They used two methods in their study: first, they collected data, with a well-designed questionnaire, from 200 teachers, which they followed up by interviewing 20 English teachers in the language centre at Sultan Qabus University in an attempt to explore teachers' responses to the questionnaire in more detail. In their seminal study,



Borg and Al-Busaidi made a sadly undervalued contribution to making learner autonomy a more central aspect of their work by investigating what autonomy means from the perspective of language teachers. In their well-designed and robust study, they point out the importance of conducting more research regarding teachers' beliefs, a largely unexplored topic in the past 30 years of research on learner autonomy. They believe that the volume of literature on learner autonomy played a central role in their project in two ways: in defining the key issues in the field of learner autonomy and in providing ideas and topics that would help them to explore the perspective of teachers on learner autonomy. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) note a significant gap between theories and practise. Teachers feel that it is desirable for their learners to develop a range of abilities associated with autonomy and to involve learners in a range of decisions about their learning, but in practices they did not involve their students in making decisions. This shows that while most teachers believe in the concept of learner autonomy, they do not put it into effect in practice.

Teachers of the English language at language centres pinpoint a number of factors that might limit the extent to which they feel they are able to promote learner autonomy. These factors include learners who have limited proficiency in English, the institutions which prescribe curricula and materials, and teachers who need to be trained to help learners to be more autonomous.

In a follow-up study, Al-Asmari (2013) conducts a survey about teachers' perceptions of practices and prospects of learner autonomy involving 60 teachers of English from different nationalities teaching in an English language centre at Taif University. A questionnaire comprised of three sections was devised specifically for this study. The findings point to the importance of involving students in making decisions in relation to their language learning process. However, the teachers surveyed lacked the proper training in learning autonomy.

The results of the study also confirmed Littlewood's (1999) assumption about proactive learners who are able to be responsible, recognise their mistakes, and learn from them so as to better make decisions by themselves. The findings also highlight the challenges that might prohibit or hinder the development of learner autonomy in Saudi Arabia; learners are challenged to manage their learning, make decisions about their studies,





and evaluate their performance or reflect on their own thinking process. The study also reinforces the need to redefine the role of the teacher in educational institutions, as their role is currently that of a knowledge supplier, manager, and consular, thus barring the learners from making decisions about their learning.

Methodologically, the studies on teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy reviewed here (Camilleri, 1999, 2007; Al-Asmari, 2013) are based on questionnaires and are thus limited. Balcikanli (2010) and Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) used two instruments, questionnaires and interviews. Chan (2003) used questionnaires of teachers and students, interviews of students, and open-ended questions following a teachers' questionnaire. The well-established instruments of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Chan (2003), which are considered to be mixed method studies, provide a strong direction for this project. While Martinez (2008) collected data from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and observations of classes, leading to interesting results, he did not make his methods (questionnaires, semi-structured interviews) known to the public.

For the purpose of my study, I obtained information to build my instruments from the available instruments mentioned above developed by Borg and Al-Busaid (2012), Chan (2003), and Al-Asmari (2013), as well as additional sources such as Reeve and Jang's 2006 study entitled 'what teachers say and do to support students' Autonomy During a learning Activity'.

This section was an attempt to provide a brief summary of the literature relating to learner autonomy, and it has shown that little is known about the interrelation between the concept of autonomy and what learner autonomy means to teachers. Previous findings highlight the need for more studies based on observation and practical experience, not on theory.

Collectively, these studies outline the critical role of learner autonomy, highlighting the need for more investigation of teachers' beliefs regarding learner autonomy to achieve a complete understanding of actual challenges and problems that might hinder the development of learner autonomy in specific contexts.



## **2.9 Context of the present study**

According to the preparatory year deanship website, one of the purposes of the preparatory year in Saudi universities is to supply students with personal skills to help them achieve life-long learning, both in and outside the university, and to improve their ability to think critically and analyse different kinds of topics to help them in writing a well-constructed academic research paper. Throughout the preparatory year, the university will help learners make use of technology to support their studies. One of the main goals of this year is to encourage students to communicate effectively between themselves and others.

The value of English in Saudi universities is summed up by Smith and Abouammoh (2013): ‘English acts as a core model during preparatory year, besides the study skills which include how to use the literary and learning resources, research skills, reading and listening skills, note-taking skills and personal skills such as time management and effective communication’ (p. 58). One of the roles of English language teachers is to help their students improve their skills and independence as well as improve their ability to interact with society. However, new students in their preparatory year do not have all the skills that are required in university study and depend more on teachers for their learning. Thus, one way to support these skills is by developing the autonomy of learners through English language teachers.

## **3-Methodology**

### **Research questions**

1-Among English language teachers in the preparatory year in Saudi universities, how is learner autonomy defined by teachers?

2-Do English teachers promote learner autonomy in their teaching practices?

3-What are the challenges that teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?



4-In what ways can teachers improve opportunities for greater autonomy in language learning in this context?

### **Research design**

A combined qualitative and quantitative methodological approach was used in the present study for collecting data, involving a questionnaire and interviews.

### **The questionnaire**

The questionnaire method has a number of features that make it attractive to employ in research. According to Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010), ‘the main attraction of questionnaires is their unprecedented efficiency in terms of (a) researcher time, (b) researcher effort, and (c) financial resources’ (p. 6). Besides these advantages, a practical advantage of using a questionnaire is that it collects data based on facts, behaviour, and attitudes (Dörnyei and Taguchi, 2010, p. 5).

However, there are certain drawbacks and limitations associated with the use of questionnaires. Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) outlined three limitations of questionnaires: ‘simplicity and superficiality of answers, unreliable and unmotivated respondents and little or no opportunity to correct the respondents’ mistakes and the final big problem with regard to questionnaires is that people do not always provide true answers’ (p. 7). It could be said that questionnaire data is not dependable or strong enough to convince someone, or might not even be acceptable, despite the fact that it is helpful in measuring specific behaviours and attitudes and obtaining specific information about certain facts.

To ensure the quality of the research and the questionnaire, I had to design questions that are closely connected to the subject to ensure that the findings are useful. I utilised available instruments from prior researchers, as noted previously. To design the questionnaire, I first engaged with the literature on autonomy to identify the parts and themes that will be discussed in the study. Following this process, I drew up a series of items about learner autonomy and the debates surrounding the notion of autonomous language learning. One of the existing challenges is the substantial amount of literature on autonomy it relates to a variety of concepts, definitions, and debates,



which makes dealing with autonomy in teaching practices more complicated. To address this, the sections of the questionnaire depend on the selection of specific and particular content that deals with practical issues in teaching rather than theory.

The questionnaire is divided into four sections. The first section includes information on participants' background and experience. The second covers issues related to beliefs about autonomy. The third includes activities, autonomy support, responsibilities, and abilities, which fall under the title of autonomy and teaching practice. The final section involves the challenges that might hinder the development of learner autonomy and the future of autonomy in the context of the study. The items in the first section were adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) instrument to gain information about teachers' beliefs regarding learner autonomy. The issues included in section two are presented as 6 Likert-scale items on a 5-point scale of agreement. The third section, on autonomy and teaching practice, is divided into four parts. The first part is on activities and consists of 9 items designed to obtain information on how often teachers encourage or offer opportunities for students to engage in learning activities. The second section deals with autonomy support, including 5 items assessing how often teachers support their own students' autonomy, based on a paper written by Reeve and Jang (2006) about what teachers say and do to support students' autonomy during a learning activity. The third section considers the issues of responsibility and how often learners are involved in making decisions about their learning activities or materials, consisting of 6 items. The previous three parts, activities, autonomy support, and responsibilities, consist of a series of statements using rating scales indicating different degrees of a certain category (Dörnyei and Taguchi, 2010, p. 26) ranging from often to never. The fourth part of the section three asks teachers about their perception of students' decision-making abilities, consisting of 6 Likert-scale items on a 5-point scale of quality (very poor to very good). The fourth section of the questionnaire assesses issues related to the challenges that might hinder the development of learner autonomy as well as the challenges surrounding its improvement. The 6 items therein reference the results of Al-Asmari's (2013) study.

The next stage for developing the questionnaire was to ask the supervisor to provide feedback on the items and the content of the questionnaire.



Following further revisions to the instrument, the questionnaire was tested by colleagues studying in the TESOL MA programme at the University of Leicester, as well as colleagues working at King Saud University. The supervisor's feedback and the teachers' and colleagues' suggestions led to the final version of the questionnaire.

The final version of the questionnaire consisted of 38 Likert-scale items covering section two, teachers' beliefs (1–6). Section three included 26 items about autonomy and teaching practice with respect to involving learners in learning activities and how teachers support learner autonomy during these activities. The last two parts of teaching practice and autonomy deal with the responsibilities of learners in learning activities as well as teachers' views on learners' abilities to be autonomous learners. The final section includes 6 Likert-scale items about the future of learner autonomy in Saudi Arabia and the challenges it faces. The final version of the questionnaire was converted into a web-based format, using Google Forms. The most significant feature of Google Forms is free, effective online tool and the results can be transmitted to spreadsheets. The questionnaire was tested by me and two colleagues in the MA TESOL programme before the final version was sent to the participants. The final version of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1.

For the purpose of the study, a probability sample was used. According to Bryman (2012, p. 195), this kind of sample helps in generalising the findings derived from a sample to the population as a whole. Due to the study's large number of participants, comprised of English teachers in preparatory year programmes at Saudi universities, the population of the study was divided into strata and simple random samples were taken from each stratum to form stratified random samples (Burgess, 1993, p. 27).

The self-completed questionnaire was distributed via email and administered to a group of teachers, both male and female, teaching English in a preparatory programme at King Saud University and King Abdul-Aziz University. The email included information about the study with an attached email survey sent to the chosen individuals who were invited to complete the questionnaire. Of the 50 questionnaire recipients, there were 30 respondents.



A statistical analysis was conducted to interpret and present the results of the questionnaire, to make suggestions for examining the status of learner autonomy, and to explore the ways in which it could be developed in a preparatory year programme.

## **Interviews**

The second phase of the study consisted of follow-up interviews with English teachers working at King Saud University in the preparatory year programme. According to Polkinghorne (2005), interviews are considered a source of qualitative data; they help dig below the surface to introduce the aimed topic into a discussion and conversation. Using them, the researcher can learn more about certain issues. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with four volunteer teachers via purposive sampling. According to Guarte and Barrios (2006), this sample is acceptable but not ideal and not representative of all teachers, they are forming a group of teachers who can contribute to the topic, and it is randomly selected as they are forming the characteristics of the sample to be involved with study. One significant advantage of using semi-structured interviews, according to Barribal and While (1994), is that they are appropriate for exploring perceptions, beliefs, and opinions regarding complex or sensitive concepts, allowing the interviewer to obtain more information and examine certain issues in greater depth. The early stages of constructing the interview were informed by a review of the literature and areas related to learner autonomy to identify the topics that should be covered. Then, the first draft of the interview schedule was assessed by the supervisor. The final draft was piloted with two colleagues from the MA TESOL programme. The interviews took place over three days. All of them were conducted face-to-face in Saudi Arabia. An example of the interview schedule is included in Appendix 2.

By using two strategies, both quantitative and qualitative, to collect data, research questions can be answered more completely (Bryan, 2008, p. 637). The mixed methods approach is unique in that it allows useful, important and interesting results to be obtained from two perspectives. Furthermore, it provides teachers with the opportunity to explain why they have provided specific responses and reactions to questionnaire items.



## **Ethics**

The questionnaire was sent by email to participants; their participation was voluntary, and they were given sufficient information about the study to make an informed decision about their participation. They were told that the information they would provide would be treated with the utmost confidentiality and anonymity as part of the university's ethical rules. For the interviews, the participants were asked if they preferred recording the interview or just writing their responses; they preferred writing rather than recording.

## **4-Results**

### **Profile of the Respondents**

The respondents to the questionnaire were a probability sample of 31 teachers of English working at King Saud University and King Abdul-Aziz University in Saudi Arabia. The respondents to the interview were a non-probability sample of four female teachers working at King Saud University. All the respondents were Saudi. Sixteen of the questionnaire respondents were female while 15 were male. Over 76% had a master's as their highest degree, 3% had doctorates, and the remaining 20% had lower levels of educational attainment, such as a bachelor's degree or another diploma. The experience these respondents had in teaching English ranged up to 14 years, but the majority of them had 5–9 years of experience teaching English (50%). Descriptive statistics were used to analyse and summarise the results of the questionnaire for each research question. Professional development activities, such as self-learning activities, integrated technology, second language assessment programs, and courses concerning the use of technology in learning language training, were only mentioned by 18 respondents. Half of these respondents mentioned that they had previously enrolled in TESOL programs.



### **1-Among English teachers at preparatory year in Saudi universities, how is learner autonomy defined by teachers?**

Previous research has proposed four perspectives on learner autonomy: social, political, psychological, and technical autonomy (Oxford, 2003). Table 1 displays a summary of statistics describing teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. Surprisingly, only 3.2% of the sample (one respondent) did not agree that learner autonomy is promoted through activities that give learners opportunities to learn from each other. On the other hand, the most interesting aspect of the data is that a clear majority of the respondents, 61.3%, agree on the role of co-operative group activities in supporting the development of learner autonomy, while a slight majority (51.6%) agree that autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together, and a similar majority believes that activities giving opportunities for learners to learn from each other promotes autonomy. In light of this analysis, it is clear that most of the teachers believe in the social orientation of learner autonomy.

Besides the social orientation of learner autonomy, there is also a political orientation. More than 75% of respondents believe in (58.1% agree, 19.4% strongly agree) giving learners some choice in the kinds of activities they do to promote learner autonomy.

With regard to the psychological perspective, almost 75% of respondents share the perception (38.7% agree, 35.5% strongly agree) of the importance of developing the capacities of learners to evaluate their own learning, while 61.7% of responses strongly agree that motivated learners can develop learner autonomy more than those who are not motivated.

In terms of the technical orientation, almost 80% of teachers (40.5% agree + 39.0% strongly agree) recognise that learner autonomy is promoted by working independently in self-access centres; the totals for each of the questions are as follows:

80.7% (19.4% strongly agree), 64.5% (12.9% strongly agree), 77.4% (25.8% strongly agree), 77.5% (19.4% strongly agree), 74.2% (35.5% strongly agree), 81.3% (61.7% strongly agree), 79.5% (39% strongly agree).

Based on this presentation, the psychological orientation (5–6) and the technical orientation (7) were the most supported,





with higher average levels of total support, and of strong support, than for the social perspective (1–3) or the political perspective (4).

The strong support for both the technical and psychological perspectives is an indication of the important role of the psychological perspective in learner autonomy. Without the support of the psychological orientation, the technical perspective will not be able to function (Oxford, 2003).

With regard to the role of teachers in learner autonomy, respondents were almost evenly divided between those who are unsure about the role of teachers in autonomous learning (38.7%), and the slightly larger group (45.2% total; 35.5% agree + 9.7% strongly agree) who believe that learner autonomy means learning without teachers. It is clear that teachers' roles in learner autonomy are unclear for some teachers.



	Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
1	Cooperative group activities support the development of learner autonomy. ( <i>social</i> )	0	0	19.4	61.3	19.4
2	Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together. ( <i>social</i> )	0	3.2	32.3	51.6	12.9
3	Learner autonomy is promoted through activities that give learners opportunities to learn from each other. ( <i>social</i> )	3.2	3.2	16.1	51.6	25.8
4	Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do ( <i>political</i> )	0	6.5	16.1	58.1	19.4
5	To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning ( <i>psychological</i> )	0	0	25.8	38.7	35.5
6	Motivated learners can develop learner autonomy more than those who are not motivated ( <i>psychological</i> )	0	19.4	0	19.4	61.7
7	Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in self-access centres ( <i>technical</i> )	0	0	20.5	40.5	39.0
8	Learner autonomy means learning without teachers	3.2	12.9	38.7	35.5	9.7

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for teachers' beliefs on learner autonomy

## 2-Within English language teaching practices, do teachers in Saudi Arabia promote learner autonomy?

To answer this question, the questionnaire was divided into four sections that explored teachers' perceptions about their teaching practices in relation to the activities, responsibilities and abilities of their students,



and specifically examining the kind of support they provided to their students inside the language classroom. To provide practical information and answers regarding how teachers promote learner autonomy within teaching practices, this section takes into consideration the definition of autonomy offered by Holec (1981): the ability to take responsibility for decisions about all aspects of learning, including determining objectives, selecting methods and content, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes. Questions related to the activities, responsibilities and abilities of learners were based on survey instruments developed by Chan (2003). To assess autonomy support inside the language classroom, the questions on support for autonomy took into consideration Reeve and Jang's (2006) description of supportive instructional behaviours for learner autonomy.

In the questions listed in Table 2, respondents were asked how often they encourage and involve their students in activities in and outside the classroom. This section aimed to discover any autonomous language learning behaviour taking place and how the teachers encourage their students in learning activities involving the practical use of autonomy in learning.

The overall response to other activities, such as reading books and newspapers in English, using English learning websites to practice English, and encouraging students to use English with friends and family, was very positive; 96.8% (87.1% often) use English learning websites to practice English. Strong evidence of autonomous behaviour was found in teachers' responses to question 13, as more than 93.3% (67.7% often) offer their students opportunities to make suggestions. This contrasted with the finding that a majority of teachers rarely (38.7%) or never (12.9%) offer students an opportunity to choose learning materials in class, while 45.2% of participants do so sometimes and only one respondent (3.2% of the sample) does so often. This suggests a need for further investigation, or probing questions, since a substantial majority of teachers report that they offer an opportunity for their students to make suggestions, but most rarely or never offer an opportunity for them to choose classroom material. In response to this issue, interview respondents were asked about learner autonomy and the choice of learning resources and activities. One participant commented, 'Involving the learners in choosing resources would enhance their confidence and passion for learning, but this should be in accordance with the teacher. (How?) Teachers can give advice



and suggestions to help learners in choosing suitable materials’. This comment reflects teachers’ belief regarding learner autonomy and their role in supporting learner autonomy by giving advice and guiding learners.

**Activities**

<b>Statements:</b> <i>How often do you....</i>	Often	Sometime s	Rarel y	Never
9- Encourage your students to do assignments that are not compulsory?	19.4	58.1	22.6	0
10- Encourage your students to read books or newspapers in English?	67.7	12.9	16.1	0
11- Encourage your learners to practice using English with friends and family?	71.0	19.4	9.7	0
12- Encourage your students to use English learning websites to practice English?	87.1	9.7	3.2	0
13- Offer an opportunity to your learners to make suggestions?	67.7	25.8	6.5	0
14- Encourage your learners to write down new information?	45.2	45.2	9.7	0
15- Offer your students an opportunity to choose learning materials in class?	3.2	45.2	38.7	12.9
16- Offer your students an opportunity to choose learning materials outside class?	12.9	16.1	64.5	6.5
17- Encourage your students to ask you questions when they do not understand?	19.4	64.5	16.1	0

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for activities that teachers have encouraged students to do in and outside the classroom

**Autonomy Support**

Reeve and Jang (2006) identified some aspects of supportive instruction behaviour; Table 3 shows a statistical analysis of the responses to the questions regarding support for autonomy based on these aspects.



It is apparent from this table that supportive behaviour is nearly universal. In question 18, 90% of respondents reported the use of encouraging statements to sustain students’ engagement (like ‘you can do it’); 82.2% of those surveyed often or sometimes used verbal and non-verbal signals to indicate to their students that they are listening. While discussing support for autonomy, one interviewee said, ‘[By] providing activities like discussion and group work, debating, encouraging them by talking about successful learners and their learning strategies that can be used by other students to help them in becoming more autonomous’. Another respondent alluded to the notion of activities that can encourage students to become more autonomous: ‘inside the classroom, I can ask them to engage in discussions to find solutions, check the dictionary and give me suggestions for their preferred teaching style and outside the classroom by playing fun games and ask my students to take part in preparing activities for the next class’.

In one case, the participant thought that autonomy support ‘is a kind of encouragement and support for independent behaviour by showing learners autonomous behaviour’ and when asked ‘how’? She suggested that, ‘it might be by giving them instructions and advice’.

<b>Statements:</b> <i>How often do you...</i>	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
18- Offer encouragement to sustain students’ engagement, like ‘you can do it’?	80.0	10.0	10.0	0
19- Offer hints to students when they seem to be stuck?	63.3	33.3	3.4	0
20- Allow time for students to work independently?	61.3	35.5	3.2	0
21- Offer time to listen to students?	54.8	45.2	0	0
22- Indicate your listening behaviour to your students by verbal and non-verbal signals?	17.9	64.3	17.9	0

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for autonomy – supportive instructional behaviours

**Responsibilities**

Dickinson (1987) describes autonomy as the attitude of responsibility that individuals have towards their learning,



so it is each learner’s responsibility to make decisions about his or her learning process. Table 4 is revealing in several ways. First, unlike the other tables, it shows variations and differences between teachers’ views about autonomy in actual teaching and the kind of responsibility assigned to learners. Second, it indicates change and development in language teaching/learning language. Finally, it reveals the emergence of more freedom in teaching and learning in Saudi universities. In question 23, ‘How often are your learners involved in deciding the objectives of their English language lessons?’, respondents were fairly evenly divided: 41.9% of participants sometimes do so, while an additional 3.3% do so often; a slightly larger percentage rarely (41.9%) or never (12.9%) involve students in this way. Overall responses to questions 26 and 27, about involving learners in choosing learning materials outside the classroom and evaluating the course, show consistent results, with 71% involving students in choosing material outside the classroom (12.9% often) and the same percentage involving students in course evaluations (35.5% sometimes). While 64.5% of teachers involved learners in choosing activities for lessons (6.4% doing so often), 64.5% rarely or never allowed students to choose learning materials inside the classroom (12.9% never doing so), and 80.7% rarely or never allow students to decide how their learning is assessed, with a 58.1% majority never allowing this.

<b>Statements:</b> <i>How often are your learners involved in...?</i>	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
23- Determining the objectives of their English language lessons?	3.3	41.9	41.9	12.9
24- Choosing the activities of their English lessons?	6.45	58.1	29	6.45
25- Choosing learning materials in the classroom?	12.9	22.6	51.6	12.9
26- Choosing learning materials outside the classroom?	12.9	58.1	22.6	6.4
27- Evaluating their course?	35.5	35.5	22.6	6.4
28- Deciding how learning is assessed?	6.4	12.9	22.6	58.1

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for students’ responsibilities in language learning



### Abilities

The next section of the questionnaire asked teachers to evaluate the abilities of their learners in making decisions and identifying their own weakness and strengths. As shown in Table 5, most teachers (41%–67.7%) rated their students in or near the middle of the scale (‘okay’), particularly at identifying their own weaknesses (67.7% chose ‘okay’) and strengths (58.1% chose ‘okay’). However, in response to question 31, about their perceptions of students ‘ability to determine the objectives of their English course,’ 50% of instructors rated their students as ‘poor’ (8% as ‘very poor’), which is more than those who rated them as ‘okay’ (42%) or ‘very good’ (8%).

What stands out in Table 5 is the teachers’ positive assessment of students’ abilities to make decisions and evaluations: determining the objectives of the lessons, choosing learning materials in and outside the classroom and identifying their own weaknesses and strengths, in spite of the resistance noted in Table 4, which showed unfavourable reactions to students being involved in setting course objectives or evaluation methods (as one respondent noted, ‘it is the responsibility of teachers not for students’).

<b>Statements:</b> <i>How would you consider your learners’ ability to...?</i>	Very poor	Poor	Okay	Good	Very good
29- Choose learning materials in the classroom?	0	9.7	41.9	45.2	3.2
30- choose learning materials outside the classroom?	3.4	17.2	37.9	27.6	13.8
31- Determine the objectives of their English course?	8.0	42.0	42.0	0	8.0
32- identify their own strengths?	3.2	16.1	58.1	16.1	6.5
33- identify their own weaknesses?	6.5	6.5	67.7	9.7	9.7

Table 5: Descriptive statistics for teachers’ perceptions of students’ decision-making abilities

### 3-What are the challenges that teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?

Table 6 deals with issues related to challenges to autonomous learning.



Taken together, the results from this table suggest that there is association between the lack of responsibility among students and helping learners to become more autonomous, as over half of the participants (58.1) agree that their students are not sufficiently responsible. Furthermore, the majority of participants (54.8%) agreed with the statement that learners' low proficiency levels affect the practicality of autonomy in different kinds of activities inside the classroom or outside the classroom through interaction with others. Only a small percentage of respondents (3.2%) disagreed with this statement. Also significant is that 54.8% of teachers agreed that teacher-centred approaches still dominate the teaching of English (from a Saudi perspective). In all cases, the majority of interviewees were able to identify different factors that might prevent learners from becoming autonomous, similar to those indicated in the questionnaire items. One teacher indicated the following problem: 'The dependence of students on their teachers as they used to this style in general schools', while another commented, 'There is no flexibility in curriculum, teachers most of the time are required to follow a syllabus'. Yet another suggested, 'Learning systems are usually fixed, not flexible'.

In response to question 36, over half of the participants said that they are not sure whether communicative teaching methods are applied more than traditional methods, while 54.8% of participants agree on the dominance of teacher-centred approaches in teaching English. This difference highlights the gap between the dominant approach used by teachers and the emergence of communicative approaches, at least in teacher education and theoretical literature.

The next issue concerns decision-making, specifically whether this responsibility rests primarily with teachers or with learners. Participants' views were divided about the statement 'only teachers determine what the learners do in class': most (54.8%) said they were unsure, while equal numbers of participants agreed and disagreed (22.6% each). This concern contrasts the results of the questions in Table 5, where most participants said that learners' ability to choose learning materials in the classroom is good (45.2%) or okay (41.9%), while only 9.7% felt that it is poor. These results indicate a positive outlook among teachers of learners' ability to choose learning materials, in spite of a sense of fear among some teachers about learners' choices.





The final questions indicated that the main problem affecting the practical use of autonomy may be the low level of English-language proficiency among university students; 74.2% of respondents agreed on the importance of this problem (19.4% strongly agree), while only 6.4% disagreed (3.2% strongly disagree). Discussing this issue, one interviewee said the following: ‘What learners want is support and encouragement, whatever level they are in; it is the role of teachers to guide [and] provide advice for them’.

#### **4-In what ways can teachers improve opportunities for autonomy in language learning in this context?**

Respondents identified professional development as a key requirement to improve teaching and learning processes; 67.7% strongly agreed that it is important. Rapid growth and the evolution of tools for teaching and learning requires educational institutions to provide training for their members for the sake of better teaching and learning.

Many of those interviewed provided examples of the kinds of activities used in and outside the classroom to promote autonomous learning. For example, one interviewee said, ‘Teachers can improve the autonomy of their learners by activities like group discussion and pair work and encouraging them read, watch and listen to authentic materials’. Other responses to this question included ‘brainstorming, critical thinking, open discussion activities; take home exams, writing reports and self-testing’, while another reported ‘by asking students to create tasks, find definitions, making short presentation and projects and group presentations’. Overall, those interviewed recognised the importance of learner autonomy in language learning, and indicated their awareness of the importance of learner autonomy in language teaching. In all cases, respondents recognised the importance of activities in and outside the classroom in improving opportunities for greater autonomy in language learning.

Furthermore, in response to this question, one respondent explicitly referred to the role of teachers in helping learners to ‘find an effective learning style’.



Her response emphasised the psychological dimension of learner autonomy and the importance of providing advice on language learning strategies to improve the performance of learners and promote greater autonomy in learning.

**Challenges and future**

Statements:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
34- Teacher-centred approaches are still dominant in teaching English	0	3.2	35.5	54.8	6.5
35- Professional development is important to improve the teaching/learning process	0	0	12.9	19.4	67,7
36- Communicative teaching methods are applied more than traditional methods	0	0	58.1	22.6	19.4
37-Students' lack of responsibility is the main problem in teaching English	0	0	29.0	58.1	12.9
38- Only teachers decide what the learners do in class	3.2	19.4	54.8	19.4	3.2
39- One of the main problems that might affect the practical use of autonomy is the low English language proficiency of university students	3.2	3.2	19.4	54.8	19.4

Table 6: Descriptive statistics for the challenges and the future of learner autonomy in Saudi universities

**5-Discussion**

While considerable literature addresses the need for learner autonomy in language learning and teaching, there is a need to examine how learner autonomy is understood and employed in practical teaching. Benson (2013) points out the importance of understanding learner autonomy to best foster it in practice. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) suggest the need to understand how teachers interpret this concept to encourage it in their teaching.



With respect to the first research question, ‘How is learner autonomy defined by teachers?’ the most interesting finding was that the psychological and technical orientations of learner autonomy were more strongly supported than the social and political perspectives. Teachers accept the social perspective of learner autonomy. They endorse the political, psychological and technical orientations of learner autonomy, in that order. They associate learner autonomy with concepts common in the literature, such as learners’ independence and responsibility for their own learning, and involving students in their learning process and means of evaluation. However, by exploring how autonomy is employed in practical teaching, it seems that teachers retain control over learners in some aspects of the learning process, such as determining the objectives, the materials, and the evaluation and assessment activities. This notion of autonomy is similar to that indicated by teachers in the studies by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), and by Balcikanli (2010). The most interesting finding from this study is that more than half of teachers believe in the role of cooperative group activities in supporting the development of learner autonomy, endorsing a social perspective on autonomy.

The second section of the questionnaire contained three segments on teachers’ promotion of learner autonomy in their teaching practices; the first assessed how often teachers encourage their students to do activities in and outside the classroom. Teachers believe that it is their duty to encourage learners to take on these practices of autonomy. This finding supports the work of other studies in this area (Chan, 2003) linking autonomous practice with the responsibility of teachers to encourage their learners to carry out various kinds of self-directed activities. The second segment investigated instructional behaviours that support autonomy. The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis of the interviews is the teachers’ role in giving advice and indicating successful learning strategies for learners, mirroring the results of previous studies. Cohen (1998), for example, recognised the role of training in the use of learning strategies to help learners find ways to achieve success in learning, developing learner autonomy, and self-direction.

The third segment asked teachers to indicate how often they involved their students in determining the objectives of their English language lessons, choosing learning materials in and outside the classroom, evaluating the course, and determining how learning is assessed.



Meanwhile, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) report that most teachers believed involving their learners in the decision-making process by choosing the objectives of their course was desirable. Moreover, according to Al-Asmari (2013), teachers of English at the university level responded quite unfavourably to the suggestion that students establish their own learning goals. On the other hand, Balcikanli (2010) found that student teachers believed strongly in the importance of giving learners a chance to determine the objectives of their courses, promoting learner autonomy, while Camillieri (2007) also found that teachers seemed to be more supportive of involving their students in setting short-term goals. It is difficult to explain these differences, but they might be related to differences in context;

In the case of assessment, the results of this study are consistent with previous findings; most teachers consider assessment to be their own responsibility (Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012). This outcome differs from that of Camillieri (2007), who found teachers to be more supportive of autonomy through involving learners in self-assessment.

In terms of choosing activities and learning materials, teachers' views were strikingly different than their perspectives on goals and assessments. These results seem consistent with other findings, and indicate that involving students in choosing activities is seen as desirable by teachers (Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012; Camillieri, 2007; Balcikanli, 2010), whereas Chan (2003) found support for the view that selecting learning activities was the responsibility of teachers. One possible explanation for this result, according to Benson (2011), is that asking students to take responsibility in methodological aspects, such choosing activities, and involving or giving students responsibility for choosing content or objectives could lead to their failure as students may set objectives that are different from the goals of the curriculum.

Concerning evaluation, the teachers in this study were more supportive of the idea of involving learners in evaluating their own progress than those in Chan's (2003) study.

The fourth section of the questionnaire asked teachers to evaluate the abilities of their learners in decision-making, their ability to choose learning materials in and outside the classroom, and their ability to evaluate and identify their own weaknesses and strengths.



The teachers had a positive impression, overall, of their students' abilities in most aspects considered indicators of learner autonomy. Similarly, previous studies have demonstrated that most teachers have positive attitudes towards learners' abilities in most aspects of decision-making. The most notable exception is their view of learners' ability to choose learning objectives, which most teachers consider their own responsibility (Chan, 2003).

Another obvious finding to emerge from the analysis of the challenges that might hinder the development of learner autonomy was related to teachers, as over half of the participants were not sure about whether the decision-making responsibility should be exclusive to teachers or not, while respondents who had an opinion were equally divided between those supporting student participation and those opposed to it. While this result may not be generalizable to a broader population, it is also possible these results derived from participants' assumptions about the social orientation of learner autonomy, assumptions which contradict the decision-making responsibilities of teachers within fixed curricula.

Nevertheless, considering teachers as a possible obstacle to learner autonomy is consistent with Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) position that teachers lack autonomy themselves. Teachers also tend to agree strongly with institutional factors that undermine the development of learner autonomy. Chan (2003) found that teachers believe that it is their responsibility to make classroom decisions, and lacking knowledge about learner autonomy, they were unmotivated to improve this practice.

With respect to teaching methods, most teachers understand that a teacher-centred approach dominates English language teaching, which results in less autonomous learning. This finding supports the findings of Chan (2003) linking the dominant role of teachers to a non-autonomous classroom, a connection also supported by Nunan (1996), who suggested that this classroom-management style results from decisions made by institutions and consequently by teachers.

Factors related to curricula and educational institutions are also understood to constrain the development of learner autonomy. In the current study, teachers indicated that they are teaching within the limits of fixed curricula.



This finding is in agreement with those of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), Balcikanli (2010), and Chan (2003), but contrary to those of Krashen (2006), who describes elements of curriculum design that may help foster autonomous language acquisition, such as choosing topics that are related to students' needs and interests and giving them the opportunity to choose their own reading materials. As mentioned above, teachers were not confident about their students' level of responsibility and their decision-making skills, so they might feel it difficult to involve students in autonomous learning. This finding might be the result of teachers lacking the skills of autonomous learning themselves, preventing them from successfully promoting learner autonomy (Little, 1995). It has also been argued that the effectiveness of freedom in curricula must be based on providing students with explicit or implicit scaffolding structures to encourage their ability to take control over their learning process (Benson, 2011).

With regard to the fourth research question, regarding the ways in which teachers can improve opportunities for greater autonomy in language learning in Saudi Arabia, most teachers strongly agree that professional development can help improve their capabilities and the teaching and learning processes, in agreement with previous research by Al-Asmari (2013) and Al-Hazmi (2015). This underlines the importance of involving teachers in autonomous learning to help promote learner autonomy. Little (1995) suggests that language teachers are able to promote learner autonomy in their students only if they have experience with autonomy themselves.

In this study, respondents also pointed out the role of variation in activities in and outside the classroom in promoting learner autonomy. It could thus be said that depending only on textbooks, which might have limited activities and deal mostly with topics of little inherent interest (like grammatical rules), is one of the main challenges to promoting learner autonomy. In this study, teachers pinpoint how using different kinds of activities in the classroom, such as group work, pair work, discussions, and puzzles, along with activities outside the classroom, such as writing reports, self-testing, and reading, watching, and listening to authentic materials, would help to create more opportunities for self-directed learning. Because languages are easier to learn through different modes of acquisition, each activity can add something that the others do not (Benson, 2011).



The study's results also highlight the need to make curricula flexible, rather than fixed, to promote learner autonomy. To achieve a curriculum-based approach that fosters learner autonomy, Benson (2011) and Krashen (2006) identify principles of curriculum design for autonomy, such as offering different kinds of reading materials for self-selected reading, giving students an opportunity to speak without being forced to, and choosing interesting topics during the course of study to help learners become more effective autonomous learners by the end of their studies. One of the most important benefits of a curriculum emphasising learner autonomy is helping learners to continue improving themselves after graduation.

Another way to improve opportunities for autonomy is to shift from a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred approach, so that the authority in the classroom is not limited to teachers. According to Nunan (1996), to support autonomous learning, classroom teachers must choose learning activities according to students' needs and interests.

## **6-Conclusion**

The most obvious result of this study is to raise our awareness of Saudi teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. Overall, teachers' responses seemed positive towards the concept of learner autonomy. As noted, they were aware of the meaning of learner autonomy in its technological, political, social, and psychological orientations. This awareness was an indication of the existence of theoretical knowledge about the concept, which might or might not affect their teaching practices.

The second major finding was that teachers agreed on and supported most of what has been written about the concept, its definition, and the general orientation of learner autonomy in language learning. Their general instructional behaviour indicated their support of learner autonomy and a willingness to encourage their students to become more autonomous.

The third significant finding to emerge from this study is related to the current situation of learner autonomy in teaching practices. Teachers used different kinds of activities in and outside the classroom to encourage their students to use the target language.



Another observation resulting from this study concerned the challenges that teachers face in helping their students become more autonomous learners. Most of the teachers agreed that teacher-centred, rather than learner-centred approaches, dominate language teaching in Saudi Arabia; they seemed unsure as to what extent communicative teaching methods were overtaking traditional methods, a finding which could indicate a lack of knowledge among teachers about the nature of communicative approaches. Teachers also pointed out how a lack of responsibility among learners, or their low proficiency levels, is understood to affect the practical implementation of autonomy. While there was awareness among teachers regarding learners' ability to choose learning materials, there was a sense of fear among them about this, as involving learners in these decisions might lead to their failure, which would then be interpreted as a failure of their educational institution. One of the more significant challenges to emerge from this study and a possible hindrance to the development of learner autonomy was the lack of flexibility in the curriculum.

Finally, this study has identified ways to create opportunities for greater autonomy in language learning in Saudi Arabia, including the role of professional development for teachers to meet the needs of students and keep up with the rapid technological developments underway in language teaching and learning techniques. In addition, adopting different kinds of activities in and outside of the classroom could help learners develop habits of self-directed learning, allowing them to continue to improve on their own.

The data suggests that learner autonomy can be achieved by helping language learners improve their capabilities to continue learning and to make use of the target language independently. Teachers must therefore believe in their students' abilities, involve them in choosing activities in and outside the classroom, and encourage them to choose learning materials that will work for them.

This study has enhanced our understanding of the kinds of beliefs that teachers bring to their classes and use to shape their teaching practices. These findings provide important insights into the role of learner autonomy in language learning in Saudi Arabia.

With regard to the research methods, several limitations need to be acknowledged.





The current study is based on a small sample of participants, and I did not observe teachers' classroom practices directly. Therefore, the study relied on respondents' reports of their own beliefs on learner autonomy and their self-reported teaching practices. This lack of direct observation, and the small sample, give reason for caution regarding the generalisability of these findings. The current study has only investigated teachers of preparatory-level English at Saudi universities. Although the findings should be interpreted with caution, this study represents the most comprehensive investigation to date of learner autonomy in English teaching in Saudi Arabia.

This research project has raised many questions that warrant further investigation. While teachers are generally aware of learner autonomy perspectives, what roles should they adopt to replace their traditional role of authority? Further research needs to more closely examine how communicative approaches to English language teaching can go beyond being just theoretical and be applied in practical settings. Continued efforts are needed to ensure that learner autonomy becomes the standard for English language learners at various levels and in various contexts.

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