

Exploring Learner Autonomy: Secondary School EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practices in the Saudi Context

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is considered one of the fundamental factors leading to success in foreign language learning. This research study explored 76 Saudi secondary school EFL teachers' beliefs and reported practices of learner autonomy. The English Language Teachers' Beliefs about Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a) was employed as the data collection tool. The results indicated that the teachers had positive perceptions of various features of learner autonomy. The findings also showed that while most teachers positively desired to implement learner autonomy principles in their teaching, they were less optimistic about the feasibility of developing these principles in practice. In addition, most of the teachers indicated that they offered their students opportunities to promote learner autonomy. However, the majority of the teachers did not view their students as autonomous. They identified four main factors that contributed to their perceptions of a lack of learner autonomy in their students: lack of motivation, students' low proficiency in English, students' overdependence on their teachers, and limited time allocated for teaching the syllabus.

Keywords: learner autonomy, EFL, secondary school, teachers' beliefs, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy (LA) is considered a fundamental notion in the area of foreign language learning (Benson, 2016; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a, 2012b; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Tapinta, 2016). It has been perceived as an important practice in language teaching and a desirable characteristic of language learners. Moreover, LA has gained importance as a significant factor in learning from a worldwide educational climate concerned with such aspects as lifelong learning, learning-to-learn, and generic skills (Benson, 2016, 2011). Researchers (Benson, 2013; Little, 1991) have also argued that the notion of LA is centered on the idea that knowledge is not merely transferred and achieved; rather, it includes the functional constructions of meanings by students in the process of learning.

Holec (1981), in his seminal publication, defined LA as learners' abilities to take charge of their learning. Benson (2013) provided a similar definition of LA, describing it as the capability to take control of one's learning. Autonomous learners are known to show responsibility, act independently, understand the purpose of their learning, set reachable and realistic goals, select appropriate techniques and methods to use, assess the development of their learning, and monitor their learning process (Benson, 2011; Doğan & Mirici, 2017; Little, 1995, 2007; Smith, 2008). Doğan and Mirici (2017) also explained that autonomous learners learn not only in classrooms but also out of classrooms; they are aware that learning occurs anytime and anywhere and that it is not isolated in the classroom atmosphere. Studies have indicated that there are positive relationships between LA and language proficiency (Zhang & Li, 2004), motivation (Dickinson, 1995), desire for challenge (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and greater involvement (Reeve et al., 2004).

2. Teachers' Role in Promoting Learner Autonomy

Teachers play a substantial part in promoting LA. Researchers (e.g., Doğan & Mirici, 2017; Little, 1995; Sinclair, 2000) have indicated that autonomy is not innate, and therefore, it has to be taught during schooling with the assistance and guidance of teachers. Doğan and Mirici (2017) further explained that while developing learner autonomy, teachers' support is crucial; nevertheless, as students become more autonomous, less help from teachers is required. Dam (2011) and Little (1991) supported the view that LA does not imply self-instructions or the lack of teachers; rather, both researchers emphasized the role of teachers and how it is important for teachers to scaffold, guide, monitor, and support their students to become more autonomous. Doğan and Mirici (2017) contended that a teacher may not be autonomous at all, resulting in few opportunities to successfully enhance LA in the students; such a teacher may not be a good example to the learners in terms of autonomy. Shahsavari (2014) argued that if teachers do not realize the importance of LA in the process of learning and if they are not mindful of techniques and methods to improve LA in their students, classrooms can merely be considered settings where students' only goal is to pass their examinations. Teachers who support LA need to promote learners' feelings of control over their learning process, enhance their motivational levels, and avoid undermining the learners' identity (Lamb, 2011). Dam (2008) contended that teachers in autonomy-supported classrooms should act as facilitators, counselors, or resource assistants, encouraging students to participate actively in the learning process. Benson (2003) suggested five main guidelines for teacher who want to promote LA in their classrooms to follow. These guidelines include offering choices and decision-making opportunities, providing resources and

options, being actively involved in students’ learning, encouraging reflection, and supporting students.

In recent years, growing numbers of research studies have been done on teachers’ beliefs and practices related to LA (e.g., Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012b; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Doğan & Mirici, 2017; Tapinta, 2016; Stroupe et al., 2016), most of which have targeted teachers at higher educational levels. For example, Duong (2014) found that teachers support LA in theory but not in everyday teaching practices. In Wichayathian and Reinders’s (2015) study, the researchers found that teachers did not feel their students were ready for LA, and most of the teachers indicated that they enhanced LA in their teaching practices. Tapinta’s (2016) study also revealed that teachers have positive attitudes toward LA, but students lack skills and awareness of LA. The study also indicated that contextual barriers limit the enhancement of LA in teaching. Similarly, Stroupe et al. (2016) indicated that teachers have positive attitudes to LA; however, such constraints as fixed course goals limited the promotion of LA. In a similar vein, Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) indicated that the teachers in their research expressed less positive perceptions about the feasibility of developing LA and related this to pre-prescribed curriculum and student-related factors (e.g., low proficiency in English, lack of independence and motivation). According to Reinders and Lazaro (2011), in teachers’ belief, students hesitate to work independently, lack important skills related to LA, and do not realize the importance of LA.

3. Research Focus

Researchers (Lengkanawati, 2016; Ranosa-Madrunio et al., 2016; Wang & Wang, 2016) have argued that there is a dearth of studies on the area of teacher beliefs and practices of LA. They have also argued that there is an important gap between the theory of LA and teachers’ practices and beliefs. Teachers play a fundamental role in the enhancement of LA, and they constitute the only source for understanding what practices related to autonomy are implemented in the classroom. How teachers perceive LA has a major impact on how much and how they enhance LA, and this affects students’ opportunities to become autonomous (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a). However, teachers’ perceptions of the concept of LA have not yet attracted much attention in the Saudi context as elsewhere in the world. There is also increasing research (Ranosa-Madrunio et al., 2016; Wang & Wang, 2016) calling for extensive investigations of what teachers think about LA. Following this international trend, the current research study seeks to explore Saudi teachers’ beliefs and practices of LA.

This study is significant in that it explores LA in the Saudi context, where rote learning and teacher-centered approaches are dominant in English classrooms (Alrabai, 2017; Al-Seghayer, 2015). One of the strategic objectives of the Saudi Ministry of Education, which is linked to the country’s vision 2030, is to enhance lifelong learning and develop students who are independent, self-regulated, and creative, as well as being critical thinkers (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Therefore, this study attempts to provide a further contextual understanding of the notion of LA in the Saudi context from which pedagogical and practical implications could be offered. In particular, and based on the framework of Borg and Al-Busaidi’s (2012a) baseline research work, the present study attempts to address the five following research questions:

1. What does LA mean to a group of Saudi secondary school English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers?
2. What are teachers’ views of the feasibility and desirability of fostering LA in their context?
3. To what extent do teachers view their students as autonomous?
4. To what extent do teachers agree that they foster LA?
5. What constraints do teachers confront in promoting LA?

4. Methods

4.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 76 (39 male, 37 female) Saudi secondary school English teachers. All participants in this study taught English in public secondary schools in a major region in the north-central part of Saudi Arabia. Approval to conduct this study was sought and obtained from the local Directorate of Education, and participants completed an online questionnaire delivered from May 16, 2021, to July 7, 2021. The online questionnaire included an invitation letter that explained the goal of the study and assured the participants that their participation would be voluntary, confidential, and anonymous. Table 1 displays the frequency and percentage of participants in terms of gender, their highest educational qualifications, and their teaching experience.

Table 1. Participants’ demographic information

Characteristics		<i>n</i>	Percentage
Gender	Male	39	51.3
	Female	37	48.7
Qualifications	Bachelor’s	72	94.7
	Master’s	4	5.3
	Doctorate	0	0
	Other	0	0
Years of teaching experience	0–4	8	10.5
	5–9	18	23.7
	10–14	26	34.2
	15–19	12	15.8
	20–24	7	9.2
	25+	5	6.6

4.2 Research Instrument

The instrument used in this research was the English Language Teachers’ Beliefs About Learner Autonomy Questionnaire, which was adopted from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a). The questionnaire has four main parts. The first part, which comprises 37 Likert scale items, elicits teachers’ views on foreign language LA. The second part, which comprises 21 Likert scale items, seeks teachers’ views on the desirability and feasibility of involving students in making decisions about their learning (e.g., choosing materials) and the desirability and feasibility of promoting various abilities related to LA among students (e.g., learning independently). The third part, which includes two Likert scale items and two open-ended questions, asks teachers whether they feel their students are autonomous and whether they promote LA in their instructional practices. The fourth part asks teachers about their demographic information. Whereas most of the questionnaire items are Likert scale items, part 3 includes two open-ended questions. These questions ask teachers to comment, in an open-ended way, on their students’ general degree of autonomy, as well as to explain how they promote LA; if they do not promote LA, it asks them to provide reasons for this. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic, the participants’ native language, to ensure that they had a full understanding of the questionnaire items.

5. Results

The closed questions (i.e., Likert scale items) on the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS. Descriptive statistics and the Wilcoxon signed-ranked test were employed to examine data and draw conclusions. The responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively by employing thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5.1 Teachers’ Beliefs About LA

Descriptive statistics for part 1 of the questionnaire concerning teachers’ beliefs about LA are included in Appendix A. The 37 statements in this part were ranked according to the percentage of teachers’ agreement with the items. Analysis of the results indicated that 12 items received at least 75% agreement, suggesting that these statements were dominant in teachers’ collective perceptions about LA. In particular, the analysis of the results indicated that most teachers agreed/strongly agreed that LA has positive impacts on successful language learning (88.2%). They also indicated that LA could be developed by studying independently in the library (86.8%), learning outside the classroom (85.5%), cooperative group work activities (84.2%), regular opportunities for students to do activities alone (82.9%), independent work in self-access centers (81.6%), out-of-class activities that include the use of the internet (80.3%), tasks that encourage students to work together (78.9%), and learner-centered classrooms (76.3%). Similarly, teachers perceived learning how to learn (76.3) and learning to work alone (75%) as key elements for developing LA. In addition, 75% of the teachers agreed/strongly agreed that teachers have important roles to play in developing LA. When asked whether LA means learning without a teacher, most of the teachers (63.2%) disagreed/strongly disagreed with this suggestion.

5.2. Feasibility and Desirability of LA

This section addresses the teachers’ views on the feasibility and desirability of developing LA in relation to two issues. The first issue is the feasibility and desirability of involving learners in making decisions about their course (measured using seven items). Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations of the items, and it shows that learners’ involvement in decision-making was viewed to be more desirable than feasible in all respects. When the overall desirability and feasibility were compared, a Wilcoxon signed-ranked test revealed that the difference between feasibility ($M = 2.38$) and desirability ($M = 2.81$) was statistically significant, $Z = -4.153$, $p = .000$, $r = .48$. Analysis of individual items of desirability revealed that the item with the highest mean was *topics discussed* ($M = 3.18$), whereas the item with the lowest mean was *learning objectives* ($M = 2.57$). In terms of feasibility, the most feasible item was the *activities used* ($M = 2.58$), whereas the least feasible item was the *assessment methods used* ($M = 2.09$).

Table 2. Desirability and feasibility of involving students in making decisions

Decision about:	Desirability		Feasibility	
	M	SD	M	SD
Classroom management	2.80	1.03	2.42	1.19
Teaching methods used	2.80	.99	2.20	1.08
Assessment methods used	2.58	.96	2.09	1.02
Topics discussed	3.18	.78	2.53	1.04
Activities used	3.04	.93	2.58	1.15
Materials used	2.71	.91	2.53	1.16
Learning objectives	2.57	1.04	2.32	1.06
Total mean	2.81	.71	2.38	.92

Note: Mean rating ranged from 1 to 4, with 1 representing *undesirable/unfeasible* and 4 representing *very desirable/feasible*.

The second issue investigated the teachers’ views on the feasibility and desirability of developing a set of learning abilities that are widely considered indicators of LA in their students (measured using seven items). Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations of the teachers’ answers and reveals the findings of this comparison. As in the previous part, the mean scores of desirability were consistently higher than the mean scores of feasibility in all items. Analysis of individual items of desirability in this part revealed that the item with the highest mean was *learn independently* ($M = 3.26$), whereas the item with the lowest mean was *monitor progress* ($M = 2.86$). In terms of feasibility, the most feasible item was *learn cooperatively* ($M = 2.62$), whereas the least feasible item was *monitor progress* ($M = 2.25$).

When the overall desirability and feasibility were compared, a Wilcoxon signed-ranked test revealed that the difference between feasibility ($M = 2.46$) and desirability ($M = 3.05$) was statistically significant, $Z = -6.033, p = .000, r = .69$.

Generally, the results in this section show that while the teachers desired more to employ LA principles in their teaching process, they viewed these principles as less feasible to be applied in practice in their context.

Table 3. Desirability and feasibility of developing skills for LA

Students have the ability to:	Desirability		Feasibility	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Learn independently	3.26	.82	2.49	1.08
Learn cooperatively	3.17	.82	2.62	.94
Evaluate learning	2.92	.95	2.42	.97
Monitor progress	2.86	.90	2.25	1.08
Identify weaknesses	3.12	.89	2.54	.97
Identify strengths	3.04	1.00	2.43	1.06
Identify needs	2.99	.92	2.49	1.03
Total mean	3.05	.55	2.46	.78

Note: Mean rating ranged from 1 to 4, with 1 representing *undesirable/unfeasible* and 4 representing *very desirable/feasible*.

5.3. Students' Levels of LA

In part 3 of the survey, teachers were asked about the extent to which they perceive their students to be autonomous. In the same part, they were asked to justify their answers in response to an open-ended question. Table 4 shows the results pertaining to teachers' beliefs about their students' level of autonomy. The findings indicated that 59.7% of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that their students were autonomous, 25.8% agreed or strongly agreed, and 14.5% were unsure. These findings indicate that most of the teachers did not perceive that their students had fair levels of LA.

Table 4. Teachers' beliefs about students' level of LA

	Disagree or strongly disagree	Unsure	Agree or strongly agree
"In general, the students I teach English most often have a fair degree of learner autonomy"	59.7%	14.5%	25.8%

The results of the open-ended question provided illustrations to explain the results described above (i.e., teachers' views that their students lack LA). Thematic analysis of teachers' responses to the open-ended question revealed four main causes that contributed to the teachers' perception of a lack of autonomy in their students. These were lack of motivation, students' low proficiency in English, students' dependence on their teachers, and the limited time allocated to teaching the syllabus. Table 5 summarizes these main themes and examples of their coded extracts.

Table 5. Thematic analysis results concerning factors that limit LA

Main themes	Examples of coded extracts
Lack of motivation	"Students do not want to learn; they do not know the importance of English. When I ask them to improve their English—for example, by watching YouTube for English learning—most of them say it is unimportant because they are not going to use it when they start work" (Extract 7). "I encourage students to study alone or to use the internet, but they do not want to; they want only to pass the exam" (Extract 11).
Students' low proficiency in English	"The students are very weak in English; they can't study and understand by themselves" (Extract 3). "Autonomy is a good idea, but it is good when the students' level in English is excellent. The problem is that the students are weak in the language" (Extract 8).
Students' dependence on their teachers	"They are not familiar with being autonomous. They rely on their teachers for everything. When I asked them to do the tasks by themselves, they did not do that" (Extract 15). "They do not make an effort to learn. It is a learning habit where they think it is the responsibility of the teacher [to make the effort]" (Extract 13).
Limited time allocated to teaching the syllabus	"There is a curriculum, and I am required to cover this curriculum in a specified time. It is a good idea to give students a chance to do the exercises in the book on their own, but this consumes most of the class time and I am required to cover all topics at the end of the semester" (Extract 31). "Considering the time for each class and the extensive information that I have to teach, all these things make it difficult to allow students to rely on themselves to do the exercises" (Extract 14).

5.4 Teachers' Promotion of LA

The teachers were asked whether they felt they promoted LA in their teaching practices (Table 6). Over 64.5% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they offered their learners opportunities to enhance LA, whereas 13.1% were unsure, and 22.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 6. Teachers' reported practice of LA

	Disagree or strongly disagree	Unsure	Agree or strongly agree
"In general, in teaching English, I give my students opportunities to develop learner autonomy"	22.4%	13.1%	64.5%

Teachers who felt they promoted LA in their teaching were also asked to provide examples of the strategies they employed to enhance LA in an open-ended question. Thematic analysis of the responses generated three main strategies that the teachers used to promote LA. These strategies involved using group work or pair work in classroom activities, encouraging the use of the internet outside the classroom setting, and promoting independent work in classroom tasks and homework. Table 7 summarizes these themes and provides examples of the coded extracts that led to the development of each theme.

Table 7. Thematic analysis results concerning strategies reported by teachers to promote LA

Main themes	Examples of coded extracts
Group work or pair work	"In my lessons, I ask the students to work together on the exercises. I don't tell them the answers; I ask them to cooperate and discover the answers by themselves. I always form learning groups in my lessons so students depend on themselves to solve my questions" (Extract 17). "I use group work a lot in my teaching. I also ask each student to correct their neighbor's answers so they depend on themselves other than depending on me" (Extract 22).
Encouraging the use of the internet	"I tell the students about the importance of the internet and YouTube. I also tell them that they can learn without a teacher on the internet" (Extract 19). "I give them homework that requires using the internet. I also explain to them that they can find the solutions to the homework on the internet, and I give them useful websites and learning channels on YouTube" (Extract 25).
Promoting independent work	"When we do the activities in class, I ask students to work individually. I tell them to try and try. Sometimes, I give hints, but I do not give the right answers. I ask them to take responsibility for their learning" (Extract 29). "I ask the students to do projects, each student alone. Sometimes, I ask them to prepare a part of the lesson and explain it to the other students" (Extract 23).

6. Discussion

This research study, based on the framework of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a, 2012b), explored secondary school teachers' beliefs and reported practices concerning LA. Pertaining to teachers' beliefs about LA, the results of the present research indicated that most teachers believed that LA has a positive impact on successful foreign language learning. This finding coincides with the results of previous research studies (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012b; Doğan & Mirici, 2017; Nguyen, 2016; Wang & Wang, 2016) revealing that teachers are positively disposed to LA, holding strong perceptions of its importance in foreign language learning. In addition, most teachers believed that LA could be developed via such activities as studying independently in the library, learning outside of the classroom, cooperative group work activities, regular opportunities for students to do activities alone, independent work in self-access centers, out-of-classroom activities that include the use of the internet, tasks that encourage students to work together, and learner-centered classrooms. These findings might suggest that teachers have a better understanding of how to promote LA, regardless of whether these activities are included in the prescribed curriculum. These activities have also been identified as conducive to the development of LA by teachers in other research studies (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012b; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Doğan & Mirici, 2017; Keuk & Heng, 2016). Similarly, the teachers placed great emphasis on two traits that distinguish autonomous learners—namely, the ability to learn how to learn and the ability to learn to work alone. In this sense, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b) indicated that the teachers in their research considered learning how to learn as the most key element in developing LA. Likewise, the results of this study showed that most teachers acknowledged the central role that teachers play in developing and promoting LA. This result implies that most teachers still view the teacher's role as required and necessary in the process of developing LA, meaning that LA might not be translated as learning without a teacher. Boudouaia et al. (2022) indicated that if teachers believe that supporting LA is not part of their responsibilities, their teaching process and efforts will be diverted away from enhancing and shaping LA, which will undeniably have negative effects on the process of learning. This will then lead learners to miss effective opportunities to become autonomous.

The results of the present study showed a significant gap between the feasibility and desirability of involving students in making decisions and developing students' self-learning skills in association with LA. These findings imply that although teachers had positive views about

involving their students in course decision making and developing students' abilities to enhance LA, they were far less positive to put these elements into practice. These results coincide with the results of previous research studies (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Lengkanawati, 2017; Nguyen, 2016) that documented more positive perceptions of the desirability compared with the feasibility of promoting principles of LA from the viewpoint of English teachers. As Nguyen (2016) explained, this lower level of feasibility of developing LA may be due to teachers' low confidence in their students' abilities, teachers' lack of autonomy, and a context in which teachers are restricted to prescribed textbooks as the only source of instruction, as is the case in Saudi Arabia. Keuk and Heng (2016) further explained that when teachers have prescribed textbooks with deadlines and guidelines they need to follow and apply, it can be difficult to put a desirable level of LA into practice. Similarly, Little (2008) further asserted that the promotion of LA requires prescribed curricula that are flexible to the stage of learning, allowing teachers to decide on the way they want to teach. Likewise, the discrepancy between the desirability and feasibility of developing principles of LA may also be due to the teachers' teaching level. In contrast to university teachers, who are often provided with more power to choose teaching and learning materials, decide on assessment methods, and determine students' work forms, secondary school teachers have certain boundaries and strict guidelines to follow; in this study, such factors may have influenced teachers' view that these principles are less feasible for practical application in their context.

Most teachers in the current study did not view their students to have a fair level of LA. When they were asked to explain their answers, they highlighted four main factors behind their students' low levels of LA. These key factors were lack of motivation, students' low proficiency in English, students' overdependence on their teachers, and limited time allocated for teaching the syllabus. These factors were also cited in prior research studies (Doğan & Mirici, 2017; Lengkanawati, 2017; Melvina & Suherdi, 2019; Tapinta, 2016) as constraints to the promotion of LA. The results also support Al Asmari's (2013) explanation that in Saudi public education, most students are not motivated to learn English, which significantly hinders the promotion of autonomy-related skills among students. Similarly, low motivational levels, especially among students who are not majoring in English, can constitute a major deterrent to improving LA (Wang & Wang, 2016). These results also support researchers' arguments (Alrabai, 2017; Al-Seghayer, 2015) that students' low competence in English and their heavy reliance on their teachers are major challenges to developing active learning strategies among Saudi students.

Most teachers in this study indicated that they offered their students with opportunities to develop LA. When they were asked to provide examples of the strategies they employed to develop LA among their students, they highlighted three main pedagogical strategies. These strategies involved encouraging group work and pair work, the use of the internet, and independent work. These reported strategies were also displayed in other research studies that investigated teachers' practices of LA (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Doğan & Mirici, 2017; Keuk & Heng, 2016). It is worth mentioning here that teachers in those studies highlighted broader strategies and teaching practices to promote LA, such as allowing students to set learning goals, identify their needs, make plans, choose learning topics, and negotiate deadlines for homework and assignments. This discrepancy in teaching practices may be related to the teaching level and context. The teachers in this study are secondary school teachers who, as mentioned previously, are restricted to strictly prescribed curricula and teach students who have long been taught using rigid teacher-centered methods.

7. Implications and Limitations

It is crucial to promote LA in public education—particularly in secondary school—because students soon graduate and make their way to university. Insufficient ability to take responsibility and engage in independent work may have negative effects on students' performance in higher education, where independent work is greatly emphasized and the responsibility is higher. Hence, the results of this study suggest several important implications to be considered in terms of promoting LA. First, as contexts and learning settings are never free of impediments, as Benson (2011) argued, teachers need to engage critically with the hurdles they face and to form a conception that LA is a usable and functional notion for normal classroom conditions. Second, there is a practical technique to make LA feasible, which is to provide both teachers and students with systematic support via professional development programs and workshops to create a mutual discourse on LA among them. Third, teachers' discussions with students on how to regulate their learning can be an effective way to enhance LA (Doğan & Mirici, 2017). In addition, guiding students to use evaluation sheets and learning diaries for reflection, as suggested by Doğan and Mirici (2017), can encourage LA among students. Fourth, teachers need to adopt teaching methods that support a more learner-centered atmosphere in the classroom and engage their students in learning activities that provide them with opportunities to gradually develop responsibility, freedom, decision-making skills, and a sense of ownership (Tapinta, 2016). Fifth, as Tapinta (2016) suggested, collaborative learning can increase LA among students, enhance their motivation and confidence, and reduce their overdependence on their teachers. Finally, if learning grammar and vocabulary and passing exams are important aspects of students' learning, teachers can play important roles in developing LA by guiding and directing students toward learning activities and resources that suit their personal learning styles and learning goals (Benson, 2016; Wang & Wang, 2016).

The results of the current study are subject to at least four caveats. The first major caveat is the lack of observational data about the teachers' classroom practices. In response, future research studies should conduct observations of teachers' real—rather than merely reported—practices of LA in high school English classrooms in Saudi Arabia. Second, because of the relatively small sample size involved in this study, the results may not be generalizable to other teaching–learning contexts. Hence, further research needs to include a wider sample of teachers from different contexts and various teaching levels to investigate how LA is perceived and practiced. Third, the current study involved only high school teachers. It would be interesting to explore how teacher educators, decision makers, and school owners perceive LA, as well as how they help in increasing the awareness among teachers of LA's importance. Finally, teachers' beliefs about LA based on gender should also be explored in future research.

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Appendix A

Teachers' beliefs of LA by percentage

Item No.	Item	Strongly disagree / disagree	Neutral	Agree/strongly agree
		%	%	%
36	Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner.	1.3	10.5	88.2
2	Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy.	3.9	9.2	86.8
6	Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.	6.6	7.9	85.5
25	Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy.	6.6	9.2	84.2
3	Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.	6.6	10.5	82.9
21	Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access centre.	10.5	7.9	81.6
31	Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy.	9.2	10.5	80.3
19	Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.	14.5	6.6	78.9
28	Learner-centred classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy.	13.2	10.5	76.3
29	Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.	10.5	13.2	76.3
30	Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy.	5.3	19.7	75
35	The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy	7.9	17.1	75
12	Learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would.	7.9	18.4	73.7
27	Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.	10.5	15.8	73.7
33	Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.	9.2	17.1	73.7
14	Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do.	6.6	25	68.4
37	To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	18.4	13.2	68.4
16	Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.	17.1	14.5	68.4
11	Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.	7.9	26.3	65.8
10	It is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults.	26.3	9.2	64.5
4	Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	17.1	19.7	63.2
13	Learner autonomy can be achieved by learners of all cultural backgrounds.	21.1	17.1	61.8
1	Language learners of all ages can develop learner autonomy.	18.4	21.1	60.5
5	Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners.	21.1	18.4	60.5
18	Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher.	18.4	22.4	59.2
32	The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.	26.3	15.8	57.9
7	Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.	17.1	26.3	56.6
15	Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centred classrooms.	28.9	14.5	56.6
34	The proficiency of a language learner does not affect their ability to develop autonomy.	40.8	7.9	51.3
17	Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching.	36.8	14.5	48.7
24	Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher.	63.2	1.3	35.5
22	Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.	34.2	31.6	34.2
20	Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners.	53.9	14.5	31.6
9	It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners.	56.6	13.2	30.3
23	Learner autonomy is a concept which is not suited to non-Western learners.	61.9	9.2	28.9
8	Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher.	52.6	21.1	26.3
26	Promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners.	52.6	27.6	19.7

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