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**An Investigation of Libyan EFL Postgraduate Students' Attitudes Towards
Learner Autonomy**

دراسة في مواقف طلاب الدراسات العليا الليبيين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية تجاه استقلالية المتعلم

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Hameda Suwaed*

Abstract

learner autonomy has been a central theme in the realm of English in EFL contexts. Nonetheless, the Libyan literature demonstrates a dearth of research on post graduate learners' perceptions about learner autonomy in the Libyan post-graduate programs. Therefore, this research investigates how Libyan EFL post graduate students perceive their role as learners, their involvement in their own learning and the role of their teachers in their education. In order to achieve this, a Likert questionnaire was used to obtain quantitative data from a sample of 36 postgraduate students in Libya. The findings of this study reveal that the participants are aware of the importance of learner autonomy and have some autonomous practices. Nonetheless, the results indicate that the participants strongly believe that their teachers have a responsibility in both assessment and evaluation in addition to supporting their learning. Based on the findings of this research it might be suggested that learner autonomy and strategies for fostering it both within and outside of the classroom should be given more importance.

Key words: learner autonomy, EFL, post graduate students, teachers' roles

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ملخص:

قد كانت استقلالية المتعلم موضوعاً رئيسياً في سياقات تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. ومع ذلك، تندر في ليبيا الأبحاث حول تصورات طلاب الدراسات العليا حول استقلالية المتعلم في برامج الدراسات العليا الليبية. لذلك، يبحث هذا البحث في كيفية إدراك طلاب الدراسات العليا في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لدورهم كمعلمين، ومشاركتهم في تعلمهم ودور معلمهم في تعليمهم. ولتحقيق ذلك تم استخدام استبيان ليكرت للحصول على بيانات كمية من عينة مكونة من 36 طالب دراسات عليا في ليبيا. تكشف نتائج هذه الدراسة أن المشاركين يدركون أهمية استقلالية المتعلم ولديهم بعض الممارسات المستقلة. ومع ذلك، تشير النتائج إلى أن المشاركين يعتقدون بقوة أن معلمهم لديهم مسؤولية في كل من التقييم والتقييم بالإضافة إلى دعم تعلمهم. بناءً على نتائج هذا البحث، قد يُقترح إعطاء أهمية أكبر لاستقلالية المتعلم واستراتيجيات تعزيزها داخل الفصل الدراسي وخارجه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستقلالية الأصغر، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، طلاب الدراسات العليا، أدوار المعلمين

Introduction

Over the past few decades, scholars working in EFL contexts have given learner autonomy a great deal of attention (Ningsih, 2019). More autonomy is required in EFL classes due to recent educational reforms (Saeed 2021). It is now regarded as necessary, particularly in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. "In the 21st century, the importance of helping students become more autonomous in their learning has become one of the most prominent themes," according to Abdipoor&Gholamis (2016), P. 107. In the Libyan EFL context, teaching languages most of the time is spoon-feeding in which teachers deliver the knowledge to their

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passive learners. Students in schools are not accountable for their accomplishments or shortcomings. They use a transmission-based method, which promotes memorization over active learning in order to pass exams. Even in higher education, the majority of EFL teaching at the university level is still teacher-centered and exam-oriented, despite curriculum modifications and the availability of in-service training online opportunities for EFL teachers (Al-Araibi, & Saleh, 2020). Exams continue to be the main means of assessment and learning for students at all levels of the Libyan educational system, and they have a significant impact on students' performance and attitudes.

However, EFL students who enroll in the postgraduate programs are expected to be aware of the importance of learner autonomy and assume complete responsibility for their learning (Field et al., 2014). It is assumed that postgraduate students are more autonomous learners because students' active participation inside the classroom and beyond it is the main foundation for their language and life skills improvement, (Ningsih, 2018). Furthermore, in the master's courses, students' classroom instruction is insufficient; in order to learn more about the courses, they are assigned to, graduate students must go beyond the classroom discussions and resources. In order to reach the necessary level, students must take responsibility for their education (Saeed 2021).

However, in reality, the majority of students rely mostly on their instructors to help them learn. Their prior learning styles and characteristics may prevent them from becoming independent learners when they enroll in postgraduate programs (Basri, 2020). According to Crabbe (1993), there are differences in the expectations that students and teachers have about their roles and responsibilities. Because their education was exam-focused and teacher-centered, students may find it challenging to engage in extracurricular activities and other autonomous learning activities (Al-Sadi, 2012).

In Libya, the context of this study, learner autonomy has not been promoted widely in the Libyan educational context. Learner autonomy has not been developed as the main goal of learning or as a teaching/learning objective. This could be attributed to many factors such as students' low level, teachers' beliefs and lack of autonomous experience. In the meantime, learner autonomy is supported by some teaching approaches in Libya's postgraduate programs, mostly due to the swift advancement of technology that offers new methods for teaching languages. Therefore, this research aims to shed a light on how postgraduate students perceive learners' autonomy, their perceptions about their roles and the role that their instructors play in their learning and assessing their progress.

Literature review

Learner autonomy

According to Duong (2014), learner autonomy refers to a student's ability as an autonomous learner to have control over their learning. Dickinson (1987) states that learners' autonomy is related to their responsibility to manage their own learning process. learner autonomy is also considered as a learning state in which learners devote attitude of self-direction on their learning. In fostering learner autonomy, teachers must be aware of their learners' features that can distinguish them as autonomous learners. According to Rinekso&Kurniawan, (2020), these features could be logical, disciplined, methodological, analytical and self-aware. It is not necessary that all learners have these characteristics but teachers should encourage learners to have some of them. Little (2007) asserts that learner autonomy is an 'interactive process where the teacher increases students' autonomy through giving more control over both the learning content and process', P. 26. Littelwood (1999) distinguished between two types of learner autonomy when it comes to managing their

learning process: proactive autonomy and reactive autonomy. In contrast to the latter, which refers to the learners' attempts to control the activity while the teacher controls its direction, the former refers to the students' work to control both the activity and its direction.

Rationale for Promoting Learner Autonomy in EFL Learning

Fostering autonomy in EFL classrooms is increasingly essential because of its benefits to learners. First of all, autonomy enhances the learners' skills to be life-long learners rather than passive learners who rely on memorization to pass exams. Additionally, it empowers students to take charge of their education and participate more actively in the process, (Boudouaia, 2022). According to Dickinson (1995), learners' involvement in making decisions about their learning leads to more meaningful learning. Little (1991) states that "when responsibility for the learning process lies with the learner, the barriers to learning and living that are often found in traditional teacher-led educational structures should not arise" (p.8). Crabbe (1993) asserts that promoting learner autonomy is critical for three reasons: ideological which refers to learners' right to learn based on their own decisions, psychological which argues that learning is more effective when learners are responsible of their learning and economic in which learners could fulfill their needs.

The role of teachers in autonomous learning

Alibakhshi et al. (2015) assert that instructors have a responsibility to create a learning environment for learners to practice autonomy. In order to enable students to be autonomous, educators must take on the role of facilitator. Teachers have a responsibility beyond simply controlling the classroom and serving as the source of knowledge who can explain the curriculum in details. Teachers should, instead, motivate students to study more, engage them in meaningful activities, and provide them with feedback regarding their learning progress (Saeed, 2021).

Some language instructors can find it difficult to shift their classrooms from being teacher-centered to being more learner-centered. Teachers now need to take on new roles in addition to information transmitter and facilitator, (Daberi,2022). Little et al. (2017) found that teachers play three roles in learner autonomy: resource person, facilitator, and language model. Here, teachers' perceptions influence their pedagogy and conception of their roles in the classroom. Teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy have significant impact on how teacher teach, (Ningsih, 2018).

Little (1995) mentioned that students may struggle to take charge of their education and be autonomous learners. Therefore, it is the teachers' responsibility to support the learners' autonomy both within and outside of the classroom. Nunan (1997) proposed five levels to promote learner autonomy: awareness of the course goals, involvement in selecting their own goals, intervention adopt the goals and content, creation of their own goals and transcendence in which learners implement the content of the course in the real world.

The role of learners in autonomous learning

The pandemic and the change in the teaching methods and integration of ICT in English language teaching, have led to the changes of student position and roles during the teaching and learning process. Throughout the learning process, students' active participation both within and outside of the classroom becomes crucial, (Saeed 2021). According to Dabiri et al (2022), the learners play a significant role in how learner autonomy is implemented, including self-evaluation, choosing the activities and learning goals, and selecting the resources used in the classroom.

Little (2022) asserted that learner autonomy requires that the learners are able to plan, apply and assess their work individually and collaboratively. In addition, Crookall (1983) added that the learners must possess time management skills, knowledge of the learning process, and they need to be self-motivated in autonomous learning. Ningsih (2018) summarizes the learners' role in learning autonomy as follows:

- Making decisions about their learning objectives
- Creating learning materials
- Having knowledge about the nature of learning
- Assessing their own progress

Previous research on learner autonomy in EFL contexts

Many studies have been conducted about teachers' and learners' perceptions of learner autonomy. Melvina and Suherdi (2018) investigated 36 Indonesian EFL teachers' views about learner autonomy. The findings of their research demonstrated that most of the participants think that learner autonomy is the learners' responsibility of learning with less support from the teachers' side.

Balcikanli (2010) investigated EFL teachers' views about learner autonomy in Turkey and the challenges that faces them. The findings of the study revealed that the participants hold positive attitudes about learner autonomy and engaging their learners in selecting materials, activities and assessment. In the same context, Sakrak-Ekin&Balcikanli (2019) investigated the learners' level of autonomy and the correlation between learner autonomy among EFL learners in Turkey and their academic success. A questionnaire was distributed among 267 college students. The findings showed that more than half of the participants had a high autonomy level. Also the findings revealed a positive correlation between language learners' autonomy and their academic success.

Ali &Alam, (2023) explored the effectiveness of learner autonomy in EFL learning in Bangladesh. The study also investigated the factors that affect the autonomous learning in undergraduate English language courses. Data were gathered from 12 lecturers and 60 students at a private institution through the administration of an open-ended and closed-ended questionnaire. The results of the study show that students' lack of motivation and self-confidence, and teachers' dependency are the main factors that affect learner autonomy.

Saeed (2021) investigated the Omani learners' perceptions of the role that their teachers and peers play in their autonomy. To gather data, the researcher used semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The findings revealed that the students were aware of the concept of learner autonomy and that they attributed a great deal of their autonomy as well as their motivation and self-confidence to their teachers and peers. Similar to this, Szocs (2017) investigated Hungarian high school language teachers and learners' conceptions of learner autonomy. Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview and a questionnaire. The findings showed that both teachers and students were aware of the importance of learner autonomy. The results also demonstrated that the students reported autonomous activities and felt accountable for their learning.

In the Libyan context, Al-Araibi, & Saleh (2020) used classroom observations of three teachers to research the learner autonomy practices in one Libyan high school and one Libyan college. The findings of their research revealed that teachers do not promote autonomous learning in their teaching practice inside or outside the classroom. In addition, the learners rely heavily on their teachers' instructions and explanations.

Saleh (2016) investigated the conceptions of 48 Libyan EFL university instructors about learner autonomy. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data for this research. The findings showed that the participants lack a clear understanding of learner autonomy. Additionally, the students' low level and lack of learning responsibility of their learning and lack of facilities were the main factors that affect the promotion of learner autonomy in Libyan universities.

Still, most of research is conducted at the university and high school levels. Thus, this study heeds Rinekso & Kurniawan's (2020) call for more research into graduate students' perceptions of autonomy in EFL settings. The researcher aims to investigate learners' perspectives of autonomy, their role, and their teachers' involvement in their learning process, taking into account the Libyan learners' spoon-feeding learning attitude at different stages of education and the varying learning requirements in the MA programs.

Research question

This research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Libyan postgraduate EFL students' perceptions about learner autonomy?
2. How do the students conceive their role in the learning process?
3. How do the students conceive their instructors' role in their learning process?

Methodology

Participants

Thirty-six Libyan MA students were involved in this study. They attend three MA programs in Libya: The Libyan Academy in Janzour's, Applied Linguistics program, the University of Al-zawia's, Applied Linguistics program, and Sabratha University's, MA TESOL program. The age range of the students was 23 to 35. All the participants were females.

Research tools

An online questionnaire was used to collect data for this research because it is more accessible and faster than the other forms, (Cohen et al. 2012). The 30-item Likert questionnaire for the MA students was adopted from Theo's (2018) questionnaire, whose reliability and validity has been checked and verified. Following a pilot study, the questionnaire was adjusted based on input from three participants.

The graduate students' questionnaire was divided into six sections. General details like age, gender, and MA program are included in the first part. Items pertaining to students' opinions of learner autonomy are found in the second section. It looks into how students view autonomy in their learning. The purpose of the third section was to learn about the students' extracurricular and in-class autonomous work. The students' perceptions of their teachers' roles in the classroom are the main topic of the fourth segment. The activities students participate in to improve their academic abilities are reflected in the sixth area. The final portion contains things pertaining to the self-assessment and learning objectives of the students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Thirty-six of the fifty students who received the questionnaire returned copies. To ensure a representative sample, it was restricted to postgraduate students who are still pursuing their degrees (with the exception of those who are studying overseas and those who

were accepted into MA programs but did not begin their studies). The questionnaire was written in English and had an introduction outlining the purpose of the study, providing definitions for key terminology, and emphasizing participant anonymity. It was made clear that answering the questionnaire was optional and that the information provided would remain private.

The data from the questionnaire has been divided into three primary categories for analysis: overall views of autonomy, participants' judgments of their own responsibility for their learning, and participants' perceptions of the role of their teachers in the classroom. For every question, descriptive statistics based on percentages were calculated. A more readable and understandable format for the quantitative data is provided by percentages.

Findings

From the analysis, questionnaire data were divided into 5 groups with 5 sub-headings: readiness for self-directed learning, independent work in language learning, importance of teachers' explanations and supervision, autonomous learning activities and objectives and evaluation.

1. post-graduate learners' readiness for self-directed learning

Statement 1. I have the ability to learn by myself

Statement 2. I know what I want to learn

Statement 3. MA involves a lot of self-study

Statement 4. I enjoy learning independently

Statement 5. I am responsible of my learning progress

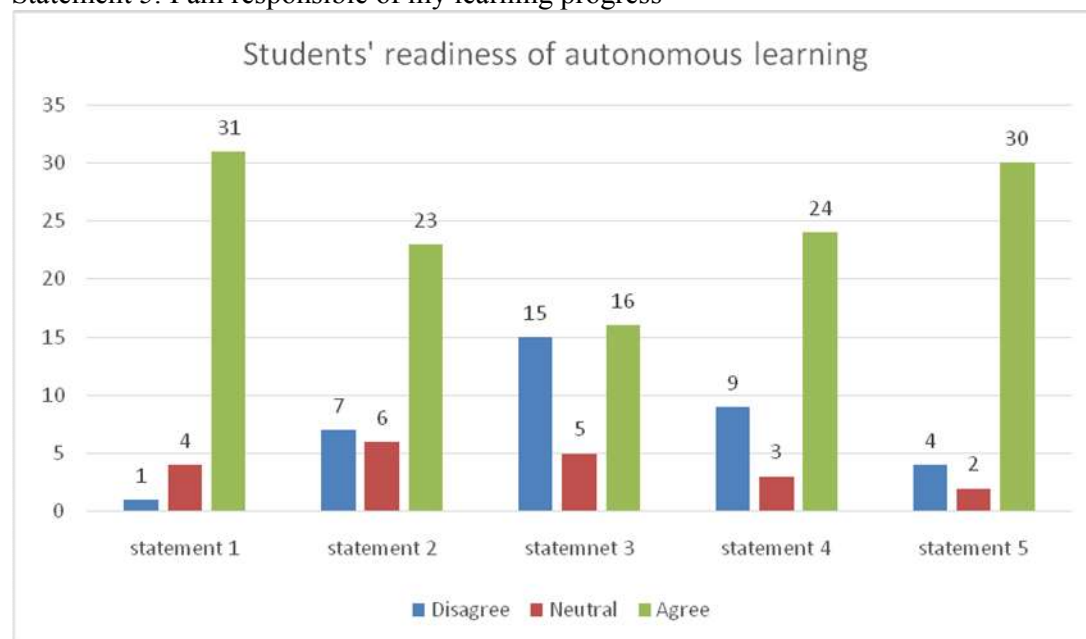


Figure 1. students' Readiness of autonomous learning

The majority of participants in this group (86%) generally agree, as shown in figure 1, that they are responsible for their own learning. They also think they are capable of learning. Over half of the participants concurred that a lot of independent study is necessary for MA. Additionally, 66.6% of participants said they enjoyed learning on their own, and the majority of them agreed that individuals are in charge of their own development. These results may

indicate the participants' preparedness for self-directed learning, but the results in the following sections may indicate otherwise.

2. The students' Independent work in language learning

Statement 1. I make good use of my free time in studying and revising

Statement 2. I am able to choose the methods/strategies of learning that suits me best

Statement 3. Besides the contents prescribed in the course, I read extra materials in advance

Statement 4. I am able to use self-study materials and resources

Statement 5. I prefer being told what to study

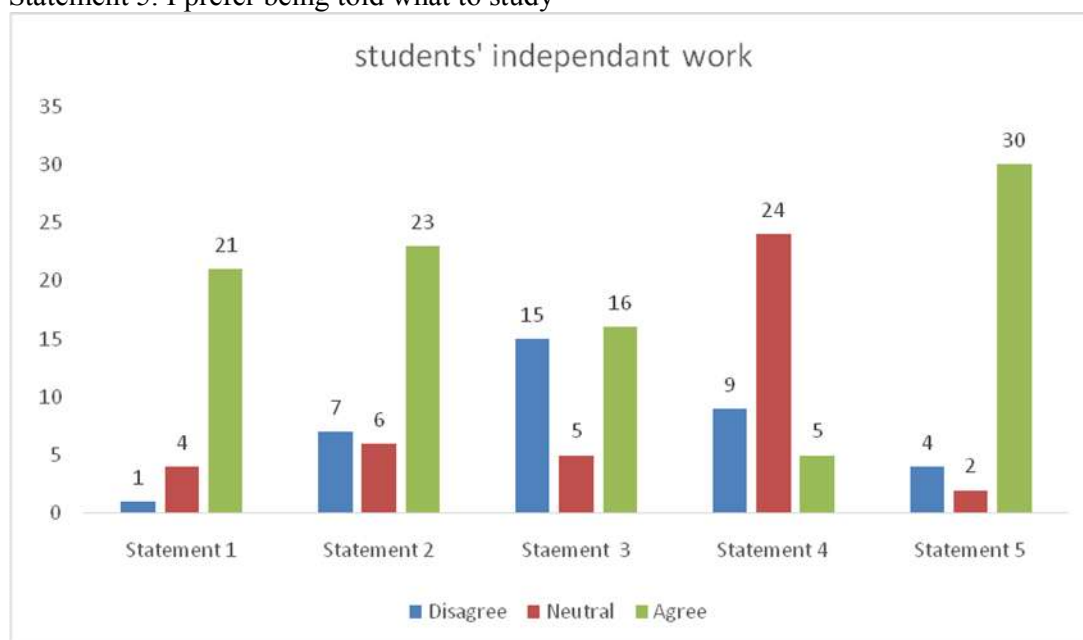


Figure 2: Students' independent work

Figure 2 demonstrates that 58% of the participants study and obtain additional information during their free time. Additionally, it shows that 63.8% of the participants selected the resources and methods that best fit their preferred learning styles. On the other hand, 19% of the participants said they couldn't accomplish that. According to the responses to question 4, over 50% of the participants agreed that they are capable of using self-study materials. Fifteen of them, meanwhile, disagreed with the assertion. The most significant finding here is that 83% of the participants preferred to be told what to study. This indicates that even though the participants attempted to be self-directed learners, they are still very dependent on their teachers.

3. Importance of teachers' explanations and supervision

Statement 1. Teachers have responsibility to make the students understand the subject

Statement 2. I like the teacher to explain the syllabus in details

Statement 3. You have to have a teacher to understand effectively

Statement 4. Teachers should let the students find their own mistake and weakness

Statement 5. A lot of learning can be done without the teacher

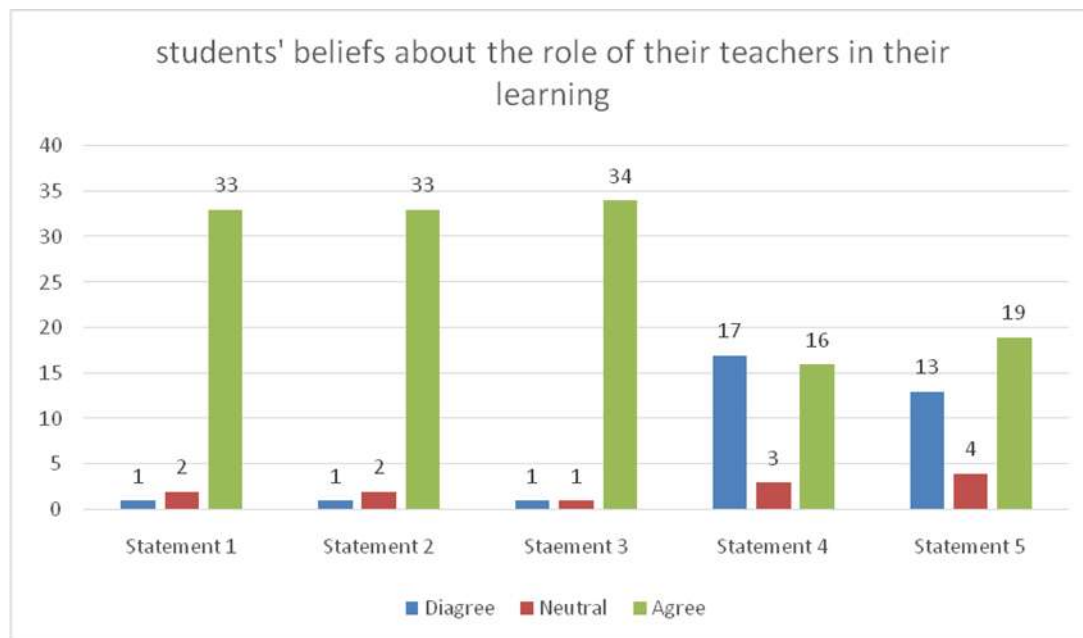


Figure 3: The students' beliefs of the importance of their teachers in their learning process

This set of items focuses on how students perceive the roles that their teachers play in their education. Most participants concur that it is the duty of the instructors to ensure that the students comprehend the materials and provide detailed explanations of the topic. The majority of them agree that the teacher's role in their education is essential for both instructing them and evaluating their progress. Regarding item 4, which suggests that professors should let students discover their own mistakes, 47% of participants disagreed. Furthermore, nearly one-third of them did not agree that learning may be accomplished without a teacher. The answers in this group reflected the participants' general agreement that the teachers play important role in their learning and they reflect their dependence on their teachers.

4. Autonomous learning activities

Statement 1. I preview before the class (i.e. see summary, videos etc.).

Statement 2. I make notes and summaries of my lessons

Statement 3. I attend different seminars, training courses, conferences to expand my knowledge

Statement 4. I prefer to work in groups to share ideas and information

Statement 5. I practice English more outside the class

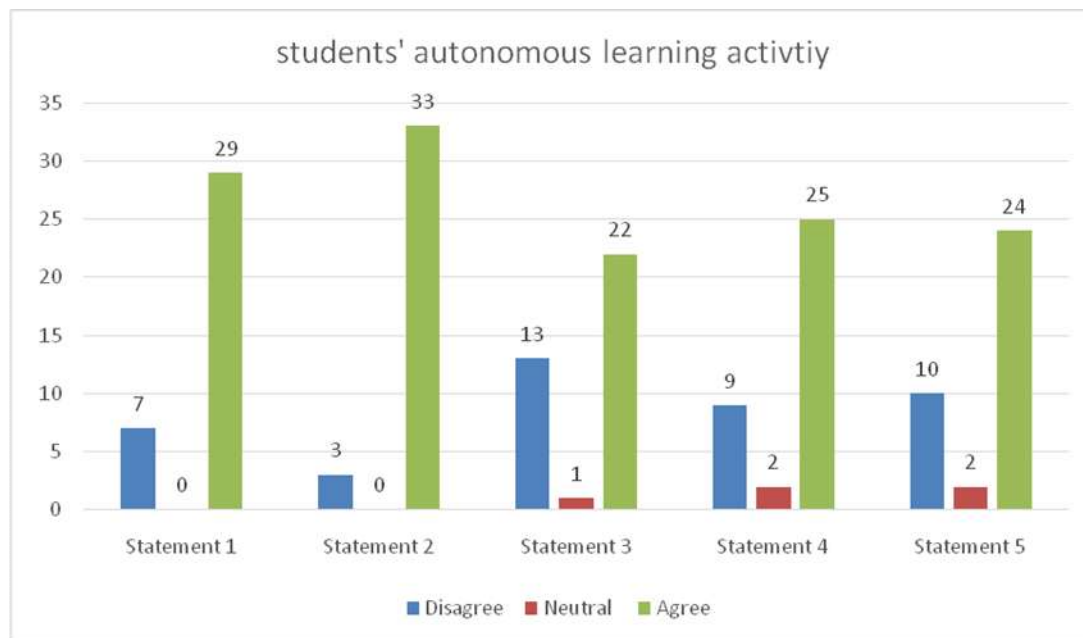


Figure 4: Students' autonomous learning activities

The majority of the participants, as seen in Figure 4, were working independently both within and outside of the classroom. According to the data, 91.6% of participants created notes and summaries, and 80.5% of the participants agreed that they preview before class. Of these, 61% participate in online courses and workshops. Almost one-third of the participants, however, disagreed with item 3, and 69% of them prefer collaborative work where they may learn from their peers. Regarding issue 5, which deals with using English outside of the classroom, 66.6% of participants said they use it outside of the classroom, while 27.7% disagreed.

5.Objectives and evaluation

Statement 1. I note my strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improve them

Statement 2. I know what is best for my learning

Statement 3. It is my job to check my mistakes myself

Statement 4. It is my job to correct my mistakes myself

Statement 5. Teachers should encourage self-directed learning

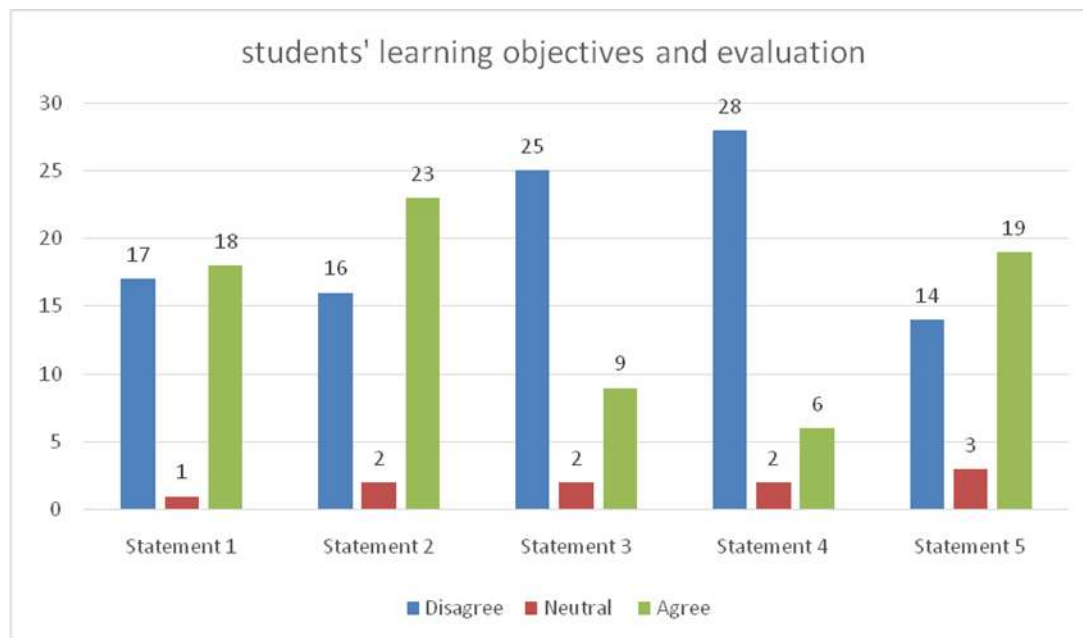


Figure 5: Students' awareness of their learning objectives and methods of evaluation

According to Figure 5, 47% of students did not think it's their job to recognize their strengths and weaknesses. for the evaluation, 77.7% of participants disagreed that it is their responsibility to self-correct, and 69% of participants believed that it is not their responsibility to check their mistakes. Teachers should support self-directed learning, according to half of the participants. The findings indicated that most participants believed it is crucial for teachers to point out and correct their students' mistakes.

Discussion and Implications

It can be said that most of the participants of this study were aware of the importance of learner autonomy. In addition, they knew that MA study requires self-study and being independent. They also valued independent work and collaborative learning. However, they also believed that the teachers' role is to help them learn and view teachers as the source of information in their learning process. These findings are similar to Breeze (2002) in which the findings of his research showed that the students were aware of their role in their learning process but they did not show interest to work by themselves. Because even autonomous learners depend more on their teachers, learner autonomy in EFL classrooms is a contentious topic. This is a result of teacher-centered education being the norm, Ningsih (2018).

The study's participants placed a high value on teacher-centered learning environments and relied on their instructors to evaluate their work and transform information. Saeed (2021) asserted that Arab students value their professors' support and scaffolding in order to increase their autonomy. This is in line with the research findings of Ali, & Alam (2023), which showed that students preferred teacher-centered learning environments and believed that their teachers are the primary source of knowledge in the classroom.

More than half of the participants demonstrated their enthusiasm and involvement in various autonomous activities both within and outside the classroom, such as revision, attending workshops and seminars, and checking additional resources and references, despite their reliance on their instructors. These results are consistent with the research which was conducted by Abdipoor & Gholamis (2016), that demonstrates the participants use of variety

of techniques to enhance their English language skills. But just like the study's participants, the majority of the activities were more receptive—like writing and reading—than productive tasks.

The majority of participants showed an interest to learn with their peers. Little (2008) asserted that student collaboration fosters the growth of learner autonomy. Through social connection with their teacher and peers, students' autonomy may be improved (Murase, 2015). Smith (2001) added that group work encourages learner autonomy in the Asian context. According to the study's findings, this may be used in Libya, where over half of the students stated that they would rather learn and discuss ideas in pairs or groups.

While self-assessment is a crucial aspect of learner autonomy, the majority of participants expressed disapproval over their involvement in the process. They believed that it is the responsibility of instructors to point out and correct students' mistakes. According to Breeze (2002), students should be aware of the various ways that their work can be evaluated. He continued by saying that teaching students how to be autonomous is necessary. Encouraging students to take an increasingly active part in their education is one method to close this gap. Discussing the course material and the assessment procedure with the students is also important. As a result, students take a more active role in their learning and in monitoring their progress. According to Al-Sadi (2012), educators should create a safe environment in which students can study, reflect on their education, and take charge of their own improvement and progress. In addition, language teachers should also assign various activities and tasks to foster autonomy inside and outside the classroom, (Thao, 2018)

The findings of this study showed that promoting learner autonomy in postgraduate programs is crucial because this will reduce the spoon-fed common teaching methods. Besides, learner autonomy promotes learners' 21st-century skills such as decision making and critical thinking. In addition, teachers could also integrate ICT to promote learner autonomy. According to Saeed (2021), the integration of technology motivates learners and enriches their learning resources. Additionally, it encouraged learners' involvement within the lectures and finding extra learning resources. According to Ezzi (2018), increasing learner autonomy depends in large part on the motivation of the students. It is the responsibility of educators to foster intrinsic motivation in their students. She recommends that various tasks and assignments, such as writing research papers and evaluating stories and books, should be used to teach students how to be independent.

Conclusion and recommendations

This research aimed to investigate 36 postgraduate students' perceptions of learner autonomy and the role that their teachers play in their learning process. The findings of the study showed that the participants hold positive views about learner autonomy. Most of them are aware that post-graduate studies require more self-study and autonomous activities. The participants also demonstrated some autonomous practices like preparing and revising, reading extra resources and attending workshops.

However, the participants value the role of the teachers' scaffolding and think that it is central to their learning process. In addition, most of them did not show interest in self-assessment. They believed that it is the instructors' responsibility to identify the students' mistakes and correct them. These findings revealed the participants' perceptions about learner autonomy, their role in their learning process and their instructors' responsibilities might be affected by their previous learning experience which is mostly teacher-centered and exam oriented.

Based on the findings of this research, I recommend the following

- Pre-service and in-service professional development opportunities such as seminars and workshops about learner autonomy should be organized to share experiences and best practices.
- The use of technology and extra materials are important to enhance the students' skills
- Student-centered approach should be encouraged where teachers play the role of facilitators and students take control of their learning.
- instructors should motivate the students towards autonomous learning and encourage them to take responsibility over their own language learning through providing various tasks and methods of assessment.

Future research

I recommend that future studies explore students' challenges to be autonomous learners. Also the role of motivation in learner autonomy is an area that needs more investigation. Additionally, instructors' perceptions about learner autonomy is an area that needs to be investigated along with the instructors' actual teaching practice so it is recommended that future research could be conducted about EFL instructors' beliefs and their actual teaching practice.

Limitations

One limitation of this research is that the sample size was not representative of all the EFL post-graduate students so it is recommended that the study is replicated and use both Quantitative and qualitative data. Also, other factors such as age and gender need to be taken into consideration as it might affect the participants' views of learner autonomy.

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