

The Perceptions and Practices of Learner Autonomy among Undergraduate English as a Foreign Language Students in Private Universities (A Case of Erbil/Iraq)

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Learner autonomy is indisputably one of the most essential concerns in higher education, as it allows students to take charge of their own learning and accomplishing the tasks provided by their lecturers outside the walls. Therefore, this study was initiated to reveal the perceptions and practices of learner autonomy among English as a foreign language undergraduate students in private universities in Erbil. The quantitative research method was utilized through a questionnaire. The research sample consists of 156 undergraduate EFL students from three private universities in Erbil. The collected data were analyzed through SPSS 25 data editor. The results have indicated that even though the students are motivated to learn English, they do not have necessary autonomy level to take responsibility over their learning. This research will shed light on the perceptions and practices of learner autonomy among English as a foreign language undergraduate students in private universities in Erbil, and will guide English language lecturers, curriculum developers, education coordinators and undergraduate foreign language students to implement autonomous learning skills in teaching and learning.

Keywords: Autonomous Learning Skills, Learner Autonomy Perceptions, Learner Autonomy Practices, Undergraduate EFL Students

1. Introduction

Learner Autonomy (LA) has received substantial attention in recent years because students have been accounted considerably as a subject, notably in the area of EFL or ESL, (Teng, 2019; Smith 2008). Thus, the enhancement of LA has been considered as the objective of education in contemporary SL/FL teaching and learning both in formal education settings and life-long real-life settings (Han, 2014; Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012).

According to Hussein and Al Bajalani's (2019) study, which involved 211 EFL undergraduate students in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), although EFL learners had a good attitude and desire for autonomy,

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they did not put it into practice as autonomous learners due to a lack of motivation. The autonomous learning strategies made students feel more independent and improved their English learning efficacy, according to the students. The results revealed that students with either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation exhibited autonomous learning behaviors; therefore, teachers had a significant impact on students in encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning.

Because self-regulation and self-confidence techniques helped EFL students increase self-learning, Muhammad and Othman (2018) revealed a substantial association between pronunciation learning strategies and pronunciation improvement. They also noted that for EFL learners to improve their pronunciation, self-governing and self-confidence tactics were necessary. According to Tilfarlioglu and Sherwani (2018), there is a relation between learner autonomy, confidence, and vocabulary learning strategies.

EFL teachers and students had positive impressions of LA, according to Ibrahim (2018), and both groups said students should have been involved in the decision-making process in teaching. The institutions in KRI, on the other hand, did not allow students the opportunity to choose classroom objectives, materials, time, place, methods, and so on. Both groups also believed that students have the necessary skills to improve LA on their own. Instructors then reported that they encouraged students to participate in activities such as giving presentations or having pair/group discussions to foster LA, however participants indicated that their teacher did not endorse their autonomy.

Studies in the literature show although an awareness rises towards LA in higher education and students are generally motivated to be autonomous learners, the autonomy practices are at minimal level based on both students' or teachers' factors. This research has been carried out to see how LA is perceived and practiced among EFL undergraduate students in private universities in Erbil. Based on the objectives, the following questions emerged to find out:

1. What are the perceptions of learner autonomy among English as a foreign language undergraduate students in private universities in Erbil?
2. What are the practices of learner autonomy among English as a foreign language undergraduate students in private universities in Erbil?

2. Literature Review

The term autonomy was first promoted by Holec (1981, p.3) and defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. Another scholar Benson (2001, p.47) describes as LA as “the capacity of taking control of learning management, learning content”. LA is designated by applied linguists in a variety of respects, including the ability and desire to take control over someone's own learning process and behavior within this way (Allwright, 1990); the ability to objectively think, make choices, and take autonomous operations (Little, 1991); and the student's psychological mindset of total responsibility, which is prevalent in self-access centers (Holec, 1980, 1981) (as cited in Oxford, Rubin, Chamot, Schramm, Lavine, Gunning, & Nel, 2013).

For most learners, effective autonomous learning necessitates major investment in the essential abilities for identifying learning requirements, establishing a learning plan, tracking progress, and reflecting on

outcomes among other abilities. Programs that encourage or assist autonomous learning without preparing learners for such experiences and supporting them in the process (whether technology-mediated or not) are prone to failures (Reinders, 2018).

In most foreign and second language programs today, the teachers' primary purpose is to improve their students' productive skills in the target language. The instructors in autonomous classrooms try to accomplish that goal by encouraging students to use FL/SL actively from the beginning. They also provide authentic communication environment which originates from students' interests to make the learning relate to students' own life and experiences. Consequently, they try to take advantage of their students' knowledge, interests, and abilities in the classroom (Little & Legenhausen, 2017).

Students in the autonomy classrooms have three interdependent functions in general.

- They are communicators, who use and develop their communicative skills in the target language on a regular basis,
- They are language explorers, who progressively establish an explicit systematic knowledge system and create an awareness towards the cultural conventions in FL/SL
- They are deliberate language learners who are continually developing a conscious knowledge of affective and metacognitive components of language acquisition. The roles of students connect to each other in a variety of ways (ibid.).

Al Obaydi (2015) performed research among Iraqi university undergraduate EFL students. The findings revealed that students' autonomy, classroom interactions, and academic achievement were all related to each other. As a result of this discovery, it is possible to deduce that effective classroom involvement has two important effects. The first was focused on creating a fun learning environment in the classroom as well as positive student interactions. The second aids learners' capacity to communicate successfully in a foreign language. This can be achieved in a variety of contexts, such as separating student and instructor responsibilities, trying to expose students to a variety of classroom environments, using a range of activities, guiding the students in verbalizing themselves, forming positive relationships with students, and using various communication strategies. Allowing learners to use a variety of communication styles is critical. As a result of their use, fluency and effective communication skills are developed, and many of these strategies are instances of autonomous learning. As a result, teachers play a critical role in teaching learners the necessary abilities for becoming autonomous learners.

Similarly, Bala and Bala (2020) carried out a research in Erbil/Iraq on the impact of former language learning culture of preparatory undergraduate students on their present learning autonomy level. They revealed the preparatory students did not generally practice autonomous learning skills before undergraduate study, so this hindered them to take responsibility over their language learning in higher education. However, the preparatory instructors advocated that they encouraged their students to gain autonomous learning skills. Concordantly, Bala and Bala (2018) proposed to the language instructors to train their students about language learning strategies to help them autonomous learners. Also, Hamad (2018) claimed that learners are able to become more autonomous, and many behaviors and actions were influenced not only by students' autonomy sense, but also by instructors' promotion of students' autonomy and responsibility.

Some university professors believe that LA is unique rather than developing over time, and that universities do not help students achieve autonomy. The meaningful events can help students gain autonomy. Student self-efficacy (an element of autonomy), for example, contributes positively to situations that demonstrate the student's ability to operate independently, like work or project assignments. Numerous students claim that studying at university has boosted their interaction with literature resources and learning independence, both of which are possible metrics of self-management. Students in their last year are also more inclined to engage with comments, implying a greater sense of taking control over their development and learning (Henri, Morrell & Scott, 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1 Method

The processes of collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting the results of a study are all part of quantitative methodology. Both in survey and experimental research, specific methods exist for identifying a sample and population, determining the inquiry approach, data collection and data analysis, displaying data, developing an interpretation, and documenting the experiments in a survey or experimental study-like style (Creswell, 2009). The quantitative research method was exploited for this research to collect the numerical data from as many as participants in a short time.

3.2 Participants

The undergraduate EFL students in private universities in Iraq comprise the research population, and 156 second-year undergraduate EFL students from three private universities- University 1 (U1), University 2 (U2), University 3 (U3) -in Erbil are the research participants of this study.

Table 1: The profile of the participants

No	N
University 1	57
University 2	19
University 3	80

3.3 Instruments

A questionnaire survey examines a sample of a population to produce a quantitative or numerical representation of patterns, attitudes, or viewpoints. The scholar generalizes or makes statements about the population based on sample results (Creswell, 2009). Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan's (2002) Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) was exploited as the research instrument for this study.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The data of this study were collected among the second-year undergraduate EFL students from three private universities in Erbil after gaining consent of the head of the departments in each university. The surveys were distributed during the course time of the students by the researcher and the course instructor.

The obtained data were typed in Microsoft Excel, imported into SPSS 25 data editor and analyzed through SPSS correspondingly.

3.5 Research Ethics

The participants' confidentiality was provided by the coding system, such as S1, S2, S3, etc. also, the participants were assured the collected data would be only used for the research purpose and disclosed to any third party.

4. Results and Discussions

Table 2: The scales of subscales in LAQ

Sub-scales							
Scales	High School Autonomy	Teachers' Role	Students' Role	Responsibilities	Abilities	Motivation	Activities
5	Always	Facilitator	Autonomous Learner	Completely the teacher's	Very Good	Highly- motivated	Always
4	Frequently			Mostly the teacher's, partly mine	Good	Well- motivated	Frequently
3	Sometimes			Half mine, half the teacher's	Average	Motivated	Sometimes
2	Rarely			Mostly mine, partly the teacher's	Poor	Slightly Motivated	Rarely
1	Never	Sole Authority	Teacher- dependent Learner	Completely mine	Very Poor	Not at all motivated	Never

The table above describes the scales of the subscales of LAQ based on 1-5 Likert-scale- High School Autonomy, Teachers' Role, Students' Role, Responsibilities, Abilities, Motivation and Activities.

4.1 High School Autonomy Experience

Table 3: The highest and the lowest means of items in high school autonomy experience of U1, U2 and U3

	N		1	2	10	11
University 1	57	items	choosing partners	group/pair work activities	deciding what to learn next	preparing portfolios
		M	2.73	2.64	2.04	1.81
University 2	19	items	setting your own goals	evaluating your course	evaluating your learning	choosing materials
		M	2.79	2.74	2.11	1.95
University 3	80	items	group/pair work activities	choosing partners	deciding what to learn next	preparing portfolios
		M	2.44	2.35	1.97	1.96

In Table 3, setting goals (M=2.79) for U1 and choosing partner for U2 (M=2.73), which fall in sometimes scale, and group/pair work activities for U3 (M=2.44) which falls in rarely scale are the highest mean scores whereas preparing portfolios for U1 (M=1.81), choosing materials for U2 (M=1.95), and preparing portfolios for U3 (M=1.96), which all correspond at rarely scale, are the lowest items.

Table 4: Students' perceptions towards their role and teachers' role at high school

Descriptive Statistics				
		M	SD	N
University 1	12. role of teachers	2.54	1.119	57
	13. role of learners	2.29	1.107	56
University 2	12. role of teachers	2.53	0.964	19
	13. role of learners	2.21	1.032	19
University 3	12. role of teachers	2.32	1.111	78
	13. role of learners	2.08	1.017	76

The findings suggest that participants agree on their high school EFL instructors are not single or primary authority in the classroom (M=2.54, M=2.53, M=2.32); nonetheless, the means of U1 and U2 are between the fair and moderate range, and U3 is in the fair range, which reveals the instructors were more dominant in language learning process. In addition, their opinions of their position as a learner in high school revealed that they were highly teacher-dependent (M=2.29, M=2.21, M=2.08). Furthermore, the SD value is about 1 signifies the normality in data distribution.

4.2 Students' Responsibility Perceptions for Their Learning

Table 5: The highest and the lowest means of students' responsibility perceptions for learning

	N		1	2	12	13
University 1	57	items	stimulating interest in English	tracking progress outside	deciding how long to spend on activities	24.evaluating your learning
		M	3.95	3.86	2.98	2.57
University 2	19	items	stimulating interest in English	choosing activities in your lessons/deciding how long to spend on activities	deciding what you learn outside the class	identifying weaknesses in English
		M	3.95	3.37	2.89	2.89
University 3	80	items	deciding what you learn outside the class	tracking progress outside	deciding how long to spend on activities	choosing activities in your lessons
		M	3.61	3.49	2.61	2.57

The table above displays the responsibility perceptions of the students over their learning. The students in U1 and U2 consider stimulating interest in English (M=3.95), and the participants in U3 believe deciding what you learn outside the class (M=3.61), are mostly the teachers, partly their responsibilities; evaluating your learning in U1 (M=2.57), and choosing activities in your lessons in U3 (M=2.57) are at mostly mine, partly the teacher's scale and identifying weaknesses in English in U2 (M=2.89) is at half their and half teacher's scale.

4.3 Students' Ability Perceptions for Their Learning

Table 6: Students' ability perceptions for their learning

	N		1	2	9	10
University 1	57	items	choosing learning activities outside class	choosing learning objectives/materials outside the class	evaluating your course	choosing learning objectives in the class
		M	2.82	2.6	2.2	2.05
University 2	19	items	choosing learning activities outside class	evaluating your learning/choosing learning objectives outside the class	choosing learning materials outside the class	choosing learning objectives in the class
		M	2.79	2.63	2.17	2.05
University 3	80	items	choosing learning materials outside the class	identifying your weaknesses in learning	choosing learning activities outside class	choosing leaning activities in class
		M	2.67	2.5	2.28	1.84

Table 6 illustrates the students' ability perceptions for their learning. Choosing learning activities outside class in U1 and U2 has the highest mean scores with M= 2.82 and M=2,79, which fall in average scale, and choosing learning materials outside the class with M= 2.67 has the highest mean score in U3. On the other hand, choosing learning objectives in the class in U1 and U2 with M=2.05 and choosing leaning activities in class in U3 with M=1.84 have the lowest mean scores which corresponds to poor scale.

4.4 Students Current Motivation Level

The tables below illustrate the extent of current students' motivation to learn English. The findings suggest that students' motivation levels in 3 groups are relatively similar; M=3.12, M=3.26, and M=3.14 accordingly, indicating that students are moderately driven to learn English. Also, SD value is around 1 that shows the normality in the data distribution.

Table 7: Students' motivation level to learn English in U1

University 1		
N	Valid	57
	Missing	0
Mean	3.12	
Mode	3	
Std. Deviation	1.053	
Skewness	0.222	
Std. Error of Skewness	0.316	
Kurtosis	-0.609	
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.623	

Table 8: Students' motivation level to learn English in U2

University 2		
N	Valid	19
	Missing	0
Mean	3.26	
Mode	3	
Std. Deviation	0.991	
Skewness	0.554	
Std. Error of Skewness	0.524	
Kurtosis	-0.485	
Std. Error of Kurtosis	1.014	

Table 9: Students' motivation level to learn English in U3

University 3		
N	Valid	80
	Missing	0
Mean	3.14	
Mode	3	
Std. Deviation	1.003	
Skewness	0.103	
Std. Error of Skewness	0.269	
Kurtosis	-0.102	
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.532	

4.5 Participation into the Activities inside or outside the Classroom

Table 10: Students' participation to the autonomous activities outside the classroom

	N		1	2	16	17
University 1	57	items	using the Internet in English	listening to English songs	writing a diary in English	send e-mails to your friends in English
		M	3.96	3.61	1.91	1.82
University 2	19	items	sending e-mails to your teachers in English	writing down new words and their meanings	writing a diary in English/reviewing your written work on your own	using the Internet in English
		M	3.16	3.11	2	1.74
University 3	80	items	speaking English with native speakers	writing a diary in English	listening to English songs	attending a self-study center
		M	2.9	2.79	2.33	2.23

The table above depicts the highest and the lowest mean scores of the activities carried out by the students. Using the Internet in English in U1 with M= 3.96, sending e-mails to your teachers in English in U2 with M=3.16 and speaking English with native speakers in U3 with M=2.90 have the highest mean scores whereas send e-mails to your friends in English in U1 with M=1.82, using the Internet in English in U2 with M=1.74 and attending a self-study center in U3 with M=2.23 carry the lowest mean scores for the activities conducted by the students.

Table 11: Students engagement to the activities inside the classroom

		University 1			University 2			University 3		
		55.asking the teacher questions when you do not understand	56.making suggestions to the teacher	57.taking opportunities to speak English	55.asking the teacher questions when you do not understand	56.making suggestions to the teacher	57.taking opportunities to speak English	55.asking the teacher questions when you do not understand	56.making suggestions to the teacher	57.taking opportunities to speak English
N	Valid	57	57	57	19	19	19	79	79	79
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
Mean		2.95	2.12	3.02	3.05	2.53	2.63	2.67	2.48	2.35
Mode		3	2	3 ^a	3	3	2	3	2	2
Std. Deviation		0.811	0.847	1.246	0.705	0.772	1.012	1.071	1.175	1.026
Skewness		0.306	0.125	-0.092	-0.074	-0.502	0.139	0.183	0.436	0.697
Std. Error of Skewness		0.316	0.316	0.316	0.524	0.524	0.524	0.271	0.271	0.271
Kurtosis		0.242	-0.872	-0.964	-0.766	0.033	-1.124	-0.197	-0.587	0.430
Std. Error of Kurtosis		0.623	0.623	0.623	1.014	1.014	1.014	0.535	0.535	0.535

Table 11 shows asking the teacher questions when students do not understand carries the highest mean scores in U2 and U3 with M=3.05 and M=2.67 correspondingly that fall in sometimes scale; on the other hand, making suggestions to the teacher has the lowest mean in U1 and U2 with M=2.12 and M=2.53 that fall in rarely scale. Also, SD value is around 1 that indicates a normal data distribution.

4.6 The Results of Subscales in LAQ of U1, U2 and U3

Table 12: The mean scores of LAQ's Sub-scales in U1, U2 and U3

		M		M		M	Average M
High School Autonomy	U1 N=57	2.35	U2 N=19	2.32	U3 N=80	2.19	2.29
Teachers' role		2.54		2.53		2.32	2.46
Students' role		2.29		2.21		2.08	2.19
Responsibilities		3.39		3.21		2.97	3.19
Abilities		2.42		2.39		2.36	2.39
Motivation		3.12		3.26		3.14	3.17
Activities		2.72		2.65		2.54	2.64

Table 3 outlines the subscales of LAQ results for U1, U2 and U3. The participants in 3 universities are at motivated level to learn English with M=3.12, M=3.26 and M=3.14 respectively, which suggest that the students are ready to be autonomous learners. Hussein and Al Bajalani's (2019) research of 211 EFL undergraduate students in the KRI region indicated that, while having a positive attitude and desire for autonomy, the EFL learners did not use it practically to be autonomous learners due to the motivation factor. The results suggested that the students who were motivated either intrinsic or extrinsic demonstrated more autonomous actions.

However, the results in Table 3 show the students believe they do not have essential skills to perform autonomous learning with M=2.42, M=2.39 and M=2.36, which these scales fall in Poor scale. Also, their responsibility perception for their learning is at Half mine, half the teacher's scale with M=3.39, M=3.21 and M=2.97. According to Ibrahim's (2018) study, although teachers indicated they believed students had necessary skills for autonomous learning, their students claimed they did not give them enough opportunities to perform autonomous learning skills. Also, the results of this study show that students do not believe they have fundamental skills to make decisions in their language learning process and it is obvious in the studies in literature that language teachers do not stimulate their students enough to gain autonomous learning skills.

Students indicated their high school teachers were authoritarian with M=2.54, M=2.53 and M=2.32, and they were mostly teacher-dependent learners with M=2.29, M=2.21 and M=2.08. Also, the mean scores for high school autonomy subscale are M=2.35, M=2.32 and M=2.19, which show students took part rarely in the decision process of learning. Parallely to these results, Ibrahim and Shams (2020) stated that the reform in higher education quality assurance system has had no impact on teaching and learning, and teachers have continued to use the same teaching methods despite the reform strategy in KRI. Specifically, students' learning methods have been based on memory, and teachers have maintained total authority in the classroom (ibid.). According to academic staff and university administrators, 52 percent of students are not involved in the educational process, while 6.5 percent say students are sufficiently active, according to a KRI study (Atrushi & Woodfield, 2018).

Bala (2020) revealed in her research that physics education department students obtained the highest language proficiency mean scores with M=2.33 and also they participate into the activities outside the

classroom with $M=3.29$ more than the students from other departments. The mean scores of the activity participation both in-class and out-class are not satisfactory considering the nature of learning at university level. $M=2.72$, $M=2.65$ and $M=2.54$ for U1, U2 and U3 respectively. Al Obaydi (2015) performed research among Iraqi university undergraduate EFL students. The findings revealed that learner autonomy, the engagement of students into classroom activities, and academic achievement were all positively related to each other.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The present study unveiled the extent of perceptions and practices of undergraduate EFL students in private universities in Erbil. The results suggest that the undergraduate EFL students in private universities are motivated to learn English, which promotes also autonomous learning. However, students do not believe they have the capacity to take control over their own learning. Moreover, their responsibility perception level for their learning is not as high as it should be in order to take initiative to plan, manage and carry out their own learning. The engagement to inside or outside the classroom activities is also not at sufficient level to perform autonomous learning strategies. They indicated they were more teacher-dependent learners, and their teachers were more authoritarian at their high schools that might affect their current autonomy level.

In higher education system, students are supposed to be more autonomous to fulfill the tasks or projects given by the lecturers. Lecturers should take into account that not every student may have autonomous learning skills. Therefore, they might teach language learning strategies to help students gain autonomous learning skills and mentor them to overcome the difficulties they experience during learning process. Last but not least, instructors should motivate and encourage their students to take initiatives for their learning.

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