Iranian EFL Experienced vs. Novice Teachers' Beliefs Regarding Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has been described as the ultimate objective in many language teaching programs since the third quarter of the twentieth century and educators have highlighted the significant role of promoting learner autonomy in the process of language learning and teaching. However, only limited number of studies has been awarded to what leaner autonomy mean to teachers. This study addressed the gap and investigated novice and experienced teachers" beliefs regarding learner autonomy. Forty teachers participated in two groups who were grouped based on their teaching experiences as novice and experienced teachers. A questionnaire which was adapted from British Council was administered to elicit the teachers" beliefs regarding learner autonomy. The independent samples t-test analysis of the data revealed a significant difference between novice and experienced teachers beliefs. The findings of the present study may have some implications for teachers in promoting learner autonomy in their classes, in general, and involving learners in the process of teaching and learning, in particular.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Experienced Teachers, Novice Teachers, Teachers" Beliefs

Introduction

The idea of learner autonomy is by no means a new one in the history of education. It is based on the idea that if students are involved in decision making processes regarding their own language competence, they are likely to be more enthusiastic about learning (Littlejohn, 1985, p. 258) and get involved in more focused and purposeful learning (Camilleri, 1997; Chan, 2001; 2003;Dam, 1995;Little, 1991). Additionally, it is argued that "learners have the power and right to learn for themselves" (Smith, 2008, p. 2), which is seen as an essential aspect for learner autonomy. There is evidence in research studies to support the claim that "increasing the level of learner control will increase the level of self-determination, thereby increasing overall motivation in the development of learner autonomy" (Chan 2001, p. 506). Thus, in order to contribute to the development of learner autonomy in language classrooms, it is vital that students be involved in making decision about their own learning. There is an important role for teachers in this process since „the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted" (Barfield, 2001, p. 3). On this basis, teachers need to experience autonomous skills in their initial teacher training, so they will be able to take a positive stance towards the development of learner autonomy in their own teaching and their students can take charge of their own learning following the models of their teachers.

In the domain of foreign language learning, it was Holec‟s (1981) seminal study on autonomy and foreign language learning which triggered a growing interest in the concept of "learner autonomy" in the last two decades. Taking responsibilities, involving in goal setting and content determination can be considered as a definition of learner autonomy (Cotterall, 2000). The autonomy debate has thus become a popular focus of foreign language teaching (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). This general debate has given rise to two inter-related directions of research. The first of these (mainly in Europe) has concerned itself with the development of learner autonomy or learner training as a primary requisite of learner beyond school in democratic societies (e.g., Benson, 2001; Holec, 1988), while the second (mainly in North America) has focused on solving the „secret‟ of the good

language learner by emphasizing learner strategies and the notion of learning to learn or strategy training (for example, Finch, 2000; Wenden& Rubin, 1987).

Learner autonomy in language education is interpreted in various ways in the literature on the topic. Benson (1997) distinguishes three broad perspectives of technical, psychological, and political towards learner autonomy. The first one puts the emphasis on skills or strategies that can promote learners" unsupervised learning; strategies identified as metacognitive, cognitive and social by Oxford (1990) fall within this group. The second one emphasizes on broader attitudes and cognitive abilities which enable the learner to take responsibility for his/her own learning, and the last one puts emphasis on empowerment or emancipation of learners by giving them control over the content and processes of their learning.

In addition, there should be suitable environment for applying autonomous learning which should be supported by autonomous teaching. Investigating teachers" beliefs of learner autonomy is extremely important as it is difficult to implement learner autonomy practices in the classroom if teachers are not exposed to the principles of learner autonomy. Fundamental to bringing more autonomy into classrooms are teachers" beliefs about teaching and learning (Lamb 2008). Without involving teachers in a self-reflection of their own well-established beliefs about teaching and learning, including teacher and learner roles and responsibilities, there is a strong chance that any effort to promote more autonomous classrooms will be unsuccessful. Furthermore, beliefs influence teachers" thoughts and actions. More specifically, the beliefs held by teachers about themselves as teachers, and about students, teaching, and learning will eventually influence the ways they view and approach their work. The term "belief" is plagued with "definitional problems, poor conceptualizations and differing understandings of beliefs and belief structures" (Pajares, 1992, p.307). Indeed, teachers" beliefs have been referred to by various terms, such as, "personal practical knowledge" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987), "teacher perspectives" (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 2003), and BAK (beliefs, assumptions and knowledge) (Woods, 1996). Clandinin and Connelly (1987) seem to have foreseen the terminology problem and suggested that the terms are "simply different words naming the same thing" (p. 488).

However, an examination of the terms reveals that not all terms carry the same meaning. They vary in their importance and strength. As a result, it could be stated that not all beliefs will influence teachers" behaviour or guide their actions. Research in this regard (e.g., Borg, 2001; Johnson, 1994; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992;Richards, Gallo & Renandya, 2001; Richardson, 1996) supports the view that understanding teachers" beliefs and the principles they operate from will help us to understand how teachers view their work; how teachers" beliefs affect their behaviour and what goes on in the classroom; how teachers use new information about teaching and learning in their teaching; and finally how teaching practice and professional teacher preparation programs can be improved.

On the other hand, Rokeach (1968) stated that beliefs could neither be measured nor observed. Donaghue (2003) explains why beliefs and thought processes cannot be directly accessed. Firstly, teachers" beliefs may be held subconsciously and so teachers may be unable to explain what they have on their minds or what goes on in their minds. Secondly, teachers – subconsciously or consciously – may want to project a particular image of themselves, especially if they are being evaluated or taking part in a research study or project. Teachers" beliefs are resistant to change (Borg, 2003; Pajares, 1992) and therefore should always be the starting point when introducing new ideas and concepts.

Another reason why teachers" beliefs are important has to do with context. Teaching and learning are context specific, meaning educational systems and teacher education programs differ greatly from one place to another. School culture, which includes both the education side (teachers" beliefs, teaching methods, curriculum and course books) and the organization side (rules and regulations, time factors, exams, management expectations), can be a significant constraint on efforts to promote learner autonomy in the classroom (Smith 2003).

Teachers" beliefs influence their teaching practice which, in turn, can lead them to create a suitable environment for autonomous learning. In other word, teachers" beliefs can lead to autonomous teaching and finally let the learners to be autonomous. In many EFL contexts, it would be a mistake to expect teachers who have traditional experience and learners to be involved

in autonomous learning environment (Hadi, 2012, p.42). Learner autonomy is not a product readymade for teachers to apply, nor is it an article of faith (Basso, 2008). Without the teacher‟s role and learners‟ positive attitudes, maintaining autonomy in EFL classroom seems to be difficult if not impossible (Hadi, 2012). Promoting learner can be seen as a burden to teachers, because they should change their role, reshape their responsibility in the classroom and infuse learners sense of autonomy so that they become able to take charge of their own learning. Based on mentioned above, it seems that few Iranian EFL teachers believe on the concept of learner autonomy only in words, and not in practice. Although they believe on learner-centeredness, their learners are dependent on them as the center of learning process.

Research in the field of teacher cognition has shown that prospective and novice teachers hold certain beliefs about teaching and learning long before they start their teaching profession (Flores, 2002). The sources of teachers‟ beliefs which have been identified in research on teacher cognition include teachers‟ personal experiences as students, or "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975, p. 61) and teacher education. Other sources may include "teachers‟ personality factors, educational principles and research-based evidence" (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p.30). Johnson (1994) states that an investigation of beliefs should include what teachers *intend* to do and *how* they behave, i.e. their decision-making, planning and implementation. Clark and Peterson (1986) provide an insightful model of teacher thoughts and actions

Various studies have been conducted on teachers‟ beliefs towards learner autonomy. Camileri Grima (2007) explored a group of 48 respondents made up of student teachers and practicing teachers of modern languages in Malta. She compared her results to the Malta cohort in the original study and found much similarity both in terms of positive overall views expressed by teachers as well as in the specific aspects of autonomy they were more and less supportive. The more recent group of teachers, though, were seen to be more positive than those in the earlier study towards particular aspects of autonomy, such as learners setting their own short-term objectives, their involvement in the selection of materials, and self-assessment. Al-Shaqsi (2009) also reports on English teachers‟ beliefs of

learner autonomy at General Education schools in Oman. Learner autonomy as a goal is now represented in the new Basic Education curriculum in Oman and this may have influenced the „surprisingly [high]‟ (Borg 2009, p. 93) positive results from this study. Teachers defined learner autonomy in terms of learning independently, self-evaluation, taking responsibility and cooperating. Furthermore, they were optimistic that their learners displayed autonomous behaviors.

In the field of ESL teaching, Richards and Pennington (1998) studied five teachers‟ experiences in their first year of teaching in Hong Kong. The five teachers were new graduates of a BA TESL program, which emphasized communicative language teaching and which therefore contrasted with the mainstream approach in Hong Kong, which is described by the authors as exam-oriented, textbook driven and based on memorization. The data were collected through belief-system questionnaires (administered at the beginning and end of the year); first year questionnaires (administered at the beginning and end of the year) which focused on teachers‟ use of language, teaching approach, lesson planning, decision making behaviour, professional relationships and responsibilities, and perceptions and values; reflection sheets – given twice a month – which asked the teachers to reflect on their changing beliefs and practices in the same five areas as the first year questionnaire; classroom observation – conducted eleven times in nine months – which focused on teachers‟ classroom language and general teaching behaviors; and monthly meetings – one a month – in which the teachers met the researchers and discussed their teaching, experiences, and difficulties. The findings show that although the teachers first believed in the effectiveness of communicative language teaching, they abandoned many of its principles during their first year of teaching. The authors state that the teachers entered the teaching profession holding beliefs in line with their BA TESL program; however, these beliefs changed by the end of the year. The authors propose the following reasons for such change: the nature of the course, teachers‟ prior experience, and constraints of their teaching context, teachers‟ age and being inexperienced.

Additionally Akbulut (2007), in a recent study of thirteen Turkish novices EFL teachers‟ beliefs about teaching and learning, found that

teachers" beliefs are not always reflected in their practices. All the participants graduated from the same university, and they were all non-native speakers of English. Before starting their actual classroom teaching, the teachers completed an unpaid assessed probationary year at the university. Data was collected through a questionnaire, which elicited participants" beliefs; semi-structured interviews on the use of L1, lesson-planning, materials evaluation, testing, decision-making, professional responsibilities, and classroom management. They were also asked whether they were able to apply the theoretical information they acquired during their programmes, and to what extent they were able to implement their beliefs into teaching. The findings showed that novice teachers were not able to apply their ideas in their teaching, for reasons of contextual constraints and discipline problems in their classes. Their teaching was almost always textbook-based because they did not feel confident to move beyond the textbook. The majority (9 out of 13) used Turkish during instruction because they felt students would not understand if they used English.

Inspired by the research done in this regard, the researchers set out to explore Iranian experienced and novice teachers" beliefs regarding learner autonomy. Thus, the following research questions were posed: Is there any difference between experienced and novice teachers" beliefs about overall learner autonomy and its distinctive subcomponents?

Method

Participants

In this study, 40 teachers were randomly selected from among 170 English language teachers of Goldis English language institute in Tabriz. These teachers were classified into two groups based on their teaching experience. One group contained 20 novice teachers with 1-3 years of teaching experience and the other group included 20 experienced teachers with more than 7 years of teaching experience. The participants included both male and female teachers. Their age ranged from 20 to 35.

Instrumentation

The only instrument used in this study was a questionnaire. In order to find out teachers" beliefs regarding learner autonomy (LA) a questionnaire was adapted by the researcher from British Council (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2010) which contained 37 items. The learner autonomy questionnaire (Appendix A) is used to evaluate teachers" beliefs regarding learner autonomy which contains 21 items, categorized into 6 subcategories: technical perspectives (items 1,2,3,11), psychological (items 12,18,19), social (items 6,8,20), political (items 4,5,9,10), role of the teacher (items 7,17,21), and age and proficiency (items 13,15,16), and were answered by the teacher participants.

The questionnaire was five point Likert scale. The content of the questionnaire was adapted to match the participants and focus of the study. The content of this instrument was validated by a panel of qualified and experienced teachers who gave their comments regarding its content validity. Also, the reliability of the instrument was estimated through Cronbach Alpha teachers" belief questionnaire ( ). As Dornyei (2003) puts it, unlike standardized questionnaires, in case of made-to-measure research instruments that are developed for specific purposes, we need not provide a variety of reliability and validity coefficient.

Procedure

In order to conduct the study, out of 170 teachers in an English language institute in Tabriz 40 teachers were randomly selected based on their teaching experiences. A questionnaire was used to collect the data. The data were collected during a semester. The questionnaire was distributed during the teachers" break time after their classes. Teachers were assured that their answers would be kept confidential. Also, no names were required to be written on the questionnaire. Finally, the questionnaires were gathered for the data analysis.

Design

This is a descriptive study in which a survey was conducted to collect the data. The variables of the study are experienced and novice teachers" beliefs, their practice, and learner autonomy.

Results

As previously mentioned, the purpose of the present study was to investigate experienced and novice teachers" beliefs regarding learner autonomy. The research question aimed at comparing the difference between the experienced and novice teachers" beliefs about learner autonomy. Having collected the research data from the questionnaire the researchers used SPSS 19, 20 and Excel 2010 to analyze the data.

One sampleKolmogorov-Smirnov Testwas used to test the normality of the data gathered from the questionnaires. Moreover, an independent sample t-test was conducted to estimate the difference between the experienced and novice teachers" belief regarding learner autonomy.

Normality of the data

The Normality of the data regarding teachers" beliefs was assessed with the help of One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. The distribution of the teachers" beliefs toward learner autonomy in two groups was normal as the p value for both experienced and novice teachers" beliefs was greater than 0.05 (p = 0.39 and 0.83 respectively).

Difference between experienced and novice teachers' belief regarding learner autonomy

Having completed the initial examination of the teachers" beliefs about learner autonomy, the researcher tried to assess more formally whether there was a difference between the experienced and novice teachers" beliefs regarding learner autonomy, which was the first research question. To begin, the researcher applied an independent samples t-test. The normality assumption was examined earlier (see Table 1) where we found there is not strong evidence of abnormality in the teachers" beliefs toward learner autonomy in two groups. The independent samples T-test assesses the null hypothesis that the population mean of teachers" beliefs about learner

autonomy in each of the two groups of teachers are equal. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 1
Independent samples t- test for teachers' belief

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Teachers' belief	Equal variances assumed	.04	.84	-2.50	38	.02	-.81	.32	-1.47	-.15
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.50	36.94	.02	-.81	.32	-1.47	-.15

As indicated in Table 1, there is a strong evidence of a significant difference in the mean belief about learner autonomy between the experienced and novice teachers, that is, overall, the difference between experienced and novice teachers" views towards learner autonomy reached significance level T=-2.50, df=38, sig<0.05. However, we compared the subcomponents of the teachers" views in six different categories of technical, psychological, social, political, role of the teacher, and age and proficiency through subsequent independent samples t-tests, the results of which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Independent sample t-test for LA Questionnaire

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Technical	Equal variances assumed	5.34	.02	-2.17	38	.03	-1.47	.67	-2.84	-.10
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.17	33.82	.03	-1.47	.67	-2.85	-.09
Psychological	Equal variances assumed	9.45	.00	-1.59	38	.11	-.60	.37	-1.36	.16
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.59	28.63	.12	-.60	.37	-1.37	.17
Social	Equal variances assumed	4.27	.04	-1.77	38	.08	-.63	.35	-1.35	.08
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.77	30.45	.08	-.63	.35	-1.36	.09
Political	Equal variances assumed	.00	.98	-.10	38	.91	-.08	.79	-1.70	1.53
	Equal variances not assumed			-.10	37.94	.91	-.08	.79	-1.70	1.53
Role of teacher	Equal variances assumed	.81	.37	-1.84	38	.07	-.85	.46	-1.78	.08
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.84	36.59	.07	-.85	.46	-1.78	.08
Age & proficiency	Equal variances assumed	.40	.53	-2.40	38	.02	-1.18	.49	-2.17	-.18
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.40	37.55	.02	-1.18	.49	-2.17	-.18

As shown in Table 2, the significant level for the first three subcategories (technical, psychological, and social aspects) is less than 0.05

whereas for other three categories (political, role of teacher, and age and proficiency) it is more than 0.05. Thus, the answer to the first research questions is positive. That is to say, there is a significant difference between the experienced and novice teachers" beliefs.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine and compare experienced and novice teachers" beliefs regarding learner autonomy. The statistical analyses of the research data indicated that both experienced and novice teachers believe on learner autonomy and they apply learner autonomy in learning and teaching process. The results of the Independent-Samples t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the experienced and novice teachers" beliefs regarding learner autonomy.

Therefore, the first hypothesis was accepted. Based on the data analysis the experienced and novice teachers both believed on learner autonomy. However, novice teachers believed on technical, psychological, social, and political aspects more than experienced teachers. Also, novice teachers believed on developing learner autonomy in all ages more than experienced one. Meanwhile, experienced and novice teachers both believed on promoting learner autonomy with both young and adult learners. This might be due to their up- to –date academic studies and knowledge in teaching area. On the other hand, experienced teachers who believed on traditional teaching methods also believed more on teachers" role regarding learner autonomy. The findings of the study are in line with those of Al-Shaqsi (2009) who studied English teachers" beliefs of learner autonomy at General Education schools in Oman. His findings indicated that most of the teachers define learner autonomy in terms of learning independently, taking responsibility and cooperating. Also, the findings of the present study support those of Camilleri (1999) who studied 328 teachers in European context. According to these teachers, students should be involved in decisions about a range of learning activities, such as establishing the objectives of a course or selecting course content. Camilleri (2007) also replicated this study with a group of 48 respondents made up of student, teachers and practicing teachers of modern languages in Malta. She found

positive view expressed by teachers as well as in the specific aspects of autonomy they were more and less supportive of. Moreover, the findings of the present study indicated that teachers" experiences affect their belief on the concept of learner autonomy. This means that the more they are experienced, the more they underestimate the role of learner autonomy in their classes. They mostly believe on teacher-centered classes as compared to learner-centered ones.

In the preset study, the findings revealed a difference between experienced and novice teachers" personal beliefs regarding learner autonomy. The reason might be the fact that beliefs dispose teachers" thinking. Also, the findings of the present study would be of great benefit for teachers to make their classes more authentic and reliable regarding learner autonomy and letlearners be involved in the process of teaching and learning. This would not be possible without teachers" self- esteem regarding their beliefs and ideas toward autonomous teaching and learning. Although many teachers believe that teachers are the sole authority in the class, they need to change their idea in this regard which will make the process of teaching and learning more understandable and tangible for both learners and teachers. To sum up, as the findings of the present study indicate, we can conclude that teachers" belief regarding LA influence their teaching practice in the classroom whether they are experienced or novice.

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Appendix A (Learner Autonomy Questionnaire)

Dear teachers

Please answer the following questions based on your own ideas.

	Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
1.	Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy.	£	£	£	£	£
2.	Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.	£	£	£	£	£
3.	Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.	£	£	£	£	£
4.	Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.	£	£	£	£	£
5.	Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do.	£	£	£	£	£
6.	Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.	£	£	£	£	£
7.	Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching.	£	£	£	£	£
8.	Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to co-operative group work.	£	£	£	£	£
9.	Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.	£	£	£	£	£
10.	Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.	£	£	£	£	£
11.	Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy.	£	£	£	£	£
12.	The ability to monitor one"s learning is central to learner autonomy.	£	£	£	£	£
13.	Language learners of all ages can develop learner autonomy.	£	£	£	£	£
14.	Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	£	£	£	£	£
15.	It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners.	£	£	£	£	£
16.	It is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults.	£	£	£	£	£
17.	Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms.	£	£	£	£	£
18.	To become autonomous, learners need to develop the	£	£	£	£	£

	ability to evaluate their own learning					
19.	Learning how to learn is the key to developing learner autonomy.	£	£	£	£	£
20.	Learning to work together is central to the development of learner autonomy.	£	£	£	£	£
21.	The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy.	£	£	£	£	£

Biodata

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