

Developing Learner Autonomy in EFL Academic Classes

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Abstract

Learner autonomy, an educational goal which is highly related to higher education, is almost taken for granted among scholars and educationalists though its fulfillment helps learners take charge of their learning needs. Nevertheless, what is actually achieved in all probability is not the desirable goal line designated in terms of developing learner autonomy in EFL settings. Given these considerations among university students in higher education, the present study addressed the perceptions of students of Shiraz University of Applied Science and Technology on learner autonomy in academic EFL courses. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The data were thematically analyzed in accordance with the principles of qualitative data analysis that is the content-analysis of the data. Remarkably, facilitating and impeding factors to learner autonomy were found in EFL classes based on what the participants mentioned. The students' conception of learning was based on the principles of learning in learner autonomy. They conceived their role as what was in line with the students' role in autonomous learning. There was not a considerable distinction among male and female students regarding what they indicated about their conception of learning, their role in the learning process and their views toward different aspects of learner autonomy in EFL courses. Subsequently, it was highly recommended that there should be more attention to the principles of learner autonomy as well as learners' needs and interests to create a more stimulating environment to motivate the students to become self-motivated and active participants in the process of learning in EFL educational contexts.

Keywords: EFL Settings, Higher Education, Learner Autonomy, University Students

Introduction

Empowering learners to be autonomous is a widespread pedagogical concept which should be attained in higher education. The role of universities is to generate diverse opportunities for critical thinking, personal responsibility, independent learning and to allow students to become aware of their attitude toward learning. Universities should provide an opportunity for the academics to take on a more supportive tutorial role in the assessment process, a facilitator as opposed to teacher and to provide guidance where necessary. This is necessary because the ‘conventional chalk and talk’ approach offers a limited learning experience in which students become bored and their level of learning is seriously impaired. These approaches also generate the feeling of being receptors of information and being led by the other and the academic among the learners.

There are a number of studies which have reflected that allowing students to take responsibility for their learning and for course design fosters high student motivation and excellent attendance. It encourages them to be actively in charge of their learning and control over it (Little, Dam & Legenhausen, 2017; Livi, Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannett, & Kenny, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Wang & Littlewood, 2021; Yumuk, 2002). It is, therefore, important that universities allocate opportunities for fostering learner autonomy to empower students, give them a sense of being in charge of their learning, define what they want to learn and perceive appropriate syllabi for the courses they attend (Little 2022; Raghunath, Anker, & Nortcliffe (2018).

Nevertheless, it seems that in EFL academic classes, what is achieved in reality is far from the principles of learner autonomy. Stated otherwise, the concepts are limited to the theoretical domain and are not actually put into practice. In view of these concerns, the present study was an attempt to investigate the course of actions in academic EFL courses in terms of learner autonomy among a group of Iranian EFL undergraduates. It was also an attempt to identify the facilitating and impeding factors to learner autonomy which could be illuminating in fostering a rich learning environment in the Iranian educational context; resulting practice of more autonomy. The study was an investigation to strengthen, improve or modify the course design and educational programming in an EFL context. Results would hopefully help to reinforce or reform programming courses in line with new trends favoring learner autonomy as an important pedagogical goal and an unavoidable methodological option. Findings of the study would inform teachers, students, and curriculum developers to expand responsibilities in learners in our context to become self-regulated and self-awarded in expressing their needs and maintaining motivation and excitement about learning. Therefore, by the importance of learner autonomy particularly in graduate studies, this research intended to investigate to what extent BA programs at the Department of Foreign Languages of Shiraz University of Applied Sciences promoted this issue. So, the general purpose of this study was to investigate BA students’ views on learner autonomy in BA courses.

Review of the Related Literature

Definitions of Learner Autonomy in the Literature

In the literature, the terms “independent learning” and “self-directed learning” also refer to autonomy. There are a number of terms related to learner autonomy that can be distinguished from it in different ways. Benson (2013) clarified that most people now agree that autonomy and autonomous learning are not synonyms of “self-instruction”, “self-access”, and “self-study, self-education”, “out of class learning” or “distance learning”. He explained that these

terms basically describe various ways and degrees of learning by yourself, whereas autonomy refers to a capacity to control your own learning. Autonomous learners do not necessarily have to learn by themselves. [Little et al. \(2017\)](#) mentioned that autonomy is about people taking more control over their lives—individually and collectively. They clarified that autonomy in language learning is about people taking more control over the purposes for which they learn languages and the ways in which they learn them.

The Students' Role in Autonomous Learning

[Holec \(1981\)](#) clarified key elements for the learners in learner autonomy as assessing progress and achievement and evaluating the learning program. Holec mentioned that learners decide the objective of their courses, what they should learn, what activities to use and how long to spend on each activity and what materials to use in their lessons. [Crookall \(1983\)](#) asserted that learners also need the skills to manage their time and to cope with stress and other negative factors that may interfere with their learning. They also need some knowledge about the learning process and the nature of language. [Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons \(1986 cited in Holden and Usuki, 1999\)](#) identified the role of students in autonomous learning which were to have a purpose for studying, to work for themselves, to participate enthusiastically, to study actively and to show ways in which they wish to learn. [Ho and Crookall \(1995\)](#) also stated that the learners should learn to be self-motivated and self-disciplined in autonomous learning.

[Little \(2022\)](#) discussed language learner autonomy as a dynamic role that the learners are able to plan, apply, observe and assess their own learning. Little further asserted:

From the beginning they do this as far as possible in the target language, which thus becomes a channel of their individual and collaborative agency. By exercising agency in the target language, they gradually develop a proficiency that is reflective as well as communicative, and the target language becomes a fully integrated part of their plurilingual repertoire and identity. (p.66)

The Desirable Learning Environment in Autonomous Learning

To express who they were, what they thought and what they liked to do. [Mac Daniel \(1994\)](#) and [Kenny \(1993\)](#) maintained that autonomy was not just a matter of permitting choice in learning situations but of allowing and encouraging learners that professors will need to correlate curricular aims to fit into their students' needs and into aspects of the college's educational system; monitor for continuous improvement but reduce or eliminate formal testing, think in terms of "talent development" rather than "deficit reduction"; define goals of instruction as measurable outcomes; correlate on the kinds of outcomes-critical thinking, problem solving, creativity that will serve the future citizen in a changing world; adjust time spent by students so that mastery is the goal; work to assure student success by using criterion-based evaluation rather than norm-referenced evaluation and redesign curriculum around priority outcomes to be demonstrated by students in a performance context. According to [Broekman and Valk \(1999\)](#) a main goal of education is focusing education upon students' learning instead of teachers' teaching. Some researchers ([Holden and Usuki, 1999](#); [MacDaniel \(1994\)](#); [Nortcliffe \(2005\)](#), [Motteram, 1999](#); [Nunan, 1993](#) and [Wenden, 1991](#)) have shown that the role of the academic throughout the student-driven module is as facilitator as opposed to the teacher; to question their perceptions and provide guidance where necessary. Also, according to [Raghunath et al. \(2018\)](#) autonomous language learning should not be equated with teacher-less learning. Teacher's role might not become superfluous when learners become autonomous. For the teacher was needed as a counselor, advisor and expert and these roles were more open-ended and demanding. Some of the studies also took both students and teachers roles into consideration. For example, [in a study conducted in 2022, Abd Rahman et](#)

al. compared students and teachers' perceptions and expectations of learner autonomy and sought to find of the degree of autonomy that both groups possessed in a descriptive research design. It is clear that teachers in different settings may exert facilitative roles, not to mention the mutual effects that students and teacher may have on one another that speed up reaching the goals of autonomous learning.

[Gamble et al. \(2018\)](#) characterized the description of an ideal lesson in autonomous learning which were: practical lessons performed in group work, participatory classroom learning where there is an atmosphere of freedom in which students' opinions are voiced, communicative lessons in which it is easy to ask questions, interesting lessons, meaningful lessons that students are not forced to memorize by rote for tests and non-predictable lessons that the pattern is not always the same. Borg and [Alshumaimeri \(2019\)](#) described some conceptions of learning indicative of learner autonomy which were increasing one's knowledge, applying knowledge, understanding, seeing something in a different way, developing social competence, personal fulfillment as a process not bound by time or context, when learners can teach someone confidently and memorizing, reproducing and studying as a means to an end. [Tsi \(2021\)](#) explained some features indicative of the ideal learning environment as when learner's levels are more or less the same, studying without having to worry about grades or rank, suitable content when the topic or lesson is relevant to learners, to learn how to study, the atmosphere is stimulating and when the class size is small.

[Mailloux \(2006\)](#) conducted a descriptive correlational study and examined the extent to which students' perceptions of faculties' teaching strategies, students' context, and perceptions of learner empowerment predicted perceptions of autonomy among 198 senior female nursing students in Northeastern Pennsylvania, USA. The findings revealed that there was a significant direct effect ($t = 4.299$, $p < .001$) between perceptions of learner empowerment and perceptions of autonomy and a link between learner empowerment, stated as a priority in nursing education, and autonomy identified as a priority in practice.

The role of Academics in autonomous learning

Some researchers (see, e.g., [Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019](#); [Chan et al., 2022](#); [Gamble et al., 2022](#)) showed that the role of the academic throughout the student-driven module is as facilitator as opposed to the teacher; to question their perceptions and provide guidance where necessary. Also, according to [Raghunath \(2018\)](#), autonomous language learning should not be equated with teacher-less learning. Teacher's role might not become superfluous when learners become autonomous. For the teacher was needed as a counselor, advisor and expert and these roles were more open-ended and demanding.

It can be challenging for teachers to turn a bare classroom into an appealing learning environment wherein students learn ([Apat, 2022](#)), while their motivation is boosted. The role of an instructors in learner autonomy is a motivator, explicator, resource person, language model, leader, facilitator and Knowledge transmitter ([Holden & Usuki, 1999](#)). Also, [Little et. \(2017\)](#) in their study clarified the role of instructors in learner autonomy which were: explicator, resource person, language model, motivator, leader, facilitator and Knowledge transmitter. Moreover, [Jamila and Zubairi \(2022\)](#) reported that learner autonomy is a learner-centered approach, empowering the learner to the maximum extent, making teachers facilitators.

[Yumuk \(2022\)](#) found that a main goal of education is focusing education upon students' learning instead of teachers' teaching. [Wanna and Paulos \(2021\)](#) argued that good teachers let

their learners get involved and this is the essence of education. According to Tsai (2021), professors will need to correlate curricular aims to fit into their students' needs and into aspects of the college's educational system; monitor for continuous improvement but reduce or eliminate formal testing, think in terms of "talent development" rather than "deficit reduction"; define goals of instruction as measurable outcomes; correlate on the kinds of outcomes—critical thinking, problem solving, creativity—that will serve the future citizen in a changing world; adjust time spent by students so that mastery is the goal; work to assure student success by using criterion-based evaluation rather than norm-referenced evaluation and redesign curriculum around priority outcomes to be demonstrated by students in a performance context.

Ryan and Deci (2020) verified that autonomy was not just a matter of permitting choice in learning situations but of allowing and encouraging learners to express who they were, what they thought and what they liked to do. Little (2022) described their role as active participants and monitors. According to the aforementioned discussions, it can be concluded that the purpose of most of the studies on learner autonomy is to explore the learners' perceptions on autonomous learning, enhance higher levels of learning by principles of autonomous learning or establish a learning environment based on these principles. The most frequently used instruments in these studies were qualitative ones such as interviews, open-ended questionnaires, self-reports, diaries or course reviews. The data collected through these instruments have been thematically analyzed by the use of key-terms in learner autonomy in an attempt to extract the most recurring themes in of independent learning. Borrowing from these studies, it can be concluded that the role of students, instructors and educational systems in promoting learner autonomy is unavoidable. Higher levels of learning such as team learning or learning skills such as grammar and reading could be fostered by fostering learner autonomy. In addition, by putting the principles of learner autonomy into practice, a learning environment in which learners take more responsibility for learning could be achieved. The studies also point out that creating a learning environment with the goal of increasing autonomy necessitates the students and the instructors' awareness of the principles of autonomous learning and their reluctance to implement them.

In view of these concerns, the present study intended to investigate the genuine facets of the principles of learner autonomy in EFL academic courses among a group of Iranian EFL undergraduates in an attempt to probe what actually happened in academic courses in fostering learner autonomy. The following research questions were developed based on the objectives of the study:

1. What is the students' conception of learning in the learning process?
2. How do the students conceive their role in the learning process?
3. How do the students conceive the instructors' role in the learning process?
4. To what extent do the academic EFL classes develop learner autonomy from students' view point?
5. Are there any differences in male and female undergraduate students regarding their attitude towards learner autonomy in academic EFL courses?

3.0 Method

The study favored a qualitative research design. Qualitative research paradigms are extremely apt for investigating the participants' beliefs and perceptions.

Participants

The participants were a group of Iranian undergraduates majoring in English Journalism, Document Translation and English Translation. They enrolled in several academic EFL courses as a requisite for the fulfillment of a BA degree. The participants were 30, 20 to 28-year-old junior and senior students (18 female and 12 male students). Purposive sampling was used to select the participants of the study.

Instruments

In order to collect the required data semi-structured interviews were conducted. The credibility (truth value) of the obtained results was obtained by consensus, using a peer review and by referential, interpretive adequacy, using low-inference descriptors, verbatim or direct quotations from the participants, and thick, rich description. The dependability (consistency) of the analyzed data was obtained by coding agreement, using inter-and intra-coder agreement estimates. The intra-coder reliability and the inter-coder agreement estimate were 0.84 and 0.81, respectively.

Data Collection Procedure

Semi-structures interviews were conducted until data saturation occurred. Each participant was interviewed by the researchers and their responses were recorded. The average time for the interviews was 30 to 45 minutes.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data collected through the interviews were analyzed according to the analysis of qualitative data. The main stages of data analysis were familiarizing, organizing, coding, reducing, interpreting and representing. It favored the principles of content-analysis of qualitative data in which the data were thematically analyzed. In the initial phase, the literature on learner autonomy was extensively reviewed and the underlying key points were extracted to develop a coding scheme. Next, the key points were transformed into abbreviations for the process of coding the data. Then, all the responses were meticulously read and coded according to the coding scheme. The codes were then extracted in order to classify them into definitional and meaningful categories. Likewise, in the familiarizing stage, the researcher read and reread the available transcripts of the data to capture thoughts as they occurred. In the coding and reducing stage which was the core of this qualitative analysis, the identification of categories and themes and their refinement were perused. Coding involved developing concepts from raw data. After initial coding and breaking the data into small pieces, searching for the categories began. The task was to reduce the large number of individual codes into a manageable set of categories. The initial coding led to the development of tentative categories. The developed categories were substantive etic categories. Substantive etic categories are primarily descriptive based on the researcher's interpretation. In the thematizing stage, once all data were sorted into major and minor categories, the researcher investigated the range of categories and determined whether some fit together into themes. The researcher examined all entries with the same code and then merged these categories into patterns by finding links and connections among categories and subsequently calculated them in percentages. In the interpreting and representing stage, which was an inductive process of generalizing based on the connections and common aspects among the categories and patterns, explanations were provided.

4.0 Results

The following table presents the important factors the participants mentioned with regard to their role in the learning process.

Table 1: The Participants' Conception of Their Role in the Learning Process

Features	Percentage
Self-responsibility	91
Self-motivation	93
Self-directedness; self-organization	85

Ninety-one percent of the participants believed that they were responsible for their learning and perceived themselves as playing a very important role in the learning process. They added that nobody learns for them so they should attempt to learn by themselves (Self-responsibility). Ninety-three percent of the participants asserted that they should be interested and have perseverance and motivation to progress and continue their plans. They indicated that lack of interest and motivation impedes their learning to a great extent (Self-motivation). Eighty-five percent also noted that in order to learn, they should organize different activities and strategies. They should determine the overall direction of their learning according to their aims and plans and in this process, sometimes they needed to manage different sources to achieve their goals (Self-directedness; self-organization). Table 2 presents the most important factors the students referred to as involved in their learning process.

Table 2: The Participants' Conception of Learning

Factors	Percentage
Increasing ones' knowledge	96
Developing competence	82
Applying knowledge	82
Memorizing, reproducing and studying as a means to an end	79
Critical thinking; seeing something in a different way	79
Understanding	75

Ninety-six percent of the participants stated that learning occurred when they gained new knowledge which they didn't know (Increasing ones' knowledge) and that they should get involved in the process. Eighty-two percent of the participants indicated that learning occurred when the new knowledge became part of their background knowledge (Developing competence) and that learning occurred when they could practice the knowledge in real situations. (Applying knowledge). Seventy-nine percent of the participants pointed out that learning occurred throughout using different strategies (Memorizing, reproducing and studying as a means to an end) and gaining the ability to critically analyze the new topic (Critical thinking; seeing something in a different way). Others (seventy-five percent) said when they could understand something, it meant that learning had happened (Understanding).

The following table shows the most prominent factors the students mentioned with regard to the instructors' role in the learning process.

Table 3: The Students' Conception of the Instructors' Role in the Learning Process

Instructors' role	Percentage
Motivator; supportive tutorial	95
Knowledge transmitter	83
Resource person; expert	83
Explicator	79
Facilitator	69
Helper; advisor; problem solving	65

Ninety-five percent of the participants believed that the instructors should create a positive atmosphere, to construct ease and conviction in the classroom, enthuse /stimulate students' interest, to motivate students, and to support and encourage learners (Motivator; supportive tutorial). Eighty-three percent of the participants stated they broadened the students' world knowledge (Knowledge transmitter) and presented and discussed various opinions (Expert; resource person). Seventy-nine percent said that the instructors played an important role in the learning process as they explained what they were unable to understand alone (Explicator). Some (sixty-nine percent) of the participants wrote that the instructors should teach them how to learn and smooth the progress of learning (Facilitator). Some (sixty-five percent) expected that the instructors should help the students to solve their problems (Advisor, helper and problem-solving).

The following table presents the significant factors the students referred to about their EFL courses.

Table 4: *The Students' Views about EFL Courses*

Factors	Percentage
Needed to study actively	95
Participatory classroom learning	93
Helper; advisor course instructors	93
Knowledge transmitter course instructors	90
Needed to be active participants	80
Suitable content/Level	88
There was an atmosphere that encouraged further academic projects	83
Comprehensive & comprehensible materials	80
Obtained new knowledge	93
Authentic and topical Discussions	91
Appropriate syllabuses	78
(Lack) when learners are not rushed	85
(Lack) practicality	85
(Lack) studying without having to worry about grades or rank	89
(Lack) choosing the materials, the objectives, what the students should learn in the next sessions of the course, the activities and the time spent on class activities	99
(Lack) stimulating atmosphere	90
(Lack) suitable content (assignments)	89
(Lack) when learners' opinions are voiced	90
(Lack) group work	75

Ninety-five percent of the participants asserted that they studied vigorously in order to learn (Needed to study actively). Ninety-three percent asserted that it was easy to ask questions in the classrooms or after the class. They stated that the students gave their opinions about the topic and discussed it and the instructors helped them to reach a conclusion. There was an opportunity for reciprocal communication and there were discussions of other possibilities (Participatory classroom learning). In case of problems and need for further elaboration, guidance or assistance, the instructors attempted to help them to a great extent. The instructors attempted to arouse the learners' attention and help them to solve the problem based on their experience and knowledge. (Advisor, helper, and problem-solving course instructors).

Ninety-percent of the participants indicated that sometimes the learners' competence was not fully developed and the instructors tried to broaden the topic and discuss it. In case of

a need for topic elaboration, the instructors allocated time and effort to expand the students' world knowledge. The participants further stated that in case the instructors' explanations raised their interest, they were encouraged to go on with the topic by the new knowledge gained and looked for the new trends in the subject (Knowledge transmitter course instructors).

In classrooms, the impression triggered many students (eighty-percent) to participate in class discussions and express their opinions about the topic (Needed to be active participants). Eighty-eight percent of the participants stated that the materials they received were related to their major and the teaching procedures in the classrooms were appropriate to their ability level despite the difference in their styles (Suitable content/level).

Eighty-three percent of the participants mentioned that in case they were interested and active and the instructors and the learners had enough time, they could participate in further cooperative and collaborative academic projects and always received guidance where needed. In addition, eighty-percent of the participants noted that the majority of the materials were understandable as the texts were uncomplicated to follow and grasp; and at the same time, were inclusive in the subject-related (Comprehensive and comprehensible materials).

With regard to the contents of the materials, Ninety-three percent of the participants wrote that they learnt a lot of new materials. However, most of the students mentioned that in a few courses they didn't gain new knowledge and they didn't learn anything (Obtained new knowledge). Seventy-eight percent of the participants believed that the syllabuses they received for most of the courses were composed of all-inclusive materials; some of which were not covered. They believed that most of the syllabuses were appropriate and even supplementary (Appropriate syllabus).

Eighty-five percent of the participants wrote that in many courses the bulk of material was more than the time allocated to them and that adequate time was not devoted to doing the assignments. The findings indicate that the students complained about the bulk of assignments for different courses. The learners stated they didn't have enough time to complete them. So, most of the assignments did not meet the instructors' expectations because they were rushed. The participants added that when they did their assignments hastily, they were unable to submit a high-quality work because they didn't have the time and opportunity to concentrate on a specific issue. They asserted that lack of time in doing the assignments impedes successful learning to a great extent and on the contrary, adequate time leads to a higher level of learning. They attributed this to the fact that learning occurs in the process of doing the assignments (learning is doing not by rote learning and memorizing the lectured materials). The learners pointed out that doing the assignments forces them to think critically. It obliges them to search and seek to solve their problems. It helps to expand the depth of knowledge. The students also said that doing the assignments familiarized them with the preliminaries of research and prepared them to become prospective researchers. It further leads to the better learning of theoretical and applied topics (Lack of when learners are not rushed).

Eighty-five percent of the participants indicated that in most of their classes, they didn't gain practical knowledge because what they generally received was theoretical knowledge (Lack of practicality). Eighty-nine percent of the participants noted that in studying the lessons, their main concern was not learning but gaining grades or ranks (Lack of studying without having to worry about grades or rank).

Ninety-nine percent of the participants indicated that they didn't choose the materials for the courses. They said that they were usually involved in decision making about the web-

based material and the selection of topics for the assignments and presentations. The learners pointed out that they were not involved in decision making with respect to the course objectives, what they were supposed to learn in the subsequent sessions, the activities to be covered and the time allocated to them. With respect to the allocated time to each activity, the participants stated that they were only allowed to decide it for group work in a few classes (Lack of choosing the materials, the objectives, what the students should learn in the next sessions of the course, the activities and the time spent on class activities).

Ninety-percent of the participants believed that because of insufficient time for doing the assignments, repetitious and impractical materials, unvoiced opinions, uncomfortable classrooms, and lack of group/peer activities, the classroom atmosphere was not stimulating and even sometimes had an impeding influence on their motivation and learning. Some of the students confessed that the competition over good grades motivated them to study for obtaining a high mark rather than learning. They illuminated the environmental influence is very significant on learning (Lack of when the atmosphere is stimulating).

Eighty-nine percent of the participants explained that some of the assignments were beyond their ability levels (particularly in situations where they were not familiar with the procedures of doing the assignments; particularly, in the first year of the BA program) (Lack of suitable content-assignments). Ninety-percent of the participants noted that in most of their classes, their opinions about the materials, the objectives sought and the kind of activities were not considered (voiced) (lack of when learners' opinions are voiced).

Seventy-five percent of the participants wrote that they had experienced group work in a few courses and emphasized that group class discussions and group assignments had a good impact on their learning. Meanwhile, the students wished that they had done more group work; expressing how they could have benefited from sharing their knowledge and concentrating on specific issues through group discussing and/or peer assignments.

Discussion

With regard to the students' role in the learning process, accepting responsibility over learning was the most dominant factor that nearly all the students referred to. This belief is one of the fundamental principles of autonomous learning that [Chan \(2001\)](#), [Little \(2022\)](#), [Mailloux \(2006\)](#) and [Yumuk \(2002\)](#) found in their studies.

To be self-motivated learners was another feature that nearly all the students noted. They declared that in situations where they were not interested and motivated, they experienced drawbacks in the outcomes such as learning and evaluation. This idea is supported by [Raghunath et al.'s \(2018\)](#) who verified that autonomous learners should be self-motivated.

A majority of the students indicated that they should gain some knowledge about the learning process and sort the activities and resources to match their style for learning. Therefore, the element of self-control over one's activities is of overriding importance. This view is in line with [little et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Ryan and Deci \(2020\)](#) who evidenced learner autonomy as the process of self-determination and self-regulation. Moreover, most of the students emphasized that they should manage different strategies. Likewise, [Kashefian-Naeeni and Sheikhnezami Naeini \(2020\)](#) pointed up the correct use of strategies by clarifying that "one of the criteria which demonstrates the degree of successfulness of individuals is the extent to which they can make use of different strategies" (p. 1607). When asked to elaborate on the conception of learning, nearly all the students responded that learning is a process in which

new knowledge is gained. A majority of the students noted that learning happens when the new knowledge becomes part of the learners' competence and they can regard it as their background knowledge. These are compatible with [Livi et al.'s \(2015\)](#) findings that increasing one's knowledge and developing competence is one of the indications of autonomous learning.

Some of the students believed that learning occurred when they could apply the learnt knowledge to authentic situations and when they were empowered in the subject-related. This is consistent with [Wang and Littlewood \(2021\)](#) who observed in their study applying knowledge and empowering as the indications of learner autonomy. Memorizing, reproducing and studying were among the significant features that the students identified as a means to an end in which the learners used several strategies and techniques to achieve their goal. Moreover, some of the students stated that critical thinking and gaining the ability to see something from a different perspective were the indicators of learning. Similarly, [Park \(2002\)](#) and [Yumuk \(2002\)](#) practiced these abilities in fostering autonomous learning. Almost all of the students believed that the instructors should provide the opportunity to encourage, interest and motivate them. They stated that the instructors should be motivator supportive tutorials. Correspondingly, [Abd Rahman et al. \(2022\)](#) reported that promoting learner autonomy is influenced by the teachers' motivation and encouragement. [Benson \(2013\)](#), [Holden and Usuki \(1999\)](#) and [MacDaniel \(1994\)](#) also verified that instructors should inspire and pique students' interests. They proposed that the students should create a positive atmosphere and eliminate barriers and obstacles that interfere with the joy of learning. A majority of the students noted that the instructors' role in the learning process acknowledged transmitters, experts, resource persons and explicators. This perception is matched with those of [Benson \(2013\)](#) and [Holden and Usuki \(1999\)](#) who asserted that the instructors were able to broaden the students' world knowledge in the subject-related, they presented various opinions and resources, and explained what students were unable to understand alone. Also [Gamble et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Nortcliffe \(2005\)](#) demonstrated that in autonomous learning, the instructors were as experts and this role was more open-ended and demanding. Some students and some instructors defined the instructors' role in the learning process as a person who provided guidance on how to study. Some of the students asserted that the instructors solved their problems and gave suggestions about research works and materials. These conceptions are similar to [Nortcliffe \(2005\)](#), [Motteram \(1999\)](#) and [Wenden \(1991\)](#) who asserted that the instructors served as facilitators and helpers. The findings of the present study indicated that the students believed that they were supposed to study actively to learn. This is consistent with what [Holden and Usuki \(1999\)](#) and [Zimmerman and Martinez-Pones \(1986\)](#) represented about the learners' role in autonomous learning (to manage and organize different habits of learning to catch the points and prepare themselves for the materials).

Nearly all the students said they had the opportunity to ask questions and participate in class discussions. This is exactly in line with what [Borg and Alshumaimeri \(2019\)](#) formed about the desirable classroom learning in learner autonomy (that it is participatory and students and instructors get along and there is an atmosphere that encourages communication). Many students stated in the classroom discussions, they liked to be active and participate in the negotiations. The majority of the students declared that the teaching strategies and most of the materials were related to their majors and ability level; and in case they were interested in a subject and active, they had the opportunity to have cooperative research projects and articles with their instructors and peers. These conditions were in line with [Zimmerman and Martinez-Pones \(1986\)](#) who found that in autonomous learning, the students were active in the classrooms and received suitable content which was pertinent to their ability level. A lot of students wrote that most of the materials they perceived were comprehensive and

comprehensible. This is in line with [Holden and Usuki \(1999\)](#) who implemented the ideal lesson in autonomous learning that was unproblematic to follow and inclusive in the subject-related.

Most of the students reported that they didn't have enough time to concentrate on several assignments for different courses because of the large amount of the materials to cover. This finding runs contrary to [Wanna and Paulos \(2021\)](#) who implied that in the autonomous learning, the students should have enough time to gain personal fulfillment not bound by time or context and they should not be rushed. Most of the students said that in some of their courses, they didn't gain new knowledge. This is not in line with [Raghunath et al. \(2018\)](#) who reported that the learners should gain new knowledge as one of the goals of autonomous learning. Most of the students also believed that many of the courses they took did not include current topics, while [Little et al. \(2017\)](#) declared that the ideal lesson in autonomous learning should be authentic and have topical issues to motivate the students to learn better. The majority of the students complained that in most of their lessons the materials covered were theoretical and a small proportion of the covered materials included applied ones. On the contrary, [Livi et al. \(2015\)](#) concluded that in autonomous learning, the desirable lesson should be practical and students should gain practical knowledge.

Most of the students declared that their main concern was to gain good grades rather than to learn. This is contrary to [Ryan and Deci \(2020\)](#) who mentioned the notion of self-evaluation and reached to this conclusion that the learners should not be forced to study hard for receiving high marks or ranks. They should acquire personal fulfillment. Most of the students noted that they didn't generally get involved in determining the objectives, the materials, what they should learn in their next sessions, the activities and the time spent on each activity. They noted that the only options they had were choosing the topic of their assignments, the topic of their presentations, and the internet materials on their own and in a few classes that they had group work; they could adjust the time on the activities. On the other hand, [Chan, Humphreys and Spratt \(2002\)](#) verified that the learners' role in autonomous learning was to choose the materials, the objectives, what they should learn in their next sessions and the activities and the time spent on the activities. The majority of the students complained about the conditions that had a negative effect on their learning; such as inadequate time for doing the assignments, some repetitious materials, impractical ones, when their opinions were not voiced, even uncomfortable classrooms and not conducting the class activities in group work. Furthermore, most of the students stated that some of the assignments were not compatible with their ability level because they were not familiar with the procedures of doing the assignments; especially in the first semesters. At the same time, the assignments were varied for each course and the students didn't have enough time to complete them well. In opposition, [Wang and Littlewood \(2021\)](#) clarified that in autonomous learning, by creating a positive impression, the learners should be stimulated to learn and the content provided for the learners should be compatible with their ability level. Most of the students in the present study said that in many classes in case they expressed their opinions about the materials, the objectives of the course, the type of activities or the amount of time allocated, they were not voiced; however, [Raghunath et al. \(2018\)](#) described in their study, a leaning environment in which the learners' opinions were voiced. As in autonomous learning, the students are regarded as active participants and their needs and interests are in priority. Some of the students declared that in a few lessons they had group work and they illuminated that conducting the class activities in group work was a beneficial experience as they could share the knowledge by the students and take advantage of the shared time to focus on specific topics. Similarly, [Lewis \(2004\)](#) and [Tsai \(2021\)](#) considered the group work activities as a requirement of learner autonomy.

6.0 Conclusion

The findings of the present study indicated that in fostering a learning environment leading to practice learner autonomy, the predispositions of the participants about learning were in line with the principles of the conception of learning in autonomous learning like gaining new knowledge, learning as a process, developing competence, applying knowledge, critical thinking, understanding, empowering and memorizing, reproducing and studying as a means to an end. The findings led to the conclusion that in EFL academic classes issues such as studying actively, participatory classroom learning, helper, advisor and knowledge transmitter instructors, an atmosphere that encouraged further academic projects, comprehensive and comprehensible materials, and new knowledge and appropriate syllabus led to the promotion of learner autonomy; however, the students were not satisfied with the time allocated to various assignments. Another point was that the amount of emphasis on practical issues was not satisfactory for the students. Next, the locus of priority for most of the students was first on grades and ranks rather than learning but in an environment conducting to learner autonomy; it should be the opposite; that is, the priority should be on learning rather than obtaining grades or rank.

According to the literature of learner autonomy, the students should express who they are and what they need in an autonomous learning. It entails that they should choose the materials, the objectives, what they should learn in the next sessions of the course, the activities and the time spent on class activities; however, most of the students didn't generally decide on these issues. The findings on learner autonomy principles show that the students are allowed to express their opinions about the materials, the objectives and their opinions should be voiced. However, most of the students in the present research asserted that when they expressed their opinions, it was not voiced and it had a negative effect on them. Therefore, they preferred not to express their opinions next time. In addition, a majority of the students were not content with the influence of the environment in stimulating them. Nonetheless, the principles of learner autonomy indicate that the classroom atmosphere should be inspiring for the learners to enhance the chances of self-motivation. Also, the assignments were not tailored to their ability level. On the other hand, in learner autonomy, the content for the learners should be appropriate to their ability level. Some of the students were willing to participate in more group activities as it benefited them. One of the principles of learner autonomy is that learners can learn in group work activities. Notably, there was not a considerable distinction among male and female students about what they indicated about their conception of learning, their role in the learning process and their views toward the different aspects of learner autonomy in BA courses. It entailed that there were no gender differences in perceiving and rehearsing the principles of autonomous learning.

It was decidedly endorsed that in EFL contexts, for the pavement of establishing a learning environment leading to learner autonomy, the theoretical principles of autonomous learning should be put into practice and emphasizing the concepts does not lead us to fruitful results. Hence, there should be more devotion to the principles of learner autonomy as well as learners' needs and interests to create a more inspiring environment to encourage the students to become self-motivated and active participants in the process of learning in EFL educational contexts.

Concerning the BA courses and their role in the promotion of learner autonomy, the students referred to some aspects that necessitates more negotiation with them in the process of selection of the materials, the objectives, what they should learn in their next sessions, the

activities, and the time spent on each activity to be offered in a semester to match the students' needs and interests. Of course, the instructors' ideas as an expert and resource persons are very valuable and besides, cooperation among students and instructors is very illuminative too. One solution can be to regard the pre-selected syllabuses as tentative ones and to administer a brief questionnaire at the start of the semester to be informed of the students' expectations from the course, their needs, interests, their objectives about the course and the desirable activities and to include them as much as possible in the eventual syllabus. Moreover, in this way the students' opinions are voiced and they feel that they are responsible in their learning processes.

Another reassessment in conducting a learning environment leading to greater autonomy can be including more group-work activities in the classrooms, for the assignments and papers to eliminate the lack of time for doing the assignments and facilitate one of the conditions of learner autonomy that is when learners are not rushed in learning and in addition, in this way, the students are involved in the learning process in the classroom along with stimulating them to be active participants and motivated and interested.

Next, there should be more emphasis on practical issues as the majority of the students sought more applied knowledge to put into practice in their jobs now and in the future. Then, there should be a stimulating atmosphere, worryless and responsive situation to motivate the students to be vigorous and to study for the sake of learning as a first priority and then studying for obtaining grades or rank.

Besides, the assignments designated for the learners should be well-matched with their ability level and they should be familiar with the processes of doing the assignments and then conducting them. This consideration facilitates one of the conditions of learner autonomy that is assigning suitable contents for the students. This can be done by the implementation of process-oriented assignments to monitor for continuous improvements rather than judging product-oriented assignments that results in this impression that the assignment is more than their ability level.

According to the findings of the present study some suggestions for further research are provided in this section. A parallel study can be conducted with BA students of other branches to correlate the results of the two studies. Moreover, the issues extracted in this study as leading factors and as hindering factors can be implemented in a case study to see if the outcomes are corresponding to the findings of this study. A similar study can be carried out with the students and the instructors of other universities to see whether there exists a similar relationship with those of this study. Likewise, a related study can be performed implementing a quantitative instrument to see if the results are in line with this study.

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