EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Learner Autonomy in Omani Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Autonomous learning is a study skill that may be challenging not only to learners with a dependent learning style but also to teachers used to teacher-oriented methodology. However, the considerable shift in the teaching and learning paradigm especially after the 2020 pandemic has made autonomous learning a must-gain skill. This research aimed to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy (LA), their actual practices, and the challenges of LA promotion at Omani secondary schools. It also investigated possible associations between teachers' beliefs about promoting LA and their academic level, gender, and years of experience. Within a convergent mixed-method parallel design, thirty Omani EFL school teachers were selected through convenience sampling to participate in the study. The instruments included teachers' perceptions questionnaire, classroom observation data, and interviews with teachers. Frequency counts, ordinal regression analysis, and grounded theory were used to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data. The results revealed that although EFL teachers at Omani secondary schools practice some strategies that promote learner autonomy, these practices are not intentionally and exclusively implemented for LA purposes. Moreover, the results showed some discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and their actual practices of LA due to some constraints and challenges such as the intensive English curriculum, teachers being overloaded with numerous school tasks besides teaching, learners' limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and teachers' inadequate professional background in the concept, principles, and practices of learner autonomy. No significant association was found between the teachers' general beliefs about LA and their particulars. It may be argued that the concept of autonomous learning and strategies to promote LA should be included as a core component of teacher training programs. By the same token, more self-study and self-assessment practices may be added to the English course materials in schools to help learners develop this essential skill for their higher education.

Keywords: EFL teachers, learner autonomy, Oman, secondary schools, teachers' perceptions

1. Introduction

The importance of learner autonomy in EFL classrooms and its various dimensions that make it difficult to define has been extensively researched (Alonazi, 2017; Dafei, 2007; Dang, 2011; Harmer, 2007; Kheira, 2015; Little, 1991; Waldispühl et al., 2015). The concept of learners taking charge of their learning was introduced in the 70s, but Holec's (1981) definition is the most popular one among researchers. In his view, learner autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's learning and be responsible for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012, p. 4). Holec's (1981) definition emphasizes the learner's responsibility and capacity as the main components of LA (Nguyen, 2014), which was generally accepted by other researchers (e.g., Al-Haysony, 2016; Benson, 2001; Crabbe, 1993; Hedge, 2001; Little, 1991, to name a few). These studies highlight the capacity to monitor one's learning by self-detachment in decision-making, critical reflection, and taking independent action. However, Hedge (2001) believed that this definition is quite limited and suggested that "learner autonomy is the ability of the learner to take responsibility for his or her learning and to plan, organize, and monitor the learning process independently of the teacher" (p. 410). Other studies such as Dam (1990), Littlewood (1999), and Sinclair (2000) also considered the willingness to act independently or in a group to be an instance of responsibility.

In their attempt to define learner autonomy, the above-mentioned studies highlighted the complex nature of autonomous learning as a process that involves learners' taking charge of their learning, making decisions, planning, organizing, and monitoring their learning independently of the teacher. With the rapid growth in technology and the consequent advancements in education, independent learning seems not only inevitable but also a must-gain skill from early school years. However, in some educational contexts in general and EFL contexts in particular, this essential trait may remain latent in learners due to the dominance of teacher-centered approaches. To further address the issue in the Omani educational context where school students are mostly teacher-dependent, this small-scale study was designed to assess venues for promoting autonomous learning in Omani schools with a focus on EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy (LA), the extent of their LA practice, and the challenges they might have faced in the classroom.

Learner autonomy in Oman still needs further investigation to see how far this skill is promoted in the school contexts, how EFL teachers perceive it, whether teachers put their beliefs into practice, and many other aspects of promoting learner autonomy. The present research reported below was designed in an attempt to address some of these issues. In addition to the

questionnaire and interviews, this study also included classroom observation protocols to closely study classroom instruction and practices. To conduct the study, the following research questions were addressed and two null hypotheses were developed.:

RQ1. How do Omani EFL teachers perceive learner autonomy regarding the promotion of language learning?

RQ2. What different practices do Omani EFL teachers implement to promote their students' autonomous learning?

RQ3. Is there any discrepancy between Omani English teachers' perceptions of learning autonomy and their actual practices?

RQ4. What challenges do EFL teachers encounter in promoting learner autonomy at secondary schools in Oman?

RQ5. Is there any association between the participants' academic qualifications, gender, years of experience, and their general belief about learner autonomy?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Learner Autonomy

Autonomous learning is not a unidimensional trait. As discussed earlier, it comprises skills such as planning, organizing, and monitoring one's learning, making decisions, and assuming responsibility for those decisions. In addition to responsibility and capacity, Sinclair (2000) showed other related aspects of learner autonomy including learner metacognition, motivation, their active role in learning, and their awareness of the learning process (Reinders, 2010, as cited in Al-Muqbali, 2017). This awareness may imply the learners' use of individual learning strategies in line with their independent learning that would be backed up by the teacher's support (Nguyen, 2014). Along the same line, Little (1991) emphasized the vital role of teachers and suggested that autonomy is not to learn without a teacher or not attend any classes. Rather, instead of full reliance upon teachers, more autonomous forms of language learning are practiced, and more social interaction is required. Autonomous learners perceive the classroom as a place where they collaboratively work to learn from each other, a process that gradually develops independent learning. As a case in point, Koad and Waluyo (2021) conducted a survey to investigate the interrelationship between Thai learners' beliefs about autonomy, language learning, and learning strategies. Focusing on individual differences that would make language learners more or less proficient, their study showed that learner autonomy was one of the factors that could also predict language proficiency.

Regarding the extent of the teacher's role in LA promotion, Littlewood (1999) suggested two types of autonomy, namely, proactive autonomy and reactive autonomy. In proactive autonomy, learners take responsibility for

practicing their learning strategies and have their guide for learning. Reactive autonomy, on the other hand, is considered a lower level towards developing proactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999) and requires the teacher's direction to help learners organize their learning resources autonomously to achieve their aims. Learners act as collaborators rather than passive recipients.

In fact, an autonomous classroom is a place where learners and teachers interact with each other. The teacher as a facilitator (Nasri et al., 2015) is responsible for helping learners become aware of various learning strategies and learning styles (Benson, 2001; Camilleri, 1999). This facilitator role is manifested in different activities in an EFL classroom such as encouraging the use of English as the only language for classroom communication, encouraging learners to self-assess their progress and identify their needs and goals, involving learners in decision making, encouraging them to use online resources inside and outside the classroom to do tasks and prepare different kinds of activities for their lessons, and incorporating collaborative tasks inside and outside the classroom as well as encouraging learners' inquiries and attention to their errors to develop effective autonomous classroom behaviors (Scharle & Szabo, 2000).

Of course, it is crucial to provide continuous feedback to students to promote the students' responsibility for their learning (Dornyei, 2001; Joshi, 2011). The feedback may also be provided by peer tutors which enhances autonomous learning. Eleftheriou's (2019) study with Middle Eastern students showed that both directive and non-directive approaches in peer tutoring help the tutees decide their preferred type of feedback to enhance learning of lower-order and higher-order concerns respectively.

There are different approaches to learner autonomy and its implementation which are recapitulated in the following section.

2.2. Approaches to Learner Autonomy

In traditional teaching, LA was thought to take place outside the classroom. However, modern education has strongly acknowledged that LA practices can effectively be implemented both inside and outside the classroom setting (Al-Zeebaree & Yavuz, 2016). Given this, Benson and Voller (1997) introduced four versions of autonomy: a) Technical: the act of learning a language outside the framework of an educational institution without the teacher's intervention; b) Psychological: capacity that allows learners to take more responsibility for their learning; c) Political: conditions that allow learners to control the process and content of learning as well as the institutional context within which learning takes place; d) Social: capacity to interact and collaborate with others.

Later in 2001, Benson expanded the 1997 view and suggested six approaches to support learner autonomy in line with the previous and later research (Al-Muqbali, 2017; Lee, 1998; Littlewood, 1999; Nguyen, 2014; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1998). The approaches were identified as Resource-based, Technology-based, Classroom-based, Curriculum-based, Teacher-based, and Learner-based. Although Benson's (2001) model was more classroom- and practice-based, Oxford (2003) considered the 1997 framework more apt but revised the social and political versions to socio-cultural (with a focus on mediation) and political-critical (with a focus on ideologies and power structure). This is the model that Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) used in their study to develop a questionnaire to measure teachers' beliefs about the promotion of learner autonomy in their educational context, which in turn was slightly modified, validated, and used for the current study.

The definition of the concept of learner autonomy and the relevant approaches and models that have been developed were briefly presented above. However, the main issue in promoting learner autonomy, which is also the concern of this research is how teachers perceive it in terms of their role and classroom practice on one hand and the factors that may affect the development and promotion of this construct in the classroom context on the other hand. These issues are discussed in the following section.

2.3. Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Learner Autonomy and Potential Challenges

Perception refers to beliefs that guide behaviors (Pajares, 1992 as cited in Nguyen, 2014). A belief, in turn, is known as a personal thought that one holds consciously or without consciousness and which influences one's behaviors (Borg, 2011). Of course, beliefs and perceptions are used sometimes interchangeably (Joshi, 2011), but they should also be distinguished from knowledge. Nguyen (2014) clarified that knowledge is usually viewed as the information one has about a concept whereas holding a belief refers to the thought that influences the way that an individual uses his/her knowledge. A good number of research studies have been conducted on the relationship between teachers' knowledge and beliefs/perceptions of LA, their methodology, and the extent of autonomous learning opportunities they provide for learners (Alonazi, 2017; Borg, 2011; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Camilleri, 1999; Gebel & Shrier, 2002; Kelchtermans, 2013; Mansour, 2009; Nguyen, 2014; Phipps & Borg, 2009).

Camilleri's (1999) study, for example, showed the positive attitudes of teachers toward implementing some strategies to promote learner autonomy. This involves learners evaluating their progress and making decisions about some learning strategies. Nevertheless, because of some political reasons,

those teachers disagreed with involving students in making classroom decisions such as selecting the textbook and the time and place of learning. Camilleri (2007) also investigated EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy in Malta to compare the results with the findings of his previous study in 1999. Interestingly, the teachers in the Malta study had positive views on involving students in deciding on their immediate goals, instructional materials, and assessment tools. The differences in the findings might be due to the different research contexts and the teachers' background in developing learner autonomy in students. A few other studies confirmed teachers' positive beliefs about the effective role of learner autonomy in improving language proficiency and the performance level of language learners (Joshi, 2011; Martinez, 2008; Shahsavari, 2014).

The studies discussed so far were all concerned with teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy, but it should also be investigated whether teachers especially those in favor of promoting LA implement it in their classrooms. In their studies, Al-Asmari (2013) and Duong (2014) focused on teachers' classroom activities and their attitudes toward learner autonomy. They found out that although the participants held positive views about the effect of learner autonomy on learning English, they faced difficulties in implementing it due to a variety of constraints. These constraints are very likely to turn into challenges that would affect the promotion and development of autonomous learning if they are not given due attention. Benson (2002, as cited in Alonazi, 2017) categorized them into internal challenges related to learners and contextual challenges concerned with teaching methodology, institutions, policy, and sociocultural context. Benson's categorization inspired several studies (Chan, 2003; Nakata, 2011; Smith, 2003; Vieira, 2003) which confirmed the impact of internal and contextual challenges on students' autonomous learning.

Nevertheless, despite all these constraints and the empirical research that confirmed the negative impact of the challenges, Benson (2002, as cited in Alonazi, 2017), like Voller (1997) and Littlewood (1999) believed that teachers are capable of developing learner autonomy in their students even to a limited extent. To see how far English language teachers were aware of the concept of learner autonomy and their attitudes toward promoting it, Al-Shaqsi (2009) conducted a study in the EFL context of Oman. Al-Shaqsi's participants were secondary school teachers who taught English as a Foreign Language in the Al Batinah region. The findings revealed that the teachers were familiar with the concept of learner autonomy and that they had a positive impression of their students' abilities in autonomous learning. However, the study could have been augmented using interviews to explore the connections between activities suggested by teachers for the promotion of learner

autonomy and its actual development. Three years later, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) studied Omani EFL teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and sought their attitude toward implementing it in the classroom. As far as the teachers' attitudes were concerned, the study showed participants' positive views similar to Al-Shaqsi's research. However, they found it infeasible to involve students in making decisions about learning goals and assessment tools. The study used questionnaires and interviews as data collection instruments. Al-Busaidi and Maamari (2014) specifically studied the understanding of Omani teachers about the definition of learner autonomy and the sources of their ideas on learner autonomy.

3. Method

3.1. Design

A convergent mixed-method parallel design was used to conduct this study. Mixed method design is used to collect, analyze, and mix both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies to gain a better understanding of the research problem compared to using one of the methods alone (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). There are three forms of mixed method design namely, convergent parallel design, exploratory sequential design, and explanatory sequential design. Explanatory and exploratory sequential are two-phase designs in which the analysis of the first phase data informs the collection and analysis of the second phase data.

In convergent parallel design, which was the basis of the present research, data may be collected from one or more sources followed by another source of data such as a survey followed by a focus-group interview. Data analysis may be in the form of side-by-side comparison, joint display, or data transformation merged analysis. As illustrated in Figure 1, either qualitative or quantitative data are first collected along with the other type in the convergent parallel design. According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011), the point of interface is where the two strands mix (i.e., either the qualitative/quantitative data collection is mixed, their analysis together, or the interpretation).

In this study, the quantitative data that comprised the teachers' questionnaire responses were collected at the same time as the qualitative data collected during classroom observations and interviews. The quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately using frequency counts and regression, and grounded theory respectively. The findings were later merged for final interpretation.

Figure 1

Convergent Parallel Design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011)
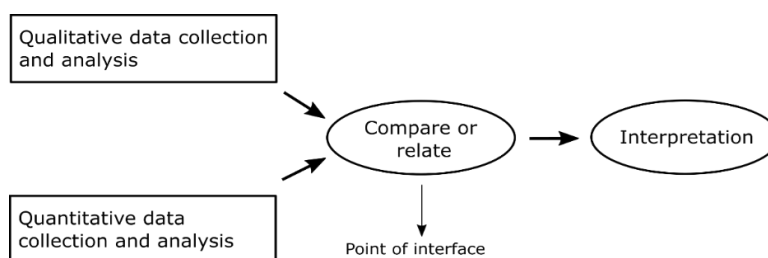
3.2. Participants

Due to the limited number of teachers who would agree to participate in the research and the lack of logistics to travel to other regions in the country, convenience sampling was used, but its shortcomings in terms of potential bias were considered in the interpretation of results. Thirty Omani male and female teachers (fifteen male and fifteen female) with BA and MA degrees and zero (recently employed) to twenty-five years of English teaching experience in secondary schools in the Dakheliya region were selected to participate in the study. From among the participants, fifteen teachers (seven male and eight female) volunteered to take part in the interview and classroom observations as well.

3.3. Instruments

Data collection tools included classroom observation protocols, a survey questionnaire (Appendix 1) adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), and semi-structured interview protocols.

3.2.1. Classroom observation

As mentioned earlier, fifteen teachers agreed to participate in the classroom observation and interview in addition to responding to the questionnaire. Classroom observations were conducted to collect in-depth data on the teachers' practices. Participant teachers were not informed about the focus of the classroom observation (i.e., teachers' practice of learner autonomy) so that more dependable reflection on their teaching performance would be elicited before seeking information on their beliefs through the questionnaire.

3.2.2. Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire taken from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) was reviewed and some changes were made to the wording and order of the items

as well as the Likert grids (for example, an "Unsure" box was added to the 4-scale grid in section 2 of the questionnaire). It was reviewed two more times by three university professors and then piloted with six Omani EFL teachers similar in characteristics to the research sample. Typos and vague items were fixed and the final draft with a reliability index of .80 was printed and copied for distribution.

3.3.3. Interview

As to the third instrument, the interview questions were developed based on the main categories of the survey questionnaire. To categorize and validate the interview data, a list of techniques and challenges related to (promoting) learner autonomy was made from the questionnaire items and was given to the participants to rate the frequency of their use of such techniques and check the challenges they might have faced in practicing learner autonomy at school. The answers to the given lists were also discussed during the interviews to make sure that the participants gave their genuine opinions and thoughtful responses. The interviews which took between 30 to 45 minutes were audio-recorded and the transcriptions were later double-checked with the teachers to assure the accuracy of the transcribed data.

3.4. Procedure

The following steps were taken to collect the data within the convergent parallel design. Qualitative data were first collected through classroom observations. The classroom practice and interaction of fifteen volunteer teachers who also responded to the questionnaire and participated in the interviews were carefully noted down in the researchers' observation notes and the checklists were marked accordingly.

Next, the quantitative data were collected from the entire sample of thirty participants through a survey questionnaire on teachers' perception of promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms. After collecting the survey data and during the classroom observations, the same fifteen teachers in classroom observation were invited for the interview.

3.5. Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from the observations, interview protocols, and the open-ended questions in the questionnaire were analyzed using the grounded theory method. Qualitative data analysis was integrated with the data collection in an evolving process. This included notetaking, open and axial coding, categorizing, memoing, and sorting. The summarized data including the emerged themes from the interview and observations were

reviewed and double-checked for further connections based on the quantitative data explained below.

The following subcategories were defined according to the quantitative questionnaire items to facilitate comparison with the qualitative data:

- Technical perspectives on learner autonomy (items 2, 6, 18, 26)
- Social perspectives on learner autonomy (items 3, 14, 16, 21, 25)
- Psychological perspective on learner autonomy (items 5, 10, 24, 27, 28)
- Political perspectives (items 4, 7, 13, 19)
- Beliefs on teacher role in developing learner autonomy (items 8, 20, 29)
- Beliefs on learner autonomy and teaching methodology (items 15, 23)
- Language proficiency and learner autonomy (items 22)
- Learner autonomy and effective language teaching (items 11, 30)
- Age of learners and learner autonomy (items 1, 9, 17)
- The relevance of learner autonomy to cultural context (item 12)

The questions formulated at the start of the Method section are treated here. The data collected to answer Questions 1 and 5 were analyzed using frequency counts and ordinal regression analysis. To answer Questions 2, 3, and 4, the data were analyzed through open coding and axial coding following the grounded theory method.

4. Results

The results of the quantitative and qualitative data analyses are presented in separate sections as follows.

4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

To answer the first question (i.e., How do Omani EFL teachers perceive learner autonomy regarding the promotion of language learning?), the ratings of the thirty items in Section 1 of the questionnaire were merged based on their shared theme(s) and are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that participants expressed +70% agreement with seven indicators that are likely to promote autonomous learning. The figure corresponding to the "Unsure" responses (43%) in the present research is alarming and may have different implications. It may imply that teachers know more about the characteristics that are directly related to the students themselves such as language proficiency, motivation, cooperative learning, and the like, but assessment is more of the classroom teacher's responsibility. Another reason could be the teachers' sense of authority when it comes to assessment. Their uncertainty may also lie in the importance of the decisions

based on assessment results, and they may believe that students do not have the expertise to decide about the assessment objectives, instruments, administration, and interpretation.

Table 1

Sample of teachers' responses to learner autonomy principles

Items	Agreement %
Effective role of cooperative learning	93.3
Learner-centeredness being ideal in promoting learner autonomy (LA)	70
Rejection of learner autonomy in the traditional teacher-centered classroom	66
Independent learning outside the classroom	90
Effect of students' motivation on LA promotion	83
Effect of LA on students' language proficiency	90
Students' freedom to decide about assessment methods	43 (Unsure)
Effect of learners' self-monitoring on their autonomous learning	90
Using classroom activities that promote autonomous learning	83

The lowest agreement (66%) is related to Item 15 in Section 1 of the questionnaire which reads "Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching." The low agreement on this item implies that respondents did not consider traditional teacher-centered methodology in conflict with autonomous learning. An interesting point about the last item in Table 1 above is that although 83% of teachers claimed to have provided some practices that could develop learner autonomy, in other items they expressed that they did not use those activities intentionally to develop autonomous learning in their students.

The high rates of agreement with the relationship between LA and language proficiency (90%), agreement with learner-centeredness (70%), and the student's independent learning outside the classroom (90%) are positive signs about the respondents' tendencies to practice and promote autonomous learning in their educational context. The teachers' general belief about the extent of their students' autonomous learning was summarized in Part 3 of the questionnaire and is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Teachers' General Belief about their Students' Autonomous Learning in EFL Classroom
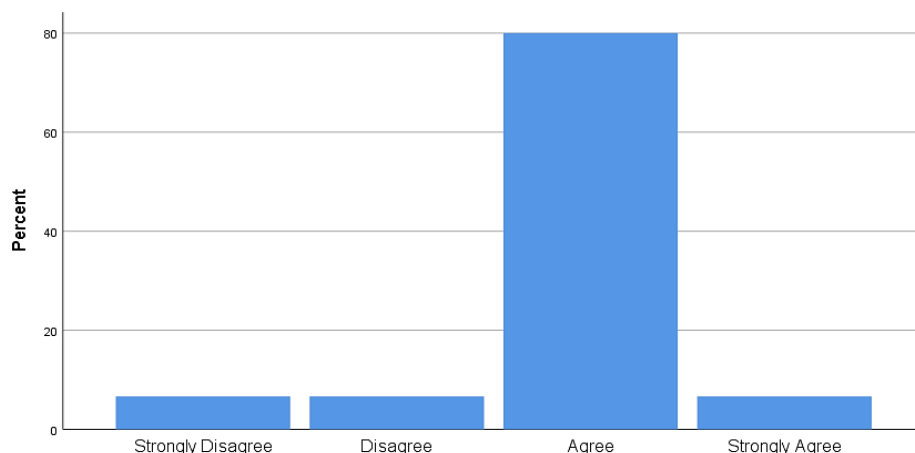
Figure 2 shows that 80% of the participant teachers observed autonomous learning in their students. They observed learners preparing for lessons and sample exam questions, providing materials related to the topic of a given lesson, searching for the meaning of new words, and designing their lexicon (word book). In addition, participants commented that high achievers would sometimes cooperate with low achievers to improve their language skills and help them feel motivated to learn English.

To answer research question 5 (i.e., Is there any association between the participants' academic qualifications, gender, years of experience, and their general belief about learner autonomy?), ordinal regression analysis was used to measure the degree of association between the variables specified in the question. Regression analysis in general is a set of statistical methods to determine the relationship between the dependent (DV) and independent variables (IV). In other words, Regression analysis shows if and to what extent the independent variables, also called predictor variables, can predict the dependent or outcome variable. Ordinal regression is used when the outcome variable is ordinal, and the predictors are either ordinal or continuous (ratio or interval).

In this question, the IVs include academic qualification (degrees), gender, and years of experience (service). The DV is the teachers' general belief about learner autonomy. Research question 5 was formulated to examine if the DV can be predicted from the IVs. Four levels were defined for the outcome variable (general belief (GB) about promoting LA), namely (1) Agree and practice, (2) Agree but not practice, (3) Unsure, (4) Disagree. Table 2 shows the proportion of cases in each category. Sixty percent of the participants agreed with promoting LA and practiced it in the classroom, 30% agreed but did not practice LA, 3.3% were unsure about the concept and 6.7% expressed their disagreement with LA promotion in their classroom.

Table 2

Case Processing Summary

		N	Marginal Percentage
GB (General Belief)	Agree & practiced	18	60%
	Agree but not practiced	9	30%
	Unsure	1	3.3%
	Disagree	2	6.7%
Years of experience as an English language teacher (Service)	0-4 years	6	20%
	5-9 years	8	26.7%
	10-14 years	13	43.3%
	20-24 years	2	6.7%
	Above 25 years	1	3.3%
Gender	Male	9	30%
	Female	19	63.3%
	3	1	3.3%
	999	1	3.3%
Qualification	Certificate	1	3.3%
	Bachelor's degree	24	80%
	Master's degree	5	16.7%
Valid		30	100%
Missing		0	
Total		30	

Regarding the years of experience, the highest proportion of teachers (43.3%) had 10-14 years of experience and the lowest proportion had 25+ years. Hence, the distribution of experience in the sample looks proportional. As to gender, the percentage of female participants is twice that of the male teachers, and it seems that 6.6% did not (or forgot to) specify their gender in the questionnaire. The last predictor variable (qualifications) shows that 80% of the participants held BA, 16.7% MA, and 3.3% had other teaching certificates.

The model fitting information in Table 3 shows if the model improves our ability to predict the outcome. In other words, it shows what the actual outcome is compared to the probability that the model predicts the outcome. Here the concern is whether there is any statistically significant improvement in the prediction if only the intercept (the mean value of the dependent variable when X or dependent variable = 0) is used to predict which of the four categories of the DV a participant will fall in. The model fitting shows a fairly significant improvement (.012) in the prediction regarding the explanatory (independent or predictor) variables that were included in this study.

Table 3

Model Fitting Information

Model	-2 Log Likelihood	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Intercept Only	45.251			
Final	24.089	21.162	9	0.012

Link function: Logit.

Table 4 shows the goodness of fit in the regression analysis measuring how well the observed data correspond to the expected data assumed by the model. The results show that the observed values do not correspond with the expected values in the model (.979 > .05). So, the null hypothesis for question 5 "there is no association between teachers' gender, years of experience, and their academic level with their general beliefs of LA" is retained.

Table 4

Goodness of Fit

	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Pearson	18.640	33	0.979
Deviance	16.021	33	0.994

Link function: Logit.

Pseudo R-Square is a version of R-Square used when the outcome variable is ordinal, not continuous (hence teachers' general belief about promoting and practicing LA). From among the commonly used Pseudo R-squareds, three of which are usually presented in the SPSS analysis, the Nagelkerke is reported, since in this study the aim is to minimize the squared difference between the prediction and the actual y value. That is, the mean of the y (DV) values would be the best guess. The Nagelkerke R-Square shows that 59.3% of the variance in the outcome is explained by the explanatory variables (IVs or predictors) which is a considerable proportion.

Table 5

Pseudo R-Square

Cox and Snell	0.506
Nagelkerke	0.593
McFadden	0.367

Link function: Logit.

Table 6 reports the Parameter Estimates. The table highlights the individual influence of each predictor variable on the outcome variable.

Table 6

Parameter Estimates

		Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold	GB = 1.00	-5.80	3.79	2.34	1	0.12	-13.23	1.63
	GB = 2.00	-2.43	3.45	0.49	1	0.48	-9.20	4.32
	GB = 3.00	-1.67	3.44	0.23	1	0.62	-8.43	5.08
Location	Service = 0	-21.57	5671.83	0.000	1	0.99	11138.16	11095.02
	Service = 1	-3.15	2.37	1.76	1	0.18	-7.80	1.49
	Service = 2	-2.47	2.23	1.22	1	0.26	-6.853	1.90
	Service = 4	1.08	2.40	0.20	1	0.65	-3.62	5.80
	Service = 5	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	Gender = 1	-1.09	2.42	0.20	1	0.65	-5.84	3.66
	Gender = 2	-3.03	2.46	1.52	1	0.21	-7.86	1.78
	Gender = 3	-21.53	0.000	.	1	.	-21.53	-21.53
	Gender = 999	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	Qualification=0	-21.41	0.000	.	1	.	-21.41	-21.41
	Qualification=2	-0.96	1.15	0.69	1	0.40	-3.23	1.30
	Qualification=3	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.

Link function: Logit.

a: This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant

In Table 6, the threshold refers to our shift between each level of the outcome variable to another (e.g., from Agree and Practice to Agree but not Practice). Conventionally, the last level (hence Disagree) is not shown in the threshold list and is taken as the reference. Based on the values (cf. the Sig. column) in Table 6, no statistically significant association is found between the predictors and the outcome variable. Therefore, participants' general beliefs about LA cannot be predicted from their qualifications, gender, and years of teaching experience. In sum, since no significant association between the predictors and the output (response) variable is found, the estimate values (cf. Estimates column) cannot predict the likelihood of participants falling in each of the output variable's categories.

4.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

Questions 2, 3, and 4 were analyzed using the grounded theory method. The interview and observation data and the written answers to the questionnaire items in Part 3 were subject to open (initial) and axial coding to find associations between the emerging themes (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Themes from the Open and Axial Coding of the Interview Data and Open-Ended Questions
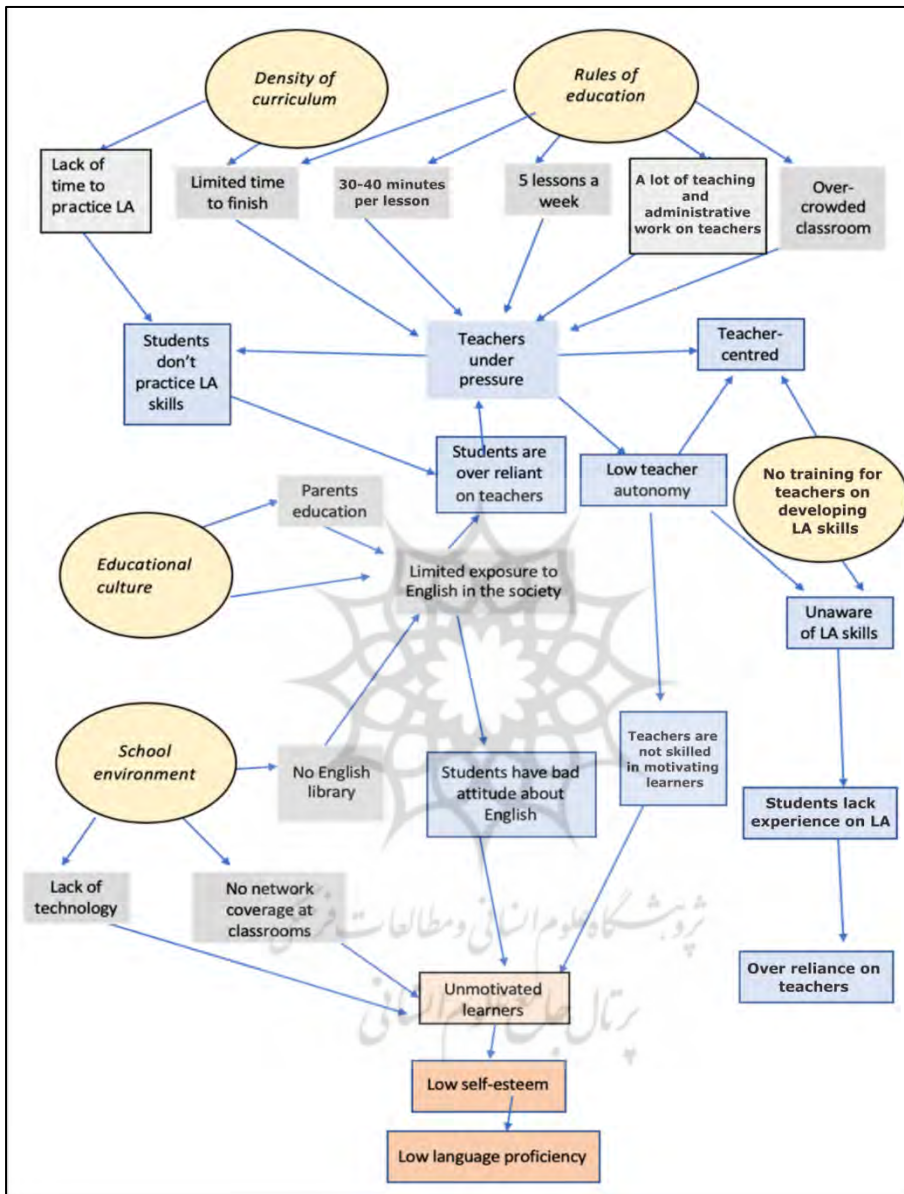
The findings for Question 2 (i.e., What different practices do Omani EFL teachers implement to promote their students' autonomous learning?) revealed different practices implemented by EFL teachers in the Omani context that promote autonomous learning skills. These practices involve group projects, role play, making personal dictionaries, preparing materials for the lessons, and reading projects. However, although the participant teachers

had a positive view of developing autonomy skills in the students, and even implemented relevant practices in the classroom, they had no intentional focus on learner autonomy promotion. They claimed that they were not thinking of promoting autonomous learning in their students while engaging them in those activities. This may be rooted in the teachers' personal experience during their school years when they had possibly been engaged in independent learning activities.

Regarding Question 3 (i.e., Is there any discrepancy between Omani English teachers' perceptions of learning autonomy and their actual practices?), the analysis of the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, the interview data, and the classroom observations showed some discrepancies between the teachers' beliefs and their practices of promoting learner autonomy. This discrepancy occurred in their beliefs and practices about the effectiveness of group work, the role of the teacher and learners in developing autonomy skills, learner-centered or teacher-centered teaching methods, technology and library implementation, and learners monitoring their learning and their motivation in learning. The difference between what teachers claimed and how they performed in the classroom could be attributed to some challenges that the EFL teachers encounter at secondary schools in Oman. These challenges were addressed in question 4 discussed below.

Based on the data analyzed to address Question 4 (i.e., What challenges do EFL teachers encounter in promoting learner autonomy at secondary schools in Oman?), the main challenges included cultural factors and limited exposure to English outside classrooms, lack of technology services and lack of English libraries at schools, the density of the curriculum, the impact of some rules imposed by the ministry of education at the secondary school level, and lack of a strong background in learner autonomy research and relevant training. The teachers believed that these challenges are likely to cause students' lack of autonomy and over-reliance on their teachers.

5. Discussion

The findings of the quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaire ratings and open-ended responses, interviews, and observations were compared for every participant. The former provided the frequency of agreements to the addressed ideas and extent of association between the IVs and the DV, while the latter collected from fifteen participants as a potential representative of the sample introduced deep insights into the participants' mindsets, concerns, ideals, and personal takes on the realities of LA promotion in the EFL classroom. The findings of this study are mostly in line with previous research while some contradictions are also observed. The teachers'

high rating of students' motivation (83%) as an effective factor in autonomous learning is supported by Littlewood's (1999) view and Duong's (2014) findings with Thai teachers. Duong (2014) also revealed that the participants did not believe in students' self-monitoring to promote learner autonomy while the findings of the current research revealed that teachers do value students' self-monitoring as an effective factor that contributes to their autonomous learning. This contradictory result might be due to the difference in educational cultures and contexts and/or the educational systems that shape teachers' belief in the scope of learner autonomy.

In support of students' involvement in deciding on assessment, however, Camilleri's (1999) study revealed the teachers' positive views. Concerning the teachers' use of autonomous learning practices and the activities that they used with no intention to promote learning autonomy related to Question 2, one is reminded of Raya and Sircu (2013) who emphasized the importance of teachers' first-hand, personal experience in autonomous learning to develop learner autonomy in their students. These practices involve group projects, role play, making personal dictionaries, preparing materials for the lessons, and reading projects. In support of these findings, similar promotion activities were reported by Al-Shaqsi (2009), Borg and Al-Busaidi (2011), and Nguyen (2014).

The effect of learner autonomy on language proficiency which was highly rated (90%) by the participants is in line with Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) and Al-Zeebaree and Yavuz's (2016) findings. These studies together with the present research show that teachers believe in the relationship between language proficiency and learner autonomy. The high percentage of teachers' agreement with learner-centeredness (70%) and the students' independent learning outside the classroom (90%) are supported by Benson's (2001) learner-centered approach to learner autonomy and Sinclair's (2000) idea about learners' taking responsibility for their learning. These students' classroom activities are evidence for Sinclair's (1999) view of learner autonomy starting to develop first in the classroom.

The results of the regression analysis showed that participants' general beliefs about LA cannot be predicted from their qualifications, gender, and years of teaching experience. This was identified in Nguyen's (2014) study which revealed no relationship between EFL teachers' beliefs in Vietnam with their gender and years of experience. However, Nasri et al.'s study in Iran (2015) showed a significant difference between genders in that the female teachers used some learner autonomy strategies that the male teachers did not use. Similar to the current study, their research did not show any significant

association between the participants' academic degree and teaching experience as predictor variables and their beliefs as the outcome variable.

The studies, which reported similar discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and practices, include Nguyen (2014), Duong (2014), Borg and Al-Busaidi (2011), and Al-Muqbali (2014). The difference between what teachers claimed and how they performed in the classroom could be attributed to some challenges that the EFL teachers encounter at secondary schools in Oman. The main challenges included cultural factors and limited exposure to English outside classrooms, lack of technology services and lack of English libraries at schools, the density of the curriculum, the impact of some rules imposed by the Ministry of Education at the secondary school level, and lack of a strong background in learner autonomy research and relevant training. The teachers believed that these challenges are likely to cause students' lack of autonomy and over-reliance on their teachers.

The results of the qualitative data are also well supported in the literature. The themes that emerged from the open and axial coding have been observed in the previous studies conducted on cultural factors and exposure to English by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Al-Muqbali (2017), extensive curriculum factor by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Benson (2011, as cited in Al-Muqbali, 2017), Ministry rules factor by Harmer (2007) who specifically referred to the limited class time, and Nakata (2011) in Japan who found out that institutional rules negatively affected teachers' practice of learner autonomy in the classroom. Teachers' insufficient or lack of background in learner autonomy as well as school environment were also raised as challenges by Nguyen (2014) and Al-Muqbali (2017).

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study explored Omani EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of learner autonomy at secondary schools. The analysis of the data from perceptions questionnaires, classroom observations, and interviews revealed that the participant teachers used some autonomous learning strategies in the classroom, but they did not consciously do that to promote learner autonomy. While they agreed with the positive effects of autonomous learning on students' performance, the teachers found the promotion of learner autonomy quite challenging due to factors such as limited class time, the heavy English curriculum, and lack of knowledge about this construct, to name a few. Interestingly, teachers' gender, years of experience, and academic degrees did not show any significant association with their perceptions of learner autonomy and practicing it in their classroom.

The findings of this study may raise Omani EFL school teachers' awareness of the fact that autonomous learning skills in students can provide them with outside-classroom activities and more exposure to English as well as developing the habit of independent learning and self-reliance. The same may as well be brought to the attention of the Ministry of Education (MOE) to put more focus on LA promotion in the teacher training programs. Developing autonomous learning in school students will have a long-term effect on their higher education studies since the university environment requires students' self-reliance in learning and research. Students who are not prepared for independent learning may face serious challenges in adapting to university life and acquiring the necessary study skills in the academic environment. Promoting learner autonomy, independent learning, and self-reliance in classrooms in general and EFL contexts in particular may pave the way for students' autonomous learning and readiness for tertiary education.

Regarding the challenges faced by teachers, the principles by Cotterall (1999) on the design of language courses can help teachers to better implement and promote learner autonomy as well as share responsibility with their students. This can be coupled with the development of an autonomy culture based on the European Language Portfolio.

This study suffers from some limitations. First, the number of schools that participated in the survey was not enough to generalize the results especially because all schools were in one governorate only (i.e., Al Dakheliya). Another limitation was the number of classroom observations for each teacher. Each participant was observed only once due to the tight schedule of data collection and the limited logistics. Some other limitations occurred in the study which were not in the control of the researchers. For instance, the term learner autonomy was generally a new term for most of the EFL teachers in the pilot group, so the researcher provided a short simple definition for LA at the beginning of the questionnaire to facilitate conducting the survey. Moreover, although some of the teachers appeared to have the correct understanding of the different perspectives of LA based on their beliefs, they faced difficulties in transferring their beliefs and understanding into practice, which led to some contradictions between their beliefs and teaching practices.

Developing the culture of autonomous learning in secondary school classrooms requires some procedures. First, teachers and learners should raise their awareness of the learning autonomy skills and relevant activities that ultimately bring up independent learners. This can be achieved by conducting training programs about developing LA skills for both teachers and learners at the secondary school level. In addition, the challenges of limited exposure to language, lack of technology services, the density of the English curriculum,

having limited English sessions per week, short time of one daily lesson, and teachers being overloaded with different teaching and non-teaching tasks at schools should be considered. Finally, syllabus designers are suggested to consider and incorporate extra-curricular activities to enhance LA skills. It is also recommended that orientation workshops be organized for parents so that they are in the loop and are kept updated on the independent learning tasks that students are required to do outside the classroom and school context.

To more comprehensively measure the ground impact of learner autonomy practices, research studies involving the learners are necessary. One such example involving Omani students is the study by Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2012) where the attitudes of 141 freshmen were examined about their teachers and curriculum. Moreover, motivation is linked with the promotion of learner autonomy goals as studied in the work of Abdullah et al. (2019) in the context of Oman.

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