Exploring the Concept of Autonomous Learner in Language Teaching

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Abstract

Autonomy is a philosophical concept which deeply means shaping the character of a person. In education, it is related to the teaching approaches and methods. Autonomous learner is able to be responsible for his own learning. The paper directs attention to the importance of building autonomous learner. It employs a quantitative and a qualitative method to collect data in the form of a questionnaire, observations and interviews. The autonomy conception of the instructors and students is investigated and evaluated. The results reveal that there is a need to improve the beliefs of college instructors and students.

Key words: Autonomy**,** Autonomous learner**,** awareness, pedagogical approaches, quantitative method, qualitative method

استكشاف مفهوم المتعلم المستقل في تدريس اللغة

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الملخص

الاستقلالية هـي مفهـوم فلسـفي يعنـي بعمـق تشـكيل شخصـية الشـخص. فـي التعلـيم ، يتعلـق الأمـر بأسـاليب وطـرق التـدريس. المـتعلم المسـتقل قـادر علـى أن يكـون مسؤولاً عن تعلمه. يوجه البحث الانتباه إلى أهمية بناء المـتعلم المسـتقل. تتبـع الدراسـة المـنهج الكمـي والنـوعي لجمـع البيانـات فـي شـكل اسـتبيان وملاحظـات ومقابلات. تم البحث في مفهوم الاستقلال الذاتي للاساتذة والطلاب وتقييمه. تظهـر النتـائج أن هنـاك حاجـة لتحسـين معتقدات الاساتذة والطلاب.

الكلمـات المفتاحيـة: الاستقلالية ، المـتعلم المسـتقل ، الـوعي ، المنـاهج التربويـة ، الطريقـة الكميـة ، الطريقـة النوعية

1. Introduction

Developing new perspectives in language teaching mean implementing innovation in order to achieve education improvement. This innovation can be perceived in new pedagogical approaches, new technological developments and alternative assessment methods (Waters 2009).

There are three main categories that act as barriers facing educational innovation: teacher-related category, system-related category and school-related category. Firstly, teacher-related category refers to the lack of understanding innovation by teachers; this leads to negative attitudes that hinder changing any practices. Secondly, system-related category is linked with the lack of providing support for teacher to implement innovation; this support can be reached by equipping teachers with sufficient

resources. Thirdly, school-related category refers to the need of building innovative culture; there is a lack of understanding this new culture by senior management (Vanden Branden 2009).

2. Research Objectives

The study explores importance of creating an autonomous learner. This concept lies basically on raising awareness that can create a new educational culture. The study aims at raising awareness on the importance of autonomy; the importance of creating autonomous learner. The study discusses and analyzes the teachers' and students' realization on autonomy.

3. Research Questions

1- What are the teachers' perceptions of autonomy?

a. Do teachers believe in the concept of autonomy?

2- What are the students' perceptions of autonomy?

a. Do students believe in the concept of autonomy?

3- What are the manifestations of autonomy in the teaching practices?

4. Definition of Autonomy

The concept of autonomy does not mean following a new methodology in the classroom; it refers to the attitudes followed by learners and teachers. This notion passed through several stages of development in politics, philosophy and language education (Ruiz-Madrid 2005; Navarro-Coy 2003). Roussaeu (1762: 6 as cited in Navarro-Coy 2003) related the concept of autonomy to a pedagogical

origin; he pointed out that "the learner is an active individual, who is at the center of the learning process".

There is a terminological problem concerning the definition of autonomy because there are several terms related to this notion such as 'self-instruction', 'self-direction', 'self-directed learning' and 'individualization' (Ruiz-Madrid 2005; Navarro-Coy 2003). Jones (1998 as cited in Ruiz-Madrid 2005) refers to "self-instruction" as a long-term learning project in which students can improve their learning without the existence of the teacher. This view means that learners can study by relying on themselves with or without being in touch with teachers.

According to Dickinson (1987:5), "self – instruction" concept means that learners can work without the teacher's direct control. Little (1991:4) defines autonomy as the ability to have freedom to practice critical reflection and decision making. For Holec (1981:3), autonomy is having the ability to be responsible for one's learning. Holec (ibid) believes that being responsible for learning is the first step in autonomy. This is done by being involved in all the steps of the learning process such as: planning, implementing and evaluating.

5. Understanding Autonomous Learner

Chwo (2011) believes that autonomous learners have motivation that lead them to monitor their learning process. This can enable them to have sustainable education. Holec (1981) states that the basic skills of autonomous learners are being able to choose the instructional

materials, understanding the learning objectives to order them according to their priorities, and having the ability to evaluate the progress and the achievements. O'Donnell et al. (2013) pointed out that autonomous learners have positive attitudes in comprehending success and failure; they control the process of their learning and success. They have the ability to establish suitable learning settings. Having the power of discussing, monitoring and assessing their attempts in learning is what distinguish autonomous learners from others. Because they understand their learning needs, they can put their learning targets. In facing any problem in their learning, they are capable to solve it. Autonomous learners are considered life-long learners because they continue their learning journey even after their formal education settings.

Porto (2007) stated that autonomous learners own awareness in different aspects; language awareness, self – awareness, learning goals awareness and learning options awareness. Chan (2001) explains the curiosity that autonomous learners have in their learning; they defer any kind of pleasure to reach their learning targets. Furthermore, they concentrate on the advantages of learning for their future. Holec (1981) explains that learners must change their concept from being "the products of the society they live in" to "the producers of the society they live in". Accordingly, autonomous learners are considered democratic citizens as they have the ability to think critically. Karaballa et al. (2010) point out that autonomous learners have the ability to choose their learning strategies and apply it in the needed learning contexts. They have

the ability of shifting their learning strategies to other learning experiences.

6. Understanding teacher Autonomy

Benson & Huany (2008) points out that autonomous teacher is the one who is able to work against the educational systems and try to establish space for students to have control over their own learning. Thavenius (1999: 4291, as cited in Benson 2011) defined teacher autonomy as the one "who reflects on her/his teacher role and who can change it, who can help her/his learners become autonomous, and who is independent enough to let learners become independent". Reinders and Balcikanli (2011) referred to teacher autonomy as being able to recognize the students' learning needs and provides assistance to develop their autonomy.

Aoki and Smith (1999:2) define teacher autonomy as "the capacity, freedom, and or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching". According to Thavenius (1999, as cited in Benson 2011) the autonomous teacher is the teacher who has independent character; thus, he is able to make his students independent. Having a high level of awareness is the main characteristic of an autonomous teacher; this means that this teacher is able to transform his task in order to make his students autonomous (ibid).

Riley (1996) stresses that the role, behavior and objectives of the autonomous teacher are totally different from the traditional teacher. This means that the autonomous teacher is a counselor, knower, facilitator, coordinator and advisor. According to Camilleri (1999),

autonomous teachers will notice all important steps that are needed to create autonomous learner. During this process, both the teacher and the learner must be capable of taking risky decisions and its consequences to create autonomous context (ibid). Ellis and Sinclair (1989) pointed out that one of the crucial points to create autonomous learner is the procedure that is followed by the teacher with his students; s/he must discuss the content and the methodology of their course. This step will motivate the learners to present their ideas.

7. Methodology

In this study, the researcher collects quantitative and qualitative data. This approach of using quantitative and qualitative gives different types of information, and provides results that must be same (Cresswell &Plano Clark, 2017; Cresswell, 2013). To answer the research questions, quantitative data will be collected through a questionnaire that was designed for teachers. Qualitative data will be gathered by using a classroom observation which is used to observe the learners' autonomy in their real context.

The methodology in this research is used to see how teachers and learners realize the concept of autonomy, how do they apply it in real settings. To validate the findings, the study was conducted in two different faculties: faculty of Arts and faculty of education – University of Basra. Both faculties include departments of English. The number of the EFL learners who participated in the study were 50; the number of the teachers 25.

7.1 The questionnaire

Using questionnaire for gathering data is considered a practical method; it offers a technique for collecting immense amounts of data by using open-ended questions or multiple choices. Every angle of the research topic can be tackled by using questionnaires because there are no time constraints as the participants can answer any time. In addition, the researcher can ask all the questions that help in covering the topic.

Concerning the questionnaire of the teachers, it includes several sections, starting from their experience in teaching, their awareness on autonomy, their attitude towards this concept and their responsibility in raising perception on autonomy.

7.2 Observations

The observations lasted for nearly three months because the concept of autonomy needs sufficient time to be observed in actual settings. The researcher observed the teachers' strategies in teaching and the students' engagement in classrooms. The observed lectures were in different courses in the English departments.

7.3 Data Analysis

The teachers' beliefs about autonomy are divided into five sections:

1. The teachers' conceptions about autonomy

Several questions were raised concerning the teachers' beliefs about the students' ability to learn without the presence of the teacher. Figure one shows

that teachers totally disagree that students can succeed in learning without teachers.
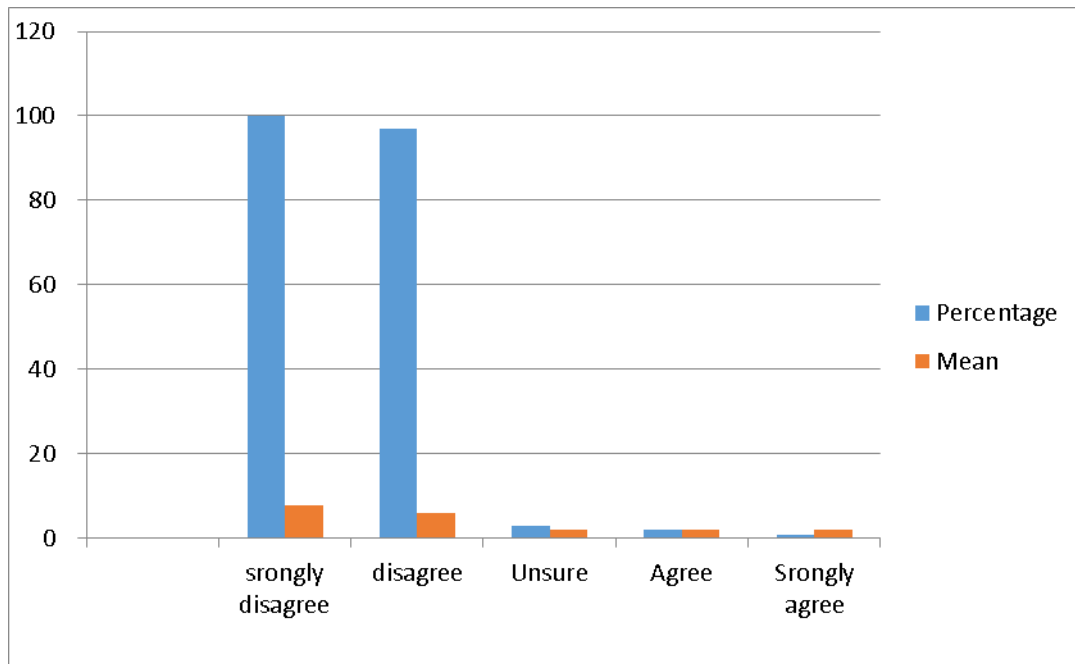

Fig. 1: The Percentage level for the teachers' conceptions about autonomy

2. The teachers' conceptions on self-developing autonomy by learners

Figure two shows that teachers strongly disagree that learners can develop autonomy by giving chance to learn from each other.
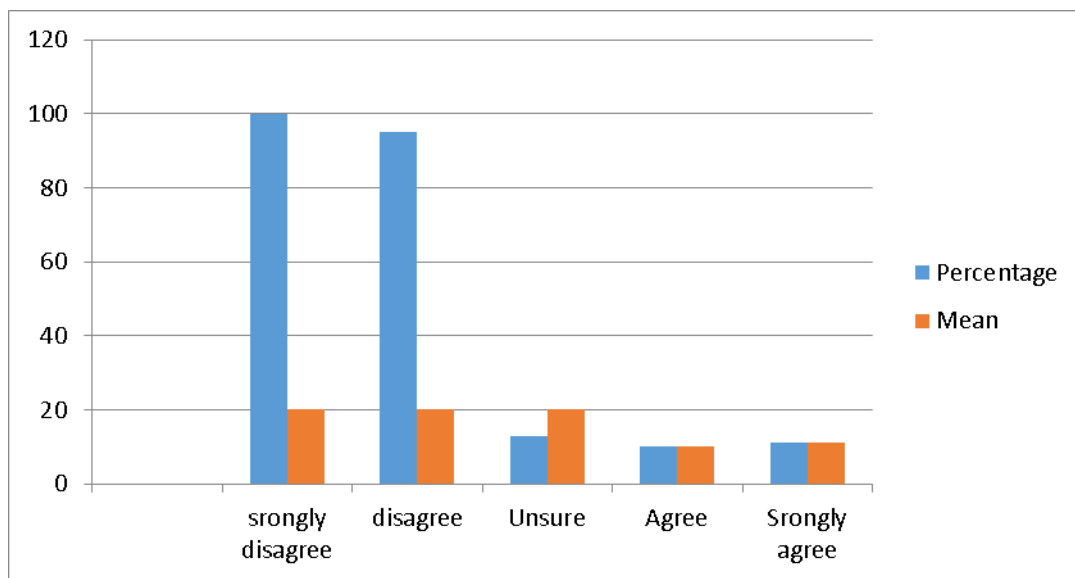

Fig. 2: The Percentage level for the teachers' conceptions on self-developing autonomy by learners

3. The teachers' conceptions on independent tasks

Figure three shows that teachers strongly agree that students have the ability to finish different tasks and activities indecently.
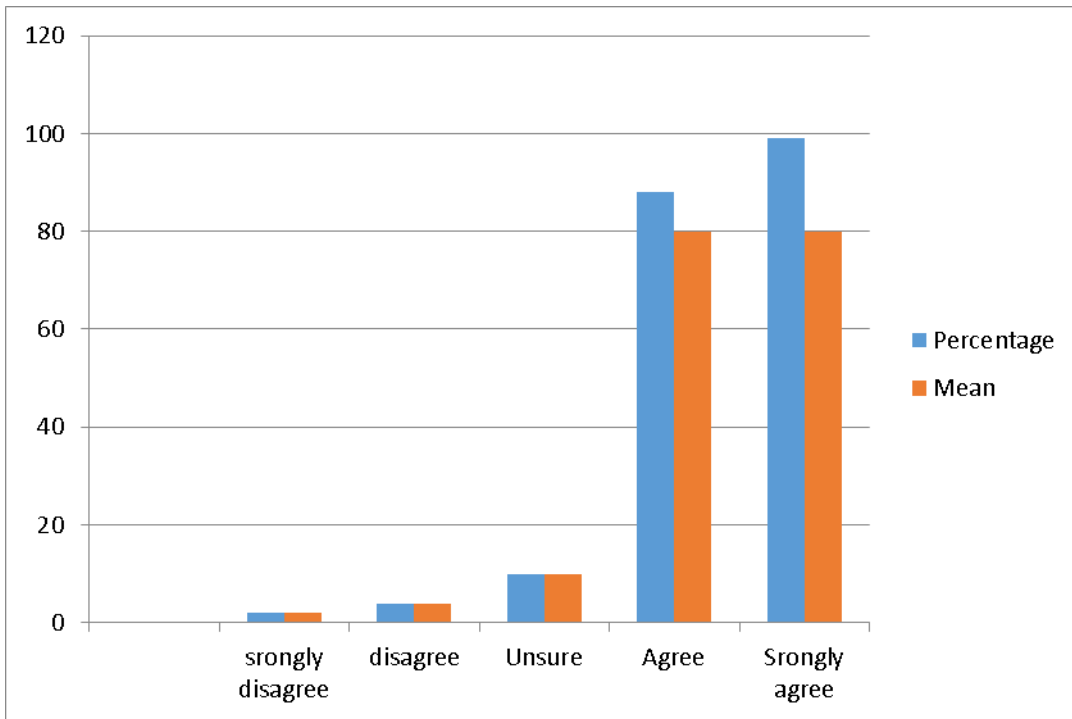

Fig. 3: The Percentage level for the teachers' conceptions on independent tasks

4. The teachers' conceptions on choosing the studied material by students

Figure four shows that teachers strongly disagree that students can be given the chance to make decisions about the material that they study. Teachers believe that choosing the materials is mainly the role of the teacher.
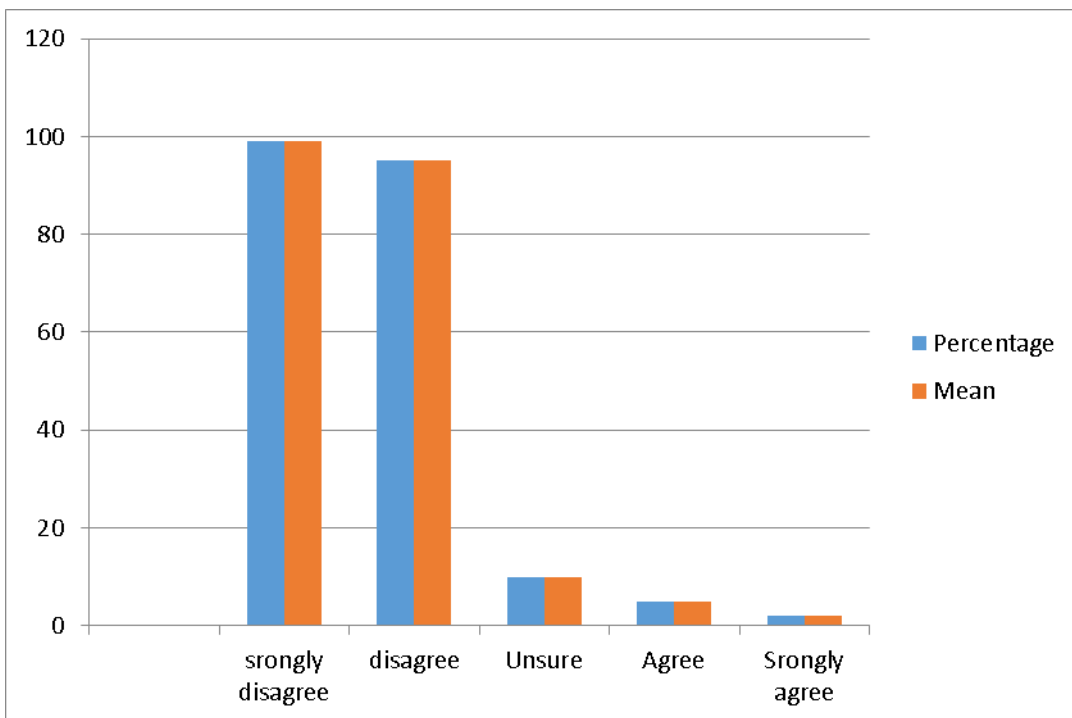
Fig. 4: The Percentage level for the teachers' conceptions on choosing the studied material

5. The teachers' conceptions on their role on promoting learner autonomy

Figure five shows that teachers strongly believe that learners can be autonomous only with the aid of the teacher.
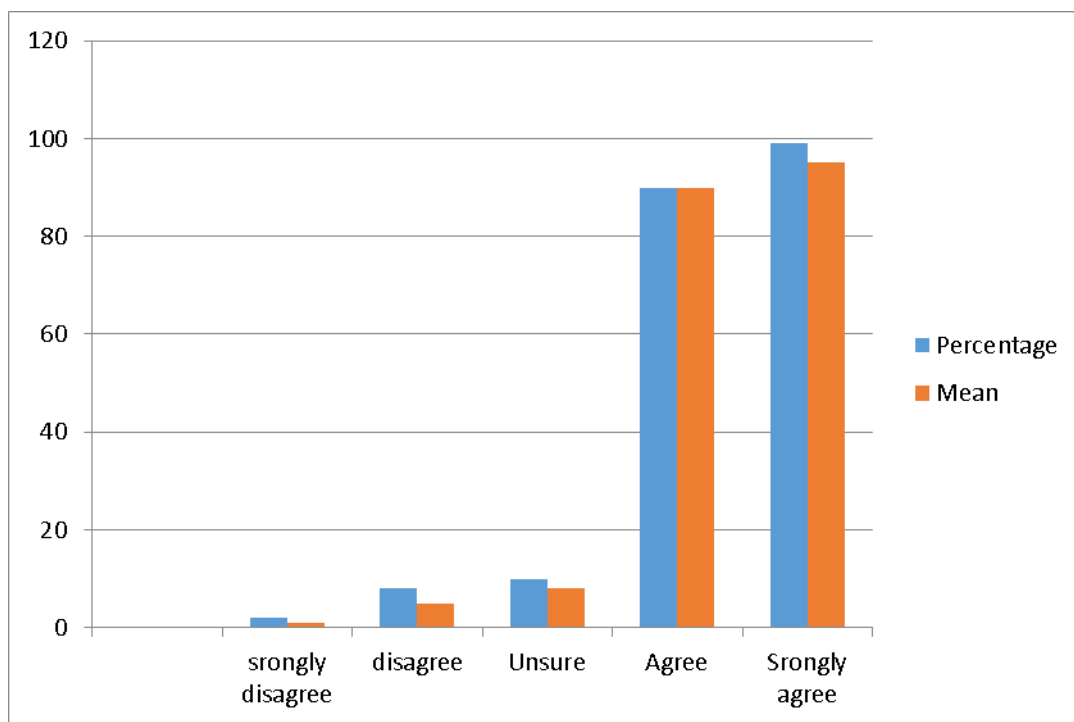

Fig. 5: The Percentage level for the teachers' the conceptions on promoting Learner autonomy

8. Results and Discussions

The teachers' questionnaire showed that there is mainly a lack of awareness on autonomy. Different interpretations were given by teachers on their understanding of this concept. They understand it as giving power in classrooms to students or giving the students total freedom in choosing the material in studying. The teachers' realization lack positive, reciprocal relationship between the student and the teacher. They believe that students lack the ability to be responsible for their learning. The teachers still insist on using traditional learning and teaching.

The students' observations reveal their understanding of autonomy; they interpret this concept as learning without the need of the teacher. They showed negative attitude towards being autonomous learner and preferred to be

under the guidance of the teacher. They feel that they cannot be responsible for their learning; their success in learning must under the supervision of teachers.

The observations, in which the researcher was the observer, aimed at understanding the teachers' and the learners' actual practices of autonomy in real settings. The observations showed that in all lectures the main role in teaching is played by the teachers. There is a lack of sharing responsibility between teachers and learners. The teacher is the dominant character. The role of the students was totally negative as they are listeners relying mainly on the information given by their teacher. All roles are played by teachers starting from choosing the lessons objectives, preparing the lectures, and arranging tasks and arrangements. Even the mistakes committed by students are corrected by the teacher. The observations show that the teachers handled all these roles to be the only source of information which, as they believe, enable them to handle power.

9. Conclusion

Fostering the concept of autonomy in language teaching needs several steps. Firstly, there is a need for raising the awareness of the teachers and the learners on the importance of autonomy. Secondly, designing special training programs for teachers to train them how to apply new strategies in teaching. Thirdly, giving sufficient understanding on the steps of creating autonomous learner; this will reduce the stress of both the teacher and the learner. As the teacher will not lose his\her power in teaching, and learners will have a voice in their learning journey. This will create significant engagement. In fact,

this will establish a new perspective and orientation in teaching and learning.

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