The role of teachers in developing autonomy among university EFL students in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq- Students' Attitudes

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Abstract

This study, which used a mixed-method approach, is an extract from a PhD thesis on the role of teachers in the effort to promote greater learner autonomy among university level EFL students, especially in terms of the Kurdish context in which the research was set. The research used the English Language Departments of the University of Salahaddin — situated in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's capital city Erbil — the University of Sulaimani in Slemani, and the University of Duhok in Duhok as the study site. These were selected, as the subject of learner autonomy has not been regularly included as one of their learning objectives. The sample population was made up of 211 students. After a quantitative and qualitative analysis was conducted, the collected data showed there was a positive attitude toward the role of teachers in developing learner autonomy in principle but that this did not translate into its practical application by the students even though they displayed a strong desire to see themselves become autonomous learners.

Key words: learner autonomy, role of teachers, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, EFL students, and attitude.

1. Introduction

In the West, developing a learner's personal autonomy is central to their education system (Benson, 2011) and, indeed, the evidence is that this makes a significant contribution to a student's learning outcomes. However, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq this ethos is new for many of its learning institutions and teaching professionals. MHE (2010) recognises that even though many of those who have watched the efforts by the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to make progress with regard to learner autonomy

have praised the commitment that has been shown, it is firmly of the opinion that there remains a significant amount of work to do in order to make the Kurdish educational system comparable in terms of its teaching and attainment standards to the equivalent education providers in the West. That said; currently, the region is in the middle of undertaking a substantial change in its education policies by attempting to move its focus from the more traditional styles of teaching that have been espoused for generations to the modern, Westernised educational ideals. For Lu (2014), however, this transition period is an important process in the drive to develop and support learner autonomy/collaborative skills and that in order to do so, it is necessary to understand the teaching and learning practices that are in use currently.

Obviously, there is no doubt that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's higher education system faces many serious problems, which in turn leads to questions about the competency of its administrators, teachers, and the appropriateness of the methods it chooses to instruct its students with. Indeed, it is apparent that there is no concerted policy in place that helps to develop students' abilities, even in terms of just being prepared for their lessons. Researchers who have investigated this largely blame the inflexible nature of the teaching system. Hassan and Jamaludin (2010, p.3), for instance state that it is standard throughout the Middle East for teachers to be entirely responsible for how effectively their class learns, which also means they are the sole decision-makers when it comes to the planning and preparation of their students' activities. Marzouk agrees, again noting that for the majority of the Middle East, education systems employ an instruction method that is based on memorisation and formal lectures, and that "Students are expected to memorise their textbooks word for word" (Marzouk, 2012). Such an approach to teaching means there is little or no opportunity for the students to express themselves or explore other ways of learning. Therefore, in Middle Eastern classrooms, discussions between class members are rarely encouraged and almost never take place (Marzouk, 2012).

It is no wonder, then, that a large proportion of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's language learners struggle to attain a good standard of English and that they are often disillusioned with their education experience. For Jastad (2008) the problem lies with the fact that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's educational set-up reinforces the idea that teachers are in charge and that students should just sit and listen to what they have to say. Meanwhile, Alsayid (2015) also found that Region's education system reinforced the hackneyed idea that those students who learned, in other words memorised, the most facts were obviously the best learners even though many of them did not question the material they were given to memorise. Indeed, it seems that Wahab's (2017) opinion is right; the curriculum has been designed in such a way that everyone who is educated by it thinks and behaves in the same way. In other words, it is specifically biased against individual/independent/autonomous action.

2. What does learner autonomy mean?

As a term in its own right, 'learner autonomy' was first used in 1980 by Henri Holec, the man many consider the 'father' of the learner autonomy style to teaching language. Since its first introduction, however, numerous explanations have been given about what it is, all of which differ between writers, the context in which it is used, and any conclusions the educators debating the point reach. For Holec, learner autonomy was "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3), which is not only pertinent but possibly the most widely alluded to description. As such, therefore, this quote is the bedrock of the concept, embodying as it does the key principle that it is essential learners take control of their own learning.

3. Learner autonomy — A difference of opinion

In spite of the fact that the Holec explanation of what learner autonomy is details every aspect of transferring learning from teachers to learners, many other language researchers disagree with it. Benson (2001, p.49), for example, does not believe Holec has accounted for "the nature of the cognitive capabilities underlying effective self-management of learning" while in 2008, Cotterall drew attention to two further points of contention. Firstly, his opinion was that Holec viewed autonomy as a dormant ability that learners needed to cultivate, while secondly, he felt that the definition overly concentrated on the technical parts of learning, particularly when it comes to introducing the methodological skill set necessary to the successful development of an individual's learning management abilities (Cotterall, 2008). For Little (2015), however, the difficulty he has with Holec's explanation is that "Learner autonomy is a problematic term" as "it is widely confused with self-destruction". His definition of autonomy is that it is a capacity: a capacity that enables an individual to develop skills in critical reflection, decision-making, detachment, and independent action (Little, 1991). This view is shared by Benson who, in his 2001 paper, reasoned that Little had added an essential psychological slant to Holec's original explanation as it defined autonomy as a process of learning that encompasses cognitive and self-management processes.

Contrary to the above arguments about what autonomy is or is not, there is a general consensus about a definition that was included in a project report presented to the Council of Europe, which states that "autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3). This definition identifies autonomy as a proactive state in which an individual uses their initiative to formulate their own learning directions and reflections and thus "enables learners to organize resources autonomously in order to reach their goal" (Littlewood, cited in Chan, 2015, p.148). That said, Littlewood did make a distinction between proactive and reactive autonomous states. His view was that being proactively autonomous requires learners to establish their objectives, plan and choose the appropriate methods by which to meet those objectives, and evaluate their learning processes. In reactive autonomous learning, his opinion was that learners should not be self-directed but should respond

to directions given to them. They are then required to manage their resources autonomously so that the learning objectives are met.

Other interpretations of autonomy such as Grolnick and Seal's (2007, p.132) regard it as "a sense of volition… the opposite of feeling controlled by someone else"; whereas for Deci and Ryan (1987, p.1025) it is an "action that is chosen; action for which one is responsible". As a consequence, the concept of autonomous language learning is often thought of by commentators such as Murray, Fuyishima and Uzuku (2014, p.81) as an approach that creates a "social learning space" in which individuals learn "with each other and from each other".

Teachers' role to develop learner autonomy

Teacher-based approaches to autonomy concentrate on the education and professional development of teachers. These methodologies have evolved out of the belief that changing the way teachers perceive autonomy can be achieved by fostering their commitment to its aims and encouraging them to include learner autonomy-supportive practices into their lessons, which should result in a move toward autonomy-friendly learning environments. Thus far, research has been focused on understanding the fundamentals of teacher autonomy and devising principles to encourage its adoption (Benson, 2000), as well as investigating ways to develop the parts played by teachers (Aoki, 2002). Indeed, successfully developing a culture of learner autonomy depends on successfully cultivating a tradition of teacher autonomy. Little's (1995) argument for this assertion relies on two reasons: firstly, if teachers are not themselves autonomous, then they cannot expect their learners to be; secondly, teachers have to be autonomous if they want to continue their professional development.

It is, however, important to point out that to learn autonomously does not mean someone learns alone. In fact, for Little (1991, 2002), learning in isolation is not true autonomy; rather he describes it as "autism", which implies that the role of teachers within the autonomous learning classroom is far from redundant. This is especially significant for formal education settings in which learners do not assume responsibility for their learning objectives automatically. Nevertheless, because autonomy and the act of being autonomous suggest there is an effective, systematic control over learning (Benson, 2001, p.75),- the parts played by teachers must be adjusted accordingly. This is to ensure that learners are given the opportunity to take charge of their learning, and facilitating this transition to learner-centred autonomy is an important part of teaching. Moreover, Murphy (2008) thinks the successful facilitation of learner autonomy also relies on teachers being able to create an environment in which learners are free to choose and self-regulate their learning, which, again, should help them become more autonomous.

There are, however, some commentators who disagree slightly with this view, including Andrade and Evans (2013, p.17) for whom "autonomy reflects a state of interdependence between teachers and learners". Notwithstanding this, there has been

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a great deal of research devoted to exploring the position teachers have in autonomous learning and its promotion. This is contrast to the frustratingly small amount looking at learners' attitudes and opinions about the role they feel teachers have in developing learner autonomy. Generally speaking, though, it is universally acknowledged that teachers are pivotal to the efficient functioning of any education system; thus, the part played by language teachers in influencing their learners' belief in and enthusiasm for language learning should not be underestimated (Cotterall, 1995). As it is, teachers are often referred to by several other titles, including counsellor, facilitator, manager, motivator, and resource.

Counsellor

Counsellors are generally thought of as being sources of advice for people who need it. Regarding its significance to teaching, Voller (1997) says that when a teacher is referred to as a counsellor it means the way in which they support their learners by interacting with them through a one-to-one correspondence. As discussed, there is no dispute about the fact that teachers have a prime role in helping learners understand learning strategies and increase their learning autonomy. However, McLachlan and Hagger (2010) contend that teachers could provide even more support seeing as how they are more knowledgeable about the principles and benefits of autonomous learning as well as the teaching strategies that can assist or hinder it. Han's (2014) definition of a counsellor describes the role as responding to an individual's evolving needs, meaning that teachers should be aware of their learners' learning needs in terms of what they want to know and how they want to learn it. In addition, teachers should enquire about any future learning aspirations their learners may have and encourage them to pursue them. Riley (1997), furthermore, believes that by acting as counsellors, teachers are better able to advise their learners about the best ways of achieving their learning objectives through, for instance, the materials, methodologies, resources, and self-assessment techniques available to them. Moreover, counselling gives teachers the opportunity to offer learners alternative ways of learning and provides a platform from which learners can go on and make better-informed decisions about their goals. It is also a good way for teachers to practise being motivational, non-judgemental, open-minded, and patient (Benson, 2013), as well as improve their listening skills. Indeed, Cotterall's 2000 study concludes with the statement that learners who regard their teachers as learning counsellors are ready to become autonomous.

Facilitator

To increase levels of autonomous learning among those attending tertiary educational institutions, it is necessary that their teachers take on the non-traditional teaching role of facilitator. Voller (1997) defines this as a supporting role that requires the teacher to facilitate the means by which autonomous learning can take place. They do this by taking responsibility for how the learning process' beliefs, strategies, and structure are organised and implemented. For Han (2014), this means a facilitator is an initiator and

supporter of the decision-making process while not being directly involved. Indeed, in keeping with the principles of learner autonomy in that facilitators are obliged to turn all major decisions regarding the learning objectives over to the learners, teachers who take on this role do not teach as such, instead they work to facilitate a satisfactory outcome. Cotterall (2000, p.116) suggests that facilitating greater learner autonomy requires teachers to encourage their learners "to set personal goals, monitor and reflect on their performance, and modify their learning accordingly". In this way, learners will make their own discoveries and create their own meanings about the world. Thus, it is the facilitator's job to decide just how ready their learners are to choose their own learning objectives and materials, and how far they can contribute to evaluating their progress. In Voller's (1997) definition, facilitators act as learning supports either technically or psycho-socially. Technical support providers assist learners by helping them acquire the necessary skills and knowledge that will enable them to plan and carry out their independent language learning activities, including evaluating their achievements. Psycho-socially supportive providers, on the other hand, increase their learners' desires to become autonomous through their caring, empathetic, open-minded, non-judgemental, patient, and motivational attitude. Higgs (1988, p.41) says that when it comes to learner autonomy "the teacher should act as a manager", which Bukhari (2008) describes as "a social process, which is designed to ensure cooperation, participation, intervention and involvement of others in the effective achievement of given or predetermined objectives". Contextually, then, teachers put together entertaining classroom-based activities in order to grab their learners' attention and immerse them in the business of language learning by encouraging them to become fully involved in the whole process. Holec (2009) believes once this is achieved the teachers can then move on to improving their learners' competency levels through initiatives such as training them to establish their learning objectives, and choosing which materials to use to accomplish them etcetera. In addition, teachers can manage how learners design realistic study plans that cater for their individual learning needs and objectives, and assist in implementing them. Finally, teachers should make use of a variety of evaluation strategies to assess the how the learners actually performed; this is a vital part of a teacher's job as they seek to develop their learners' "practical abilities" (Smith, 2008, p.396). After investigating the specialist literature available on this, Sierens et al. (2009) proposed their own definition of what a teaching managerial role entails. Their opinion is that it involves consulting, decision-making, evaluating, organising, and planning, in order to ensure harmony between the classroom activities and "support autonomy by asking students to evaluate themselves, plan their own activities and reflect about themselves as learners".

Motivator

The importance teachers have in the lives of their learners cannot be stressed enough, especially when it comes to motivation. As Lai and Ting (2013), Loima and Vibulphol

(2014), and Urhahne (2015) all attest, teachers have the power to either fire up or dampen their learners' sense of motivation. Research has demonstrated that teachers who act in an autonomy-supportive way tend to produce learners whose motivation levels exceed those whose teachers are less supportive of autonomous learning. Moreover, Grolnick and Seal (2007) found that learners who have a natural inclination toward motivation were more persistent when pursuing their objectives and that they felt more competent when doing so. Thus, motivation plays an integral part in encouraging autonomous learning as well as being a key factor in how teachers manage learners' learning and behaviours. Furthermore, researchers such as Deci and Ryan (2002) discovered that an important determining factor for internal motivation is the perception that a learner has achieved a degree of autonomy. Consequently, teachers should aim to motivate their learners to continue learning even when they are not in the classroom, which would contribute to increasing their confidence with regard to their language and general communication skills. Similarly, Xu Jinfen and Xu Li (2004) agree that teachers should be motivational when encouraging learners to learn; however, they caution that they should also take account of each learner's individual differences while trying to improve their autonomy. Also essential is the atmosphere teachers create in their classrooms right at the start of the learning process. This should be an environment that inspires confidence and trust so the learners feel able to pursue their interests, express themselves freely, and make independent judgements about their learning. Indeed, when learners believe they are carrying out their learning activities autonomously, they automatically feel more in control. Reeve et al. (2007) concluded that when this happens, learners become noticeably more persistent and work harder. Engendering this type of positive learning environment requires teachers to motivate their learners through inspirational learning activities and techniques. Aside from this, Kohonen (1992, p.32) wants teachers to let learners know that they trust their abilities and appreciate the way they go about their decision-making. In his opinion, once this occurs, learners feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning progress. It follows, therefore, that teachers who provide autonomy-supportive learning need to find ways of increasing their learners' internal motivation levels. Reeve, Bolt and Cai (1999) suggest they can do this by listening more to their learners and finding out what activities they feel would be of most use to them and what it is they want to achieve. In addition, teachers should allocate more time so that learners can increase how long they spend working independently.

Resource

Fumin and Li's (2012) opinion is that teachers should behave as a type of resource. In other words, as Han (2014) words it, teachers should be repositories of knowledge and expertise ready to pass on their wisdom as and when their learners need it. Imparting their own learning experiences via this resource role means teachers can assist learners

become more confident in their language learning and increase their awareness of learner autonomy. For Voller (1997), teachers must provide guidance and support in order to facilitate the means by which their learners feel confident to take charge of their own learning. Moreover, while working with Benson, Voller found that when teachers accept the role of resource, they are regarded as their learners' main source of knowledge and expertise (Benson and Voller, 1997). Teachers can achieve this through a systematic introduction of a combination of class instruction and learning strategies into the learning process. This would give learners a number of opportunities to consider what they had just learned and give them time to put them into practice. That said, their learning should have meaning and relevance, and impart knowledge they will find of use in the real world. Creating an autonomy-supportive learning environment according to Fabela Cárdenas (2009) necessitates that teachers must be willing to surrender their control and share it with their learners. They must also selflessly help and support their learners as they decide what their interests, objectives, and values are, in addition to allowing them the freedom to choose their preferred learning activities. To discover more about the role played by teachers in the context of autonomous learning, Xu Jinfen and Xu Li (2004) conducted an empirical study. Their investigation resulted in two main conclusions: firstly, teachers should always answer questions posed by learners as well as providing them with an assortment of resources appropriate to their area of study (in this case the English language). Secondly, those resources should be readily available for the learners to use. Thus, optimising the learning environment so that learner autonomy can develop and thrive means teachers have to increase their learners' knowledge about a wide range of learning materials and strategies.

Aside from the teaching roles described above, there are other supportive behaviours teachers could adopt to promote greater autonomy among their learners. Reeve and Jang (2006), for instance, identified eleven autonomy-supportive behaviours appropriate to the teaching environment. These are: the time teachers spend listening; asking what it is the learner requires; the time students are allowed to work independently; the time learners spend conversing; how the seating is arranged; explaining/justifying the rationales behind an action; using information feedback to give praise; offering encouragements; making suggestions; using praise as a contingent reward; responding to learner-generated questions; and communicating via perspective-based statements. Each behaviour correlates with levels of academic achievement and classroom engagement, and each one furthers the way in which learners begin to behave autonomously. However, Giroux (2006) believes teachers, particularly those working in higher education, should go further and relate their teaching to the wider social issues present within their societies. The suggestion is that offering learners opportunities to gain knowledge, discuss, and open a dialogue about

various social issues will help them realise the power they have as individuals and agents of social change.

Providing more scope for learners to develop greater autonomy in their learning combined with the growing emphasis being placed on the positive affective factors that impact on language learning, therefore, necessitates some radical changes in the parts played by teachers currently. Aoki (2002) is one of the commentators who believes teachers are vital when it comes to imparting the knowledge and skills today's language learners need. In particular, he recommends teachers must:

• 	 trust their learners
• 	 create a learning environment that is psychologically safe
• 	 Provide learners with choices while leaving room for negotiation
• 	 Listen to learners
• 	 Provide learners with information relevant to their needs
• 	 Explain to learners the rationale behind any decisions made on their behalf so that the decision-making process is as transparent as possible
• 	 Instigate and support reflective discussion about the affective, cognitive, and social aspects of learning

To conclude, this section demonstrates that the effectiveness of teacher-based autonomous learning development is dependent on how committed teachers are to supporting it and encouraging it in their learners, as well as their professional skills when implementing it. Nevertheless; the adoption of an autonomy-based learning ethos is under constant threat from the traditional teaching establishment. As such, it is unsurprising that many teachers find it difficult to adapt to their new roles when they change to an autonomous learning style. However, there is no doubt that autonomous learning practices have resulted in a number of positive outcomes including increases in creativity and approval rates for schools. It has also led to greater number of learners engaging with the learning process, which in turn means higher rates of academic competence and achievement (Urdan and Schoenfelder, 2006). Moreover, teachers who use autonomous learning techniques are not meant to instruct or keep their learners under strict control, rather the expectation is that they empower learners to make their own choices and develop their personal learning styles.

9. Methodology

This section explains the methodological approach the study used to present justifications for the methodological choices that were made during the course of the research and support the philosophical foundation that the research methodology was founded on.

9. 1. Design of the study

Undoubtedly, questionnaires are a highly effective strategy in so far as they can be distributed to a large amount of participants — even when they live in geographically diverse locations — and are relatively economical to administer as well as easily

analysed (Dörnyei and Taguchi, 2012). Questionnaires are also able to gather a large quantity of data using limited resources and within tight timeframes; however, a purely quantitative approach would not have been able to capture every aspect of this study as Gillham (2000) cautions that the answers received may be insincere or superficial. Consequently, using a purely quantitative approach based on a statistical evaluation of the data collected from the questionnaires would not be able to fully comprehend the attitudes, feelings, and impressions of the respondents (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Indeed, for a lot of people, filling in questionnaires is not something they enjoy and the temptation, according to Dörnyei (2003), is for them to select the answer that appeals to them most, rather than the one that is most truthful.

As Maxwell (2013) explained, it is clear then that the interview element is important and provides a valuable way for researchers to understand a respondent's actions. For Benson (2001), interviews are also useful for gaining an in-depth understanding of respondents' learning experiences and the contexts in which they took place: while Rubin and Rubin (2012) think interviews show the quantitative data in a more detailed and meaningful light.

The mixed-method approach, therefore, was considered the most appropriate tool for this research not only for the reasons given above but also because it is the strategy most usually recommended within the language learning field (Dörnyei, 2007). Indeed, combining different sets of data that have been collected at various stages of a research project can provide a detailed account of the subject under investigation (Creswell and Clark, 2011). Punch (2013) describes quantitative research as something that is normally guided by the researcher's area of interest, whereas qualitative research takes its starting point from the subject's perspective. That said; these can be combined successfully in a single research project.

9. 2. Participants

The participants taking part in the research were comprised of 211 EFL learners who study English as a foreign language at Salahaddin, Sulaimani, and Duhok Universities. The research used 90 learners from Salahaddin University; 54 learners from Sulaimani University; and 67 learners from Duhok University. It should be pointed out that the study did not ask every teacher and learner from these Universities' English Language Departments to participate because, as Jackson (2016) states, in most instances it is neither feasible or indeed necessary to survey every person who is potentially *ad rem*.

When it came to the proficiency levels of those taking part in this research, and to ensure the learners participating were as homogeneous as possible, it was decided that only students majoring in English language and in their final 4th year of undergraduate studies would be selected. This was for two reasons: firstly, it is more likely that learners in their final year will engage with the feedback process, which for Brown (2007) suggests they have an increased sense of ownership regarding their learning and rates of progress. In addition, final year learners will be better able to provide a

wide range of variables compared with their fellow 1st, 2nd, or 3rd year learners. The second reason for using only 4th year students is that learners in their final year spend the majority of their time studying in comparison to those in their 1st year, as well as concentrating more on deep learning activities than 2nd-year learners (Thomas *et al.*, 2015). This means they may have a greater awareness about their learning levels, an understanding about which learning methods work best for them, and have developed learning for life attitude, which results in them being in a good position to make accurate reflections about their learning experience.

Out of the 211 students who participated in the questionnaire part of the study from across the three Universities, 47 volunteered to take part in the interviews. A random selection was then made and 24 were chosen to participate in the semi-structured interview process. The eventual interviewees were chosen as they fitted the basic criteria in that their participation was voluntary: although, gender was a consideration. Finally, the interviews were conducted using 14 males and 10 females.

9. 3. Data analysis process

After collecting the data, statistical analyses were carried out on the questionnaires and processed through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software — version 24, Windows operating platform. This meant the data underwent several statistical procedures. The items contained in the questionnaires were arranged using the Likert scale and given values from 1 to 5. The respondents were required to indicate how much or how little they agreed with the statements laid out in the questionnaires with the format being: 1. strongly disagree, 2. disagree, 3. undecided, 4. agree, and 5. strongly agree. Participants who selected values 4 and 5 were evaluated as expressing support for the statement, whereas those who selected 1 and 2 were evaluated as rejecting it. Those who selected value 3 were evaluated as neutral and thus, expressing no firm opinion.

Following on from the statistical descriptions stage, each section's qualitative data along with that collected from the learners' interviews were transcribed. This was analysed using King and Horrock's (2012) guidelines on qualitative data analysis, which suggests a three-step approach. This was duly applied in this study's analytical procedures. In the first step, descriptive coding was applied to the completely transcribed data. The second step involved applying interpretative coding to the data. In this technique, descriptive/defined codes that transcend the participants' actual words become grouped together. The final step comprised the all-encompassing themes that made up the data analysis' key concepts. These themes arise from the descriptive and interpretative codes established in the previous two steps, although they contain higher rates of abstraction. Indeed, this part of the process involved carefully listening to and rereading the data to identify any essential factors that may have been missed before classifying them into a wider set of categories.

9. 4. Issues of validity and reliability

Extra measures were put in place in order to ensure the study's validity: this included triangulation — the combining of methodologies within a single study to examine the same phenomenon. For the present research, this meant collecting data from both the questionnaires and interviews, in accordance with Jick's (1979) beliefs that compiling research material using a combination of methods is worthwhile even if there is no convergence between the data. It was able to come to some meaningful conclusions and verify the collected data's accuracy (Creswell, 2014), reliability, i.e. the results are understandable based on the data collected, and credibility, i.e. its participants had the requisite knowledge to provide relevant data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), this study drew heavily on the principles of construct validity. This is used to find out how accurately a tool measures what it is intended to measure. Indeed, construct validity is considered by some commentators such as Mislevy (2007) to be the most important of the validities believing as he does that it is the basis from which all other validity types are derived. Furthermore, from a scientific perspective, construct validity encompasses every aspect found in the other types of validity.

In terms of measuring the reliability of the questionnaires, the research employed the Cronbach alpha coefficient to make an estimation of the scale using the internal consistency method. This is a proven technique, and one that Brown (2001) says is the most frequently used when measuring consistency in questionnaires. That said; the present research still conducted a pilot study of the questionnaire using 24 learners and applying SPSS 24 to the results before using the Cronbach alpha coefficient to check the reliability of each variable that was identified. Following this, the researchers implemented the alpha if item deleted test in order to remove any items that were not likely to measure the same within the construct as the others in a scale (Dörnyei, 2007). This increased the reliability of the instrument, which raised the amount of confidence the researchers had in the research results. In keeping with Dörnyei's (2007) preferences, the research's tolerated reliability for all the sections relating to the learners had to cover a range of over .9 but not fall beneath .8. As a consequence, the results (0.916) proved the instruments were both consistent and reliable.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.916	10

10. Findings and Data Analysis

Table 2: The role teachers play in autonomous learning

old rank	New rank	Section 6: The role teachers play in autonomous learning	Mean
2	1	Q2. Teachers are responsible for helping their students to use English in real situations.	4.27
7	2	Q7. Teachers are responsible for helping shy students to overcome their fears	4.22
1	3	Q1. Teachers are responsible for encouraging their students.	4.13
9	4	Q9. Teachers are responsible for increasing their students' confidence levels.	4.10
4	5	Q4. Teachers are responsible for helping their students to work together	4.09
8	6	Q8. Teachers are responsible for giving students the chance to decide how they learn	4.06
5	7	Q5. Teachers are responsible for arranging group work activities	4.06
3	8	Q3. Teachers are responsible for making decisions about how they manage their classes.	4.03
6	9	Q6. Teachers are responsible for encouraging their learners to work together.	4.00
10	10	Q10. Teachers are responsible for helping students to learn by themselves	4.03

Quantitative Analysis — Questionnaire

The answers to this section of the questionnaire gave very strong mean score values with none of the questions having a lower than 4.00 average, which indicates how importantly the participants felt about the influence teachers have with regard to learner autonomy. The strongest response was for Q2 (4.27), which was placed first in importance, showing that participants overwhelmingly thought teachers should instruct their students in how to use English in situations that reflect their real life experiences. Q7, Q1 and Q9 — 4.22, 4.13, and 4.10 respectively — in second, third and fourth place highlight how much value is placed on helping and encouraging those who lack confidence in their language skills and ability to overcome their self-doubt. This is connected to the fifth placed question — Q4 (4.09) — which indicates how important the respondents viewed being given the chance to work collectively was: safety in

numbers! Jointly scoring 4.06, Q8 and Q5 in sixth and seventh position in the table demonstrates the respondents' desire to be included in deciding what learning methods they wish to employ, although they also feel it is down to their teachers to direct their group activities. The final three questions in eighth and ninth and tenth place — Q3 (4.03), Q6 (4.00) and Q10 (4.1)— still elicited strong mean score values and reflect that respondents are content that teachers are left to decide how best their classes should be managed while also acknowledging the role they play in promoting collective working within those classes and helping students to learn by themselves.

Qualitative Analysis — Interview

When asked in the interviews about the way in which teachers could encourage greater levels of autonomous learning among their students, the participants came up with several suggestions that ranged from more homework and activities, to involving their students more. Others suggested they initiated courses to boost their students' self-confidence while another wanted them to avoid favouritism. One respondent said that teachers should be more relaxed with their students in order to build up a relationship with them "this is the way a teacher builds rapport with their students" and thus, motivate them to push the boundaries of their learning. A further tactic the respondents broadly agreed with was for teachers to share their own learning experiences with their students and for them to point out alternative sources of information to aid them in their learning activities. This correlates with the general feeling from all three of the participating universities' interviewees that teachers should teach language organically rather than aim to have their students pass their exams.

Individual learning needs were also believed by some respondents to be a way for teachers to make their students more autonomous; although, this view was challenged by some who thought this complicated the process. Encouragement was cited as being an effective tool as was the passion displayed by their teachers "even if I didn't like semantics I would study for him because I don't want the disappointment look in his eyes." Being given opportunities to use language in a naturalistic way in their lessons was mentioned as a strategy the respondents regarded as effective, too; along with the fact that teachers should involve each student, even those who were reticent, in the conversations and activities.

Moving on, the interviewer enquired about the attributes the respondents thought were most important for their teachers to have. Being inclusive was mentioned, as was the need to listen to students' ideas, and insisting that homework be completed on time. Encouragement, correcting errors, providing reliable sources of information, and being available outside of the classroom also made the list. The interviews also revealed the students' desire to be listened to and when it came to whose responsibility it was to prepare the students to learn autonomously, one respondent said: "You cannot clap with one hand, so it's both sides responsibility."

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Discussion

Indeed, for Benson and Voller (1997), teachers should act as counsellors, facilitators, managers, knowledge, and resource providers for their students. It is easy to lay the blame for any shortcomings at the feet of students, but less easy for teachers to accept they may have contributed to these failings. In the interviews carried out for this research, the students implied that they thought learning English with the support and guidance of a teacher was a good thing but that often some of their teachers' working practices did not meet their expectations. Examples of some of the criticisms included dissatisfaction with the manner in which their English departments taught the language, the strictness of the teaching regime and, indeed, the teacher themselves, as well as disgruntlement with the way they were offered knowledge. Regarding the last point, some interviewees felt they could only passively receive the information given by their teachers while others reported that their lessons were tightly controlled, which did nothing to encourage them in their attempt to become autonomous. Furthermore, it was also said that there was an overall lack of communication from teachers to students about their problems with learning English.

All together, then, these points illustrate the many ways in which students could be hindered from attaining autonomy. That said; the contrasting argument is that students may be more inclined to think they can achieve a good standard of English autonomously if they receive help from their teachers. Bozack *et al.* (2008) advocate the designation of dedicated learning environments as a way of supporting learner autonomy and monitoring the way teachers behave with regard to encouraging their students to adopt autonomous learning as part of their language-learning regime.

The research found that the environments the students considered most conducive to learning included elements such as a friendly and welcoming atmosphere, pair and group working, activities that were enjoyable and inclusive, and the freedom to select which activities they wanted to take part in. Furthermore, being involved in decisions about the lesson content, materials, activities, and teaching objectives were important to them, as were factors such as being taught by a teacher who moved around the classroom helping students when required but also encouraging them to find answers to their language difficulties using self-discovery. In light of this, every effort should be made to ensure that the contributions teachers and students make to the language learning process, be they failures or successes, become more equal. This shift in position will enable teachers to give their students the required amount of autonomy and confidence to continue their learning once they leave their classroom environments; thus, successfully producing autonomous learners.

Obviously, the results demonstrate the undeniable influence teachers have over the promotion of autonomous learning. The implication then follows that by acting as counsellors, facilitators, managers, knowledge, and resource repositiories, teachers have an unrivalled opportunity to actively guide their students' autonomous learning

behaviours. Therefore, to address the issue of what students expect from their teachers and what they actually receive in terms of sometimes poor teaching performances from those working for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's English language departments, there follows a set of suggestions for teachers to consider.

The first point is that teachers must be mentally prepared to adopt the idea of autonomous learning both for themselves as well as their students. Consequently, the hope is that teachers will equip themselves with the skills necessary to enable them to help their students develop autonomy in their own learning. Moreover, it is anticipated that this will lead to teachers realigning their teaching practice to the new more learner-centred curriculum and incorporate the requisite learning strategies and study methods into their normal classroom habits. In other words, teachers should begin to consider their role as being learning facilitators instead of knowledge providers, which is what they were in the days when learning was teacher-centred. In addition, teachers should also introduce more opportunities for their students to become involved directly in the learning process and, as Nasri (2014) says, teach themselves to learn how to do things differently. After all, they cannot expect their students to learn new techniques and approaches if they are not prepared to do so also. Furthermore, as teachers become more familiar with and practise autonomy, so they will find it easier to instruct their students in how to achieve it.

The second point relates to the general acceptance of the idea that teachers can use strategies such as regular monitoring and evaluations — including self-evaluations — to keep track of their students' progress and help them improve their autonomous learning techniques. These are also effective ways for teachers to increase their knowledge about and familiarise themselves with what interests their students have, how they reflect on their English language learning, and the strengths and weaknesses of their learning. Importantly, however, this can help create a non-defensive learning atmosphere in which the students do not feel they have to fear failure and any subsequent sanctions that may bring. Indeed, it is not the intention of this monitoring and evaluation approach to help students attain high marks in their tests; rather, the aim is to foster and encourage them to embrace the idea of lifelong learning.

The third suggestion is that there should be a greater emphasis on reducing and, if possible, removing completely any negative factors that may be affecting the students' ability to learn. This will require teachers to become more sensitive to their students learning processes and to reassure them that learning and acquiring language is a pleasurable experience. They can reinforce this positive outlook through strategies such as increasing how much they communicate with their students outside of the classroom, and encouraging their students to take more responsibility for their learning. In addition, teachers can be invaluable when it comes to assisting students to conquer any difficulties they encounter in their learning as they are the ones best placed to offer any appropriate guidance and instruction. This, in turn, will help

develop further the students' use of autonomous learning and thus, result in them progressing in their quest to learn English.

The fourth point relates to the choices that students should be given and which have been shown increases their self-confidence and, ultimately, leads to greater levels of learner autonomy. These include considering what students learn and what types of materials they are given to work with, how effective the teaching plan is, whether they are given opportunities to collaborate with their peers and thus, participate in group discussions, and which evaluation methods are used. In addition, consideration should also be given to whether students are assigned tasks that require them to practise their language skills outside of their classrooms, if they are given assignments that necessitate them working on their own, and are they permitted to preview their lessons. Including all of these into the learning environment will demonstrate to the students that learning a language is an enjoyable and fulfilling occupation, which should encourage them to become more open to the idea of learning autonomously. Furthermore, giving students the chance to learn from one another as well as actively encouraging them to collaborate with their peers has also been shown to boost their self-confidence and autonomy levels.

The penultimate recommendation is that teachers need to do more to get their students to realise that it is their responsibility to engage with the learning process and not their teachers'. This means students are principally responsible for any successes or failures in their language learning, while the point should be made that education does not refer to teaching, it is about learning. Specifically, education's primary aim is to facilitate learning and, indeed, learning how to learn is a more important skill for students to acquire than listening passively to a teacher who is simply acting as a counsellor, facilitator, manager, and resource provider/repository for the process.

The sixth and final suggestion is that when they are trying to promote autonomous learning it is important that teachers are aware of theirs' and their students' attitudes toward it. This is particularly pertinent for those students who feel uncomfortable being required to work away from their teacher. Consequently, it is vital that teachers discuss this with their students so that they can tell them about the advantages of being autonomous and how valuable a skill it is in terms of it helping them with their language acquisition. To further encourage their students, teachers should assign them tasks that require them to work away from their classrooms, which, out of necessity, will make them engage in autonomous behaviours and reduce their fear of making mistakes. This will result in an increase in the level of autonomy attained by each student, which should result in a measurable improvement in language learning standards.

Conclusion

The findings from the research have provided a considerable amount of information about the role teachers have in encouraging autonomous learning from the perspectives of the students who took part in it. The evidence does seem to suggest that the development of learner autonomy is dependent to a certain extent on how much support teachers give to their students. Furthermore, the opinions the students expressed about how they regarded their teachers' roles in encouraging autonomous learning are in accordance with the opinions of the scholars discussed earlier in the Literature Review. In summary, it was the students' clear view that the role their teachers have in encouraging greater autonomous learning is essential, even though they were aware that the successful acquisition of and proficiency in English was dependent on their own efforts. This leads to the conclusion that in order to achieve a greater level of autonomy in their learning, students could benefit from being offered specifically targeted types of support from their teachers (Cotterall, 1995).

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